THE EFFECT OF COLONIZATION ON THE ABORIGINAL PEOPLE’S CULTURE AND RELIGION
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Abstract
This paper examines the devastating impact of post British colonialism upon the Australian Aborigines and the substantial issue of the Stolen Generation. It explores the significance of land for the Aboriginal people, in relation to their cultural and religious beliefs, and the meaning of The Dreaming, before considering the effect of racist evolutionary theory on the Aborigines as individuals as well as a community. The paper also assesses contemporary issues for the Aborigines and the effectiveness of government policies that were introduced in the hope of reconciling the indigenous people for the years of loss and suffering.

Keywords
Colonization, Dreamtime, Indigenous People, Aboriginal land, Stolen Generation, Cultural Genocide

Knowledge and understanding of the devastating effect of colonialism and post-colonial policies upon the Aborigines has been well documented from Aboriginal oral traditions as well as written accounts from early European settlers (Fryer-Smith 2002). It is difficult to know whether traditional Aboriginal life still survives in the twenty-first century, as colonization had such a massive impact on the population of Aborigines: not only were groups of people ruthlessly massacred, but their rich culture, their rituals and languages that were deeply embedded within them, were also destroyed (Roberts 2008). The Australian Bureau of Statistics states that indigenous people make up 2.5% of the total Australian population. Among the indigenous population in 2006, it was estimated that 463,700 (90%) were of Aboriginal origin (Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker 2010, 25).

Before the Europeans ever settled into Australia the Aboriginal people had inhabited the continent for over 40,000 years, some say over 100,000 years (Roberts 2008). There is scientific evidence of carbon-dated humans to support Aboriginal occupation of the Australian land. It has been estimated that 300,000, and possibly more, Aborigines were settled in Australia in the late 1970s, when the British Europeans arrived to conquer Australia (Fryer-Smith 2002). The term ‘Aborigine’ has been defined as ‘people who descend from, and identify with, the Australian race that inhabited Australia before the arrival of the
Europeans’ (Roberts 2008, 1). At the time of colonization, there were 500 Australian nations, over 270 Aboriginal languages and 600 dialects (Fryer-Smith 2002). Aboriginal society was split into clans. They lived in small semi-nomadic family groups. Each group was identified by their language and culture and would gather for social and ceremonial events (Fryer-Smith 2002). Each individual belonged to specific territories within the family group and had spiritual connections and obligations. The notion of land ownership was very different from the European legal systems (Dudgeon et al. 2010). The land was not owned by anyone; they belonged to the land. As Maddock (1972) explains: ‘It would be as correct to speak of the land possessing men as of men possessing land’ (cited in Fryer-Smith 2002, 2:8).

The Aboriginal people were not materialistic, as emphasis was placed on social, religious and spiritual activities. The environment was controlled by spiritual rather than physical means, as religion was deeply rooted in the land (Berndt & Berndt 1992, in Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker 2010). Aborigines place high importance on maintaining their culture and spirituality in all areas of life (Fryer-Smith 2002). Oral traditions were a way in which the spiritual, mythical teachings were passed down from generation to generation, preserving the culture that was central to the identity of this indigenous group. Because the Aborigines were the first occupants of Australia their affiliation with the land is undeniably at the center of their faith, culture and community. As Fryer-Smith observes: ‘land is ... the foundation of the group’s existence’ (Fryer-Smith 2002, 2:8).

The bond between the Aborigines and the land was not only for the use of natural resources, it was equally important for their belief system, as all of their practices were connected with the Australian landscape. Thus, the Aborigines believed their rightful place was with the land, as this was where their ancestors were (Roberts 2008). Land is a sacred inheritance from The Dreaming (Fryer-Smith 2002, 2:8). ‘The Dreaming is a term used by Aboriginal people to describe relations between the spiritual, natural and moral elements of the world’ (Aboriginal Art Online 2011). Survival for each group, physically, spiritually and culturally, depended on the territory; thus it is the foundation for the existence of each group (Harvey 2000). Each group had a responsibility for the spiritual safeguarding of the land through ceremonials and practices. In relation to this, Harvey (2000) explains that the land is the mediating factor between the spirits and humans, as it is an inseparable connection and bond between the two. Their relationship to the land means that Aborigines act as guardians of the land on behalf of their Ancestors. No words can express how significant
land is to the Aborigines, both individually and collectively. The Aborigines would embrace the earth as a totem and speak of it in a deep symbolic way (Stanner 1999, cited in Fryer-Smith 2002). Aboriginal people experience the land as a symbolic landscape, rather than simply a physical environment (Fryer-Smith 2002). Their religion was based on a philosophy of the natural environment (Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker 2010). Men were predominantly responsible for the spiritual activities but women were also involved in the rituals and ceremonies (ibid.).

