Clarifying Misconceptions of Aboriginality

When speaking of Indigenous Australians, there is a tendency amongst the majority within dominant Australian society to distinguish between those people of the remote and the more settled regions. These binaries are also reflected in academic discourses. Those living in remote Australia are seen as 'traditional' or 'real' while those living in the more settled areas are often disparagingly referred to as 'not real' Aborigines (Gray, 1999:19–20; Langton, 1993:11–13; Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996). This distinction is based on stereotypical assumptions about Aboriginality. There are, of course, differences between Indigenous cultures in different parts of Australia today, just as there were before white occupation. The Murray Island people are in culturally significant ways 'different from Indigenous people on mainland Australia who in turn differ from each other' (Mabo (No. 2) Toohey J. at 179). But the consequence of cultural diversity is something very different from the dichotomy so frequently drawn between 'real' and 'not real'. The same type of judgment is rarely applied to other cultures in the same way. No one suggests that white Australian culture is not authentic
because people no longer wear 18th Century clothes and travel by horse-driven transport, or that other cultural groups within Australia do not live the 'right' kind of culture (Gray, 1999:19–20).

The mindset that constructs what is authentic and what is not reflects the fact that racial hierarchies still exist. The dominant culture still holds the power to impose value judgments on those who are seen as the 'other' (Said, 1994:10–14; Anderson, 1996:59–60). Such perceptions operate at the unconscious level much of the time, and are continuously reinforced by similar assumptions underlying much of the coverage of Indigenous issues by the media and the non-Indigenous education system. It is not a perception limited to overtly racist, individuals, but is common even amongst well-educated, intelligent people who may be sympathetic towards Indigenous people. Many Indigenous students, including myself, have had to deal with these misconceptions on a regular basis (Indigenous Perceptions of the Academy, 1994). The infiltration of such views into the dominant society is extremely great. Indeed it is one that continually confronts Indigenous communities such as my own. It takes immense time and commitment, not to mention the need for adequate resources, to break down such views. It is relatively recent that Professor Stanner called for Australians to transcend this mindset. He believed that Australia needed to go beyond the 'cult of forgetting' about the plight of Indigenous people and to move on with a 'better understanding' (Stanner, 1969). On reflection, it is argued that we still have a long way to travel on this path today (Gray, 1999:15–16; Harvey, 1999:17–18; Bourke and Bourke, 1999:53).

The need to avoid perpetuating Aboriginal misconceptions is supported by the AIATSIS. In its analysis of Research into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (1999), the Institute highlights the need for research to reflect the diversity of Indigenous societies, and to avoid perpetuating the myth that most or 'real' Aborigines live in the 'Top End' of Australia (AIATSIS, 1999:13, 15–16; Foster, 1999:17; Bourke, 1994:15).

Divisive notions of 'authentic' Aboriginality were used by opponents of the YYNTC to justify extinguishment arguments and to suggest that because we do not live like our ancestors, all law and custom had ceased (Yorta Yorta evidence to Federal Court Australia, 1996–98). In determining Native Title rights however, 'no distinctions of Aboriginality need be made', as the
'relevant principles are the same' (see *Mabo* (No. 2), Toohey J. at 179). These issues will be dealt with but there are some crucial factors that guide the analysis of Yorta Yorta occupation. These are: Aboriginal society in its proper time perspective; the notion of change in any cultural system and the existence of a living culture that continues to maintain connections with the ancestral lands (Anderson, 1995:34–37; Broome, 1994:121–4; Beckett, 1994:1–8; Bird, 1993:89; Clayton, 1988:53; Keen, 1988:68; Cowlishaw, 1988:88; Aborigines Advancement League, 1985:15–16; Langton, 1981b: 16–22; Gilbert, 1973:207).

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