

Misconceptions about Indigenous Australians

Aboriginal culture before European settlement

Misconception 1: Australian Indigenous people were simple and uncivilised.

In the Willandra Lakes Region, now a World Heritage site, evidence has been uncovered of the antiquity of the Indigenous people of Australia and of their early ritual and daily practices. In 1968, excavations uncovered a cremated female Aboriginal person in the dunes of Lake Mungo dated to over 25,000 years ago. This is believed to be one of the oldest cremations in the world. In 1974, the ochred burial of a male Aboriginal person was found nearby, believed to be over 40,000 years old. These ancient burial practices show evidence of Aboriginal people with a system of spiritual beliefs reflecting upon life after death.

The notion that Indigenous people were 'primitive' and 'uncivilised' is fully discredited. Since time immemorial the Indigenous people of Australia have had a rich system of kinship, far-flung trading networks and well developed systems of governance with complex interlocking rights, responsibilities, privileges and entitlements to the land. The famous French anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss described the Indigenous people of Australia as the "intellectual aristocrats" among early people. In the past, Indigenous peoples' limited technology and the multiple uses they made of it have been confused with lack of social sophistication. This is not a sustainable viewpoint.

Misconception 2: The absence of agricultural practices is evidence of a primitive society.

Indigenous Australians were predominantly hunter-gatherers and their cultural and hunting practices varied greatly depending on the natural coastal, riverine and desert environments. Archaeologists have established that most Indigenous communities were semi-nomadic, following food sources according to season, successfully adapting to the changing physical environment, and returning to

the same place at the same time each year. Some Indigenous practices had resemblances to 'agriculture', for instance eel traps, yam replanting, fish farms, firestick farming and grain growing. Stone and bone tools discovered in parts of Australia are among the oldest in the world. Some were used to grind seeds at least 30,000 years ago. In some parts of Australia, the storage of seeds was practised on a large scale. Indigenous peoples' patterns of subsistence were very well adapted to the Australian environment, its relatively abundant food resources and its climate variability.

Misconception 3: Australia was an empty unoccupied land available for colonisation.

At the time of European settlement there were no unoccupied wilderness areas. Archaeologists estimate that population levels were between 250,000 and 1 million people and had been relatively stable for thousands of years. Indigenous people constituted 100 per cent of the Australian population. This is in sharp contrast to today's Indigenous population of just 2.4 per cent of the total population.

Indigenous people did not mark out land ownership according to traditional European methods but rather used geographic boundaries, such as rivers, lakes and mountains. This led to the incorrect claim of *terra nullius* ('land belonging to no one') to justify the seizure of land and to claim sovereignty of Australia. As Justice Brennan declared in the famous *Mabo* case, the theory that the Indigenous people had no property interests in the land was "a discriminatory denigration of indigenous inhabitants, their social organisation and customs".

Response to and impact of European settlement

Misconception 4: There was little resistance to European settlement.

Although, following the arrival of European people, there was peaceful exchange between Indigenous people and

Europeans in many areas, there was fierce resistance in others. Yagan, leader of the Nyungar people of Western Australia, - considered one of the first Indigenous resistance fighters - participated in a number of food raids and killings in retaliation for the deaths of his people at the hands of settlers. Clans of people in the Eora group in the Sydney area also undertook a campaign of resistance against European settlement between 1790 and 1810. Historian Henry Reynolds has argued that Aboriginal resistance was “challenging, prolonged... spirited and determined”.

Misconception 5: There was little direct loss of life from European settlement. The impact of settlement was not, therefore, great.

There were relatively few deaths from armed conflict but in other ways European settlement in Australia had disastrous consequences for Indigenous people. It brought chickenpox, small pox, influenza, measles, as well as venereal and other diseases to which Indigenous people had no immunity. Indigenous people were dispossessed of their traditional lands and many were removed to camps and collectives. There was an estimated 90 per cent reduction in the Indigenous population between 1788 and 1900.

The introduction of European farming methods and animals such as sheep, rabbits and cattle had other impacts. Many out-competed endemic fauna. Indigenous people gradually became dependent on the support of the colonists for their livelihood affecting their diet, health and wellbeing. There was also loss of language and culture. There were between 200 and 250 distinct languages spoken by Indigenous people at the time of European settlement, with approximately 600 different dialects. Today, less than 20 languages have survived.

Indigenous Australians today

Misconception 6: People who speak for Indigenous people can only be those of full Aboriginal parentage.

Indigenous people are classified by the Australian Government as those who identify themselves as Indigenous on account of their full or part Indigenous parentage and who are accepted as Indigenous by the community in which they live. It is offensive to Indigenous people to make a distinction between full and half blood. People of mixed parentage from Europe, North America or South America are not described in this way.

Misconception 7: Despite huge government handouts, Indigenous people still can't look after themselves.

Indigenous people do not receive additional personal income because they are Indigenous. There are, however, special programs designed to help overcome disadvantage. They include: the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme (CDEP); Aboriginal Medical Services and Aboriginal Legal Services; the Indigenous Employment Programme; and the Indigenous Education Strategic Initiatives Programme. The Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (ANU) has shown that these special support programs, far from being overgenerous, are greatly under-funded and do little to deal with the disadvantages faced by Indigenous Australians.

