

Filling the “Anomie” Vacuum (John Wenitong HEP/CYI):

At the beginning of the end was the word and the word came from the new ‘gods’; this word was forcefully injected and intellectually accepted by the Australian Aboriginal people as truth and a reality. This ‘truth’ used in conjunction with absolute power, then began to undermine at least 30-50,000 years of living with pride and dignity and began a downward spiral of self-doubt and initial belief in the powerlessness and worthlessness of all remembered culture, law and religion. Thus, in following Nature’s principle that there cannot be a vacuum, a single, immensely powerful word evolved to fill the void and in doing so gained a destructive power over many indigenous people since non-indigenous settlement; that word is *shame*.

Why do many Aboriginal Australians remote and urban, adult and youth, seem to lack energy, with no real goals or enthusiasm for ‘betterment’ as Indigenous Australians step with mainstream Australians into the contemporary world? Why so many community suicides? Where are our future leaders? Many indigenous and non-indigenous people in Australia, having worked for many years for, and in the area of indigenous leadership and advancement in Australia have repeatedly asked these same questions.

We know that Aboriginal people are not handicapped by an “intelligence impairment” as was once mistakenly thought by the colonially minded ‘invaders’ (Banner, www, 2005, p.20-28). We now have professional Aboriginal people in almost all areas of professional Australian society including doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, politicians, teachers, engineers, tradespersons, authors, media, multi-media professionals, intellectuals and yet, we also have documented and ostensibly, almost insurmountable social problems in many urban and remote indigenous communities throughout Australia.

During my own career as an indigenous health worker, alcohol and drug counsellor, media trainer, university lecturer, youth worker, community development adviser and scholarship administrator I have examined many issues that I and other indigenous professionals attacked with naïve gusto, albeit with some individual success, in attempting to advance indigenous people in diverse areas of societal life. However, one particular issue kept raising its head and would not allow a delineation that we could examine and find solutions to. My first real understanding that this issue was a basic foundation of crisis areas in indigenous advancement came when I determined to deconstruct the use of a very common word used regularly in indigenous communities in both urban and remote areas.

That word is ‘shame’ of which the generic English dictionary definition is: 1: a negative emotion that combines feelings of dishonour, unworthiness, and embarrassment; 2: the capacity or tendency to feel shame; 3: a state of disgrace or dishonour. From my own point of view (and with the benefit of hindsight), I could never understand what my people, who had survived around 50,000 years in one of the harshest environments in the world, the last ‘ice-age’, invasion, loss of country, slavery and attempted genocide, had to be ashamed about (Lippmann, 1996, p.9-10). It occurs to me that any people who could survive through this should be extremely proud to still exist and even prouder to have emerged as a minority population (albeit alienated) in their own land. However, myself and many other articulate and educated indigenous Australians have used the word ‘shame’ in a self-derogatory sense every second sentence since I was a child.

In examining the concept of shame in indigenous life through inquiring and working with traditional, semi-traditional, urban and community elders, leaders, parents, students, professionals and youth I found that the frequent utilisation of the word shame was not especially from being black nor being different. Neither is it from a lack of English literacy and numeracy competency or our easy acceptance of the worst of the Western social habits like drug and child abuse and gambling, but from what is best described by the French sociologist Durkheim as a sense of "...anomie in which old values have lost their meaning and new values have not been accepted to take their place. People in this state appear to lack a sense of purpose and meaning to life" (cited in Edwards, 1996, p110).

Let us now examine the rationale behind Aboriginal Australians feeling this sense of anomie that could lead to a sense of shame, primarily just for being an Aborigine. Imagine if you would, a race that had a societal culture formed over 50,000 years or more; whose beliefs were absolute, whose oral history supported that certainty and who possessed a complete and utter confidence in their strength and ability to survive, coupled with a historically based self-assurance that this would carry on for ever (Edwards, 1996, p.12-21). Now put yourself in the shoes of an Aboriginal child post 'settlement'. Their parents, elders, family and extended clan heroes were conquered, beaten, enslaved, killed, raped and treated as non-human. Their people, now fast becoming a minority in their own land, had those foundations of personal confidence such as traditions, beliefs and life-narrative shattered (Kidd, 1997, p.146-232).

