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WHAT IS A PART ABORIGINE?

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There can be no ethnic group in Australia that displays as much diversity as the Australian Aborigines. Their lifestyles range from hunting and gathering in the most remote corners of Australia, through a more settled existence in outback country towns and on the fringes of towns and cities, to an ongoing struggle to survive in the hearts of Australia's biggest cities. What is it that unites all Aboriginal people regardless of where they live? Many people, white Australians especially, seem to think that it is the racial characteristics, skin colour and "blood", which makes an Aborigine. To these people, the darker a person's skin is, the more Aboriginal they are. When this sort of thinking predominates, as it so often does, many Aboriginal people start finding themselves robbed of their Aboriginality. People tell them that they are only half or a quarter Aborigine, or a "part Aborigine".

When this sort of idea pervades the schooling of Aboriginal children, and it does more often than not, children grow up feeling that there is something important missing from their lives. They may begin to feel that they are not real Aborigines, that they are only echoes of the Aboriginal of the past. They are never taught about the contemporary Aboriginal culture and its struggle for power and recognition.

What do we know about contemporary Aboriginal culture? What evidence is there to show that the English speaking Aborigines of Australia's towns and cities are as much Aborigines as those Aboriginal people who retain the more obvious aspects of pre-European Australian culture? In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to outline, from a white Australian point of view, what I see as some of the essential features of Aboriginal culture.

First there are the social structures of Aboriginal life. While many a white Australian mother is suffering loneliness and alienation in her suburban home, Aboriginal people in all areas of Australia are still maintaining extended families often in overcrowded homes designed for a nuclear family. These extended families carry with them all the commitments and responsibilities, all the patterns of communication and belongingness which have

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survived since before the white people arrived. These social structures are attended by typically Aboriginal childrearing patterns which train for early personal independence along with close identification with the group.

Second, these families tend to maintain an Aboriginal mode of economic behaviour. Unlike their white counterparts, they most often do not believe that they ought to work and accumulate money and spend it carefully. Like their pre-European ancestors, they tend to see work as linked more closely to survival. When work is directed towards the accumulation of money for its own sake it is seen as greedy; when it is seen as the careful utilization of available resources to fulfil present needs, it is seen as responsible. In the urban setting these resources are sometimes money from casual labour, sometimes from friends and family, sometimes from social welfare payments. It is a tragic irony, in my experience, that those people who most loudly condemn urban Aboriginal people for refusing to be swallowed by the Western system of labour and capital are also the people who most loudly deny that urban Aborigines are "real" Aborigines in the first place. To me, the unique mode of economic adaptation developed by urban Aborigines is the most convincing demonstration of their Aboriginality.

Third, the languages which Aborigines use, all reflect a distinctively Aboriginal orientation towards information, other people, and the world at large. There are over one hundred Aboriginal languages currently in use in Australia, the most widely spoken today being Aboriginal English. Recent research (for example, Eades 1983) has shown that, in many of its crucial aspects, Aboriginal English is more like pre-European Aboriginal languages than like standard English. Aboriginal English, of course, sounds like standard English (and this is why many people deny that it is an Aboriginal language). But, in terms of the crucial functions of language, like how meanings are communicated, Aboriginal English reflects traditional Aboriginal languages and culture. Eades' analysis of Southeast Queensland Aboriginal English demonstrates the distinctively Aboriginal use of English for seeking information without asking direct confronting questions, for imparting information and withholding it without causing offence or attributing blame, for quietly and indirectly seeking and relating explanations for people's actions. I know many urban Aboriginal people who are quite unconscious of the way in which their English differs from that of their white Australian neighbours. These people can carry on a normal happy conversation with their friends, black or white, but are quite bewildered by how difficult they find the English through which they are expected to learn at school and college.

It is often the ignorance of educators concerning the fundamental differences between Standard Australian and Aboriginal English which makes survival in educational institutions so very difficult for Aboriginal students. Just because an Aboriginal child can have a seemingly normal conversation with you in the playground, this is no indication whatever that he or she has ever had the opportunity to learn the complex structures of Standard English upon which so much classroom learning must depend.

The fourth factor which unites urban and fringe dwelling Aborigines with their tribal counterparts is their Aboriginal spirituality. On the remote settlements where I have worked, traditional ceremonial life is still very active. In my limited understanding of Aboriginal spirituality, I see it as focused upon people and land. At Milingimbi all the songs and ceremonies, as far as I could tell, refer to specific pieces of land, specific plants and animals, and specific groups of people. The material aspects of culture receive no emphasis, and the ancestors and those people alive today are identified with their clanspeople and their land in a timeless, or "dreamtime" perspective. Many people believe that English speaking Aborigines lost their Aboriginal spirituality when they were dispossessed of their land, and thus of their songs and languages. However, the urban Aborigines I know, like their tribal counterparts, tend also to reject the white preoccupation with material goods, and continue with their traditional focus upon meaningful interaction with the members of the extended families and cultural groups to which they belong. The strong desire of urban Aborigines for land rights, and the strength with which they fight to retain control of the tiny areas where they have been besieged in the urban centres (like Musgrave Park in Brisbane), reflect an ancient concern with land and home.

Aboriginal culture is really a large collection of quite diverse cultures which all reflect common Aboriginal values. While I have met thousands of Aborigines from many different subcultures, I have never met anyone who considers himself or herself to be partly Aboriginal. Why then do so many white Australians believe that urban Aboriginal people are somehow only part Aboriginal? One reason may be that, in their ignorance of Aboriginal culture, some whites believe that Aboriginality is mainly a matter of colour or genetics. The Aborigines they see are not very black, nor do they carry boomerangs or speak tribal languages, so they conclude that they must be only partly Aboriginal. The assumption that identity can be measured by skin colour is incredibly widespread. Other whites, it seems, refuse to acknowledge the viability of Aboriginal culture because of bitterness engendered by their own culture. Those people who are brought up believing that how hard one works

or how much money one has is a measure not of greed but of one's worth, are angry and resentful towards people whose self worth depends on other less tangible things.

Schools can play a major role in either worsening or alleviating this situation. What can be done?

First, and I think most importantly, something must be done about the appalling ignorance of so many white teachers about contemporary Aboriginal culture and values. Any teacher who considers his or her pupils to be part Aboriginal will be unconsciously contributing to the confusion the child is likely experiencing in developing a cultural identity. (If the child is of Aboriginal descent but does not in any way identify with an Aboriginal group, then this is a different problem. However, I have never seen this to be the case.)

Teachers must develop an interest in and understanding of contemporary Aboriginal culture, in all its diversity, and foster an appreciation of this culture in all their pupils, black and white. This means that a good many social studies curricula will need to be radically re-evaluated, not only in terms of how Aboriginal culture is portrayed, but also in terms of the implicit assumptions from Western culture which pervade the teaching of social science. If this can be effected, all children will benefit. White children will learn to appreciate the richness and beauty of Aboriginal culture and also the devastating effect which the dominant Australian culture may have upon it. The Aboriginal children will learn that they can still be Aborigines with television sets, space invaders and BMX bikes; their Aboriginality lies in their identification with their people - their grannies, and cousins, brothers and aunts. It lies in the meaningful way in which they interact with these people, with their feelings about their people and their home, with the way they think, work and talk. They can be no more part Aborigines than they are part human beings.

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