Aboriginal ceremony and rituals are a means of contact with the spiritual world and the Ancestral Spirits; sacred ceremonies, dance and music are essential in maintaining the spirituality of Aboriginal life as majority is centered on The Dreaming (Fryer-Smith 2002). The core belief of Aboriginal cosmology throughout Australia is The Dreaming (Hume 2004). Sacred knowledge derived from ‘Dreaming events’ concern all aspects of Aboriginal life (Hume 2004). The Dreaming portrays the complexity of Aboriginal culture, hence there are various interpretations of what is meant by ‘Dreamtime’ (Hume 2000). It has been referred to as ‘everywhen’ as it is a timeless concept that exists outside the western notion of linear time (Fryer-Smith 2002). It refers to the period of creation, the creative form of the land and to the present supernatural world (ibid.). It originated at the beginning of time, remains in the present and will last forever (ibid.).

When western scholars of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century ranked the world’s different cultures using a hierarchical system, unsophisticated, indigenous groups, such as the Aborigines, were placed at the bottom and the Europeans, regarded by themselves as more advanced, at the top. The western notion of God is very different from that of the Aborigines, which is why The Dreaming is widely misunderstood (Hume 2004). For the Aborigines, the concept of Dreaming confirmed the non-religious nature of the Aboriginal belief system. Nonetheless, The Dreaming has a significant historical and spiritual importance, as it speaks of the journey and actions of the Ancestors and supernatural beings (Aboriginal Art Online 2011). The Aboriginal belief system of Dreaming is rightfully classed as a religion, rather than just a set of beliefs (David 2002), but Dreaming is also a belief that links ‘living people, clan by clan, or lineage by lineage ... with ancestral beings by inherent and imperishable bonds through territories and totems’ (Stanner 1998, cited in David 2002, 19). Researchers agree that Dreaming is the center of Aboriginal belief system and law. The Dreaming is told in myths, stories, songs and artwork, visual illustrations of the symbols
related with the Dreaming (Aboriginal Art Online 2011). It is a philosophical concept that
tells of the creation of the world and all that is within it. The stories describe the movement
of the Ancestral Beings across the earth. The spirits took the form of humans as well as
animals. (Fryer-Smith 2002, 2:5). It can also refer to night dreams, in which special
knowledge or songs are revealed (Hume 2004).

The Dreaming is both a narrative of the forming of the world and an expression of the
spiritual power of the ancestral leaders in the land. It is a way of life where each person is
connected to The Dreaming through their inherent membership (Hume 2004). The Dreaming
is a different form of reality through which special knowledge, such as information about
songs and ceremonies, may be received. Music is a vital part of Aboriginal culture and
ceremonies. Traditional songs are significant as they are a way of telling and maintaining
Dreaming stories. The ceremonies allow human beings to enter a direct relationship with the
Dreaming (Fryer-Smith 2002). It has been described as ‘a state of reality beyond the
mundane’ (Hume 2004, 245). Thus, unlike western ideology, which separates the spiritual
from the physical, The Dreaming is a unison of both the spiritual and the physical world
(Hume 2004). The Ancestral Beings created sacred laws that were passed down as a
complete system. Certain areas of land were given custodianship to particular language
groups that were dependent on whether those groups were following the law (Fryer-Smith
2002). There is a belief that the Ancestors hold the power to intervene in the life of humans.
They are vital in safeguarding human existence and in maintaining the fertility of the land
(Fryer-Smith 2002).

