

みんなくりポジトリ

国立民族学博物館学術情報リポジトリ National Museum of Ethnology

About Aboriginality : questions for the Uninitiated

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2009-04-28 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Taylor, Russell メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	https://doi.org/10.15021/00002809

About Aboriginality: questions for the uninitiated

Russell TAYLOR

*Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies
Canberra, Australia*

Between 56,000 and 68,000 years ago a man died in a locality that is now identified as south-eastern Australia.¹ The discovery of his remains in 1974 was significant for a variety of reasons, not least that his 'delicate' skeletal features, unlike the skeletal features of others found in the locality until that time, were very similar to those of many contemporary Australian Aboriginal people, and his burial involved the use of red ochre which remains a significant element in the artistic, philosophic and religious activities of many Aboriginal peoples today. Among the questions which might flow from knowledge of this man's death (and life) are: how would he have conceptualized his identity? And would its construction have been completely unfettered and free of the influences and impositions of others?

In contemporary Australia the notion of Aboriginal identity, or Aboriginality, is for many including myself an intensely personal concept. It is not only extremely complex and emotive but, in the context of its construction, usage and definition by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal social actors, it is still evolving. The concept is applied in a wide range of social, political, academic, scientific, judicial, governmental and other contexts, in attempts to articulate a complexity of meanings. Such meanings may indicate a classification or category of identity of a person who is an Australian Aborigine, but may also imply shared cultural identity, philosophy and values applying to and within the Australian Aboriginal community or population, taken as a whole.²

Debates about Aboriginality

Aboriginality is a notion that has inevitably been associated with a debate concerning 'traditional' versus 'non-traditional' (or otherwise described) aspects of Aboriginal identity. Such a debate inherently focuses on a suite of attributes which are perceived to act as indicators of identity and/or culture, including descent, skin color, physical features, lifestyle, values, customs, language, beliefs, dress and behaviors. To a significant degree, such a discussion invites views about all aspects of Aboriginal existence, cultures and cosmology. Such views must take into account the 200 years or more of colonial history, and the cumulative effects of colonialism in Australia. They must also have regard to the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and to the oppression, survival, continuity and revival of those cultures.

Langton (1993: 11) has reminded us that 'Aboriginal cultures are extremely diverse and pluralistic. There is no one kind of Aboriginal person or community'. Further, she has

highlighted the historical context of the concept of Aboriginality in stating that ‘before Cook and Phillip, there was no “Aboriginality” in the sense that is meant today’ (ibid.: 32). Similarly Ariss (1988), in his analysis of work by Aboriginal writers, characterizes them as a sector or loci of production of an Aboriginal discourse which has influenced, and continues to influence, the construction of Aboriginality.³ As with Langton, Ariss’ study also highlights the recent construction of Aboriginality, in the context of the initial and ongoing contact between Aboriginal peoples, the British and others, and the emergence of an even more recent concept of a pan-Aboriginal identity.

An important issue arising from Ariss’ findings is well illustrated by the following:

Aboriginal writers are conscious of the contradictions and difficulties associated with experimentation in written media. The tension between the old and the new is again a concern. It is the political status of Aborigines within a dominating culture that necessitates their taking up the discursive practices of that culture in order to assert its separate identity while simultaneously building communication with that culture. (ibid.: 138)

Ariss contends that it is such political imperatives that foster the growth of Aboriginal control of the production of discourse, which will lead to the construction of a ‘truer Aboriginality’ (ibid.).

Langton has insightfully described the evolving nature of the construction of the concept of Aboriginality as an ‘inter-cultural dialogue’ achieved through the ‘experiences of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people whether in actual lived experience or through a mediated experience’ in a temporal continuum, whereby ‘Aboriginality is remade over and over again in a process of dialogue, imagination, representation and interpretation’ (Langton 1993: 81).⁴ However, in my view, this process of dialogue also has the ability to bypass Aboriginal Australians. For example, Aboriginal rights advocate, the late Kumantjayi Perkins, in recounting his childhood experiences in Adelaide, South Australia, paints a provocative picture in describing the circumstances around the initial personal revelation and recognition of his own Aboriginal identity. Perkins, on arrival as a schoolboy in Adelaide from Alice Springs, was slated for being racially different, and specifically, for being a ‘nigger’ by non-Aboriginal people. He recalled: ‘I did not know what racism was when they chased me down the street as a nigger, I did not know who the nigger was, *I did not know that I was the nigger!*’ (emphasis added).⁵

Perkins’ experience somewhat mirrors my own experience of living and growing up on the Sydney waterfront in the 1950s. In the low socio-economic, inner-city, suburban environment which was the setting for my childhood and early teenage years, several significant aspects and influences of difference, including racial, religious and political difference, were encountered, explored and, indeed, employed by me through a daily contesting of relationships, representations, behaviors and language. To my knowledge, my family was the only Aboriginal family or group living in the immediate local community.⁶ With the strengthening recognition of my own Aboriginality, such daily interaction increasingly invited actions and responses by me - usually taking the form of

my parrying and attempting to refute mistaken, misguided or deliberately racially denigrating views - aimed at asserting my own identity, difference and specialness as an Aboriginal.⁷ It was an identity most commonly determined and expressed as 'part-Aboriginal' and even 'half-caste' by 'part-Australian' others (mainly Anglo-Australians) most of whom had never met an Aboriginal person apart from myself and my immediate family. It is therefore from these early experiences that my views are derived, and I express them in this chapter in the guise of what is commonly referred to by some commentators as an 'urban Aborigine'.

