



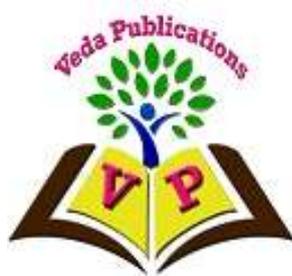
## PLIGHT OF EARLY ABORIGINES: AN EFFORT TO RETRIEVE THEIR LOST CULTURAL IDENTITY AND REPRESENTATION

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### ABSTRACT



From the very beginning, far-reaching incompatibilities were the main factors which led the Europeans and Aborigines being unable to come to terms with each other. The contrast was enormous in that one was 'civilised' and 'sophisticated' and the other considered 'uncivilised' and 'primitive'. Therefore, it was difficult for Europeans and the Aborigines to understand each other's complex societies, habits, intelligence and social values. To the Aborigines, an intrinsic part of their life was deep emotional attachment to the land, which had mythical and social values of considerable significance. They had lived for centuries as hunters and gathers in communes. While the white civilisation was based on the sanctity of private property, the Aboriginal culture was based on primitive communal society, where sharing food and everything else was regarded as being quite normal and acceptable. Therefore, the Aborigines was unable to comprehend that when he took white man's property, he was stealing, and not merely using the particular item as a public property.

**Keywords** *Identity Representation, Cultural loss, Stolen Generation, Genocide, Terra nullius etc.*



From the very beginning, far-reaching incompatibilities were the main factors which led the Europeans and Aborigines being unable to come to terms with each other. The contrast was enormous in that one was 'civilised' and 'sophisticated' and the other considered 'uncivilised' and 'primitive'. Therefore, it was difficult for Europeans and the Aborigines to understand each other's complex societies, habits, intelligence and social values. To the Aborigines, an intrinsic part of their life was deep emotional attachment to the land, which had mythical and social values of considerable significance. The entire continent had mythical signs and values related to their tribal system and status. They were completely dependent on land for their dreams and aspirations. Though it, they had acquired their inspirations for art, music, dancing, and other forms of cultural standing and lived in comparative harmony with their environment. Their lives were not at all simple. They were with harsh climate, inhospitable land, droughts, and fires; they had a lot to contend with. Despite all the adversities, they lived in relative peace and harmony until the arrival of the Europeans. From the moment Aborigines realised that Europeans had come not just to visit them but to settle permanently, the Aborigines regarded the intrusion into their lives with disdain. Many took up their primitive weapons and fought for their existence. Due to the fact that they were unable to organise themselves into a fighting force and were against sophisticated British firing power, they were crushed. Later, most Aboriginal attacks became mere skirmishes on guerrilla basis; they seldom succeeded in pinning the enemy.

To Australian Aborigines, land was the most important issue then as now. They were intimately familiar with all aspects of it, as their dependence was directly related to it. Their everyday living demanded that they should have adequate knowledge of land. They were in harmony with all living creatures around them. Through mythical beliefs and dreaming their natural world was included in their social world. Ceremonial sites were of particular significance, unlike other areas for hunting and gathering. Not only the ceremonial sites but also the whole concept of land was sacred to them. Their mythical beliefs came very close to

creation of land, and since myth was closely related to their socio-religious terms, land became the sacred issue in an Aboriginal culture. In British terms, land was a God-given gift to them. It was highlighted by special significance and related to their sacred beliefs with spiritual importance. Land was an inalienable and incontrovertible right of possession. Spiritual linkage to land by birth thrust a particular tribe to a sector of land, which facilitated food, ceremonial sites, and everything else for everyday living. Even today, landowning groups can be easily identifies all over Australia. Land holding was a spiritual phenomenon, only truly held by mythical beings. Their human representations were granted a lien on land to hold not for themselves and their future off springs but for the dead as well. There was definite ownership linkage through birth, myth, and death. Land title was held by signifying ritual emblems possessed by a particular tribe who had relevant claim. The title was not transferable. It was inalienable heritage of the particular tribe.

