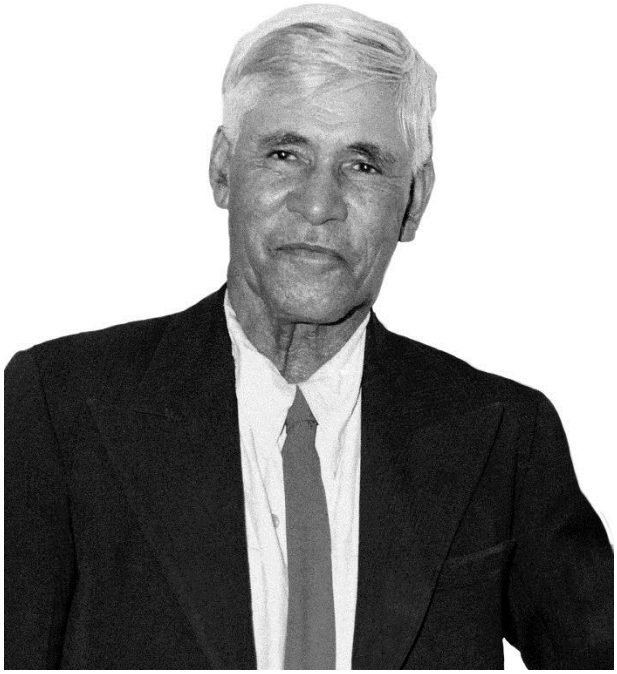
The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1988 Lecture Notes

The Meeting of Two Traditions: Aboriginal Studies in the University - A Murri Perspective

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The Meeting of Two Traditions: Aboriginal Studies in the University - A Murri* Perspective

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It is an honour for me to be invited to give this lecture, a Memorial to an esteemed Aboriginal man of this area, who was committed to understanding and harmony between the two traditions represented here tonight. I thank the Nganyaywana, Gumbaynggir and Dhan-gadi people of this area, and the University of New England, for their welcome.

I would like to introduce myself in the correct manner. I am a Birri Gabba woman, with claims on my Father's Mother's country in what is now North Queensland, and my Mother's Mother's country in central Queensland. I belong to that land. I am entitled to the language, all the stories, and the history of that land.

As Aboriginal people became human in this country, so Aboriginal knowledge and processes of teaching and learning began to develop—long before the last Ice Age, at a time when volcanoes were still active in this land. They have continued to mature since then, generation after generation, always based on the permanence of the land, and the cyclic rhythms of nature. Harmony with the land, knowing it, learning from it as Mother and Teacher, has provided a solid and permanent basis for law, and for harmony with one another.

It has taught us to experience life to the fullest. Through art, song, dance, ceremonies, stories, we have seen knowledge, identity and community strengthened. The potential of each individual has thus been developed to the fullest, in a non-competitive way, so that each person is able to exercise his or her responsibilities to the land and community.

Two hundred years ago, a very different educational tradition intruded into this land. The extent of the difference must be emphasized. It may become clearer if we begin with an example from another British colony.

Two years ago a Canadian born lecturer in the Social Work Department of the University of Zambia, in Australia on sabbatical leave, gave a paper at a Conference of the Australian Association of Social Work Educators.

It was clear that a Social Work Department existed in that University only because British and other western universities had them. The curriculum and text-books came from England and the U.S.A. The Department, predominantly white, was having difficulty finding "problems" in the Zambian community on which to focus their attention. Research on the resolution of disputes in rural villages was regarded as a break-through in providing local content to the course. The graduates rarely went into social work, and showed little interest in staff positions within the Department.

So from an indigenous perspective, it is clear that universities are colonial importations. If we are to relate to them, we need to take a critical look at them.

Other indigenous people have recognized the need to do this. Some ten years ago, Julius Nyerere, until recently President of Tanzania, and formerly a school teacher trained in English institutions, spoke of the growth in awareness which led him to re-define education. For most of his life he had accepted western definitions, but had become increasingly critical of the education systems supposedly based on them, and their usefulness for the people of his country.