McKeich's statement that: 'urban Aboriginal "society" and "culture" must be seen as complete, integrated and consistent systems relevant to their members - not merely as a truncated (or castrated) version of any other socio-cultural systems' (cited in Langton 1981: 20) is totally supported by my own view born of experience. I am passionate about the need for the separate and distinct nature of urban Aboriginal identity and culture to be recognized as authentic in its own right, in the same way as the integrity and authenticity of the identity and culture of Aboriginal people who happen to reside in what is sometimes termed 'remote' Australia is recognized.⁸

On the same theme, Sutton's description of the construction and historical nature of Aboriginal identity is also of considerable value, not only in relation to an 'urban' Aboriginal identity but also in relation to the concept of a pan-Aboriginal identity. Sutton states:

Urban Aboriginal history construction is a statement, moral and political, about the suffering, resilience, and persistence of a colonised and displaced people, but it is also a search for a background and underpinning to what must now be assumed to be an indefinite state of future difference. In this sense it is the creation, as much as the explanation, of a separate identity...the past is also the present...the Aboriginal person is likewise the historical Aborigine – not merely the survivor but the embodiment of the scarifying processes of conquest, dispossession, resettlement, missionisation and welfareism. (Sutton 1988: 261)

In December 1999, an Aborigine, Mr Geoff Clark, a Tjapwuurong man from Western Victoria, was elected Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the peak indigenous advocacy and representative body at the federal level in Australia.⁹ Mr Clark was described in the media (front page) as a 'fair-skinned blue-eyed radical – a man many people find difficult to accept is, in fact an Aborigine'. Further, 'there will be a lot of attention and cynicism – about his ancestry'. In response, Clark is quoted as saying:

I've always copped it about my colour ... people say 'you can't be an Aborigine'. But that's one of the rights we've got to fight for. But I'm not worried about the attention. Why should I? I'm accepted by my own community, now I've been accepted by the ATSIC Board. That's good enough for me. (Anon. 1999b: 1)

From a strictly Aboriginal perspective, Langton's analysis, Perkins' poignant recollections, and Clark's emphatic assertions, together with my own experience, all

serve to highlight and reinforce the point that Aboriginality is simultaneously a biological, racial, cultural, spiritual, political, social and of course, academic construct. It has been recreated endlessly by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators and selectively (re)invented and (re)invoked to match a dynamic and diverse set of social, political and other situational contexts. Until recently, however, such (re)inventions and (re)invocations of Aboriginality have overwhelmingly lain in the domain of non-Aboriginal individual and institutional constructionists. This historically accrued bias or imbalance of white over black, or *etic* over *emic*, standpoints has been noted with considerable and growing concern by the indigenous (and indigenous academic) community.

On this issue I am in total agreement with my Aboriginal colleague, Ian Anderson (1997: 4) who feels that this imbalance is a function of the history of black/white power relationships in Australia, exacerbated in my view by the minimal, albeit increasing, degree of Aboriginal participation in academia.¹⁰ Significantly, Anderson (*ibid.*) writes: 'It is taken-for-granted that non-Aboriginal Australia has the right to dissect and define Aboriginalities – a privilege that is rarely reciprocated'. In Anderson's view, this imbalance or propensity for non-Aborigines to define Aboriginal identity is exacerbated by unfair criticism and ridicule of Aboriginal views on the subject, even to a point where some non-Aboriginal academics have sympathetically declared the study of and writing about Aboriginality to be 'an epistemological no-go zone' (*ibid.*: 5).¹¹ Nevertheless, we Aboriginal people know who we are. We have been placed in a position of having to defend our position of self-knowledge, not only to challenge and shift perceptions and thereby to adjust the historically accrued imbalance with our own constructions and not simply to form a binary opposition, but more importantly, to assert a certain primacy and even exclusivity of our own standpoints.

The current three-pronged definition of Aboriginality, developed since the late 1960s and accepted by the Federal Government, involves the existence of Aboriginal descent, self-identification and recognition by the relevant Aboriginal community.¹² This definition, considered by Langton (1993: 29) to be more 'social than racial', represents a move away from earlier definitions based on perceived proportions of Aboriginal blood and degrees of blackness. It sits fairly comfortably with the Aboriginal community because of a sense of community ownership of the assumptions that underpin the definition.

Aboriginal arguments around the concept of Aboriginality are currently being driven not only by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perceptions of Aboriginality in an open or 'external' debate, but also, perhaps to a lesser extent, by a partially closed or 'internal' debate or discourse within the Aboriginal community. This internal debate is driven to some extent by competition for resources and, importantly, disputes over the rights to represent and to be able to 'speak for' Aboriginal people on a range of key issues.¹³ These disputes involve the posing of questions and the airing of issues which explore both the integrity and the diversity of certain elements and arguments which constitute and underpin Aboriginality, and which go to the question of what is, and who can rightfully claim, Aboriginality.

Cowlshaw and Morris (1997) provide a cross section of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal perspectives on aspects of Aboriginality, including discussions of the issue of denial of Aboriginality by some Aboriginal people.¹⁴ The reasons for denial are diverse and complex. For some, it is a way to escape the effects of racial discrimination and/or to improve access to socio-economic opportunities, for others it is a means to achieve or enhance individual freedom from the intrusive and pervasive control of the state. This issue has become a component of the Aboriginality debate even to the extent of disputes arising within families, as some descendants seek to reclaim an Aboriginality previously self-denied by their parents and/or grandparents, and even, in some instances, continuing to be denied by their siblings.

In the context of any ongoing debate, and particularly from an Aboriginal community perspective, developments at a national level during the past decade (such as the impact of the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the 1997 Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families) have ensured that the debate over identity has become perhaps more complex both in its external and internal nature and scope. In this context Beckett (1994) has highlighted the recent intense public (external) and private (internal) interest in the construction of Aboriginality. This has involved an ongoing national and international debate over human rights, individual and group equality, ethnicity, nationalism and, particularly in the Australian context, multiculturalism. Such discourse and interests have glaringly exposed, in the public domain, some fundamental questions including: what attributes constitute an Aboriginal identity? What are the historical determinants in the development of this identity? In particular, what has been the role of the state in the development of this identity?

