

# Aboriginal Concepts of the Family

Yolanda Walker

**T**he Aboriginal family unit has seen many changes since European invasion. Like families all over the world, the Aboriginal family is the place where social behaviour is constructed, interpreted and transmitted from one generation to another. This is a process which has continued since the invasion of white man. Aboriginal people see the family as a place of nurturing, with the ability to provide and teach. When one or both of these factors is not functioning adequately, a family breakdown can occur.

An Aboriginal family can consist of anything from a single mother with a child to an extended family of twenty. Regardless of size, if adequate nurturing is provided, any family will be an accepted part of the community. Apart from basic nurturing, Aboriginal people attach great importance to kinship and spiritual bonding as well as respect for elders and each other, the sharing of knowledge and the ability to support each other. These are very significant factors when looking at Aboriginal concepts of the family.

Looking back at the traditional family unit, lifestyles were certainly different. However, even today, many similar morals and kinship values have continued to play a major role within the family. Traditionally, emphasis was placed on the extended family. Extended families are those which stretch beyond the nuclear family of mother, father and children. The traditional Aboriginal family consisted of mother, father, children, aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents and grandchildren. They would all live together in a communal environment, whereby responsibilities were shared throughout the family. Responsibilities included child rearing, food hunting, cooking, cleaning, providing security and teaching others. Child rearing was focused on 'undemanding security and physical demonstration of affection.'<sup>1</sup> Respect was the norm for all family members,

*Yolanda Walker is a Social Research/Policy Worker for SNAICC.*

but more importantly, there was great respect for elders, as they taught how to deal with life when growing up.

Colonisation posed a great threat for Aboriginal family life, and eventually led to total disaster. Families were separated and children removed. There was a loss of land, diseases became widespread and there was a lack of food and water in a dirty act of cultural genocide. The white man possessed selfish assimilation attitudes and as a result, a sadness emerged and large changes came about.

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Today, to look at Aboriginal families is to cover a wide area. A dominant feature characteristic of most families is the sense of kinship. This is the feeling of family togetherness, the ability to rely on each other, and the creation of spiritual bonding which helps to form strong family relationships. Kinship also includes the creation of interdependence and support between the members of a family. Sharing is an important way in which the kinship system operates. Material provisions aside, the sharing of time, advice, companionship or encouragement are essential elements of kinship values.<sup>2</sup> Spiritual bonding is the bonding which goes beyond a blood relationship. This is a bond which passes on a bit of the Dreamtime, thus passing on 'Aboriginality.'

The importance of respect for family members involves many issues which are continuous and concurrent in Aboriginal families. Respect for each

other, respect for elders who play the role of our teachers, and respect for individual initiative and decisions are important aspects of Aboriginal family life. When respect is taken away, family members immediately lose the ability to love and care for each other adequately. There comes a sense of neglect and rejection for other family members.

To love and care within an Aboriginal family without conditions is an extremely important concept of the family unit. That is the ability to love and care no matter what another family member chooses to do with their life and with no restrictions on the amount of love given. For example, it seems that even though children in the Anangu family in South Australia are difficult to control and are turning to glue sniffing and other substance abuse, the women never implied or stated that they did not want these children or supported permanent removal of them. One woman said:

The mothers and fathers they still love and care for their children and they would keep and care for their children if they could.<sup>3</sup>

Role models have always been an essential part of the Aboriginal family unit. We rely on role models to set good examples for us, which consequently helps us to differentiate between right and wrong. Role modelling is illustrated through normal everyday behaviour where those learning usually observe subconsciously. For example, often a young girl will observe her mother cooking or looking after the home, one day she may use what she has observed in her own family. Role models are the people we hold the most respect for, usually our parents or grandparents. They are necessary to keep the spirit alive. We rely on our role models to teach us about life so that we too be positive role models to our children.

Unfortunately, effect of a role model can be negative, and as a result, roles become reversed within families.

According to some women in the Anangu family in South Australia, children are acting like 'bosses' and adults are afraid of them. The traditional relationships between children and elders was seen as harmful and destructive to family cohesion and strength of culture.<sup>4</sup> This role reversal can be caused by several factors, including sicknesses in the community which made it difficult for the traditional role models to carry out their duties. Also when role models turn to substance abuse, such as alcohol, they start to adopt a very carefree attitude, which is destructive of both their respect for other family members and of their individual self-esteem.