The system, he said, tended to turn people into a more marketable commodity—the more education they received, the more money they were worth in the job market. Rather than learning to use tools effectively, they tended to become tools. But turning people into commodities and tools did not make them more human. Africans, he declared, needed to define and control education for themselves.[1]

Murris then have a right and a duty to make their own critique of the University. That critique, rather than posing a threat, has the potential to enrich the University, and help to make it a meeting point for dialogue, and a focal point for the elimination of racism and colonialism. The University of New England, given its rural setting, the proximity of Murris traditionally of this area, and the rural origins of so many of its students, has a special potential and responsibility in relation to those goals.

A Murri Perspective

As I have said, tertiary education in Australia exemplifies a tradition which is very different and in stark contrast to Aboriginal traditions of education. Its origins are colonial, and it still remains part of a western educational empire. It provides employment opportunities and career stepping stones for academics from the U.S.A., U.K., Canada, etc., and markets for their text-books and journals. That easy interchangeability both indicates and perpetuates a rootlessness, a detachment from this land and responsibility for it.

In contrast to our holistic approach, the division into a multitude of disciplines intensifies that detachment, making any link with the land, and at times all reality, even more tenuous. Professor Ted Wheelwright's description of the process whereby economics split so that part of the discipline became "pure" economics, and his critique of its consequent remoteness and impotence seem relevant to many other disciplines.[2]

The staffing requirements of the prevailing industrial, commercial, administrative, educational and other structures, and the expectations graduates - have of employment opportunities and careers, determine much of what happens in universities, as well as the standards whereby individual students and the institution itself are to be assessed. As Nyerere says, graduates become commodities to be offered for sale in a highly competitive market. The prospect of wealth and privilege predominate, rather than that of an enriched humanity.

How then have Aboriginal knowledge and Aboriginal people fared in these institutions? That question should be considered in the broader context of 200 years of colonial occupation of this land, and the process of extermination and exclusion of Aboriginal people. For the first 150 years of occupation, extinction was commonly predicted, initially of Aboriginal people, and then more persistently, of our culture.

Indeed, as recently as 25 years ago, a conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs adopted a policy of cultural extinction, entitled Assimilation, which aimed at having "all Aborigines and part Aborigines...observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians".[3]

That policy later gave way to one of integration, which "recognizes the right of Aboriginal people to live in our community on fully equal terms, but retaining, if they so desire, a separate and identifiable Aboriginal heritage and culture".[4] This was an improvement: but it involved no structural changes, and asked nothing of the white community but tolerance. It allowed Aboriginal people and their knowledge to be placed under the umbrella of "multiculturalism", or, as a recent Australia Post stamp issue suggested, just another group of immigrants. Both of these manoeuvres are, in effect, attempts to mask our status as the indigenous people of this country, to belittle our unique relationship with the land, and to give a facade of legitimacy to colonization.

In this context, early efforts of academics were inspired by a mixture of aims. These included the recording of Aboriginal customs and language before they disappeared; the provision of a basis for the control and manipulation of Aboriginal people, the exploitation of their labour,[5] their removal from land wanted for agriculture or mining: and the acceleration of the process of assimilation. Many of the early studies are characterized by superficiality, paternalism, racism, a preoccupation with peoples' sexual life and a desire to confirm the theories of social Darwinism.

However, progress was made. In 1930, Radcliffe-Brown increased the official estimate of the 1788 Aboriginal population from 150,000 to 300,000.[6] In 1964, Professor Elkin referred to a late 19th century estimate of Aboriginal occupation of Victoria of 400 years as one which "belongs to the past, just as our views today may have to be discarded later".[7]

At that time, few were interested in questions about the past, or even in Murris then living on the fringes of towns and cities. So Professor &antler was able to devote one of his 1968 Boyer Lectures to "The Great Australian Silence".[8] Comparatively, the volume of research and studies published since then on various aspects of Aboriginal life, and relations with white Australia, is quite massive. From an Aboriginal perspective, however, it is a very mixed bag. We are now recognized as having occupied this land for at least 50,000-,rears; the Aboriginal population at the time of white settlement is acknowledged to have been at least 750,000. This makes the contrast with the estimated Aboriginal population of 67,000 in 1901 even more marked, and questions about "Terra nullius" and peaceable occupation, and the barbarism of colonization harder to ignore.[9]