I concur with Langton's view that 'different urban Aboriginal communities have their distinctive cultural histories and histories of white contact, but a common "Aboriginality"' (Langton 1981: 17). Most Aboriginal views of cultural identity, to my mind, would certainly attest to a notion of a shared or common cultural experience, having both inner (essentialist) manifestations and outer manifestations (affirmation), each heavily influenced by kinship relationships and the concomitant history of colonial oppression and associated factors.

It is within this history of the colonial experience of Aboriginal peoples, that the role of the state in the construction of Aboriginal identity has been and remains most influential and cannot be understated. Most studies of Aboriginality (by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal commentators) recognize the progressive historical nature of attempts by the State, and other associated institutions with state approval, to shape Aboriginal identity with varying degrees of success. In my view, the key issues sitting alongside the concept of identity have to do with the rights of Aboriginal people – or more specifically the denial of such rights by the State.

In the context of the historical and ongoing denial of our rights, recognition of the right to define our own identities is supported by international conventions and the specific provisions of the United Nations Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Article 8, in particular, provides that Indigenous peoples have the right to their

own distinct identities. This right to identify ourselves as Indigenous peoples, as Dodson (1994: 5) points out, is part of 'the broader right to self-determination; that is, the right of a people to determine its political status and to pursue its own economic, social and cultural development'.

However, although the right to control identity by Indigenous people is recognized and supposedly protected through international human rights covenants (of which Australia is a signatory), the gap between rhetoric and reality in Australia is significant. Dodson maintains that the issue of lack of control over our identity lies 'at the core of the violation of our rights' (*ibid.*). In Australia, the state has been and remains reluctant to fully honor the provisions of such international conventions and agreements. As a recent example, the amendments to the Native Title legislation enacted in Australia have been internationally condemned as being racially discriminatory, a matter which appears to be of little concern to the current Government which has, subsequent to the amendments, faced an election and been returned to office.

The omnipresent and oppressive role of the state has been discussed in various studies, including those of Beckett (1988) and Morris (1988 and 1997), who provide valuable insights, not only into the role of the state and resistance on the part of Aborigines, but also into the shaping of identity. In particular, Morris' Foucauldian approach to the power relationships between the dominant state and oppressed Aboriginal communities is of special interest. The following words by Wood, in supporting Morris' views about a historical process of 'encapsulation' (by the state) which resulted in the 'encompassment' of traditional Aboriginal culture and customary law, provide a vibrant description of Aboriginality-as-resistance - and particularly so when considered in an 'urban' context. Thus, encapsulation by the state

did not simply lead to the collapse of Aboriginal culture in the face of white settlement, but that operating within the context of this encompassment was the process of involution whereby small communities managed to sustain a tenacious identification with their Aboriginal heritage. This had the latent potential to develop into a reconstituted identification with Aboriginality as a social and political force through a series of oppositional acts and interpretations of white hegemonic norms. (Wood 1997: 101)

The primacy of Aboriginal standpoints

Thus far this chapter has sketched some of the issues in the ongoing debate about the concept of Aboriginality. However, at the end of the day I would emphasize the point that any such debate must be left for adjudication by Aboriginal people ourselves.

Two significant points emerge. First, any discourse or debate about Aboriginality must include the mandatory condition that, for any person to claim Aboriginality, a biological connection must exist. That is, as a fundamental and critical threshold test for any claim to Aboriginality, a person must be a descendent of another Aboriginal person. Without such a biological connection, any claim, irrespective of the weight of any other supporting arguments, appears to me to be unsustainable. I am obviously no convert to

the 'New Age' suggestions about the existence of any universal, primordial 'Aboriginal within', as espoused in the works of Arden, Tacey, et al. (see Grossman and Cuthbert 1998: 775-776). As far as I am aware there is little argument in the Aboriginal community against biological connectedness as a criterion.¹⁵ Secondly, integral to the emerging debate is another critically significant issue, that is, the nature of what has been termed 'lived experience' by Langton (1993) and others.

This 'lived experience' is the essential, perennial, excruciating, exhilarating, burdensome, volatile, dramatic source of prejudice and pride that sets us apart. It refers to that specialness in identity, the experiential existence of Aboriginal people accrued through the living of our daily lives, from 'womb to tomb' as it were, in which our individual and shared feelings, fears, desires, initiatives, hostilities, learning, actions, reactions, behaviors and relationships exist in a unique and specific attachment to us, individually and collectively, because and only because, we are Aboriginal people(s).

The 'lived experience' adds significant diversity and considerable dimension to biological connectedness, a key feature underpinning this experience being kinship.¹⁶ Anderson has commented on 'the importance of identity as a relation of bodies, practices and the past' (Anderson 1997: 12), and on the primacy of kinship. In his writing, he has analyzed and asserted his own Aboriginality by relying on descent, kinship and the associated, strong, local and wider family and extended family connections and relationships which he has referred to as 'lived relationships' (ibid.: 5). I believe that Anderson speaks for most of us when he states that such relationships serve to establish and sustain his identity as an Aborigine in the face of colonialism and the concomitant racial, social and political challenges, barriers and exclusions.

In my view, it is this same diverse, multi-dimensional, empathic significance of lived experience, and of relationships based on kinship, that gives rise to and justifies the growing and strengthening assertions of the primacy and exclusivity of Aboriginal views in the construction of Aboriginality. This lived experience and associated kinship relationships represent a certain 'value-addedness' to Aboriginal standpoints and is the essential and critical (and perhaps obvious) difference between Aboriginal views and those of most non-Aboriginal commentators. It is a value-addedness which cannot be replicated or replaced through teaching or research, irrespective of the degree of rigor, sensitivity and empathy employed, and it is a value-addedness which should not be denied.