Another cause of a power imbalance within the family is racism, whether encountered at school or at work. This contributes to a low social status which makes people 'give up' in a sense. Attitudes towards life become distorted; 'Why should I bother when they treat me like this?' anger is then taken out on family members which consequently invites a power struggle between those family members.

more rural environment, and where they are more numerous, poverty can also often be found. Where there is poverty, we often start to get loss of values, loss of respect for other family members, and often a complete functional breakdown of the family unit. This kind of situation could certainly be the cause of a loss of hope and great depression. It means that survival becomes a day to day concern, and often morals and values are disregarded because food and shelter became the only priority. The result of this struggle is often family violence and/or substance abuse. In Alice Springs Hospital, of 155 Aboriginal women reporting for injuries, 109 were the result of violent assault. 75 of these were from town camps, 18 from urban Alice Springs and 16 were from the bush.<sup>5</sup>

It is certainly accurate to say that domestic violence and alcohol often go hand in hand. There are however, many other possible family related causes. Some of these include low socio-economic status, anger due to racism, loss of identity within the family and a loss of moral and cultural values.

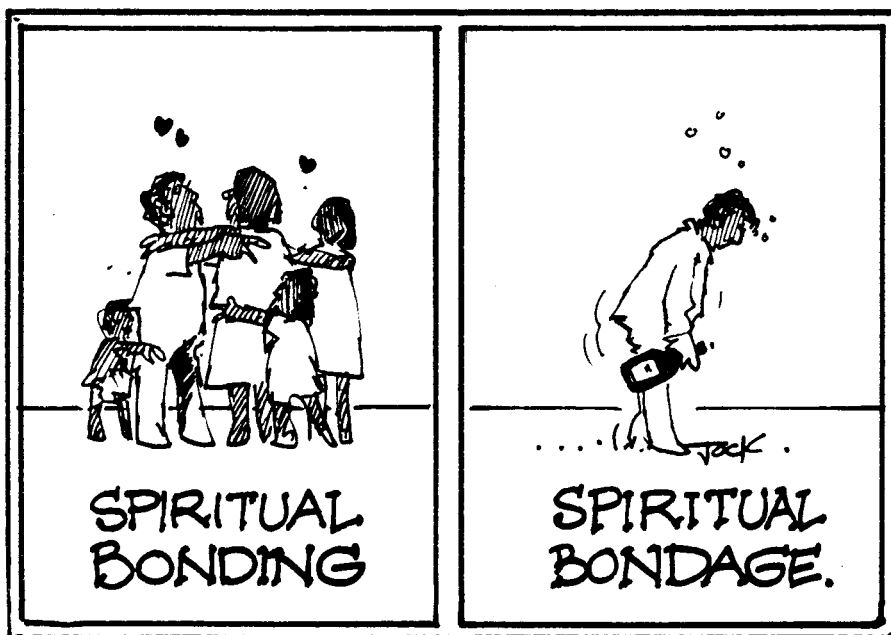
The make up of Aboriginal families has changed somewhat over the years with less couples who are both Aboriginal. Although it was once considered the norm to marry within one's own tribe, it seems now that intermarriage and single parenting is just as likely as both partners being Aboriginal. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics report on the 1986 census, Aboriginal families had the following make-up:-

- In one in three families both the man and the women were Aboriginal.
- In one in three families one member of the family was Aboriginal.
- In one in three families there was a single Aboriginal parent.

It therefore appears that traditional concept of the extended Aboriginal family has altered considerably. A study by the Aboriginal Education Foundation in Adelaide on a random sample of 88 households living in government rented housing, reported that 4 in 5 or 81% were female breadwinners and 1 in 2 of these were supporting mothers. 15% had suffered sexual assault and 51% had suffered other physical violence. Many had frequent foster home and institutional experience and deficient basic education (1 in 2 had left school earlier than they now wished). Many were experiencing a high level of financial difficulty. Two in three were in receipt of some pension or benefit.