On the other hand, myths generated from earlier studies persist. As recently as last February, the prestigious English newspaper, *The Guardian Weekly*, carried a feature article claiming that Aboriginal people "did not know that a child came from coition (i.e., sexual relations) of a man and a woman", and quoting a contemporary historian's description of us as having had "an almost animal-like level of life".[10]

The silence and insensitivity linger on. The editor of a *New History of Australia* published in 1974, justified the lack of attention given to black/white relations in this widely used textbook, saying "that the Aborigines were just not important in the early history of white settlement".[11] In this year of 1988, the eight courses offered in Archaeology by the University of Sydney's Centre for Continuing Education still deal only with Europe, Greece and Egypt.[12] Only three years ago, it was discovered that the remains of some 200 Aboriginal people removed from a burial site near Broadbeach, on Queensland's Gold Coast, in 1963, had been stored and studied in the Anatomy Department of the University of Queensland for 20 years.[13]

So, from a Muni perspective, while it is good to see the superficiality, paternalism and racism of earlier studies acknowledged, I suspect that, as Elkin graciously acknowledges, much of the present output will be viewed with similar horror 25 years hence. It is still a case of white academics and writers describing us and our culture, generally using western concepts, categories and definitions,

i.e., white terms of reference. Many of the areas of study undertaken still reflect white preoccupations, perspectives and priorities.

Take, for example, the 26 papers published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in 1976, under the title *The Origin of the Australians*.[14] The time, effort and money expended by the contributors in trying to discover how Aboriginal people came to be in this continent causes many of us to shake our heads in disbelief. For us, that is not a question. As I said at the beginning of this lecture, we speak of ourselves as becoming human in this land. The uniqueness of Aboriginal languages lends support to that statement.[15]

In saying that, I am not challenging academics to prove that we came from elsewhere; but rather inviting them to reflect on the origins and implications of this basically white preoccupation. Are they more comfortable dealing with the silent, non-living past, than with living people and traditions? Are they unconsciously trying to minimize our unique relationship with this land? Do they think that in over 50,000 years of continuous living in this country we haven't learnt more important things about this land, about living in it and with one another, which they could share?

I'm afraid this must sound very negative, and perhaps lacking in gratitude to academics involved in developing Aboriginal Studies. I am reminded of a cartoon strip featuring Stanley, a bespectacled cave-man, which appeared in one of our daily papers some years ago. Stanley is shown, hands behind his back, addressing a black cave-man: "I believe in the equality of all men." The black cave-man answers: "Of course!" Stanley wags his finger at him: "Not 'of course', Jackson. You are supposed to say: 'Thank you'".

What I am trying to point out is that, on our time-scale, Aboriginal Studies in white academic circles is in its infancy. Given its history, and the restraints arising from the colonial context, it would be surprising if the quality were much better.

The indigenous people of this country are still waiting for colonial scholars to explore and appreciate the significance of the following facts:

- the borders of more than 300 autonomous areas remained unchanged for thousands of years;
- there were no prisons or armies maintained in our society;
- the natural environment was not destroyed or polluted;
- our ancestors did not have any need to colonize neighbouring lands and people.

It is refreshing to see that some of the better material being published acknowledges both that we have something of value to share with you, and that white perspectives impose a limitation. For example, in his recent book, Understanding Interaction in Central Australia, Kenneth Liberman points out that Aboriginal society, with the priority it gives to maintaining harmony, to consensus, to the non-promotion of self, already measures up well to definitions of a just and humane society proposed by social thinkers.[16]

He also acknowledges that his descriptions "are very much the product of (his) embeddedness in the perspectives of European sociability", and that a Japanese sociologist, for example, might have seen and described things differently.[17]

Writers showing such openness and sensitivity will understand, and in no way be offended, when we say that we have had enough of being defined and described by whites, of having others determine what is relevant and important in Aboriginality. We will say who and what we are. It has taken a long

time for white Australia to reach the point of being ready to hear what we say, rather than what others say about us.

