



## **God, Indigenous culture and spirituality**

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I asked Sealin Garlett, Chairperson of the Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress, what I should tell the NCYC delegates about indigenous culture and spirituality. The following is a paraphrasing of what he shared.

“You ought to talk about connections. Connectedness is important to aboriginal culture. The identity of any indigenous person is based on this. Aboriginal people were very close to God. Our spirits are connected to the land, and through that we are connected to the Giver of the land. God is the giver of the land. All aboriginal people had a name for God, although we didn’t have a name for Jesus. When the name of God was mentioned, it was really special, like it was a hallowed moment.

As a young boy and growing into manhood we were taught some special language. We had to learn it by heart. It was like a prayer, a bit like the Lord’s prayer. It enabled us to connect to the land, and the old people. It formed a bond.

God gave the aboriginal peoples responsibility to look after the land they lived on – different groups had responsibility for different areas of land. The land tells a story, like where our boundaries are. We never owned the land, we had to use it and care for it, we had a responsibility not to damage it. It was like our life line when we felt a bit sick we would go back and sit down on our land and feel the warmth of belonging and we would reach out for that healing, that’s why sometimes people say our spirits are really hurt through mining, because as custodians we have let down the great spirit, the Giver of the land. The land is crying out, damaged.

We didn’t have a name for Jesus, but I believe that if the missionaries hadn’t come, (and we give thanks to God that they did), God would still have let us know of God’s redemptive plan. Take for example, the tjitty tjitty story. This story comes from the Nyungar people of the South west of WA. This is the story of two men who were out, and one did something accidentally that caused the other one to die, then our law said that the second man had to die, as a punishment. The relatives of the person who died would spear him to death.

But it could be taken to the elders of the tribe, and they would call for a special man. That man was the tjitty tjitty. He would come, and he would listen to the stories of both sides. The accused man would be allowed to stand behind the tjitty tjitty. He had to do exactly the same actions as the tjitty tjitty did. If the tjitty tjitty ducked, he had to copy. The relatives were then allowed to throw spears at the man, with the tjitty tjitty in front. If the man did the same as the tjitty tjitty did, and wasn’t injured, they would say he was innocent. Then the families would come and mourn and cry together.

This is like a bible story. That is the way it is with Jesus too - he came to give us justice and equality, we stand behind him, and he takes the punishment for us. He makes things right, even though a wrong has been done”.

### **Interested?? more info....**

If you're interested in finding out about an indigenous Christian spirituality, you can start by talking to the indigenous delegates, talking to a past participant about going on About FACE (Faith and Culture Exchange) or reading the following books:

Rainbow Spirit Theology: Towards and Australian Aboriginal Theology by the Rainbow Spirit Elders. HarperCollins *Religious*, 1997

The Rainbow Spirit in Creation: A reading of Genesis 1. The Liturgical Press, 2000.

For further indigenous references, check out  
<http://coombs.anu.edu.au/SpecialProj/ASEDA/ASEDA.html>

### **Countering the negative images – Some facts about indigenous people**

There are many negative images and misconceptions about indigenous Australians. Below are some facts that might surprise you. These facts are sourced from the *Racism No Way!* website located at <http://www.racismnoway.com.au>

#### **Fact 1: Indigenous people get the same unemployment benefits as other Australians**

Unemployed Indigenous Australians are entitled to Newstart allowances at exactly the same rate as other unemployed Australians. In over 250 communities more than 30,000 Indigenous people prefer to work for their benefit on Community Development Employment Projects. If they do not turn up for work they do not receive their wages (or benefit) and they are ineligible for other benefits such as rent assistance and health concessions. Many industries, cattle, fishing and pearling, in remote Australia were almost totally reliant on Indigenous workers in their formative years. Location has an important impact on the overall rate of unemployment of Indigenous people as well as limited educational opportunities, an increasing working-age population, a decline in rural industries and lingering prejudice among non-Indigenous employers.

#### **Fact 2: Indigenous people need their own medical services**

For every dollar spent on non-Indigenous Australians only \$1.08 is spent on Indigenous Australians yet they are three times as sick. Indigenous babies are 2-4 times more likely to die at birth than other Australians. Hospital admissions for Indigenous men are 71% higher and for Indigenous women 57% higher than other Australians. Infectious diseases are 12 times higher than the Australian average. Indigenous death rates from diabetes are 12 times higher for men and nearly 17 times higher for women. For Indigenous people

aged 25-44 the risk of death is five times greater. Life expectancy for all Indigenous people is 15-20 years below other Australians.

### **Fact 3: Indigenous education programs address disadvantage**

From 1 January 2000 ABSTUDY, the main Indigenous assistance scheme has offered the same benefits with the same conditions as the equivalent schemes for non-Indigenous students. In addition the Commonwealth Government has a number of programs for **all** disadvantaged groups including isolated students, students with disabilities and those from non-English speaking backgrounds.

In 1997 the year 12 retention rate was 31% for Indigenous students and 72% for other Australians. Contributing to the educational disadvantage of Indigenous students are poor health, poverty, location and cultural factors. Many remote communities have no access to secondary education and English may be a second or even third language.

### **Fact 4: Our backyards are safe from Indigenous land claims**

The Mabo judgement extended the same common law rights to Indigenous people that have been available to other Australians for over 200 years. Native title is no threat to private property. It cannot displace private property including farms and other commercial and residential property. Native title exists only where it has not been previously extinguished by government action and Indigenous people have maintained a connection with the land according to their traditional laws and customs.

### **Fact 5: The ‘Stolen Generations’ affect every Indigenous family**

From the earliest days of British occupation, governments had allowed the removal of Indigenous children from their families. The stolen children were raised in institutions or fostered out to white families ‘for their own good’. The *Bringing Them Home* report concluded that, in the period from 1910-1970 between 10 and 30 per cent of Indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities. Indigenous children removed from their families were almost always taught to reject their identity, culture, language, links to the land and the spiritual life of their former communities. No Indigenous family was unaffected. (Note: Walter Fejo can give a personal perspective on being “taken”, if you care to hunt him out at NCYC).