

ANTHROPOLOGY AND TRADITION: A CONTEMPORARY ABORIGINAL VIEWPOINT

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This paper was written by Noel Pearson for Mervyn Gibson who presented it to the ANZAAS Conference in Townsville in 1987. The paper is based on insights and ideas which Mervyn had discussed with Noel. Many of the basic themes in Noel's publication "Our Right to Take Responsibility" can be found in this paper.

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It appears that the present day Aboriginal situation is one of hopelessness and despair. There is every indication that there will be no positive trend towards the achievement of economic, social, and political self-determination. In fact, it seems that social and cultural disintegration continues to escalate despite successive attempts by countless white and black policy makers, reformers and bureaucrats, and despite the passage of two hundred years.

Australian Aborigines are proportionately the most over-represented race in any criminal justice system in the entire world. The legal system in Australia is at a loss to deal with this problem, and the Australian Law Reform Commission has acknowledged that the problems Aborigines face in the legal system are immense and remain unresolved. In a recent paper that was rejected by the Bicentennial authorities, Justice Michael Kirby said:

“...Any fair Australian will have a sense of disquiet, and even shame, at the way the Australian legal system has operated in relation to the aboriginal ... it represents a cruel assertion of power, sometimes deliberate, sometimes mindless, resulting in the destruction of aboriginal culture, unparalleled rates of criminal conviction and imprisonment and massive deprivation of property and land.”

In relation to a country that has one of the highest standards of living in the world for the majority of the population – the great proportion of Aborigines live in circumstances that would be regarded as being well below the poverty line. To use the normal indications of poverty such as the provision of housing, the state of health, life expectancy, infant mortality and the availability of social services and amenities, Aborigines are comparably in a worse situation than Third World countries. This is so despite massive expenditure since 1967 by both State and Federal agencies in the areas of Aboriginal health, housing, education and employment. Aborigines continue to die from diseases that have long since been eradicated from the white population. There is chronic dependency on welfare spending by governments – but the figures still show massive unemployment, poor health, low retention rates and low representation in the higher levels of the white education system.

The segregation of Aborigines from mainstream Australian society continues despite assimilation policies that have attempted to encourage them to be part of that society. Even in 1987, many black and white people assume that Aborigines must head in the direction of assimilation in order to deal with and solve their problems.

However, the situation is that today black people are feeling increasingly alienated from white society, and the volume of their dissatisfaction grows every day. It seems to me that we are

searching for a place in mainstream Australian society that doesn't exist in reality. We *want* Aborigines to live like us in an urban environment, but *we don't want* them to be closely associated with us. Australians want Aborigines to be employed, but they won't provide employment or they expect them to remain in servile and unskilled labour. Despite increased access to white education and white institutions, there are still considerable barriers that have led Aborigines to not consider education in white society as socially valuable.

So far I have described a situation where Aborigines have failed to adapt to a white way of life. Does this mean that they have successfully retained the values and achievements of their own way of life?

The present situation shows that clearly, Aborigines have not been entirely successful in retaining their culture. Cultural loss and disintegration continues at an *alarming* rate. For example, children from the Hope Vale Aboriginal Community know *significantly less* about the language and traditions of their parents. It is somewhat morally disturbing that a cultural program is implemented in a white-oriented institution which represents the very same ideas that have contributed to cultural disintegration in the first place.

Further to this, cultural fragmentation and dispossession appears to continue to remain a devastating factor in the breakdown of Aboriginal society. Aborigines are not only rejecting education in non-Aboriginal terms, but they are also either rejecting black cultural education or are simply failing in their responsibility to maintain it.

This paper is the product of my own personal consideration of Anthropology and Aboriginal society. Having studied Anthropology and Archaeology at the University of Queensland, I took a year off my studies to return to the Aboriginal community at Hope Vale. In my work as a projects officer in the community, I had the opportunity to observe my own society, equipped with the ideas that my years of study had given me. My practical experience there, considering the community's social problems and talking to community members, has led me to believe that there seems to be a vast *disparity* between the science of Anthropology and its ideas about Aboriginal society, especially with regard to their social problems, and Aboriginal society itself. In this paper I have chosen to dwell on the problem of alcohol among Aboriginal people.