This is a relatively new task for us. For the greater part of our history as people indigenous to this country, we felt no need to make any explicit definition of ourselves. As one Murri said to a recent Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry, "among ourselves, we are only people; it is only when we come into contact with Europeans that we are Aboriginar.[18]

Since colonization, and especially in recent decades, we have had to clarify and confirm our identity for ourselves. Even quite young Murri kids know that they think differently; behave differently; have different values; see the land, their family, old people in ways that are different to white people. And so appropriate Aboriginal ways of behaving, speaking and living are being more explicitly identified and enhanced. And in recent years, for the first time in our history, we are being put in the position of having to describe ourselves to the colonizing society.

This has proved to be an especially difficult task for us. We have little difficulty in doing it, and engaging in appropriate dialogue, with people from other countries who have shared our experience of being colonized. We can do it with other peoples who have not shared that experience. Even those non-Aboriginal Australians who eschew the relationship of colonizer-colonized have difficulty in grasping the maturity and sophistication of our thought and culture. But for people who are not even aware of that relationship and its effects, the difficulty approaches impossibility: for then, as Fanon says, "Every contact between the occupied and the occupier is a falsehood."[19] Despite the difficulties, we are prepared to make the effort: but little progress is likely until white Australia owns its colonial history, the persisting colonial relationship with Aboriginal people, and the obstacles to dialogue. As Fanon says, it is the colonizer "who has brought the 'native' into existence and who perpetuates his extistence".[20]

He also describes accurately the pressures which dialogue attempted on white terms places on the indigenous intellectual:

> The intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses, if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations. But most often...they cannot or will not make a choice...[21]
>
> You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eyes. At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realize that he is utilizing techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country.[22]

But the dialogue does take place. Let us look at an example of it happening in another context. In July last year, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry mentioned above heard evidence from Aboriginal people of Toomelah and Boggabilla, on the N.S.W./Queensland Border. Towards the end of the first day of hearings, the President, Judge Marcus Einfeld, spoke of all living in this country as being Australians, and our inability to undo the past.[23] The next day, a respected local Aboriginal woman, Julie Whitton, took up these points in a written submission:

> ...for anyone to say to a Muni that "the past is over" is just not right. We can't forget the past. White people don't forget their past. But for Murris time is different anyway. We don't divide time up into past, present and future. This is just what the Dreaming is all about. The Dreaming is happening all the time. That's why we can't "forget" (or put

> behind us) all the massacres that happened to our people here. How can we forget them and the resistance fighting of our people? For us that only happened yesterday, the other day; like our Dreaming these things are part of who we are. "Past" is a white man's idea. We know that we can't lose anything that has happened to us. What has happened to our people is our people. It is what we are. We believe this strongly. For Murris it is what is happening that is important. That's why, for instance, when we call a meeting, the meeting starts when everyone who should be there has arrived. That's the meeting time. So to tell us to forget the past and to look to the future makes no sense at all. It's an insult to tell us to forget the past. That's the same as telling us to forget the Dreaming, to forget how the old people struggled, to forget who we are...
>
> Over the years there have been many times when I have gone home and said: "that's it, no more. I'm not going to battle any more for Toomelah". Then I have laid down and seen the faces of my Mother, my Aunties and one or two others of the old people around me. They say: "Don't give up, Julie, you have to go on". And I do, not for me, not for Toomelah but for them. I know we have to make things a reality for the people who've struggled before us. Those are the people who have struggled and died. I can tell you, that all you have to do is to drive down to Old Toomelah (site of the former Mission), pull up your car and you can hear it, especially at night, the sound of the old people in the bush, the old people talking still. This is what we live with, who we live for.
>
> I also want to say something about being Australian.. .It is an insult to tell us that we are Australian citizens. How can anyone tell us who we are? We know who we are. We are Murris, the indigenous people of this country.[24]