They had lived for centuries as hunters and gathers in communes. While the white civilisation was based on the sanctity of private property, the Aboriginal culture was based on primitive communal society, where sharing food and everything else was regarded as being quite normal and acceptable. Therefore, the Aborigines was unable to comprehend that when he took white man's property, he was stealing, and not merely using the particular item as a public property. Such an act did not warrant punishment. In his society, everything was public property. This, of course, landed him in a lot of trouble with the white society, who could not understand the ancient Aboriginal culture of shared property.

Hot climate necessitate daily hunting, as no food could be stored for any length of time. They all shared in fishing, hunting, and gathering available plants and seeds. In those circumstances, they had very little time to do anything else. Every activity related to the commune rather than the individual. Their system of living and any form of government were quite informal. There was no chief or king or leader as such. If the clan was not sanctioned by an elder on matters of misdemeanour or disputes, they were left to float along very much like the unstable



nature and variations of the environment. People were not static. Ecology played a part, where they were bound together in the scale of nature in complex relationships. There was no competition, little violence, and they lived in comparative peace. They developed a classless society, where struggle for anything else other than food would be no longer an issue. They buffeted round in a constantly transforming environment which sometimes brought about for the betterment.

Against this attitude to life, they were persuaded by the white society to be 'civilised', whenever they were conquered or whenever they came into contact with white missionaries or station owners. Naturally, it was a giant leap for them to adapt. Those who did not want to be 'civilised' were possibly shot or cleared away from the white environment by using deceptive strategies. Since the white men placed no value on the black women's consent, women were taken as they pleased. The Aboriginal girls were viewed as sexual commodity to be used by pastoral workforce of both whites and black stockman as they deemed fit. They ended up with all the vices and diseases of the white society. The Aborigines, then as now, could not overcome the huge obstacles which confronted them. This was largely due to the fact that the white society had mistakenly assumed that the Aborigines had no culture and badly needed civilising. Later, they systematically had begun to assimilate them and their children into the white culture, which the Aborigines consistently tried to reject. Others, such as the outback station owners and missionaries, merely regarded them as part of the environment which was there for them to exploit.

It is, therefore, no wonder that the Aborigines felt the undesirable, which up to this day they have constantly resisted. Above all, the new generation has not lost the sight of regaining their rightful ancestral lands, most of which have been irretrievably lost to white Australians. Despite the High Court decision in 1992 in Mabo Case, this at last re-established, inter alia, that indigenous people were the original inhabitants of Australia, and, therefore, the ownership of land rested with them, successive governments have not had the courage and moral fortitude to strictly implement the High

Court's decision. Meanwhile, between 1788 and 1802, Pemulwuy waged a guerrilla war against the British settlement, and because of his resistance to the invaders, he became one of the most remembered and written about historical figures in Australian Indigenous History. He was regarded as a courageous resistance fighter. Pemulwuy, a Bidjigal man from the Botany Bay area, saw the damage done to Aboriginal society by the colonisers and was not tempted to befriend them as Arabanoo and Bennelong has done. He led many attacks on the settlement from Botany Bay to the Parramatta area and later to Toongabbee. In 1790, he speared a much disliked convict gamekeeper by the name of John McIntyre and was then wanted for murder. In a battle in 1797 at Parramatta, he was shot and hospitalised but escaped to the delight of his community. Wanted dead or alive, Pemulwuy was finally shot dead in 1802 and his head was sent to England. His son was Tedbury was taken prisoner in 1805. About one hundred years after Philip, the misconception that Aborigines never legally 'occupied' Australia was put to rest by the Mabo decision by the High Court. Previously, judges were bound to follow the legal precedent that Australia was terra nullius (unoccupied) at the time of the settlement, and therefore, all Aboriginal land and belonged to the Crown. Mabo Case recognised the principle of enduring native right.

