
Our Children: Part of the Past, Present, and Providing a Vision for the Future: A Murri* Perspective

Lilla Watson

Lecturer, Department of Social Work, University of Queensland.
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"Aboriginal people have not . . . invented childhood."¹ This statement goes to the very heart of the difference between Western and Aboriginal societies as far as children are concerned. Aboriginal children have always remained part of the adult world.

Separation or exclusion from adult activities was kept to a minimum. Indeed, most of those activities were planned and organised to ensure the maximum involvement of as many children as possible. This applied to hunting and gathering, to dance, song, and many ceremonies. From the earliest age, they were aware of what was going on in the community, and were exposed to the whole spectrum of human relations. The expression "not in front of the children", which became the title of a TV sitcom some years ago, would not have been used by Murris.

Responsibility for kids was shared through the kinship system and the community, and knowledge of precise relationships were pointed out to children, and understood by them, from their earliest years. One's mother's brothers were especially important people. Older children assumed responsibility for caring for younger ones.

This was but one aspect of preparing and initiating them into their place in the adult world. Security came from knowing one's place in the

kinship system, and the consequent mutual responsibilities with regard to people, and to the land. This goes hand in hand with self-reliance and responsibility for one's own conduct.

Diane Bell illustrates this with a story about a group of women commenting on the conduct of a four year old child during a ceremony they had attended:

"Although she had had no parental supervision or direction, the child had behaved and responded correctly throughout. As she trotted along beside us, one of the women asked, 'Who's boss for you?' 'No-one,' quipped the child, 'I'm boss for meself.' Her statement was greeted with general approval and mirth. The notion of being boss for oneself, of being in control of one's own life, so directly expressed by the child, does not diminish as women age. . . ."²

These values and patterns of behaviour are developed over tens of thousands of years, as we became human in this land. They have been learned from the land, and through our long experience of interaction with it, as the source of life, as Mother and Teacher. They are part of the process of developing the full potential of each individual, as a resource precious to the person, the community, and the land.

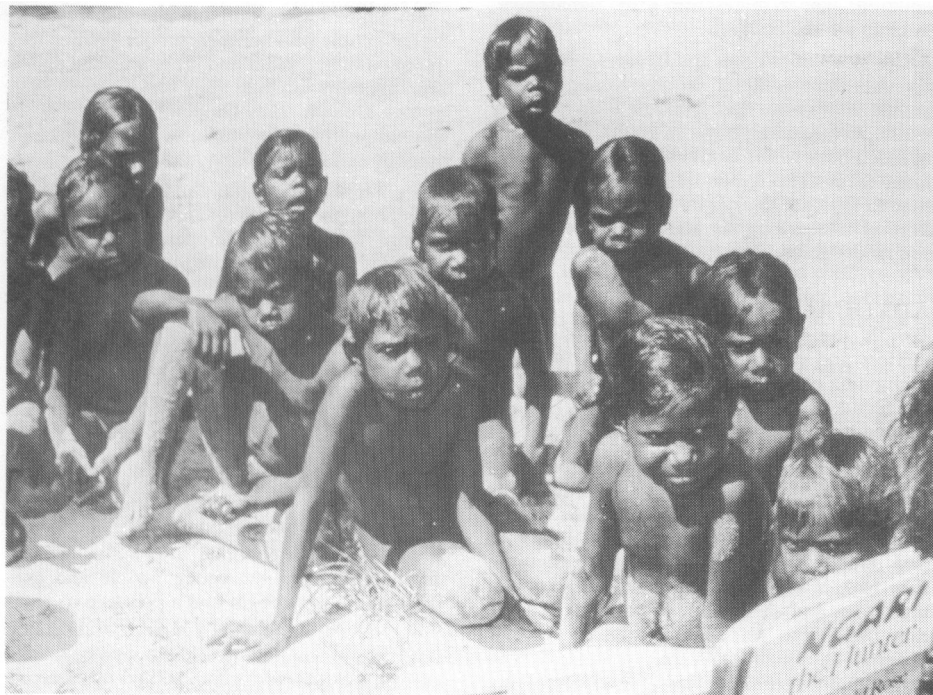
THE IMPACT OF COLONIALISM

The disruption of this pattern began in this country 200 years ago, with the establishment of the convict settlement where Sydney now stands. It did not reach the people of my mother's mother's country until 120 years ago. For many it is still just beginning. For all of us, these disruptive pressures are still present today.