Anthropologists and other white people who have set themselves up as "experts" on Aboriginal society, such as missionaries and government officials, have contributed to the creation and perpetuation of the myths that now *shackle* Aboriginal society. This paper argues that Aboriginal society has *internalised* these myths, and that these myths are necessary to justify social exploitation by sections of the Aboriginal community.

Alcohol has become such a *particular problem* for Aboriginal people because, under The Myth, it has become an expression of *identity* and *culture* for them. For black people, to drink alcohol is to *be* an Aborigine. Social relationships and community are expressed through the consumption of alcohol. This paper is concerned with the question of whether the social phenomenon of alcohol among Aborigines is the expression of *true culture and identity*, or whether it is a *distortion* and an *exploitation* of that culture and identity. This paper argues that Aboriginal society is caught in the *stranglehold* of distorted and mythic traditions.

For example: Jack collects his pay cheque or social security cheque and spends most of it providing alcohol for himself and his cousins. His wife is unable to purchase enough food for their children until the next cheque, and therefore the children are hungry and his wife has to borrow food from a neighbour to feed them. Because Jack regularly appropriates the family income in this way, it is highly unlikely that his wife will ever repay what she was given. What was once a relationship of equal cadging between her family and the neighbours becomes unequal. What was once dependency by Jack's wife and the children based on *necessity* becomes dependency by Jack based on *social exploitation* and *parasitism*.

Why is such exploitation and parasitism allowed to continue? It is allowed to continue because *The Myth* has convinced the members of the society, that it is part and parcel of Aboriginal culture and tradition. Exploitation and social parasitism has been given such currency in Aboriginal society that *The Myth* has to a large extent, turned into reality. To return to our case example: Jack justifies his appropriation of the family income for the purposes of buying alcohol for his cousins, as a true expression of cultural identity and as a fulfilment of cultural and kinship obligations. Consuming alcohol for Jack in the way that he does, is all about reinforcing kinship and cultural ties. During the course of consuming the alcohol, Jack can be heard explaining his kinship ties to his fellows. As any observer of Aboriginal alcohol consumption will testify, it is a ritual of *reinforcing* and *observing* so-called cultural ties and obligations. In fact it is a myth. It is a gross denial and distortion of true Aboriginal tradition.

Jack either consciously or not so, thinks that he is being a true Aboriginal in sharing his cheque with his cousins who may have shared their cheque with him previously. He fails to realise that true Aboriginal tradition requires him to observe *all* his kinship obligations especially those towards his wife, children and parents, not just those involving alcohol. Jack has become a social parasite who *uses* Aboriginal tradition to justify what is in essence, selfish exploitation based on an individual physical desire for alcohol. It will be evident that the kinship and cultural obligations which Jack is willing to acknowledge are those that can be centred around alcohol. He will be negligent in all of his other obligations. The myth that tradition is expressed during the consumption of alcohol by the group has gained tremendous currency in the Aboriginal community, and it has followed that any denial of *The Myth* amounts to a denial of tradition. For example:

When among an Aboriginal drinking group a request for money is refused by Jimmy, the person requesting will *stress* his relationship with Jimmy, and, if necessary, create a relationship, no matter how fanciful and artificial it might be, and *stress* the *obligations* that arise from that relationship. In this way, kinship ties, either real or imaginary, are manipulated for self-serving and exploitative purposes. In the event that Jimmy still refuses, the person may then challenge his allegiance to kin, his respect for cultural ties, and indeed his very Aboriginality. As any person conversant with Aboriginal drinking practices will testify, the question: "Are you denying me?" is used quite often against people who dare to go against *The Myth*, as if to say: "Are you denying your Aboriginality? Who do you think you are? Do you think you're white?"

In fact, persons who fail to conform to *The Myth*, in other words, those who refuse to succumb to the exploitation and parasitism which is inherent in *The Myth*, are threatened with social and communal alienation. The person who rejects *The Myth* will be told how, in time

of need, there will be no one to provide for him, since he has neglected to fulfil his obligations under The Myth.