Aboriginal religion has been described as ritualistic, as each ritual is part of faith. As David
explains: ‘Rituals involve bodily engagement targeting the confirmation of a specific belief or
system of beliefs set in an ontological framework’ (David 2002, 20). Aboriginal rituals are
historical rites in which songs are sung and the ceremonial paraphernalia is used to convey
the Dreaming stories and show its significance (David 2002). Each social right and practice is
given meaning by the Dreaming and maintained through it as it is an act of devotion (ibid.).
Aborigines are referred to this as a totemic religion, because of the relationship an individual
has with the land and its natural species (Fryer-Smith 2002). Totemism has been defined as
‘the worship of plants and animals’ (David 2002, 20). It is a link to the natural world through
Dreaming events. It represents the groups as it reinforces social solidarity between different
language groups (Fryer-Smith 2002). Rituals are a way in which the spirituality of the totem
is maintained, as it is connected to the spiritual world (Fryer-Smith 2002). Dance and music are very important to Aboriginal culture as a means of access to the spiritual world and a link to their ancestry and land (Aboriginal Art Online 2011). These ancestral rituals preserve The Dreaming and aboriginal spirituality that has passed through generations.

In the eighteenth century Britain held a dominant position in the world, partly due to its advanced technology, seafaring and military prowess. James Cook, on HMS Endeavour, first landed at Botany Bay in 1770 in the reign of King George III, a landing which led to the first settlement in 1788 and subsequent colonization of Australia. The British supposedly claimed Australia was uninhabited ‘terra nullius’, empty land; thus, they did not arrive to conquer the area, but rather to settle in it to extend their colonial settlement (Gray 1998, 15). The declaration of ‘terra nullius’ meant the British refused to accept the existence of Aboriginal people and this enabled them to assume power without compensation (Gray 1998). The Aborigines initially welcomed the British settlers, as they were fascinated by them; they even helped them by showing them where they could find good water. However, when the British overstayed their welcome and tried to take their land, the Aborigines attempted to resist the invasion and were then treated like animals and killed ruthlessly (Roberts 2008). The British seized their land and natural raw materials to increase their profit making and ‘get rich quick’ (Roberts 2008, 11). Colonialists subsequently reasoned their ill treatment of the Aborigines on the grounds of Darwin’s evolutionary theory, and deluded themselves into believing it was a matter pertaining to the survival of the fittest – the British colonist seeing themselves as the superior race and the Aborigines as the weaker ones, which is why they were a dying race (Roberts 2008).

Aboriginal people in Australian society undoubtedly suffered from white racism, which has been defined as:

> The conscious or unconscious belief in the inherent superiority of persons of European ancestry which entitles all white peoples as a position of dominance and privilege ... belief in the innate inferiority of all darker peoples ... which justifies their subordination and exploitation (Gray 1998, 7).

In 1770, Cook even wrote in his Journal: ‘they may appear to some to be the most wretched People on Earth’ (quoted in Roberts 2008, 8). As Gray (1998) observes, it was on this racist
attitude that Australian society was built and continues to contribute to racist attitudes today. Cook claimed that he wanted peace with the Aborigines on the condition that they adhered to his rules. However, they were a marginalized, indigenous group and under the Australian law founded by Cook, the British invaders never hesitated in dealing with them as though they had no rights in their own country (Roberts 2008). The Aboriginal people were deemed as the King’s subjects; which meant any form of resistance or self-defense was considered as rebellion and punishable by law (Roberts 2008). Since then nothing has been the same for Aboriginal people, as the loss of their own land and subsequent poverty was the direct consequence of white colonization (Gray 1998). The myth, that the Aborigines passively gave their land to the whites because they did not value it, was to conceal and legally justify Britain’s illegal occupation (Roberts 2008). The media also played a part in distorting the truth by presenting the situation as though the Aborigines were only explorers in Australia and not the rightful inhabitants (Roberts 2008).