Initially this disruption came in the form of deaths from disease and slaughter, and the abduction and abuse of women which accompanied the colonial expansion; but especially as a result of the forced exclusion and removal from traditional lands.

Further disruption came with moves to exploit, domesticate and assimilate Murris. The arrogance of white attempts to justify these efforts as part of a civilising, uplifting mission, a leading of us out of darkness, a helping us to "catch up" with western society amazed Murris. Not only had they experienced brutality, but had been horrified at the way they saw it inflicted on the convicts, and later on shepherds and stockmen. They were puzzled by the absence of women and children: what sort of society was this? What would become of men living without women, without children?

The impact on children was especially destructive. Having first orphaned them, squatters often kept them as pets, with view to their potential as a labour force and sex objects. When predictions that Murris were doomed for extinction were not fulfilled, the policy of smoothing the dying pillow gave way to the welfare approach. Supposedly for their own good, children were separated from their parents, and placed in segregated dormitories on Reserves, or sent to Institutions like Kinchela Boys' Home to be trained to work on properties, or Cootamundra Girls' Home for training as domestics in the homes of upper and middle class white families. They were subjected to schooling, which involved the withdrawal of the child for long periods from contact with the very people with primary responsibilities for teaching the child.



* In our area we call ourselves Murri. Aboriginal is a colonial word that is gradually being replaced by our own words, whether Murri, Koori, Nunga, Mulba etc. which are used in other parts of the continent, as expressions by the community of our unrelinquished sovereignty.

The consequences of this disruption is evident in the over-representation of Murri kids in Queensland Juvenile Institutions like Westbrook and Wilson, and in adult prisons, as well as the statistics on Aboriginal health, life expectancy, employment etc., and the more recent phenomenon of street kids in our cities. In the same way, many of the welfare systems set up to deal with the consequences of this disruption have also been doomed to failure, both because of their inflexible reliance on white terms of reference, and because of Murri recognition of their assimilationist and exploitative agenda, leading to non-cooperation.

PERSISTENCE OF MURRI CULTURE

In speaking about this disruption, I don't want to make anyone feel guilty — uncomfortable, perhaps, and aware of the need for whites to own their own history in this land — but not guilty. My main purpose is to emphasise the strength and maturity of Murri culture, which, despite all that disruption, despite all the pressures, is alive and well.

In the last decade especially a number of academics have shown a greater sensitivity to Murri culture, and awareness of the narrowing effect of studying and defining us within white terms of reference. But while most of the worthwhile material published are studies of Murriss living in the more remote areas, Murriss in urban areas find they are often describing processes which are alive and well in their communities. For us, this is a confirmation of the validity of those practices.

I'll give some examples. A few years ago, I was visiting Boggabilla. A young six-year old Murri girl who lived next door came in, and checked me out: where I was from, did I know her cousin Bill from there, or her Auntie Roslyn, who was my mother, where did she come from, etc. Kinship, country are means of locating and identifying people — not "What do you do for a living?", etc.

My brother's wife is white. They had a daughter about 11 years ago, and she was very much into the spirit of the mid-seventies, down-playing titles, etc. She tells the story of how she came to appreciate the importance of kinship for Murriss. When my brother Charles visited, she would refer to him as Charlie, and tell Birri to "Give Charlie a kiss," etc. Charlie would gently say to Birri, "Come on Birri, give **uncle** Charlie a kiss." The quiet battle went on for some weeks, until one day, in exasperation, Charlie turned to his sister-in-law to insist: "Lyn, it's **UNCLE** bloody Charlie!"

Murri kids today are still exposed to the adult world. When I was going to school, my classmates were never allowed to read the newspaper "Truth" — a fore-runner of the worst of the Murdoch tabloids — but it was old hat to the kids in our family. The greatest prestige I enjoyed at school was my ability to report on the latest sex scandals, murders, robberies, etc.!

Many of the games Murri kids play are imitative of adult activities. They are spoken to in adult language, rather than baby-talk, indicating to them that eventually they will take their place in the adult world. When a toddler starts to walk, on wobbly legs, it is common for adults to say: "Look out! Better step aside, there's a big woman

(or big man) comin'". This language, and these actions all help to prepare the child for its adult place in the world.