It is facts such as these which have contributed to an alteration of basic morals and values within many Aboriginal families. There is little chance that these mothers are able to provide full and adequate care for themselves or their children. Sadly, one in three had weakening or no ties with 'outside' Aboriginal communities, and one in two used little traditional Aboriginal language/ways/ customs, or had little traditional culture - related discussion in their household. It appears that kinship is slowly being replaced with the need for survival in many of these communities - and that can include the need for alcohol, and the need to use drugs. As a result, the kinship will not be passed on to the next generation and so marks a sad end to many Aboriginal Identities.

Evidently there has been a change in the Aboriginal family situation. Where



Although concepts such as role modeling, kinship and respect for others exist clearly within most Aboriginal families, it is important to note that varied family systems exist within different communities. Therefore, the concept of what a family is to an Aboriginal person can vary. It seems that where Aboriginal people live in a

When the family can no longer cope, parents turn to the welfare system for assistance. This is often in the form of food vouchers and clothing. Often too, if the situation deteriorates, the only answer is to place their children in a foster placement or family group home until things hopefully start looking more positive.

a family once meant a communal tribe of sharing, giving and nurturing, it has now been transformed into a cycle of problems and troubles. Although many families still have the ability to respect one another, love one another and teach one another, there are also many families who are struggling and fighting for their survival, that is, traditional values have been lost because the fight for survival has become so much more important. Traditionally life was much simpler, there were less or no worries about food supplies, unemployment, alcohol and drugs, health problems, violence, housing and basic security. Nowadays life is a lot more complex,

with a lot more worries to go along with it. Many of our people still find it difficult to adjust to the white man's way of thinking, and as a result simply cannot cope in a society with so much negativity towards Aboriginal people. The direct result of these feelings is often family breakdown. Bad attitudes causing low self-esteem outside the family often become reflected within the home causing destruction. It seems unfair that while some families' concept of a family are love, care and respect, other families have fallen victim to power conflicts, substance abuse, violence and the basic fight for survival. ♦

## References

1. *Extending the Boundaries of Family Therapy* SNAICC Paper, 1989.
2. Poad, D., West, A. & Miller, R. (1990) *Contact*. 2nd ed. Port Melbourne: Heinemann Educational.
3. *Looking after Children Grandmothers' Way* : report to the Child Protection Policy and Planning Unit, SA, on the Child Protection Project / from the Ngaanyatjarra, Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council. Adelaide: Child Protection Policy & Planning Unit, 1991.
4. *ibid*
5. Sam, M. (1992) *Through Black Eyes* Melbourne: SNAICC.

## Spirit in the Winter Trees

Kym Walker

As I walk on the land of my people's dreaming  
I can feel the spirit of the winter trees  
As the winter season takes her children  
It will leave her naked under the winter sky

Yet she still holds her head high  
and maintains a sense of dignity  
For the spirit of the land gives her strength  
to hold her identity

And it's from the land that my people  
will gather their strength of identity  
For the land is our Mother who will hold us  
close in her arms

For like the trees you will take from us  
Our children and our way of life  
you try to force your values on us  
Treating us like second graded citizens

As the seasons continue their endless cycle  
like trees we will flower  
With a stronger spirit  
and identity with each new day  
For we will both adapt and still maintain  
our sense of being

And like the trees  
you will never take away our spirits  
For it remains in our souls  
We will not wear a mask of another culture  
and pretend we are something else

## NATIONAL CHILD PROTECTION COUNCIL

*prevention of  
child abuse  
and neglect*

A National Clearing House for information and research on the prevention of child abuse and neglect is being established in Canberra under the auspices of the National Child Protection Council. It is located in the Australian Institute of Criminology.

The first function of the National Clearing House is to collect information (1) on all research since 1980 focussed on primary and secondary prevention, and (2) on all primary and secondary prevention programs and activities in place or planned for the near future.

The National Clearing House will compile and disseminate information to client groups on a regular basis and initiate networking activities with other relevant organisations. We would greatly appreciate your response if you have undertaken research in this area or have a prevention program or activity currently running. Please contact:

National Clearing House on the Prevention of  
Child Abuse and Neglect  
Australian Institute of Criminology  
PO Box 2944  
CANBERRA CITY ACT 2601  
Telephone (06) 274 0207