Misconception 8: Sovereignty, land rights and apologies for past behaviour are irrelevant to the practical problems faced by Indigenous people.

Colonisation has inflicted great individual, family and community damage on Indigenous people. A formal acknowledgement of these wrongs, such as was made by the Australian government on the 13th February 2008, was seen by many Indigenous people as a necessary first step to creating a better future. Indigenous people believe that self-determination, sovereignty, economic independence and cultural sustainability are inextricably linked to the “practical” problems of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage. They do not believe that these issues can be separated.

Misconception 9: The policy of removing part-Aboriginal children from their families, between the late nineteenth-century and the 1960s, was a policy based on good intentions, and one for which contemporary Australians should not feel compelled to apologise.

The policy of child removal that was practised in Australia between the late nineteenth century and the 1960s in relation to Indigenous people was not the same as the contemporary welfare-based practice of removing children from negligent or abusive households. Rather than being removed because they were in danger (although in some instances that might have been true), Aboriginal children were removed because of their race—and only if they were of mixed descent. While Aboriginal people as a whole were regarded by the white population as a “doomed race”, the so-called “half-castes”, or people of mixed descent, were seen to be a social problem that might be solved by removing them from their families and progressively absorbing

them into the white population. While many white Australians saw this as a good thing to do, despite the anguish that it caused the families concerned, others spoke out against it. For Australians to apologise for this hurt now does not mean that they were personally responsible but that they acknowledge and do not agree with what was done, in much the same way that they might disagree with (or conversely celebrate) other aspects of their history.

Misconception 10: There is little racism in Australia.

It is unlawful in Australia to discriminate on the basis of race, colour, nationality, descent, ethnic or ethno-religious background and it is illegal for people to engage in racist activity or to encourage, incite or permit racist attacks. Racism, however, comes in many forms, much of it subtle and unconscious. Indigenous people experience racial discrimination on a daily basis. A 2003 study conducted by Kevin Dunn, found that only 4.8 per cent of Indigenous respondents thought that there was no racism in Australia. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination pointed out in 2000 that some processes, laws and administrative practices in Australia continue to operate to the systematic disadvantage of Indigenous people (e.g. Aboriginal deaths in custody).

Misconception 11: All the stories about Indigenous people are about their failures.

There are many individual Indigenous success stories in Australia ranging from famous people to everyday examples. Some examples include: Cathy Freeman, Evonne Goolagong Cawley, Anthony Mundeen (sport); Jimmy Pike, Rover Thomas, Emily Kngwarreye (art); Yothu Yindi, Christine Anu, Jimmy Little (music); Deborah Mailman, Ernie Dingo (theatre/film); Neville Bonner, Aden Ridgeway (politics); Marcia Langton, Mick Dodson, Larissa Behrendt (academia); Eddie Mabo, Noel Pearson, Faith Bandler and Warren Mundine (political activists). There are also many successful Indigenous organisations and communities (see for example the [Australian Collaboration's](#) research).

Misconception 12: Violence against women and child abuse are characteristic of Indigenous culture.

The view that violence is an endemic part of Indigenous culture is false. The often shocking levels of violence and abuse in remote Indigenous communities are the product of poverty, racism, dependency on welfare payments,

unemployment, and, most significantly, substance abuse (alcohol, drugs and petrol sniffing). There is widespread agreement that there is, first, need to reduce substance abuse by ensuring that the type of petrol available cannot be used for petrol sniffing, by creating dry communities and by limiting the supply of alcohol in other ways. There is also unanimous condemnation of violence directed at women and children and agreement that perpetrators of such crimes should be brought to justice. How else to deal with violence is a matter of debate. There are, for example, differing views about the place of Aboriginal customary law within the formal legal system.

There is a misconception that Indigenous people are doing nothing to deal with violence and abuse in their own communities. There are numerous examples of Indigenous people working within their communities to combat abuses. The Larrapinta Learning Centre in Alice Springs has drastically reduced substance abuse and violence in the community, although its efforts are severely hampered by lack of adequate funding. Some communities have taken the initiative to establish night patrols with very encouraging results. Indigenous communities need to work in partnership with the non-Indigenous community (including government, police and the judiciary) to stamp out violence. While strengthening the criminal justice system is important, so too are education, community programs, support and refuge shelters, behavioural workshops, dispute resolution mechanisms and night patrols.

Useful sources

Grattan, M. (Ed.). (2000). *Reconciliation: Essays on Australian Reconciliation*, Melbourne: Black Inc. Edited by well-known political correspondent Michelle Grattan, this book includes essays from a wide range of contributors, including John Howard, Kim Beazley, Lillian Holt, Geoff Clark, Peter Garrett, Raimond Gaita and Noel Pearson.

Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (2006), *Ending Family Violence and Abuse in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities: Key Issues*, http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/family_violence2006.pdf This report summarises findings from research and consultations on family violence and abuse in Indigenous communities between 2001-06. The report considers, among other things, the relationship between violence and substance abuse and Aboriginal customary law, violence and human rights.

T H E A U S T R A L I A N C O L L A B O R A T I O N

Reynolds, H. (1996). *Aboriginal Sovereignty: Reflections on Race, State and Nation*. NSW: Allen & Unwin. Historian Henry Reynolds presents a study of Aboriginal sovereignty and self-determination in a historical and contemporary political, legal and social context.

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