Aboriginal couples would never refuse to attend dances or parties just because they could not find a baby-sitter. It would just mean that they would have to pack up the kids and some blankets and take them along to wherever they were going. When the children go to sleep, you make up a bed for them on the floor. Just last Sunday, the cover story on the TV supplement in the Brisbane Sunday Mail concerned an eighteen year old actress who was learning how to change nappies, a skill needed in her role as a baby-sitter in a TV serial. She was obviously not a Murri.

Murriss in urban and town situations have always been aware of being different: we are now paying more attention to identifying and enhancing Murri ways and values. To put this in context, it is worth remembering that, only 25 years ago, Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs adopted a policy of 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 The assumption at that time was that Murri culture was dead, or dying, and that Governments should try to hasten the process.

That pressure was very real. My father, for example, would refuse our requests to be taught our own language, or even words from it: "Better for you to forget about all that", he would say, sadly. We children were all given European names. But now my nieces and nephews, and their children, are given Murri names: Birri (Strong Rock), Kaava Wobina (Native Bee), Gaala (Black Cockatoo), Minya Mundayah (Little Black Cloud), Coedi Jirrima Murrawung (Boy Guardian of the Mountain), Mali Naagu Yulu Bimbilla (Man Child is Very Good).

And the children know that those names give them a place in the world. Everyone should have such a place, and the awareness of not being alone in the world that goes with it. When my niece Warrika Minkali whose name means "Big Rain" was still not walking, her mother had left her in her stroller on the verandah, and went to bring her inside as a storm approached. She started to cry, and her sister Maira, then three, explained why: "Mummy, you shouldn't do that; that's her mob coming to see her. That's why she's crying! She wants to see her mob!" And Maira Wandu, whose name means "Good Hill" is always looking around for "her mob" when travelling. She looks forward to outings and picnics as opportunities to visit her mob, the mountains and hills.

So that process of identifying and enhancing Murri values, of defining ourselves in our own terms, goes on. We never had to do that explicitly before colonisation, and it has taken time to see the necessity to do it since. In addition, for the first time in our history, we now find ourselves in the position of being able to define ourselves to the colonising society, in our own terms.

We have found this to be a difficult task. We can readily establish appropriate dialogue with people from other countries who have shared our experience of European colonisation. We can do it with other people who have not shared that experience. But with people with whom we stand in the relationship of colonised-coloniser, it is a different matter. Frantz Fanon has described the

process whereby the coloniser creates "the native", something less than human,⁴ and then relates to the colonised in a way which makes "every contact . . . a falsehood".⁵ The obstacle to dialogue is in the coloniser, and the relationship he has created. It had tragic consequences for "explorers" — we would rather call them tourists — who starved to death amidst abundant supplies of food and water, because they were unable or unwilling to learn from Murriss around them.

MURRIS RECLAIMING CONTROL

Murriss are now in the process of regaining control over our own lives. The Aboriginal Embassy, established on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra in 1972, marked a new wave of Murri affirmation of identity and independence. Murri dissatisfaction with the policies, practices and effects of non-Aboriginal agencies impacting on our lives was being articulated more forcefully; and some of those agencies were getting around to recognising their ineffectiveness for Murriss.

And so the seventies saw the establishment of many Murri agencies — Legal Service, Health Service, Housing Companies, and Child Care Agencies. Their development and functioning have been remarkable, given the pressures involved. On one hand, there are expectations on the part of traditional agencies that we will provide all the services they have provided, and that they will not have to worry about Murri "clients"; that the structures and procedures of the Murri Agencies will mirror theirs. Government and other funding bodies also have their expectations.

On the other hand, these Agencies are trying to work out ways of functioning which reflect and enhance Murri terms of reference. The goals of community control and accountability are being established in the face of divisions, confusion and uncertainties resulting from the disruption caused by colonialism. The group-based nature of our society allows responsibilities to be shared out, so that they don't become intolerable burdens for individuals to cope with, whether in the agency or in the community.

For example, at the Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency here in Brisbane, when dealing with what would usually be called a "problem" involving a child, the agency tries to act as a convener. It tries to bring together all the people with an interest in, or a responsibility for that child, often with the child. A neutral ground is used to minimise any existing tensions, and limiting future ones. The idea is that the group, rather than the agency, will sort out what needs to happen.

The experience, insights and promise developed in these processes are important not only to the Murri community, and not only as relieving white agencies of some responsibilities: but as contributors to a new vision of how people relate to one another, and to the land.

CONCLUSION

What, then, do Murriss have to contribute to changing the face of child welfare, to preparing a better future for children of the next century?