In this context, Langton's concept of an 'undifferentiated Other' is pertinent:

There is a naïve belief that Aboriginal people will make 'better' representations of us, simply because being Aboriginal gives 'greater' understanding. This belief is based on an ancient and universal feature of racism: the assumption of the undifferentiated Other. More specifically, the assumption is that all Aborigines are alike and equally understand each other, without regard to cultural variation, history, gender, sexual preferences and so on. It is a demand for censorship: there is a 'right' way to be Aboriginal. This thinking is as much based on fear of difference, as is white Australian racism. (Langton 1993: 27)

While the logic of Langton's view is undeniable, support for the primacy of Aboriginal standpoints about identity still holds sway in my view. What is being sought in the call for a certain primacy of the Aboriginal standpoint is recognition of that unique 'weighted' validity, the value-addedness, of constructions of identity represented in the lived experience underpinned by kinship. We seek the recognition that, wherever and whenever a point in the local or national debate about Aboriginality may be reached which requires adjudication or resolution, the responsibility and legitimacy for such adjudication must be owned and decided upon by the Aboriginal community and not be shared and/or left to non-Aboriginal others.

Assertions about the primacy or supremacy of Aboriginal standpoints in Australia and elsewhere, based upon the value-addedness of our lived experiences are, of course, not new.¹⁷ Dodson's powerful words remind us that:

Alongside the colonial discourses in Australia, we have always had our own Aboriginal discourse in which we have continued to create our own representations, and to re-create identities which escaped the policing of the authorized versions. They are Aboriginalities that arise from our experience of ourselves and our communities. They draw creatively from the past, including the experience of colonization and false representation. But they are embedded in our entire history, a history which goes back a long time before colonization was even an issue. (Dodson 1994: 9)

Trask (1991), writing from the perspective of an anthropologist and a native Hawaiian, is extremely critical of non-native (*haole*) academic views and misrepresentations, whose arrogant theories and practices, she asserts, are grounded in western academic colonialism. She accuses academia, and in particular anthropologists, of being 'part of the colonizing horde because they seek to take away from us the power to define who and what we are, and how we should behave politically and culturally' (ibid.: 162). She strongly advocates the existence, strength, place and primacy of native knowledge and forms of history or 'genealogy' which 'are claimed and contested all the time' by both native and non-native peoples. In discussing the recent national native cultural resurgence experienced in Hawaii, Trask points out that such cultural (re)assertion is perceived as a threat by the dominant culture because it challenges hegemony.¹⁸ However, Trask (ibid.: 164) firmly maintains that native knowledge and culture must prevail in this challenge as:

the Hawaiian stands firmly in the present, with his back to the future, and his eyes fixed upon the past, seeking historical answers for present day dilemmas... for the future is always unknown whereas the past is rich in glory and knowledge.

In a significant reference to the value-addedness mentioned earlier, she states that 'Native nationalists' claim to knowledge *is their life experience as Natives*' (ibid., emphasis added).

For the past two decades or more, a similar resurgence in cultural identity with an

ultimate goal of self-determination has been experienced in New Zealand. In this regard, the views of Durie (1998), a Maori of the Ngati Kauwhata and Rangitane tribes, are of considerable relevance. Durie feels that 'Maori self-determination is a shallow goal if a Maori identity is not part of the equation' (ibid.: 79). He highlights the fact that (as has happened in Australia) individuals and communities have sought to (re)establish identity and culture through ancestral tribal affiliations which existed prior to the coming of the Europeans and 'in that sense reflected historical, social and geographic characteristics' (ibid.: 53). Durie's words, which highlight a distinction in the concept of Maori identity between that of a pan-Maori identity and a more specific tribal identity, are compelling:

It is now evident that there is no single Maori cultural stereotype and being Maori may have quite different connotations for various groups. Maori are as diverse as other people – not only in socio-economic terms but also in fundamental attitudes to identity. Nor can a Maori identity any longer be entirely dismissed in favour of a tribal identity. The reality is that some Maori also choose to identify with a particular tribe, others might wish to but have lost access, and others still might be content simply as Maori, with no desire to add a tribal identity. (ibid.: 59)

Durie (1998: 57) refers to the recent commencement of a longitudinal survey which aims to better understand contemporary Maori values and identities by exploring the realities of Maori existence.¹⁹ The survey examines four interacting dimensions: human relationships, Maori culture and identity, socio-economic circumstances and change over time. Significantly, the culture and identity aspect of the survey is considered to represent an amalgam of personal attitudes, cultural knowledge and participation in Maori society. In this context particular attention is being paid to self-identification, knowledge of ancestry, participation in *marae* activities (those of customary social and cultural centers), and involvement with extended family – all aspects of the lived experience referred to earlier in this chapter.

In rejecting past attempts at assimilation, Durie cites access to cultural resources and the resources which nurture culture, together with language revival and the retention, transmission, ownership and control of traditional knowledge, as key determinants of identity, which

does not relegate a Maori cultural identity to an absolute alignment with the past. Cultures change and develop but in shaping a vision for the future the configuration of the past often provides a framework for reconfiguring that future. (Durie 1998: 79)

It is perhaps unnecessary to emphasize that the resources which nurture culture, and which are responsible for the transmission of much traditional and cultural knowledge, in the Australian context as in New Zealand, include of course, those important components of the lived experience, family and kin.

