Critically examine the ideas of cultural heritage, institutional racism and the lack of State and Commonwealth government support of Australian Indigenous communities, using the Dharnya Centre as an example.

The Yorta Yorta people of the Murray-Goulburn region have one of the oldest living cultures in the world. They are a proud people who are also generous with sharing their knowledge and culture with outsiders, as demonstrated in our university trip on country earlier this year. The Dharnya Centre was a culmination of the peoples’ determination to preserve culture and family ties as well as create a space for learning, teaching and discussing history and culture. It aimed to do this through the training and employment of local Yorta Yorta people whilst gaining the benefit of involvement in the economy via tourism. Built in 1985, it was designed as a live-in learning centre to accomplish the above goals, and was successful in doing so, until it was closed in May 2007 due to a ‘white ant infestation’. This essay will examine the reasons behind the Centre’s closure, the political motivations, the concept of institutional racism and the severe underfunding of Indigenous ventures. It will look at Victorian funding for other non-Indigenous ventures, particularly colonial tourism, and how sharing this funding could benefit the Yorta Yorta. It will also define the important concept of cultural heritage and why preserving this, and continuing to practice and teach culture in old and new ways are so important to the prosperity of Yorta Yorta people.

Amongst many of the fights of the Yorta Yorta people, for rights, for land justice, for joint management of the Murray, for the declaration of Barmah Forest as a State protected site, has been the fight for the reopening of the Dharnya Centre. Sadly for reasons I shall discuss later on in the essay, this
struggle is still continuing. The Centre was opened in 1984 with a Commonwealth government grant, it is located in the Barmah State Forest in the heart of Yorta Yorta country and comprises of three buildings; accommodation; living and cooking area and the learning centre itself. The idea was to be a live-in learning centre, for not only visitors and students to learn about Yorta Yorta culture and history but also to continue family connections and hold important meetings for the local people. The Centre was shut down in 2007, with the ‘official’ reason being an infestation of white ants causing structural problems. The deeper motivations behind this closure and the potential of preventing its closure will be returned to shortly. The Centre was seen by the Yorta Yorta people as a positive resource to enable the practice of culture and were deeply saddened by its closure.

In order to examine the underlying reasons for the closure of the Dharnya centre and the impacts this closure has had, we first need to understand the reason it was so important for the Yorta Yorta people. To do so it is crucial to understand the concept of Indigenous cultural heritage. ‘Heritage can be defined narrowly to cover only material things, such as sites or objects, or defined broadly to include religion, folklore, oral history and living culture’ (Bird 1993), it encompasses everything, both movable and immovable, that belongs to a group with a shared identity (Battiste & Henderson 2000, 64-65). Western ideas of culture tend to vary greatly from those of Indigenous peoples, for a start we have a tendency to view culture as the past and not a fluid, ever-changing concept. The importance of the Dharnya centre is not only the physical land it is on, but also the living culture it preserves and
passes on to future generations as well as other non-Indigenous visitors.

Since colonization cultural heritage of Indigenous people has been adversely affected, aside from attempts to wipe out Indigenous culture and history altogether it was also subjected to analysis by academics and scientists and most recently attempted to be exploited for profit of the colonizer (Bird 1993). The Dharnya Centre is a positive example of Indigenous people making strides against the colonizer as it takes back control of culture and ensures the preservation of the Yorta Yorta people’s history, family connections, environmental protection and continued cultural practices.

Control over cultural heritage is something that involves complex state laws that often do not encompass these same holistic views as held by the Yorta Yorta people. The protection of this culture is directly linked with the group retaining control over the knowledge, objects and sites (Battiste & Henderson 2000, 68). Attempts to regain this control, by way of the existence of the Dharnya Centre are outlined in the Yorta Yorta Nation Aboriginal Corporation (YYNAC) 1999 Management Plan for Yorta Yorta Cultural Environmental Heritage Project. The report takes into account long-term goals for the preservation of Yorta Yorta lands and culture and believes the Dharnya Centre plays a central role in this through a process of ‘cross-cultural communication’ (YYNAC 1999, 61).

