Thank organisers of exhibition for inviting me to speak at opening, of Zita Thompson Exhibition. Also thanks to family members, and the Museum for providing opportunity for local groups to share their Cultural Heritage with the public in the Spirit of Reconciliation.

Acknowledge Wurundjeri and Kulin nation as the traditional owners of land. Elders, Koori Organisations and Community Representatives

For my talk I would like to focus on some of the key features of Yorta Yorta culture and history particularly in relation to the YYNTC. The theme of change adaption and continuity was one of the key concepts of the YYNTC that we presented to the court hearing of 1996-1998.

Continuity of Cultural Practices and Beliefs in the Yorta Yorta context.

The Yorta Yorta community continues practices and beliefs derived from, and associated with, those of their ancestors. Many of these stories that are part of this exhibition are sourced in the traditional land and waters. Examples of these include the Spirit Ancestor Biami who is the creator of the Murray or Dhungulla, as it was originally known in Yorta Yorta language. Others relate to the stories arising from the land and waters that are transmitted by oral traditions and have been passed down from generation to generation. The sense of supernatural or non-natural beings in the land, the awareness of signs in the natural world that have been captured in the way of imagery and conveyed to us by the aged old method of oral knowledge.

These practices and beliefs affect the way in which Yorta Yorta people behave in relation to the land and waters. They are among the matters taught and passed on to Yorta Yorta young people through families and culture gatherings. They are regarded seriously by adult Yorta Yorta and are customary law matters. These practices and beliefs of the Yorta Yorta are traditionally based customs currently observed. They are the basis or the umbilical cord that connects the Yorta Yorta people with the land and waters claimed. The Bunyip was commonly referred to in connection with a specific location near a deep hole on the bend of the Murray at Barmah, where children were discouraged from swimming.
Other non-natural beings mentioned in evidence included: the Mookie Man and the Hairy Becker, sinister like characters that lurked in the bush, and were similar social control mechanisms that were used to discourage children from wandering away from the camp.

Witnesses

A number of witnesses also spoke of signs presaging events such as death, illness and other events. The Willy wagtail, the mook mook (or night owl), the curlew are identified as signs of impending bad news. The wagtail (flying in a particular fashion) is specifically linked with fatal news (Transcript 4267). The owl could have a similar meaning (Transcript 770). Signs can also consist of something simply out of its usual place (Transcript 190).

Yorta Yorta knowledge of natural and non-natural phenomena is sourced in traditional based cultural beliefs. Many of these beliefs have been recorded through local oral history projects (see Chapter 1). This demonstrates a concerted effort to preserve traditional based knowledge so that it can be passed on to future generations.

Cultural Maintenance

Many aspects of Yorta Yorta culture have continued in adapted forms. The manufacture of material objects, the continued practice of culture in the form of art and dance, and the preservation of oral knowledge are some of the mediums through which Yorta Yorta people keep the culture going.

Keeping Knowledge and Language

Other practices are less directly related to land and waters. These include the preservation and recovery of the knowledge of Yorta Yorta language. Other practices include the observance of the prohibition on eating certain species such as the long neck turtle or emu (said by some witnesses to be totems), and celebration by traditional dance. These practices confirm that for the Yorta Yorta people there continues to be a traditional order, which they continue to, acknowledge and observe. They are a means of maintaining a distinctive identity, as Yorta Yorta.

Recognition of Totems and Species

The species most commonly identified, as a totem was the emu and the long necked turtle, which was spoken of by many witnesses as totems of the Yorta Yorta people. Other species mentioned included the emu, the Murray cod, the black snake, the duck, the hawk, the curlew, the crow and the kookaburra.
Summary of Traditional Rights and Interests

Yorta Yorta witnesses identified the rights and interests that are possessed under traditional laws acknowledged and traditional customs observed. These are summarised in the following way:

- The right to continue hunting and fishing practices; for your own needs, family needs.
- The right to visit places where your ancestors camped, to camp there, and to pass on that knowledge to following generations.
- The right to protect your own cultural heritage in terms of those sites that are there in the forest.
- The right to preserve and to protect that heritage, not only for current generations but also for future generations.
- The right to be buried in your own tribal lands.
- The right to exclude people who may be having a detrimental or destructive effect on those cultural heritage aspects or those campsites where your ancestors camped.

I believe we enjoy some of those rights but I think we have difficulties in trying to exercise those rights, particularly in regard to sites, protection, and those sorts of things.

Conclusion

The foregoing evidence that was before the Court demonstrates continued connections with country. It demonstrates 'real acknowledgment of traditional law and real observance of traditional customs' as expressed in Mabo by Brennan J. at 43, Deane and Gaudron JJ. at 83, and the 'doctrine of continuity' exemplified by Toohey J. at 143. The evidence negates the view that Yorta Yorta connections have been 'abandoned' or 'washed away' by the 'tide of history' and that these are more recent revivals for 'contemporary recognition'.

Thanking You

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