Of all the white governors who encouraged colonial expansion was Macuarie along with Austria, Sydney and Melbourne. Macuarie was a giant amongst them. He brought not only ordered expansion and prosperity to the colony but also gave dignity to his own people. For those who were lazy and discontented, he did not hide his contempt for them. He travelled widely and was received with affection and respect by most people, especially those who were in the lower rung of the society. Perhaps, these were all the reasons why Australian Stories contain the names and images of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people now deceased. The Indigenous cultures of Australia forms the oldest living cultural history in the world. They go back at least 50,000 years and some argue closer to even 65,000 years. Aboriginal Australians are legally defined as people who are members of the



Aboriginal race of Australia. They are believed to be descendants of the first group of humans to migrate out of Africa about 72,000 years ago. Being the first humans to arrive in Australia about 50,000 years ago; the Aborigines discovered Australia. They were the first human inhabitants of Australia. These Aboriginal people are collectively referred to as the 'Stolen Generations' because several generations were affected. Many Aboriginal people are still searching for their parents and siblings. The term Stolen Generations is used for Aboriginal people forcefully taken away (stolen) from their families between the 1890s and 1970s, many to never to see their parents, siblings or relatives again. Because the period covers many decades we speak of 'generations' (plural) rather than 'generation' This is the most burning worry for members of the Stolen Generations. In removing their children white people stole Aboriginal people's future. Language, tradition, knowledge, dances and spirituality could only live if passed on to their children. In breaking this circle of life white people hoped to end Aboriginal culture within a short time and get rid of 'the Aboriginal problem'. In the early 20th century under the assimilation policy white Australians thought Aboriginal people would die out. In three generations, they thought, Aboriginal genes would have been 'bred out' when Aboriginal people had children with white people.

It was a presumption for many years that the Aboriginal girls would grow up and marry nice white boys. The secret agenda behind them was that they would have nice fairer children who, if they were girls, would marry white boys again and eventually the colour would die out. That was the original plan - the whole removal policy was based on the women because the women were considered as breed machine. Adult Aboriginal people resisted efforts to be driven out of towns by simply coming back. But children taken away were much easier to control. "I grew up feeling alone, a black girl in a white world, and I resented them for trying to make me white but they couldn't wash away thousands of years of dreaming.(Aunty Rhonda Collard, member of the Stolen Generations "(10).

Aboriginal children who were taken away also fed the insatiable demand for station workers and domestic servants. Without these cheap, and often

unpaid, labourers white Australians wouldn't have been able to build the wealth and infrastructure that helped them prosper. This is where the Stolen Generations and the stolen wages become one story. Authorities also took children away pretending that Aboriginal parents would neglect them. There is evidence, however, that kids were malnourished or starving because Aboriginal people were not paid the full wages they were owed.

Kinship influences marriage decisions and governs much of everyday behaviour. By adulthood people know exactly how to behave, and in what manner, to all other people around them as well as in respect to specific land areas. Kinship is about meeting the obligations of one's clan, and forms part of Aboriginal Law, sometimes known as the Dreaming. Language is vitally important in understanding Indigenous heritage as much of their history is an oral history. Hundreds of languages and dialects existed (although many are now extinct), and language meaning, as well as geographic location, is used today to identify different groups. Tools and implements reflect the geographical location of different groups. For example, coastal tribes used fishbone to tip their weapons, whereas desert tribes used stone tips. While tools varied by group and location, Aboriginal people all had knives, scrapers, axe-heads, spears, various vessels for eating and drinking, and digging sticks.

Aboriginal people achieved two world firsts with stone technology. They were the first to introduce ground edges on cutting tools and to grind seed. They used stone tools for many things including: to make other tools, to get and prepare food, to chop wood, and to prepare animal skins. After European discovery and English colonisation, Aboriginal people quickly realised the advantages of incorporating metal, glass and ceramics. They were easier to work with, gave a very sharp edge, and needed less resharpening. In most stories of the Dreaming, the Ancestor spirits came to the earth in human form and as they moved through the land, they created the animals, plants, rocks and other forms of the land that we know today. They also created the relationships between groups and individuals to the land, the animals and other people. Once the ancestor spirits had created the world, they



changed into trees, the stars, rocks, watering holes or other objects. These are the sacred places of Aboriginal culture and have special properties. Because the ancestors did not disappear at the end of the Dreaming, but remained in these sacred sites, the Dreaming is never-ending, linking the past and the present, the people and the land.