The Aboriginal Protection Act (1869) claimed to protect the Aboriginal people, but in reality it gave power to the government to take away their land, residence, children and education (AIATSIS 2014). The supposed protection feature of the legislation covered all the crimes and injustices that were committed against Aboriginals (Roberts 2008). Through this Act children were separated from their families, located elsewhere in order to make them forget their history and culture (AIATSIS 2014). It was a time of distress as children were snatched and dislocated from their families, losing the rich cultural heritage they owned, a culture that was deeply embedded within their family and community. The government and church worked together to ‘re-educate’ young children: that whites are the superior race and to never question the state or law but to accept and obey all that was imposed upon them (Gray 1998). This policy was also known as the half-caste act, as Aboriginal people of mixed lineage were removed from Aboriginal settlements (Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies). The British deluded the Aborigines to believe they had rights and were free to seek justice against any crimes committed against them. Yet, in reality, only the whites were able to give evidence and the Aborigines thus remained defenseless (Roberts 2008).

Compared with the flourishing European way of life, the Aborigines were seen as a dying race along with their culture. They were physically discriminated against, forcibly ripped from their lands and families, moved to camps and stations to keep them at a distance from
the white settlers (Gray 1998). The white colonists arrogantly assumed power by removing black people; ‘out of sight, out of mind’ justified their illegal occupation and the myth of terra nullius (Gray 1998, 21). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century genocidal practices destroyed many societies across Australia; massacres were taking place in which whole communities of thousands of people were murdered (Gray 1998). Armed police would arrive and shoot until everyone was dead (Roberts 2008). The Government went even further by offering a reward in return of every adult and child caught in 1829 (Roberts 2008). The Australian government contributed to this cultural genocide, as it dictated and controlled every aspect of Aboriginal life. If anyone challenged the authority, they would immediately be sent to prison where many were tortured (Gray 1998). The state created many illusions regarding race division; for instance, the government claimed that the Aborigines behaved like animals and segregation policies were in their best interest (Gray 1998). Yet, in reality, the policies destroyed families, allowed kidnapping of children and mislead Aboriginals to believe that Aborigines who fight for their rights are the enemies of society (Gray 1998). As whites considered the Aboriginals filthy, segregation became the social norm.

The Aboriginals suffered in other ways from British invasion. The initial, most direct impact was the introduction of foreign diseases; for example, an outbreak of small pox in Sydney in 1789 spread over the region causing the death of half of the Aboriginal population (Roberts 2008). The colonists also introduced the Aborigines to vices that they had never witnessed, vices such as alcohol and drugs. Until 1788 they lived a life of simplicity and non-violence but were later influenced by European behavior that caused revenge, murder and inter community violence (Gray 1998). The British colonials in Australia were also destroying the spirituality of Aboriginal culture and belief that had been present for thousands of years. Sacred sites and land that was fundamental for Aboriginal identity was no longer theirs. It was a process of ‘cultural genocide upon their tradition, culture and race’ (Gray 1998, 170). The Aboriginal way of life was never the same again (Harvey 2000). Aboriginal women suffered heavily during the settlement. They were taken away from their husbands, enslaved and raped (Roberts 2008). A report from 1990 stated ‘women were handed around from station to station, until discarded to rot away with venereal disease’ (Roberts 2008, 26). The colonialists even went to the extent of castrating Aboriginal males so that the whites had full ownership over the women (Roberts 2008). The colonists justified their behavior by stating that violence was the only way their own protection could be secured
Roberts 2008). The invaders failed to acknowledge the significance of the tribal lands as they took no interest in learning Aboriginal culture (ibid.). Before colonization, the population of Aborigines in Victoria was estimated at 15,500. In 1861 it was estimated at 2,341 (ibid.). This drastic decline was because they were infected with diseases, murdered in massacres, poisoned and starved through poverty (Roberts 2008).

Another devastating effect of colonialism, that has affected all areas of Aboriginal life, is the ‘Stolen Generations’ that took place from the 1890s until the 1970s. ‘Stolen Generations’ is the term used to describe the Aboriginal children who were separated from their families and left with no guarantee of seeing their parents again. The reason why children were taken from their families was to break the Aboriginal people’s future by ending the cycle of tradition that was passed on through the generations. ‘White people hoped to end Aboriginal culture within a short time and get rid of “the Aboriginal problem”’ (Creative Spirits 2014). This period of isolation lasted for decades, impacting on every generation of Aborigines. It is estimated that between 1883 and 1969 more than 6,200 children were taken (Creative Spirits 2014). The theory was that in taking children away from the ‘bad’ influence of their Aboriginal families they could be made more ‘European’ and conform to white society. In the event Aboriginal language, knowledge and spirituality that had been passed down from generation to generation was now effectively stopped. Whereas the genocidal practices sought to remove the entire indigenous population (Creative Spirits 2014), the basis of the Assimilation policy was that Aboriginal people would die out as a race as they were regarded as worthless (Gray 1998). The whites thought that they could breed out Aboriginal genes by making them have children with white people. The camps the children were sent have been compared to the Nazi concentration camps. Children were punished if they ever spoke their Aboriginal language and were completely isolated from their Aboriginality. They were abused physically, emotionally and sexually. Girls were trained to be servants and boys to be stockmen (Creative Spirits 2014). One child’s personal experience was that