Some people who attended the Inquiry say that this submission, and the following question period, were listened to in hushed reverence, and were a high-point of the sittings. They recall the President asking Mrs Whitton what she wanted as an individual: and her reply, "I don't think as an individual". The importance of keeping in touch with the land, being able to visit "places to sit and just be alone there", and examples of how old people "just came alive" during such visits were discussed. Mrs Whitton regretted that "a lot of white people cannot understand the way we feel about our beliefs, we cannot make them understand... some of them do not want to understand...They are just ignorant people". That was not intended as an insult, but was a considered opinion, from a Muni perspective. As far as this University is concerned, it should be remembered that the people to whom ,she was referring probably include many of the families whose children attend this University, and people who have been taught in school by graduates of this University. The Inquiry President thanked Mrs Whitton for her "very powerful and very dramatic contribution".[25]

There was a meeting here between two traditions. I think that the Judge, a well-educated man, would acknowledge that he learned a lot in this and other exchanges which he would never have learned from books, or a university course. He showed proper deference to people like Mrs Whitton as a person recognized as a responsible and knowledgeable member of the community. He had established a proper diplomatic relationship with the community by accompanying them for a day before the hearings, at their invitation, so they could explain and show him their country: a Bola Ground, former Mission sites, camp sites, etc. An Aboriginal exercise in self-definition was treated with respect.

The submissions of Mrs Whitton, and others, demonstrate that, despite all the assimilationist pressures, three-quarters of a century of living on Reserves, and being subjected to white schooling, Aboriginal knowledge and teaching processes are alive and well. They put paid to the myth that

Aboriginality only survives in remote communities, and that elsewhere the culture has been lost or destroyed. For a University, and especially one based in a rural setting, like the University of New England, they raise the possibility and challenge of dialogue and the development of an appropriate relationship with the local Aboriginal community.

Developments at the University of Queensland

The process has already begun within the University of Queensland, where there has been significant progress in giving due respect to Aboriginal knowledge. Late in 1982, the Social Work Department took an initiative by designating a Senior Tutorship (Aboriginal Affairs), as requiring "extensive practical and theoretical experience of Aboriginal community life" from applicants for the position, and making no mention of academic qualifications. During the following year, there was a prolonged and wide-ranging debate over this step, culminating in lengthy debate by the Academic Board, which eventually adopted, without dissent, the following motion (12/9/83):

> That the Academic Board endorse the principle that selection criteria for academic teaching positions in Aboriginal Welfare Studies should have regard to Aboriginal standards of excellence in intellectual life.[26]

The position under discussion was changed to a Limited Term Lectureship, and more recently to a Fixed Term Lectureship.

Also in 1983, a previously informal course became a 10 credit-point subject in the interdisciplinary area, within the Arts Faculty, and entitled: "Aboriginal Perspectives". Then in 1984, an advanced subject, "Aboriginal Approaches to Knowledge", was introduced. These courses have provided a meeting point for dialogue between Murri and white students, and incorporated features appropriate to Aboriginal learning: for example, sitting in a circle, use of story telling, non-competitive assessment based on pass/fail.

The 1983 debate also gave impetus to other initiatives: the establishment of a Vice-Chancellor's Committee on Aboriginal/Islander participation in University Education; the establishment of an Enclave Program, with staff; and the appointment of a Co-ordinator of Aboriginal/Islander Studies, responsible to the Chairman of the Vice-Chancellor's Committee. This Committee has since ceased operations, and it is to be replaced by an Advisory Committee to the Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Social Sciences.

The job description for the position of Co-ordinator included the following items:

- raising the awareness of the University Community to cultural aspects of Aboriginal/Islander people and the special problems created by colonialism;
- developing Aboriginal scholarship by research directed at strengthening the required teaching and knowledge in Aboriginal Studies;
- preparing a proposal for an institute of Aboriginal higher education...