For Aboriginal people all that is sacred is in the land. Knowledge of sacred sites is learned through a process of initiation and gaining an understanding of Aboriginal law. It is, by definition, not public knowledge. This is why the existence of many sites might not be broadcast to the wider world unless they are threatened. Perhaps the most well-known sacred site in Australia is Uluru. Located in the centre of Australia, southwest of Alice Springs, the first European explorers named it Ayers Rock. The caves inside the rock are covered with Aboriginal paintings. In 1985 the Commonwealth Government of Australia returned Uluru to its traditional owners, Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara people (also known as Anangu). Ceremonial performances are seen as the core of cultural life. For example, for Tiwi Islanders, these performances bring together all aspects of their art - song, dance, body decoration, sculpture and painting. Music, song and dance was and is still today a very important part of Aboriginal life and customs. There were songs for every occasion, some of which were expressed in special ceremonies. Songs and dances were exchanged often at large ceremonial gatherings when many people gathered together and when trade goods were also exchanged. These gatherings often occurred at a time and place when there was plenty of food. Dance is a unique aspect of ceremonies which is learnt and passed down from one generation to another. To dance is to be knowledgeable about the stories of the ancestral heroes although dancing, unlike painting and singing, is learnt at an early age. This allows large groups of people to demonstrate their clan rights in front of an audience. Dance is also seen as an occasion to entertain and to be entertained and through the work of dance to show their love for families and kin. It is for this reason that dance may be performed at the end of every day in some communities.

The colonisers would have acknowledged the sovereignty of the Aborigines over the land and also

the laws, but they never did it. The Aborigines were ignorant about the European laws and so were the Europeans. This certainly created the conflict between the two. A magistrate Edward John Eyre rightly reported that because of this ignorance, the relationship between two communities became estranged and tensed. He observed that: "In declaring the native British subjects and making them response to British laws, Indigenous people were placed in an anomalous position of being made amenable to laws of which they are quite ignorant, and which, at the same time did not afford them the slightest redress from any injuries they may receive at the hands of Europeans. This arose from their being unable legally to give evidence in a court of justice, and from it's rarely happening that any aggressions upon them take place in the presence of other Europeans who might appear as witness for them.... It is impossible to explain to the natives the reason of their being unable to give evidence; only see that their own people are always punished for offences, that the Europeans almost always escape"(Aboriginal Australia:61).

Thus it is evident that Aborigines and Europeans had in fact master and slave relationship where slave had no permanent dwelling place and were shifted as the master shifted. The Aborigines had no right to live on place of their choice. They were always removed from one place to the other so that they could not claim a permanent residential place. The special areas were notified for them where they could live a life like the cattle or sheep. These places were called 'Reserves'. The legal system of Australia was used to deny Aboriginal people their fundamental human rights and it continued to do so, Aborigines were forced to live on 'reserves', 'settlements', and 'missions',. Those Aborigines who demanded their rights were oppressed. As late as 1962, the Council for Aboriginal Rights found that the Director of Native Title Affairs in Queensland may cause any Aborigine "to be removed from any district to a reserve and kept there. He may also cause any Aboriginal on a reserve to be removed to another reserve and kept there"(Aboriginal Australia: 61).

The above issues have altered the terms of political thinking through a small but vocal group in the Australian society and thereby corrupted any



progressive visions of Australian politicians in power for the time being. It has still extended the demographic distance between the white and the black Australians. Australian history remains dark as far as Aborigines are concerned. The leaders of Aborigines have been fighting for their lost identity, belongingness, cultural loss and so on. In this direction, various Aboriginal writers came forward to present their issues through different genres. They feel that Old Australia (Aboriginal land) was changing and the general paradigm was shifting. Industrialised civilisation had materially transformed the Aboriginal land into the land of 'empty. The myths of the bush, the mateship, the value given to land, Dream Time, the beliefs they hold for the creator, were disappearing.

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