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THE ABORIGINAL WORLD VIEW : A WHITE PERSON'S IDEAS

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What does world view mean? What is the Aboriginal world view like and how does it affect people's behaviour? Is it possible for a white Australian to understand the Aboriginal world view? In this article I hope to present a white person's point of view on these questions. I have three sources of information: eight years living with Milingimbi Yolngu, ten years learning and working with the Yolngu language, and as many years reading the works of anthropologists, linguists and Aboriginal writers. I feel that I have only the remotest understanding of this question but it is one which needs to be thought about and talked about. Hopefully this article will provoke debate.

What does world view mean? Although many academics, for one reason or another, object to the expression 'world view', to me it sums up pretty well the ideas and beliefs which a group of people holds about its world and the people and things in it. We don't all see the world in the same way (although ethnocentric people may believe we do). Our world view may be difficult to describe but it affects the way we see the physical world, our possessions, other people and ourselves. Consequently it affects the way we act, the way we think, our beliefs about right or wrong, and our emotional reactions to what happens about us.

What is the Aboriginal world view like? Speaking firstly of those Aboriginal people who have been least affected by the Western world, it seems that they do not, as white people do, see the world as being divided up into identifiable physical objects in the here and now which can be counted, analysed and related scientifically. Their world is made up of entities which are related in a quite unscientific (from a white person's point of view) way, but in a spiritual way which reflects the nature of a universe quite different from a white Australian's. There are a number of striking differences. Firstly, the Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or space in the same way or to the same extent as the white world. The land is still inhabited by the same beings which were involved in its creation. The spirits of dead people are constantly

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present. Ceremonies not only re-enact the activities of ancient heroes but also somehow recreate them. English words, of course, are hopeless in trying to describe a universe on which the Western constraints of time and space are transcended, but a favourite English word used by Aborigines to describe their historic and contemporary world is "dreaming". The things that happen in our dreams are strange because they are not constrained by time and space but by underlying and unconscious psychological connections which we really know very little about. The Aboriginal world is similar. It is governed by relationships which are simply not available to scientific study. When an Aboriginal man says that a particular area of land is his mother, he is not speaking metaphorically. To him the land is his mother in a literal sense, in a way quite inaccessible to the Western mind.

A second distinctive feature of the Aboriginal perspective is that things cannot be quantified. In a world made up of objects related through their spiritual essences, rather than their physical properties, counting is irrelevant. Value lies in quality and relatedness rather than in quantities. Quite expectably, Aboriginal languages contain very few numbers and have few terms available for the objective contrasting and comparison of physical objects.

Another mark of the Western world view is what has been termed "the cult of the individual". It seems that every culture strikes a balance between the individual and the group, and the white culture heavily favours the individual. The white persons' myths often centre around the self-made man - "From log cabin to White House", or "local boy makes good". The formal education system often fosters this by employing interpersonal competition as a motivation towards greater academic effort. Aboriginal society on the other hand makes an individual's sense of worth depend upon where he or she fits into the group, rather than what he or she can get from it. An education system designed to help Aboriginal children would emphasise cooperative learning ventures and avoid competition as being basically anti-social.

The above are only three of the wide number of differences between Aboriginal and white perspectives. The Aboriginal universe is basically one in which physical, scientific qualities are irrelevant and the world takes on meaning through the qualities, relationships and laws laid down in "the dreaming".

What are some of the effects of the Aboriginal world view? Here I plunge still deeper into speculation, but my reading and thinking lead me to see it like this. The ancient Aborigines, unlike their European cousins, had no need to develop a scientific

perspective on the world because, living in a warm climate, they had no need to develop agriculture or technology. This may have led to the Aborigines becoming what some have said was the most religious culture in the world. In some groups, it seems, the menfolk spent up to two-thirds of their waking time involved in ceremonial activity. Similarly, because the weather was generally warm and the people were not forced by agriculture to settle in one place, it seems they had no need to develop a complex material culture. All their creative and religious drives were spent in the development and perpetuation of a hugely complex mythology with its many songs, dances and ceremonies. The tragedy of this great spirituality is that it dies when a man or a woman dies, with few visible traces left in the material world.

The religious world was not the only one to benefit from the Aborigines' reluctance to preoccupy themselves with material possessions. The family and the land both became objects of creative and emotional investment. The Aboriginal relationship system is extremely complicated. In the Yolngu system, for example, there are literally dozens of kinship terms each bearing certain responsibilities and even certain feelings that go with that relation. Everyone in the Aboriginal world is related. Everyone fits irreplaceably into a complex circular system which accurately reflects the timelessness of their world view.