This loss of racial pride, felt keenly by an alienated and conquered generation, in itself would cause that sense of anomie to creep in to every Aborigine growing up in such a differing society from the known ancestral tradition. However, the very core of Aboriginal life, the Dreaming or foundation of the accepted social religion was also degraded and outlawed. Now Aboriginal Australians were told that the religion they had believed in and respected since the days of creation (The Dreaming), was heathen and immoral. After 50,000 years of unquestioning belief and faith Aboriginal people were now expected to accept a 2000-year-old 'foreign' religion as the only true spiritual way for mankind (Rose, 1996, p.5). This also would no doubt cause a fundamental loss of confidence, and in doing so support that sense of anomie beginning to open the vacuum created by the loss of traditional values that Aboriginal people were forced to leave behind.

Again, if that was not enough, an Aboriginal child now saw with their own eyes, parents and adult family members working in menial and laboring positions in society, often for less or no wages; just to supplement their daily provisions for survival (Kidd, 1997, p.229-236). The message was loud and clear: Aborigines are not trusted, able, or privileged to be equal partners of the unfamiliar mores and mechanisms of the new society. The sense of anomie grows and is strengthened by the practicalities of Aboriginal life under the new race of conquerors. Again, the anomie vacuum sucks all optimism or hope into its hungry maw and gives back only shame at being inferior.

And finally, adding to the shame of being perceived as part of a primitive, uncivilized and unproductive people (Tench, W., accessed in <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/barani/themes/theme2.htm>, 2005, p.187), we have the English mainstream ethnocentric attitude to physical characteristics. Aboriginal Australians had no chance to compete equally in this area as their physical attributes were fashioned by physical adaptation

over many centuries in an often cruel and harsh land. Aborigines were often perceived as the opposite of the mainstream European/English ideal in physical characteristics (Worgan, cited in Banner, www, 2005, p.26). Even in contemporary society in Australia you will not see a full-blood Aborigine advertising a commercial product on television, unless they are advertising Australia for an overseas audience who expect to see one. Put simply, the mainstream 'desirable' (beautiful) people do not have black skin, skinny legs, big flat noses and brows that jut out from the forehead.

Thus, we can easily distinguish an argument for such a sense of anomie being present in contemporary Aboriginal people's lives, who are, after all only a few generations away from their first-contact indigenous kindred and why even our contemporary selves put the word *shame* forward as part of our characteristic Aboriginality. What we can do to fill the anomie vacuum and create space and a spiritual and practical foundation for much needed future leaders to lead from, is to examine the denigration of our traditional culture and consider the possibility that most if not all was untrue; that many colonial minded English' historians were blinded by the 'white is right' (at any cost), and 'different equals inferior' Social Darwinist mentality that pervaded the English societal philosophy of the time (Edwards, 1996, p.viii).

When we examine traditional or pre-contact Aboriginal life from what we know today, we can perceive a co-existent national life-style that many nations of that time had no idea could and did exist for many, many centuries in one country. A mostly auto-adaptive and congruent group of people who maintained a spiritually 'high' religion that involved ethics and morals the contemporary Western world should be in awe of today (Edwards, 1996, p.55-64). This base of religious belief was the central point of a society that survived an ice age, mega-fauna, droughts and famine and yet allowed different tribes in the society the freedom of practical implementation of religion to live as they chose. There are no traditional oral, or post-contact English written records the author is aware of, that tell of any tribe trying to make another tribe take on their particular localized beliefs or take another's land for profit or gain, unlike many of the smaller countries and societies in Europe at that time.