An Australian Aboriginal commentator, has recently stated:

Increasingly, Indigenous Australians are taking positions that assert our right to

debate and determine our own identity (Dodson 1994; Anderson 1994; Huggins 1993). Now we must demand and be 'allowed' to engage in this debate without fear of any negative recourse or consequence from non-Indigenous Australians. We must make and be allowed an 'Indigenous only' space in order to push back or shed those representations made of us by others, and create space where we can discuss this issue and determine how and what representations we wish to make of ourselves. We seek the creation of an Indigenous space where we can debate this matter with the hope that the recorded outcomes won't be over-analyzed (or hijacked) by non-Indigenous academics. This should be a space in which our own vulnerabilities, doubts, confusions and contradictions are not used against us for political purposes or to undermine our right to our cultural identity. (Oxenham 1999: xiv)

While I support the spirit behind Oxenham's words, I fear that in reality the exclusive space she seeks may be unattainable and even undesirable. In this matter, I agree with Hollingsworth (1995) and Morton (1998) that such an exclusive space might limit our capacity to listen, learn and act.²⁰ I believe there is much value in maintaining an ongoing Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal dialogue, but on the basis that within such a dialogue the value-addedness of our views is acknowledged and respected. However, Oxenham has also explicitly emphasized the point that, either within or beyond the Aboriginal community, any assumption about the existence of an homogeneous model of Aboriginality is false. In this I support her call for the universal recognition of the legitimacy of the diversity found in both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginality.

The continuing debate

Against an apparent push by the dominant culture to create stereotypical models of Aboriginality which at times appear totally intolerant of any diversity (and imply non-acceptance of any cultural change over time), the associated debate does not appear to be subsiding. Indeed, it has been somewhat exacerbated by recent socio-political developments at a national level. Time worn arguments and assumptions (some thought redundant by many of us) have been resurrected by politicians and others (and highlighted by the media) which call into question every aspect of Aboriginality, and are associated to a large degree with a perceived need, somehow in the public interest, to sort the 'real' Aboriginals from the rest.²¹

Jakubowicz et al. (1994), discuss the very influential role of the media in supporting what appears to be a racist, 'divide and conquer' agenda by the dominant culture in Australia:

A variation of the expectation frame of disunity is drawn from the long established distinction made by white Australians between Aboriginal people of different ancestry and culture. Old welfare administrations tried to classify and divide people according to 'caste' or skin colour and the concept persists that some people are more Aboriginal than others, either because of their appearance or their lifestyle. The amorphous concept is used by politicians and bureaucrats regularly to impugn the authenticity of their Aboriginal critics. Media reports, however, continue to perpetrate

this framework of interpretation ignoring more substantive elements of disputes to focus on questions of the Aboriginal spokespeople's 'authenticity' and authority to speak. (ibid.: 88)

The emergence of such ethnocentric and, at times overtly racist questioning by the dominant cultural group (sometimes described as a body of 'fair minded' Australians) aimed at Aboriginal people and our supporters, is accompanied by an expectation, an unwritten collective and public demand, meant to coerce us both individually and collectively to conclusively justify, define and defend our identities. At a fundamental level, in the practice of our everyday living, we are forced with a renewed vigor (and growing concern), to attempt to (re)justify, (re)convince and (re)inform doubting others, friend and foe, that which we know to be true about our identities. Too often, despite the weight and quality of our argument and evidence, our audience remains unconvinced.

Invariably, within this discourse we are accused of assuming Aboriginality in order to take advantage of certain perceived benefits, which would otherwise be denied.²² In my view, in adopting a 'balance sheet' approach to this issue, any imagined or real benefit(s) would be clearly outweighed by a host of disadvantages, disclosed through a simple audit of our life-choices and which clearly show that, under any and all socio-economic indicators, Aboriginal people remain the most disadvantaged in the nation.²³ If any benefits flowing from any falsely assumed Aboriginal identity do exist, they are fleeting and problematic at best. However such ill-informed, not to say, racist arguments persist, and are based on stereotypical, albeit heavily disputed models, of who is or is not an Aboriginal person.

By the same token, questions about identity put to Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginal people are driven by concerns which vary from genuine curiosity to flagrant, hostile disbelief. They consistently refer to appearance - a common starting point is, 'You don't look Aboriginal!', or language - 'Can you speak aboriginal?', or cultural behavior including questions about initiation, customs, ceremonies, and dance, such as the almost universal - 'Can you play the didjeridoo?'.²⁴ At times such questions involve intimate probing of details about family and kinship relationships, colour, history, location, spirituality and the like, in order to compare these characteristics and details with 'real' or stereotypical 'ideal' preconstructions. In the context of any internal Aboriginal community debate, however, the significant (and initial) questions are usually family and kinship-related, as these relationships (and knowledge about such relationships) is perhaps the most influential and persuasive marker of identity, confirming, or otherwise, that which in the community sense is already known.

It is both interesting, and somewhat disconcerting from an objective perspective, that in contemporary, multicultural Australia no other group is expected to confront the question of its identity and to go to such lengths in order to establish and justify such identity. The critical questions which arise are: Why is this so and when will it end? I will leave to another paper any attempts at a rigorous qualitative or quantitative analysis and comparisons of the arguments and evidence about the degree of questioning of identity experienced by other, non-Aboriginal cultural groups or individuals. I simply set down

for challenge my view that such questioning of others would be far less frequent, intense and wide-ranging than the public and political scrutiny of and interest shown in the various aspects and characteristics of Aboriginality.

Similarly, and in the interest of brevity, the reasons for this material degree of public questioning of Aboriginality are too complex for analysis here. Suffice it to say that the reasons are grounded in the complexity of power relationships that exist between the colonized but resistant original inhabitants, and the colonizing yet still insecure dominant society. Within such a power relationship, I sense that the dominant society experiences a certain discomfort or disquiet (rather than guilt) about the progressive outcomes of black/white relations in Australia over the past two centuries (irrespective of whether a 'black armband' or 'white blindfold' is applied to its views of Australian history). I also suspect that at the heart of this power relationship is the issue of ownership of and access to land (and associated resource and property rights issues), an emerging issue of the utmost significance in Australia and elsewhere over the past few decades.