Had the colonising society been prepared to learn from the indigenous culture, it might have been realised decades, or even a century ago, that the institutionalising of children — whether orphans, handicapped, or at risk — whether Murriss or not

— was inhumane and destructive. A society which abuses the land, regards it as something hostile, to be tamed, is likely to find relationships between its members marked by abuse, hostility, and oppression; and that children are likely to be subjected to those things too. What I am saying is that the position of children in a society cannot be separated from, or dealt with in isolation from the nature of that society, its humaneness, and its relationship with the land.

Jean Paul Satre invited Europeans to grow in self understanding by owning their responsibility for colonialism, and its effects on the colonised. "It is," he said, "enough that they show us what we have made of them for us to realize what we have made of ourselves."⁶ Murris are prepared to do that, and to be part of that process. But we have much more to offer, both from our own culture, and our perceptions and experience of yours.

Indigenous knowledge isn't just for Aboriginal people: it is knowledge that has been tested over tens of thousands of years, and in a special way over the last two centuries. It should be allowed to provide a knowledge base for all people who come to live in this land, and call it their home. It is knowledge to be shared in a way which will empower people to take on responsibilities for one another, and for the land; and to bring about harmony between each of us.

So street kids, for example, whether Murri or white, should not be seen as "a problem", an eyesore to be removed, or individuals to be helped. Unemployed youth should not be seen as potential delinquents, drug addicts, vulnerable to political manipulation. Rather both should be seen as a comment on the nature and values of the society in which children of the next century are growing up; and as representatives of a challenge to that society's capacity to change, and build harmony between all people, and between people and the land.

Some western writers are recognising that we have something to offer. A recent book by an American sociologist,⁷ points out that some definitions of mature, humane, and just societies being proposed by western thinkers describe Aboriginal society very well.

Our most important contribution, however, remains the recognition, enhancing and strengthening of Murri ways of behaving, speaking, living and relating to one another, and to the land. We are seeking to ensure that our vision for the future stretches as far out in front of us, as it does behind us. The continuity over such a time-scale allows us to have a longer vision of change coming about.

While time is of the essence, progress will not be measured in hours, days or years; but in terms of people's growth in knowledge, and harmony with the land and its people — now, and beyond our individual life-spans. It often happens not just in one life-span, as is commonly expected in more individualistic and less mature societies, but over many life-spans.

Before concluding, I would like to read a poem written by my brother, entitled:

SONG OF A RAINBOW WARRIOR

I am just another person
Who wishes life to be a song.
Instead, the good things of existence
Are suppressed by so much wrong.
But I will not fight these evils



'Cause then there's only win or lose.
Before a life of conflict
It's a life of song I choose.
No! I'll not enter into competition
With the robot and the gun.
I will create a world of laughter
With other children of the sun.

We invite you, the people who have come into our land and life so recently, to develop and share a similar vision for the future, for our sakes, for your sakes, for the sake of all children of the next century, and above all for the sake of the land.

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3. Resolution adopted by Conference of Commonwealth and State Ministers responsible for Aboriginal Affairs, Darwin, July 1963: "The policy of assimilation means that all Aborigines and part Aborigines will attain the same manner of living as other Australians and live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hopes and loyalties as other Australians."

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4. Fanon, Frantz: "The Wretched of the Earth", Penguin, London, 1967, p.28.
5. Fanon, Frantz: "A Dying Colonialism", Penguin, London, 1970, p.50.
6. Satre, Jean-Paul, in the Preface to Fanon, "The Wretched of the Earth", Penguin, London, 1970, p.12.
7. Liberman, Kenneth: "Understanding Interaction in Central Australia: An Ethnomethodological Study of Australian Aboriginal People", Routledge & Kegan Paul, Melbourne, 1985. For example:

"Maddock argues that . . . Aboriginal society would rate well, particularly in 'freedom asserting features', among which he includes a mutual respect for others, a humanitarian anarchy, and egalitarianpolitical relations." (p.110)

"(Habermas) argues that social justice is measured by 'the expansion of the domain of consensual action' . . . from (that) viewpoint, Aboriginal societies would rate very high marks for the degree of social justice in their political life." (p.110/1)

"While the roots of fascism exist in all societies, the emphasis upon the importance of immediate interpersonal relations and the interactional structures I have identified reduce the possibility of tyranny in Aboriginal society." (p.114).