It also requested the transferal of the Dharnya Centre from Government control to that of the Yorta Yorta Clans Group (YYNAC 1999, 57). Victorian Indigenous communities have fought for and won back some of this control through the regaining of previously removed rights to culture
and the authority and ability to make decisions regarding it, such as in the 1987 Cultural Heritage Act (Atkinson 1996, 4). However, the government still easily overrides these rights if other interests, that are seen as more economically rewarding, such as mining or farming, become involved (Atkinson 1996, 4). It also tends to overlook contemporary interpretations of culture and instead adopt a limited, static view instead of the evolving, adapting one which still exists today, a living culture (Atkinson 1996, 12; Atkinson 2004, 3). Educating young Indigenous people about culture is a necessary part of ensuring its survival into the future; this merging of past and current tradition through generations is what is meant by ‘living’ culture (Atkinson 2004, 9). With this in mind it is necessary to consider the potential political motivations behind the closure of the centre, as a way of ‘severing’ this link between the Yorta Yorta and their culture, ancestral lands and community (DAG 2008). Unless the Centre is reopened, it may just succeed in severing the ties this living culture shares between past and future generations, which are key to the continuation of Yorta Yorta tradition and survival.

To discuss the reasons behind the closure of Dharnya, we need to understand the concept of ‘institutional racism’ and how it applies in this circumstance. It involves racism that it is perpetrated by powerful group or institution and can greatly impact the lives of a marginalized group. It can be subtler than ‘everyday racism’ and involve discriminatory policy, diminished human rights, and limits access to political, social, economic, and
cultural freedoms (Atkinson 1996, 17). It can often involve exclusion from
institutions and unequal representation in relevant outlets such as public
service, and the teaching of Indigenous culture (Atkinson 1996, 18). The
closure of the Dharnya Centre, not only highlights institutional racism due
to a limited care, funding and maintenance by a government department
but also the restriction of these rights to social, economic and cultural
freedoms provided by the centre. There are many documents as well as
anecdotal evidence that can prove the reasons behind the closure of the
Dharnya Centre were in part due to neglect by Parks Victoria, a State
Government offshoot and the managing authority of the Centre (Atkinson,
Wordpress site). This choice to disregard proper maintenance of the centre
and ignoring advice given by architects of how to solve structural problems
are examples of institutional racism.

There is unequivocal proof that the government, by way of Parks Victoria
knew about the condition of the building some eight years before the
center’s closure. There is first hand evidence from site inspections given on
four separate occasions by independent architects. The 1999 inspection
showed structural issues and white ant infestation had already occurred and
were identified by Toscano Architects as ‘immediate problems’ (Atkinson,
FOI docs 2008). This makes clear that Parks Victoria was well aware of the
building’s structural and infestation issues almost a decade before it was
declared structurally unsound and closed (Atkinson 2008; DAG 2008). This
lack of care, underfunding, ignoring a clearly detrimental issue are signs of
institutional racism on the part of the State government. The problem could have been fixed and the centre still open had the problem been acknowledged back in 1999 and funding provided (Atkinson 2008, 24). The closing of the Centre can be argued as a breach of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 by ‘exclusion of Yorta Yorta from the fundamental right to practice, teach and to enjoy their cultural heritage’ (Atkinson, Wordpress site). The facts of the case are clear, yet there have been no ramifications for Parks Victoria’s negligence. There are still no plans to provide funding for the refurbishment of the centre or the handing of total control to the Yorta Yorta people, despite this failure on the government’s behalf.

The racism can also be seen as a taking away of decision-making rights that are important for the Yorta Yorta people, by taking away a Centre, which aimed to take care of country and culture and ensure it continued into the future (Atkinson 2004, 11). The holistic and community based nature of Indigenous culture previously discussed is undermined by the government’s prejudicial treatment of cultural heritage. The State government weakens the strength of this culture by compartmentalizing and fragmenting Indigenous interests into different departments which all have to fight for the limited resources available (Atkinson 1996, 5). This can be seen as an example of institutional racism when compared to the funding non-Indigenous culture receives in the state budget, with separate well-funded divisions for art, sport, tourism and the environment (Atkinson 1996, 5). The third key objective listed in the 2004 Cooperative Land Management
Agreement signed between the YYNAC and the state of Victoria was; ‘the identification and promotion of employment, training and economic opportunities for the Yorta Yorta people’ (YYNAC website). The Dharnya Centre could have been a perfect opportunity to engage in all three of these, already providing employment, training and economic revenue via tourism and could have done so on a larger scale if supported by the government.