On the question of when the level of questioning might abate or even cease, I consider that part, if not all, of the answer is found in Dodson's astute view that, in addition to assisting in control and management of Aboriginal peoples by the dominant State, non-Aboriginal constructions of Aboriginality:

have served a broader purpose of reflecting back to the colonizing culture what it wanted or needed to see in itself. My point is not about whether the content of these images is true or false. The critical point is that they have not been selected because they were true, but rather because the colonizing culture needed to think they were true. In the construction of 'Aboriginality', we have been objects to be manipulated and used to further the aspirations of other peoples. (Dodson 1994: 8)

I believe that only when the dominant culture is mature enough will the questioning subside. That is, the answer lies in the hands of non-Aboriginal others. Only when an uncynical Australian society can unequivocally, in a non-threatened manner and in a spirit of equality, accept the diversity and differences found in Aboriginality or, as Dodson has so caustically expressed it, only when the dominant society can 'throw away its mirror' and accept, without question, 'the assertion of our rights to be different' and allow us to 'practice our difference' (ibid.: 8-9) will the questioning diminish.

This will entail a concerted effort on the part of non-Aboriginal Australia to be wholeheartedly and genuinely prepared to engage with, to learn from, and to empathize and share feelings with its Aboriginal citizenry in order to achieve the degree of maturity required. Such a concerted effort does not necessarily need to be government driven and/or heralded or accompanied by any cathartic pledge or earth-shattering announcement of intentions. As Aboriginal activist, Chicka Dixon, once explained to a former Minister for Aboriginal Affairs: 'There is no need to shout, we are quite intelligent you know!' (Dixon 1999). I believe that Aboriginal Australia will recognize and stand ready to respond to such an effort.

In the context of the further evolution and questioning of the notion of

Aboriginality, I am sure that the primacy and efficacy of the Aboriginal influence in the intersubjectivity of its construction will eventually be recognized. However, for now, I feel that the following description by Beckett of the current state of play in the debate about Aboriginality may hold some relevance:

Instead of an authorized version of Aboriginality in Australia, there has been a medley of voices black and white, official and unofficial, national and local, scientific and journalistic, religious and secular, interested and disinterested, all offering or contesting particular constructions of Aboriginality. It is likely to remain this way. (Beckett 1994: 7)

One can only hope that Aboriginal voices will emerge from within this ‘medley’ to eventually take control of the debate and thereby curb the degree of questioning which until now has been relentless and endless.

In harking back to the 1974 discovery of the Lake Mungo 3 remains, and in attempting to answer certain questions about constructions of identity, one can only speculate about both the distant past and the future.

Yes, Old One, you knew how to live.
 You had no need of white man’s legislation.
 What you could see was yours, supreme,
 The earth and sky out of a dream
 Was your creation. (Davis 1983: 26, 3rd verse)

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Ms Jacquie Lambert in the preparation of this paper. Jacquie’s assistance took the form of both editorial as well as intellectual advice, and her support and encouragement have been invaluable.

Notes

- 1) Skeletal remains known as Lake Mungo 3 were excavated by Dr Alan Thorne in 1974. The remains were subsequently redated using three different methods – Uranium Series (U-series), Electron Spin Resonance (ESR) and Optically Stimulated Luminescence (OSL), and the results announced in May 1999.
- 2) Described by Aboriginal writer Jack Davis (1994: 19) as ‘...Aboriginal people together; and the acknowledging of one another, even if we are strangers. Amidst the sharing of our joys and sorrows our blackness unites us as one people, one together in our Aboriginality’.
- 3) Ariss’ study includes Gilbert, Sykes, Johnson, Coe, Bropho, and Roughsey.
- 4) Langton (1993) has identified Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships and interaction as an ‘intersubjectivity’ made up of three distinct categories: (1) Aboriginal people interacting with other Aboriginal people; (2) the stereotyping, iconizing and mythologizing of Aborigines by non-Aboriginal people without any first-hand knowledge or experience; and (3) the probing, testing interaction between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors which results in ‘imagined models of each other to find satisfactory forms of mutual comprehension’. Langton’s views have been most influential in shaping my views on this matter.
- 5) Quoted from the documentary ‘Freedom Ride (Blood Brothers)’, City Pictures Pty Ltd and