The consequences of the operation of such myths is that alcoholism and social irresponsibility is associated with Aboriginal identity. Health, hygiene and care about nutrition and economic welfare are associated with a *white* identity. There is this assumption amongst Aborigines that achievement and social responsibility is the preserve of white people. For instance I personally had the experience when a lady from my community, upon seeing the food on our table my wife had prepared for our family, commented, "Hey you live like white people!" This comment was directed at the fact, not that the food was European, but that it was sufficient to our needs. Financially the lady was no worse off than our family and yet in her mind, sufficient provision of food was *not* an Aboriginal characteristic. The same lady's finances were mostly *committed to* or *appropriated for* alcohol, vehicles and horse racing.

The Myth is probably the greatest problem facing Aboriginal society. It is a monumental problem to overcome, because Aboriginal people need to acknowledge the *deformities* that have developed in their traditions and in their ideas about cultural identity, as well they need to point out the distinction between true and distorted traditions to people whose perspective on their traditions and culture comes from within the confines of The Myth.

This is not to say all of Aboriginal society has succumbed to The Myth. There are sections of the Aboriginal community who upheld the view that social responsibility means *more* than the observance of obligations that involve alcohol or any other essentially selfish activity.

To observe the history of the Hope Vale Aboriginal Community, from the period following dispossession after the arrival of Europeans at Cooktown in 1873, one can see how an Aboriginal community was formed from diverse and disparate backgrounds. The members of the mission at Cape Bedford were torn from their families and their lands, from their traditions and their people, and yet they were *successful* in forming a *unified* community. The young children who entered the mission under the Protection Act were assimilated into Guugu Yimidhirr culture, and specifically a Christian Guugu Yimidhirr culture. The mission was a successful community with members who observed *true* Aboriginal social responsibility, and their leaders resisted any adoption of the alcohol and gambling lifestyles that other Aboriginal communities had adopted. In fact when the Cape Bedford mission people were removed to the Aboriginal settlement of Woorabinda during World War Two, there was a blatantly apparent difference in the social ethics of both communities. Only a handful of the young men adopted alcohol and virtually no-one took part in gambling, which was an entrenched practice among the Woorabinda people. The power of the social ethic against gambling among the mission people can be seen by the fact that gambling has failed to flourish at Hope Vale, where other social problems have risen. The Cape Bedford leaders utterly rejected The Myth.

The recent history of the community shows that social problems within the community have escalated tremendously. There is widespread economic and social breakdown, and alcohol appears to be destroying the traditions that were proudly established by the mission people over the greater portion of the community's 100 year history. The last 15 to 20 years have seen the *decline* of, not what the missionaries had achieved among the people, but *rather*, the decline of what the people had *themselves achieved* in the face of dispossession and colonization.

What has happened, is that The Myth has been adopted by sections of the community. Twenty years ago there was widespread resistance by the community against the introduction of social ethics from other communities by the younger folk, especially the men. Families were unwilling to allow people to engage in an alcohol lifestyle and to live off them. Now that resistance has broken down to a large extent. Hope Vale people are now more and more amenable and open to the operation of The Myth in their society.

The ideas that form The Myth are those that have been internalised from the white interpretation of black people. Anthropologists, through their advice to policy-makers and in their contribution to the public perception of Aborigines, have contributed to the construction of The Myth, which has been used to explain some of the most *ridiculous* things.

It is time to *stop* portraying gambling in Aboriginal society as some kind of traditional re-distribution of wealth. It is time to *stop* interpreting alcoholism as some kind of helpless result of cultural clash. Rather we should be seeing it for what it is. That is: the deliberate distortion of tradition for the sake of fulfilling an individual physical desire for alcohol. It is time to *stop* portraying the contemporary Hope Vale alcoholic as a passive victim of colonization. Rather we must consider how he has actively created his own problems.

My generation at Hope Vale cannot honestly point to colonization and dispossession as the immediate cause of their social problems. The generations before us are an example of how the maintenance of *true* Aboriginal traditions within the context of adaptation to a Christian mission produced a successful community.

Rather, our social problems stem from our inability to recognize how members of our community and indeed we ourselves, are using “tradition” and “culture” and “kinship” to exploit our own society.

If Anthropology is to serve any purpose for Aboriginal people, surely it must be to help recognize these problems. Anthropology has contributed to the construction and the maintenance of the myths under which the Aborigines *labour*, surely now it must engage in their destruction.