When viewed from this perspective, it can be safe and advantageous in filling the anomie vacuum, to ask indigenous Australians; who were the real barbarians? Many indigenous people have expressed total bewilderment at being perceived as primitive, once England and Europe's bloody history of superstition, greed and power/land seeking is exposed. Although a diminutive discussion point in working with indigenous people in attempting to begin to fill the anomie void and assemble a base for Aboriginal Australians to build that previously strong group and personal confidence; a distinct if small change in attitude has been noted in indigenous groups and individuals relearning their own traditional history in conjunction with Europe's history around the same time.

Examining traditional Aboriginal religion can also help to fill the anomie vacuum as many Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians still do not appreciate that many aspects of traditional religion in Aboriginal society incorporated many of the values that Christianity and other major eminent religions promote as their basic tenets. David Unaipon, one of a few mainstream-famous Aboriginal Australians from the turn of the century, saw that his people's customs, laws, stories and religious beliefs were being lost, and to counter this he went out among the surviving tribes in Western and South Australia and documented many oral narratives that would have been

otherwise lost. Below are some of his views on Aboriginal religion in comparison to other global religions and translations of the tenets of an Aboriginal religion that give testimony to the falsehood that all Aboriginal religion was 'heathen' in any sense:

Wonderful is the soul of man. A capacity for the Great Spirit of the Eternal God. Go back into those ancient civilizations and review the wonders. Those sensational discoveries in the valley of the Nile or in the jungles of Indo China, or let your mind be carried away to far off Peru or Yucatan, or think of the grandeur that once was Rome's, the glories that once belonged to Greece. Amongst these ruins are monuments and fragments of magnificent temples erected to their gods. These are evidences that go to prove that man is a worshipping creature irrespective of colour, language, or clime. The only difference is, as a nation's conception of the Great Spirit, so is their form of worship (Unaipon, D., cited in Muecke and Shoemaker, 2001).

It is worthwhile remembering here that while Unaipon was writing so eloquently and with such passion, many Aborigines were being used as non-human slaves and having forms of genocide practiced against them in various other parts of Australia. Unaipon goes on to speak of the differing ways of worshipping in grand buildings and Cathedrals worldwide and says of his people:

Not so with the Aborigines of Australia. We build no place of worship, neither do we erect altars for the offering of sacrifice, but, notwithstanding this lack of religious ceremonies, we believe in a Great Spirit and the Son of the Great Spirit. There arose among the Aborigines a great teacher, Narroondarie; he was an elect of the Great Spirit. And he spoke to our forefathers thus: 'Children, there is a Great Spirit above whose dwelling place is Wyerriewarr. It is His will that YOU should know Him as Hyarrinumb; I am the Whole Spirit and ye are part of the whole, I am Your Provider and Protector. It has been my pleasure to give You the privilege to sojourn awhile in the flesh state to fulfil my great plan. Remember (porun) children (nukone illawin) your life is like unto a day, and during this short period on earth you are to educate Yourself by your conduct to Yourself as a part of Myself and your conduct to others, with the knowledge that they are part of Myself.

Live as children of your Great Father. Nol kal undutch me wee (control your appetites and desires). Remember never allow yourself to become slave to your appetite or desire, never allow your mind to suffer pain or fear, lest you become selfish, and selfishness causes misery to yourself, your wife and children and relations, and those with whom you come into contact. Selfishness is not of the Great Spirit. Cultivate everything good, moderation in food and pleasure, be generous to others, develop a healthy state of mind and body. Body and mind governed by good and pure morals with kindness

for others, remembering that they are a part of that Great Spirit from whence you came (Unaipon, D., cited in Muecke and Shoemaker, 2001).

As we can perceive from this translation of traditional Aboriginal religious beliefs, the commonly held belief that the religion Aboriginal people practiced was primitive and of heathen values was utterly erroneous (Edwards, 1996, p.75-76). This small point again substantiated the opinion that the English point of view of another, and major part of Aboriginal life could be revisited and examined in light of fact and not accepted as another 'conqueror's truth'. Again, contemporary Aboriginal people were excited to hear such factual edification regarding pre-contact religious beliefs, especially from a traditional man who exemplified being able to live in both 'worlds' and reveal respect for another, very different culture while retaining a passionate faith in his own.