Similarly, the land is part of the people in a way in which white Australians might never understand. Different areas of land are related quite specifically to different families - as mother or grandmother or sister. Every tiny piece of land is named - like "the place where the possum burnt his hand", or "the place where Walamarrana died". At Milingimbi, and probably many other places, the songs are often made up of long lists of place names, and people seem almost invariably to be named after places. The relatedness of a person and his/her land are so complete that, at Milingimbi, men often greet their close relatives by calling them, in English, "Country".

What, then, is the white person's world view like? Some people characterise the Aboriginal and white world views as being worlds of being and of doing. The Aborigines concentrate on being, on timeless qualities which unite them to the land and to other people. The whites focus upon doing. They see the world as highly manipulable. Things can be changed and they can be collected. The whites' drive to make, change and collect things has led them to develop a complex mathematical and scientific system. If you really want to collect things you must learn how to count them. To manipulate things you must learn how the physical laws of the universe

work. You must also see yourself as an individual capable of competing with other members of the group for a share of the power which derives from the ability to manipulate. In the white persons' world things are given reality through science. At the beginning of this article, for example, I tried to establish some credibility for my argument by quantifying (in years) my experience with Aboriginal people and language. A Milingimbi Yolngu would consider the quality of my relationship with Aborigines to be a much more pertinent qualification.

Summing up thus far, it appears to me that the great advantage of the white persons' world view is that it enables them to make themselves physically more comfortable. Labour saving devices, modern medicine, and all other so-called benefits of 'Western civilization' are all products of the white persons' world view. To me, the great disadvantage of the white persons' view is that it allows them more power than they can handle. Not only does the scientific world view often alienate people from the spiritual and qualitative aspects of their personality, it also gives them the wherewithal to create the kinds of weapons which could wipe out the whole world's population, it seems, in a matter of minutes. The great advantage of the Aboriginal world view is that it ensures the intimate coherence of all people in the group - with each other, with their land, and with their dreaming (white people may call it time). The unfortunate disadvantage of the Aboriginal world view, it is quite clear, is that it renders them mostly powerless to resist the relentless onslaught of 'Western civilization'. Their philosophy of 'being' rather than 'doing' carries very little of the self-conscious militancy required to cope with the encroaching Western culture.

The remote Aborigines have been relatively unaffected by the influences of Western culture. But to what extent do English-speaking urban and rural Aborigines retain the world view of their ancestors? I, of course, do not know, and people differ greatly. But it seems to me, from my talking with urban Aborigines and reading Aboriginal literature, that something has definitely been passed down which remains in the Aboriginal consciousness and way of life long after other aspects of traditional culture have fallen away. This can be seen in the strong drive of the dispossessed to regain their land, and in the extended family system where rural and urban Aborigines still find security in a very hostile world.

Is the white persons' formal education system helping or hindering the Aborigines' efforts to maintain their freedom and integrity in areas where they are oppressed by social and economic exclusion? Clearly, good education helps, poor education hinders.

What is good education? What should teachers know or do to ensure that Aboriginal pupils can reap the best benefit from school?

Firstly, teachers must remember that, because of their different world views, Aboriginal children are fundamentally different from white children. They are not just poor reflections of their white Australian counterparts. Teachers who expect Aboriginal children to see the world as whites do will inevitably label them as lazy, slow learners, and unmotivated. Rather, they should understand that these children work towards their own goals using their own learning systems and incorporating their own cultural values. Any teacher whose classroom depends upon competition and who inadvertently portrays Australian life as a mad scramble to the top of the ladder of success will find his or her Aboriginal pupils particularly reluctant.

Secondly, because Aboriginal children have their own special ways of thinking and learning, they must be specifically catered for in the classroom. There is a small but increasing literature on teaching Aboriginal children, and teachers have a responsibility to make themselves familiar with it.

Finally, teachers must include a study of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal culture in every classroom program. This study, equally important for white and Aboriginal students, needs to incorporate a sensitive and unbiased study of the problems which Aborigines face in modern Australian society.

While it is true that our world view constrains the way in which we think and act, it is also true that we can, to a large extent, choose the way we view our world. There is much to be admired in both the Aboriginal and white world view, and concerned and careful education is a good starting point for encouraging concerned and caring Australians.

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