Sometimes at night we’d cry with hunger. We had to scrounge in the town dump, eating old bread, smashing tomato sauce bottles, licking them (ibid).

In the hands of the invaders many children suffered a loss of identity, depression, violence, low self-esteem and loneliness (Creative Spirits 2014).
Aborigines in Australia have suffered since the very beginning of European settlement (AIATSIS 2014). In the 1950s, in an attempt to redress the problems indigenous Australians faced, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal activists came together to campaign for the rights for indigenous Australians and to abolish the laws that deprived Aboriginal Australians of civil rights (Australia Government 2013). The law had authorized many crimes against the Aborigines, such as the Stolen Generation (Austlif 2014). There was clearly a breach of human rights, as racial discrimination was evident in the manner in which the colonists dealt with the Aborigines as second-class citizens (Gray 1998). Many indigenous Australians were victims of a violation of human rights as there were laws that intended to eliminate indigenous cultures as a whole, causing cultural genocide (AIATSIS 2014). The grief and loss experienced by Aboriginal people can never be compensated for. The racial division, abuse and violence committed against them has caused a loss in the identity, heritage, spirituality and knowledge of Aboriginal culture (AIATSIS 2014).

After years of struggle, two hundred years of exploitation, Aboriginal people have spoken out about the injustices they have suffered and Aboriginal law has finally been recognised in Australia. In 1975 the Aboriginal Land Rights Act was introduced. This legislation allowed Aborigines to reclaim their ancestral land that was a sacred trust passed from generation to generation (Northern Land Council 2014). But in order for justice to be brought about, the causes of oppression must also be dealt with. The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation as yet fails to address the causes of past inequality. As Gray (1998) argues, racist ideologies need to be tackled in order to combat the injustices of the social political powers. In 2008, the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd apologised to Australia’s indigenous peoples, families and communities that suffered abuse from colonialism, including the ‘Stolen Generations’. The state apologised for laws that had caused sorrow and loss. The apology included a proposition for a policy to remove the gap between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians (Australian Government 2014). Despite this, contemporary situations in Australia show that indigenous people are still the most disadvantaged group: suicide rates are higher, life expectancy is lower compared to an average Australian, female imprisonment has increased and offenders are twenty two times likely to be held in custody (Purdie, Dudgeon & Walker 2010).

In conclusion, colonialism has had a devastating impact on Australian indigenous people. It has ripped the core spirituality of Aboriginal culture and sacred land. The Aboriginal people
lost their sense of identity and home as they were snatched from the land that their ancestors resided in for thousands of years. Aborigines in Australia today still face many problems. Australia denies the cultural genocide of the Aborigines and evidence of racism still exists in Australian society today (Gray 1998). The Aboriginal people suffered racial abuse and dehumanization at the arrival of the white Europeans. Their rights as Indigenous people were ignored and violated and ‘their human rights as a people continually are denied’ (Gray 1998, 188). There are many challenges facing indigenous people in Australia today as they live in remote areas, live in poverty, have poorer health and have little educational and employment opportunities. Alongside this, many suffer negative social attitudes and abuse whilst in police custody (Skiwrk Online Education 2014). The effect of the Stolen Generation can still be witnessed today, as children who were taken from their parents age eleven continue to suffer from depression and mental illnesses (Borgen 2014). The consequences of the neglect are not to be overlooked; this is an area that is often dismissed or under reported (Borgen 2014), an area that warrants further research and investigation.

References