- Australian Film Finance Corporation, produced by Ned Landers and Rachel Perkins (1992).
- 6) The language I experienced expressed a plethora of representational terms, including racial (e.g., abos, half-castes, coons, niggers, wogs, dagos, chows, etc.), religious (e.g., prodos, micks, tikes, etc.), and political (e.g., workers, scabs, comrades, reds, commos, libs, Tories, etc.) references. At that time, as now, the inner city/waterfront suburb of Millers Point primarily comprised non-Aboriginal people who largely earned their living by engaging in shipping and other waterfront-related industries such as stevedoring, seafaring, etc. Most housing was low-cost rental accommodation owned by the then NSW Maritime Services Board. This suburb is now part of what is commonly referred to as 'the historic Rocks area of Sydney', a very fashionable and popular tourist destination. (See Fitzgerald and Keating 1991.)
 - 7) Like Perkins, my identity as an Aboriginal was pre-determined by others, quite independent of my own personal desires, appearance, actions and/or influences. Such pre-determination was based simply on the fact that my family, and in particular my grandmother (locally known as 'Auntie Mary') and father, was both identified and identifiable as Aboriginal (actually Kamilaroi) by the Millers Point community – ergo I was/am Aboriginal (Kamilaroi).
 - 8) As a positive comparison to the negative and culturally suspect 'urban' Aboriginal existence, Aboriginal residents of 'remote' Australia are deemed to exist in a timeless world, unchanged since the dreamtime, whose idyllic lifestyle mirrors the non-Aboriginal view of the 'noble savage', totally in harmony and at peace with the environment. To many non-Aboriginal commentators this is the stereotypical 'real' Aborigine.
 - 9) This election was the culmination of a national electoral process overseen and administered by the Australian Electoral Commission.
 - 10) Interestingly, Jonas (1996: 10-12) has also questioned the role and influence of academia in influencing and reporting on, inter alia, the issue of Aboriginal identity and rights. Jonas feels that the academy has certainly been an important part of the construction of Aboriginal identity and suggests that the quality of the contribution from the academy (after a shaky start grounded in evolutionist and associated social Darwinian and race-related theory) has recently improved, to a point where, in some respects, academia has been instrumental in influencing positive changes in policies and mindsets in the government and non-government sectors.
 - 11) See also Hollingsworth (1995).
 - 12) It is of interest that McCorquordale (1987) has recorded no less than 67 definitions of Aboriginality developed over the past 200 years by the Government (at both Commonwealth and State levels) in legislative and related administrative measures of control over Aboriginal people. Also, an interesting example is found in the Victorian Aborigines Act of 1886 which declared that only 'full-bloods' and 'half-castes' over 34 years of age would be permitted to continue to living on Aboriginal reserves. Men and women black enough to suffer the stigma and deprivations of Aboriginality outside the reserve were suddenly not black enough to stay inside (Dr Inga Gleninnen, 1999 Boyer Lecture, ABC Radio National; cited in Anon. 1999a: 17).
 - 13) Such resource-related issues have to do with the tensions, pressures and disputes surrounding the eligibility of people to claim Aboriginality and thereby to compete for scarce Aboriginal-specific resources (in the form of programme funding support and other measures) provided by both government agencies and community-based, service-delivery organizations. These mainly apply in the day-to-day areas of housing, education and employment.
 - 14) For a compelling Aboriginal insight into this denial (and other matters), see O'Shane (1995).
 - 15) The issue of adoption, in certain circumstances, adds some complexity to the matter.
 - 16) Briefly, suffice it to say that kinship relationships permeate all aspects of Aboriginal existence and understanding, and influence the behavior and attitudes of people in their interactions with kin and others. Generally, in more 'traditional' settings, kinship relations prescribe (in varying

kin and others. Generally, in more 'traditional' settings, kinship relations prescribe (in varying ways) the roles and responsibilities of everyday life and the protocols involved in ceremonial and spiritual activities, even extending to include the choice of marriage partners and behavior between affinal relations (e.g. son-in-law/mother-in-law avoidance). Although in contemporary Aboriginal society kinship relations are less prescriptive than in previous times, they are still generally very important and they are of the utmost significance to identity.

- 17) See, for example, Cowlishaw (1986).
- 18) The concept of cultural resurgence - sometimes referred to as 'ethnogenesis' - also applies in the Australian context. It is a political process involving the construction of a common culture out of cultural diversity - where in contemporary Australia, as elsewhere, the processes of cultural revival and political self-determination have occurred simultaneously (see Stokes (1997: 169-170) who cites the work of Archer (1991), Rowse (1985), Jones and Hill-Burnett (1982)). Trask also highlights the questioning by the dominant culture, including 'from historians and anthropologists to bureaucrats and politicians' (1991: 164), of the authenticity and legitimacy of native people who are said to invent their cultural identities and hegemony for political purposes. This questioning, as a response to a perceived threat to the established hegemony, seeks to impugn native voices and views and to divide the 'real' natives (who are said to exist in a simple, unambiguous reality) from the 'others'.
- 19) The survey is being undertaken over 15 years by the Department of Maori Studies at Massey University, New Zealand.
- 20) In particular, Morton (1998: 138), in commenting about negative aspects of the construction of a 'real' Aboriginal identity in the context of the past relationship between Aboriginal peoples and anthropologists, and supporting continued dialogue between Aboriginals and researchers, quotes Mahmood and Armstrong as stating that 'the best ethnography is created through dialogue rather than being extracted or imposed on people from outside'.
- 21) As one example of many, Dr Mick Dodson refers to an instance in 1988 at the National Congress of the Australian Returned Services League where the Victorian State President, Mr. Bruce Ruxton, together with the National President, Brigadier Alf Garland, called on the Federal Government to 'amend the definition of Aborigines to eliminate the part-whites who are making a racket out of being so-called Aborigines at enormous costs to taxpayers and for some kind of genealogical examination to determine whether the applicant for benefits was a "full-blood" or a half-caste or quarter-caste or whatever' (Dodson 1994: 3). This example was recently mirrored in similar statements associated with 1999 meetings of the Queensland National Party.
- 22) Many so-called 'benefits' are perceived to be associated with the receipt of government funding (particularly social security benefits) which actually derive from our rights as citizens rather than representing any special benefits established specifically for Aboriginal people.
- 23) For example, Aboriginal people represent less than 2% of the Australian population but have a life expectancy of 20 years less than other Australians, are 2-4 times more likely to die at birth, die at a rate of between 3.5 to 4 times more than other Australians (although Aboriginal people have much higher mortality rates for some specific conditions), suffer a death rate from diabetes which is 17 to 20 times higher than other Australians, are over-represented in the criminal justice system by a factor of at least 15, earn less than two-thirds of the national average income (1996 Census figures cited in ATSIC 1998: 34).
- 24) To which question I often respond 'Can you play the piano?'