The Office of the Co-ordinator and the Enclave Program now form the Aboriginal/Islander Unit, with eight staff positions. There has been a marked increase in the enrolment of Aboriginal/Islander students, from 28 in 1984 to 92 for this year.

I believe that the direction of these developments is a significant step by the University, in acknowledging a different living tradition, and seeking to give it a place within its existing structures, disciplines, methods and philosophies. This goes beyond just introducing an Aboriginal component into many of these areas. It shows an openness to change which could allow that tradition to have a

place of its own, with its own terms of reference and standards of excellence, as an equal, within the University.

But we must go one step further. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, the African poet Aime Cesaire made a scathing criticism of a Belgian Priest and Theologian's admonitions to whites going to the African colonies:

> Let them plunder and torture in the Congo, let the Belgian colonizer seize all the natural resources, let him stamp out all freedom, let him crush all pride—let him go in peace, the Reverend Father Tempels consents to all that. But take care! You are going to the Congo? Respect—I do not say native property... I do not say the freedom of the natives... I do not say the Congolese nation… I say: you are going to the Congo? Respect Bantu philosophy!...
>
> What generosity, Father! And what zeal!...
>
> In short, you tip your hat to the Bantu life-force, you give a wink to the immortal Bantu soul. And that's all it costs you! You have to admit you're getting off cheap![27]

The University would be "getting off cheap" if it were to go no further than giving an appropriate place to a centre of Aboriginal learning and teaching. To establish an appropriate dialogue, the University will need to own its own history as a colonial and colonizing institution alien to this land; to own the history of the land it now occupies, the land of the Nganyaywana people for tens of thousands of years. It will need to own that the legal system under which it has been established is the very system which allowed, and largely condoned and justified, the barbarity which went with the taking of that land. It will need to own that it is financed from taxes on profits and incomes which ultimately come from the exploitation of this land, its resources, and in many instances the labour of its original inhabitants.

Such acknowledgment needs a concrete expression. The University could, for example, make a substantial *ex-gratia* payment annually to the Local Aboriginal Land Council. When it establishes a place of Murri learning and teaching on its campus, freehold title of the land that place occupies could be handed over to the Local Aboriginal Land Council. It could consult with the Land Council on the use it makes of its land.

Conclusion

I hope that what I have been saying isn't making people fed guilty: uncomfortable, perhaps, but not guilty. As the poet Bruce Dawe says, "Guilt's a slippery thing".[28] My concern has not been just to make things better for us, or better between us: but an invitation for people who have come from elsewhere to live in this country and call it "home", to confront themselves, to own their own history in this land, and to come to grips with the colonial structures, practices and attitudes which persist today. It is an invitation to become aware of the effects of these on each of us, and on this land; and to work towards building a better future.

While time is of the essence, progress in developing dialogue between these two traditions will not be measured in hours, days or years; but in terms of peoples' growth in knowledge, and harmony with the land and its people. This will not happen in just one life-span—an expectation common in more individualistic and less mature societies—but over many life-spans.

But I look forward to the time when this University conducts its affairs, owns its history, relates to the Nganyaywana people, and recognizes its status in their land, in such a way that no student will

pass through its halls without being caught up in the process of de-colonization. Through this, they will be helped to develop a proper relationship with the people and land from which they come, and wherever they might choose to live and work after they graduate.

Hopefully, this process will enable whites to share the same responsibilities that we have for the land, our Mother, and the vision we are seeking to maintain: one which sees our future as a people stretching as far out in front of us as it does behind us.

The process also opens up a vision of an enriched University, at last putting its roots down in this land, and tapping into a past measured in tens of thousands of years.

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    But what is that one slaughter
    repeated many times
    to us who tread domestic grass
    and thrill to 'foreign' crimes?
    We cannot call the Turrbul back
    and guilt's a slippery thing
    if all it feeds are speeches
    and songs that poets sing...

    When the Kalkadoons stopped running
    and charged and charged again
    they fell as fell the tribesmen
    on earlier hill and plain.
    And we who wrote their finish
    must turn and write a start
    if we would turn from running
    and face our thundering heart.