Thus, these pre-contact, first-contact and contemporary role models must be utilized in combating this anomie we feel as they are our Martin Luther Kings, our Gandhis, our Mandelas whose words and actions can enable our people to rise out of our shame and lethargy caused by acceptance of our race as an inferior civilization. Unaipon and other documented leaders were and are, role models that today's indigenous people can use to defeat that word shame that has evolved out of this sense of anomie. If an Aboriginal person like Unaipon, who lived through such a terrifying and soul-destroying era of Australia's dubious indigenous past could lead such an optimistic and positive life, leaving such a telling footprint in both worlds, why cannot contemporary Aboriginal Australians equal their effort? Especially as we at least have a semblance of equality today.

Again, Unaipon is not the only exceptional Aboriginal role model and Aboriginal leaders, like Sir Douglas Nicholls, Governor of South Australia and exemplary leader for his people, can and should live posthumously as a foundation for a racial pride, sorely missing in our future leaders hearts and minds. Eric Willmott, author of *Pemulwuy, the Rainbow Warrior* (1987) and a nationally renowned inventor who told the story of Pemulwuy's great battle over many years with the invaders of his land, is another. Pemulwuy himself was a role model personifying not only the strength and pride of his people but revealing an intellect that almost every English military and political leader has given grudging acclaim. Then there are those many early lay-journalists who struggled with English writing to assist their people and who bravely critiqued the various Governments for their treatment of Aborigines from 1836 to today (Rose, 1996).

Thus, we can perceive from this brief examination of Aboriginal and Australian history why Aboriginal Australians would feel a sense of anomie and why we would accept a false account of ourselves as a lower class of people; why we would feel such shame of racial character. As contemporary indigenous people combating the sense of anomie that we see delineated in practical actions every day in our people, confronting those mistruths regarding our own, and our conqueror's history, traditions and culture can assist in filling that appalling anomie vacuum. Although revisiting the past and uncovering an arrogance and lack of awareness of actual cultural practice in non-indigenous Australians has often been perceived as a negative and unnecessary step in advancing Aboriginal Australians, this step must be taken if the anomie void is to be filled and to support a meaningful and modern Aboriginal culture (Gilbert, cited in Edwards, 1996, p. 113).

We have attempted many diverse and often expensive ways of combating the many social problems occurring in many remote and some urban indigenous communities and the majority have failed. This paper would argue that without a foundation of racial pride to sustain future leaders as Aborigines and contemporary Australians we will be condemned to a future of failure; with that sense of anomie growing larger as the gap between our heroes, our marvelous traditional history and contemporary 'assimilation' widens and becomes merely a memory of our shame, that will not allow our youth to claim that equality of personal confidence fundamental to leading Aboriginal Australia into any optimistic future.

We have the resources to resolve this situation through honest examination and deconstruction of the 'victor's' perception of our culture. We have our own Aboriginal traditional and contemporary heroes who stayed strong when many years of oppositional conflict gave way to despair and the demise of 50,000 years of a strong and proud culture. We have survived famine, flood, pre-historic animals, an ice age and many many centuries of the Earth itself changing and evolving into what it is today. We have survived humiliation, being conquered, being enslaved, being perceived as animals and we are still surviving.

However, without a deep-seated sense of racial pride nationally, we are always going to exist in the stasis of anomie and behind mainstream advances. All races, nationalities, countries and groups of humanity need to have that racial self-assurance and with that foundation supporting our unique character, we can not only lead our people out of the anomie vacuum but also lead our country into an optimistic and stable future. In fact this paper poses, who better to assist with leadership in today's often violent and destructive world populace than perhaps the only race to have survived for such a period of time in such holistic societal harmony with the Earth and each other?

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