References

- Anderson, I.
 1994 Black bit, White bit. *Republica*, 1: 113-122.
 1995 Re-Claiming TRU-GER-NAN-NER: Decolonising the Symbol. In P. van Toorn and D. English (eds.) *Speaking Positions: Aboriginality, Gender and Ethnicity in Australian Cultural Studies*, 31- 42. Melbourne: Department of Humanities, Victoria University of Technology.
 1997 I, the 'Hybrid' Aborigine: Film and Representation. *The Australian Aboriginal Studies: Journal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies*, 1: 4-14.
- Anon.
 1999a *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December.
 1999b *The Australian*, 17 December.
- Archer, J.
 1991 Ambiguity in Political Ideology: Aboriginality as Nationalism. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 2(2): 161-170.
- Ariss, R.
 1988 Writing Black: the Construction of an Aboriginal Discourse. In J.R. Beckett (ed.) *Past and Present: the Construction of Aboriginality*, 131-146. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- ATSIC
 1998 *As a Matter of Fact: Answering the Myths and Misconceptions about Indigenous Australians*. Canberra: Office of Public Affairs, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.
- Beckett, J.R.
 1988 Kinship, Mobility and Community in Rural New South Wales. In I. Keen (ed.) *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, 117-136. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
 1994 *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Cowlishaw, G.
 1986 Aborigines and Anthropologists. *Australian Aboriginal Studies: Journal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies*, 1: 2-12.
- Cowlishaw, G. and B. Morris (eds.)
 1997 *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Davis, J.
 1983 *The First Born and Other Poems*. Melbourne: J.M. Dent.
 1994 Aboriginality. In D. Horton (ed.) *The Encyclopaedia of Aboriginal Australia*, 18-19. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Dixon, C.
 1999 Personal Communication.
- Dodson, M.
 1994 The Wentworth Lecture: The End in the Beginning: Re(de)finding Aboriginality. *Australian Aboriginal Studies: Journal of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies*, 1: 2-13.
- Durie, M.
 1998 *Te Mana, Te Kawanatanga: The Politics of Maori Self-Determination*. Auckland: Oxford University Press.

- Fitzgerald, S. and C. Keating
1991 *Millers Point, the Urban Village*. Sydney: Hale and Iremonger.
- Grossman, M. and D. Cuthbert
1998 Forgetting Redfern: Aboriginality in the New Age. *Meanjin*, 4: 770-888.
- Hollingsworth, D.
1995 Aboriginal Studies – An Epistemological No-Go Zone? In P. van Troon and D. English (eds.) *Speaking Positions: Aboriginality, Gender and Ethnicity in Australian Cultural Studies*, 90-99. Melbourne: Department of Humanities, Victoria University of Technology.
- Huggins, J.
1993 Always Was Always Will Be. *Australian Historical Studies*, 25(100): 459-464.
- Jakubowicz, A., H. Goodall, J.A. Martin, T. Mitchell, L. Randall, and S. Seneviratne
1994 *Racism, Ethnicity and the Media*. St Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin.
- Jonas, W.
1996 *The Overview*. Paper presented at Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) public seminar series 1: Identity Rights Part 1, Canberra.
- Jones, D.J. and J. Hill-Burnett
1982 The Political Context of Ethnogenesis: An Australian Example. In M.C. Howard (ed.) *Aboriginal Power in Australian Society*, 214-246. St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.
- Langton, M.
1981 Urbanizing Aborigines: the Social Scientists' Great Deception. *Social Alternatives*, 12(2): 16-22.
1988 Medicine Square. In I. Keen (ed.) *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, 201-226. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
1993 'Well, I Heard it on the Radio and Saw it on the Television': An Essay for the Australian Film Commission on the Politics and Aesthetics of Filmmaking by and about Aboriginal People and Things. North Sydney, N.S.W.: Australian Film Commission.
- McCorquodale, J.
1987 *Aboriginals and the Law: A Digest*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- McKeich, R.
1977 The Construction of a Part Aboriginal World. In R.M. Berndt (ed.) *Aborigines and Change: Australia in the '70s*, 252-265. Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies.
- Morris, B.
1988 Dhan-gadi Resistance to Assimilation. In I. Keen (ed.) *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, 33-64. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
1997 Introduction. In G. Cowlishaw and B. Morris (eds.) *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Morton, J.
1998 Essentially Black, Essentially Australian, Essentially Opposed: Australian Anthropology and Its Uses of Aboriginal Identity. In J. Wassmann (ed.) *Pacific Answers to Western Hegemony: Cultural Practices of Identity Construction*, 355-385. Oxford: Berg.
- O'Shane, P.
1995 The Psychological Impact of White Settlement on Aboriginal People. *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 19(3): 24-29.

- Oxenham, D.
1999 'Preface'. In D. Oxenham, J. Cameron, K. Collard, P. Dudgeon, D. Garvey, M. Kickett, T. Kickett, J. Roberts, and J. Whiteway *A Dialogue on Indigenous Identity: Warts 'n' All*. Perth: Gunada Press.
- Rowse, T.
1985 On the Notion of Aboriginality: A Discussion. *Oceania*, 15(1): 45-46.
- Stokes, G. (ed.)
1997 *Politics of Identity in Australia*. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.
- Sutton, P.
1988 Myth as History, History as Myth. In I. Keen (ed.) *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia*, 251-268. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- Trask, H.-K.
1991 Natives and Anthropologists: The Colonial Struggle. *The Journal of Island Affairs*, (Center for Pacific Islands Studies and University of Hawaii Press), 3(1): 159-167.
- Wood, M.
1997 The 'Breelong Blacks'. In G. Cowlshaw and B. Morris (eds.) *Race Matters: Indigenous Australians and 'Our' Society*, 97-129. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.