In order to further investigate institutional racism, negligence and underfunding of the Dharnya Centre as a place of importance, we should compare to funding other ‘cultural’ sites within Victoria Receive. The year the Dharnya Centre was closed, 2007, $23 million was allocated in the Victorian state budget for developing mainstream regional tourism (DAG 2008; Atkinson 2008). Despite the large population of Indigenous people in the Murray-Goulburn region, and the rich culture the people are willing to share, none of the government’s millions of dollars of funding to attract tourists to the area focused on Indigenous projects (Atkinson 2009, 3). These statistics prove that the government has resources available to fund Indigenous cultural programs and other endeavors but due to lack of coordination, a narrow view of culture and institutional racism these are not made possible (Watson 2009, 95). There is also an argument to say that the ignoring of this portion of Victorian history is an intentional omission by the government so as to not openly admit the atrocities it committed against Indigenous Australia to national and international visitors (Atkinson 2009, 6). The way that Indigenous services in general are dealt with do not take
into account the broad range of factors involved, whether cultural or
historical (Watson 2009, 94). Perhaps if they did there would be more
success in both policy and services provided that would better serve
Indigenous Australians. Officially there are policies enacted nationally
which purport to enable the working of government departments in
collaboration with Indigenous communities based on ‘regional need’
(McCausland & Levy 2006, 278), yet we know that this is not occurring.
Whilst colonial projects around the Murray-Goulburn region continue to be
funded, Yorta Yorta ventures, including the Dharnya Centre, continue to be
ignored. There needs to be a shift in thinking on the part of the government
to ensure the voices of local Indigenous people are heard and valued as not
only an important part of history and current culture, but also their
potential to take part in the economic boon that is tourism.

The next stage is to look at the current situation in Barmah and the progress
that has been made in the five years since the centre’s closure. According to
the YYNAC website, operation of the Dharnya Centre has been
‘temporarily suspended while a structural assessment of the centre is
undertaken’ (YYNAC 2012). Due to reasons frustratingly out of their
control and directly related to underlying issues of institutional racism
discussed previously, there has been no movement made on the actual
building since its closure. The local paper, the Riverine Herald, wrote an
article around the time of our visit earlier this year and brought up the topic
of the Dharnya Centre. The Parks Victoria River Red Gum Project
Manager Chris McCormack was quoted as saying ‘Parks Victoria was committed to supporting Yorta Yorta’s hopes for the long term use of the Dharnya Centre and was working with the YYNAC to gain feedback from the community’ (Tohini 2012). This response is a confusing one, as the community, and many others such as the Dharnya Action Group (DAG) have made it very clear how important the refurbishment and reopening of the centre would be. It also needs to be questioned why has taken over five years and no funding to be received, whilst other ‘colonial heritage’ based sites around the area continue to receive large amounts of funding from the state tourism budget. The current aim of the Yorta Yorta, as well as rebuilding the two buildings deemed beyond-repair is the refurbishment of the main Centre as a place for ‘live-in learning’. The Centre, once reopened, has the potential to become a place for;

‘Research, administration, teaching intercultural programs and most importantly will continue to provide a base for family group meetings and other Yorta Yorta activities…meetings, entertainment and the recording of oral knowledge from Yorta Yorta elders…reestablish important family link…broken because of the Dharnya’s closure’ (Atkinson, Wordpress)

Until the reopening occurs there will continue to be a gap in the Yorta Yorta community where the above crucial cultural and family needs are not being fulfilled.
The Yorta Yorta people are a resilient people surviving not only colonization but also many challenges since then, including the failure of the Native Title case. They are a proud people open to sharing their amazing history and their culture. The Dharnya centre is a perfect resource for doing so. It could provide a place of learning, employment, training, and preservation for an ancient people, who are also very much a part of the present, fighting for land rights, protection of their environment and community. It is a shame that the government does not recognize the importance of Yorta Yorta history and culture and is continuing to perpetuate the systemic racism practiced upon Indigenous people since colonization. The benefits of the centre to the community, as well as visitors and potentially to the state via tourism are great, and the downsides are non-existent. We know the consequences of removing people’s right to practice culture and yet continue to allow the government to deny Indigenous people this right. The centre is declared as still being ‘under review’ but the Yorta Yorta and their supporters are tired of waiting and are demanding action.
Works Cited


