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Stories of the Dreaming

– *On Education in Australian Aboriginal Communities*

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Abstract Traditional Aboriginal education had two main thrusts. On the one hand, children were given thorough, practical life skills training. Boys learned how to fish and hunt. Girls learned how to recognise food plants and vegetation suitable for medicinal use. The other aspect of education focused on historical, spiritual and moral issues. Students were taught about the origins of plants, animals, geographical features and, most importantly, people. Students also learned about the importance of honesty, generosity and the value of harmonious community relations.

Keywords : Dreamtime, origins, education, worldview, hunter gatherers

Introduction

A British settlement was established at Sydney Cove (near the location of today's city of Sydney, New South Wales) on 26 January, 1788. From this time onwards the European settlers, mainly from Britain and Ireland, had the necessity of dealing with the original settlers on the continent of Australia. Unfortunately there were numerous misunderstandings between the newcomers and the first Australians which sometimes lead to bloody conflicts. One thing the newcomers did not fully appreciate was that the Aboriginal people had a well developed culture, including a system of formal education. (M. King-Boys, 1977) This system of formal educational was not characterised by classrooms, professional teachers and textbooks. Traditional Aboriginal education was in fact a process which happened outdoors, and was led by 'lay' teachers. This paper, a brief exploration of Aboriginal education, with reference to a 'Dreamtime' story, supports the hypothesis that traditional Aboriginal education was appropriate and useful to the societal context of that time. Moreover the author asserts that there may be aspects that have application even in the classrooms of today.

The origins of the Dreaming and the Aboriginal worldview

The continent of Australia is large enough to include quite a variety of distinct geographical regions and climatic conditions. In the past each Aboriginal tribe needed certain skills for the procurement of food, water and natural medicines. The required skills depended on the particular geography and climate of the tribe's general location. By way of examples, tribes in the N.E. tropical coast area of what is now Queensland were known to be proficient in the spearing of fish, whilst tribes located in arid central areas of Australia developed, over time, amazing ability in finding drinkable water. We note here that the Aboriginal tribes were nomadic, shifting location regularly, so as to avoid exhausting food supplies in a particular place. There are two ways in which to view this practice. On a spiritual/worldview level, Aborigines felt a responsibility to be respectful towards Mother Nature, the ultimate supplier of food. One way to show respect was not to greedily kill and eat nearly all of the emus, kangaroos, goannas and other food animals in a particular place. On a practical level, Aborigines understood the need to allow for the replenishment of food animals stocks. In today's world we might call this outlook environmental consciousness.

Naturally enough in their dispersed and varied locations tribal groups developed their own languages and traditions which gave them distinct identities and characteristics. There were, however, some aspects of Aboriginal culture which were commonly accepted. One example is the idea that "...the world is inhabited by powers (beings who exist extraordinarily) as well as by men and other creatures (beings who exist ordinarily)." (Maddock, 1982, p.117) To put it another way, Aborigines believed in both an unseen world and a visible world.

How did the unseen world relate to the world the Aborigines discerned with the five senses? While a full treatment of this question is beyond the scope of this paper, we can say that the connection was extremely important. The *Birirk*, as some Aborigines called the 'powers', were spiritual ancestors responsible for the creation of rivers, mountains and animals. The children of the *Birirk* were believed to be the forefathers of all the Aboriginal people. The *Birirk* were also believed responsible for the stories of hunting and moral education that were passed from generation to generation by word of mouth, oral tradition. (Gulpilil and McLeod, 1983)

Aboriginal communities – a focus on the group rather than the individual

Aboriginal societies in the past had as a basic tenet strong kinship ties. (Hughes, 1987) Even through to the present day some Aboriginal people maintain close links with their extended family circles. In tribal groups kinship terms were “...extended to cover all persons.” (Berndt, 1992, p. 68) The word ‘father’ could refer to men other than a biological father. Various individuals outside of a person’s nuclear family were referred to as ‘sisters’, ‘brothers’ and ‘mothers’. (ibid) One of the obvious benefits of this kind of organisation of society was that the care and training of children and youngsters was a group responsibility rather than just a family or individual responsibility. If a parent died of sickness, or in some kind of conflict, other kinfolk were on hand to see that surviving children were equipped for adult life and responsibilities in the tribal context.

The education of children – the teachers

In Aboriginal society responsibility for teaching fell on all adults. As a general rule, men, sometimes referred to as ‘uncles’, taught young boys how to spear fish, hunt kangaroos and use boomerangs to kill birds. Adult women, ‘aunties’, instructed girls in finding edible plants and “...in the preparation and application of healing plants for numerous bodily ailments and conditions.” (King-Boyes, 1977, p.58)

There are two things that are noteworthy concerning the ‘teachers’ mentioned above.

Aboriginal tribes did not have a need for “professional” educators, people with specialised knowledge as is the case with educational systems in modern societies. In Aboriginal hunter-gatherer contexts it was necessary for certain life skills to be possessed by all, and there was a need to pass on those vital skills to all members of succeeding generations. In theory everyone was qualified to be a teacher and the material taught was of direct relevance for survival.

The education of children - a discussion concerning methodology

Aboriginal education in the past involved learning “...encouraged by elders at a pace best adjusted to the individual child without recourse to developing competitive attitudes towards their peers.” (King-Boyes, 1977, p. 54) How did this work in practice? When a boy needed to learn how to spear a kangaroo, he would watch an adult stalk and spear one. The boy would first observe, and then he would try. Then he would observe again, and once more try his hand at spearing a kangaroo. Then he would try again, and

again, until success finally came. (Brehart and Vitenbergs, 2001) The youngster would keep observing a skilled adult hunting and would practice in order to little by little gain the skills needed to successfully stalk and kill a kangaroo. For some boys this process of observe then try, watch and do, took longer than for others. It did not matter. Competition in the learning process was not relevant. The important thing was to continue the training until the required skill level was attained.

As a general rule, Aboriginal society placed more emphasis on listening (to elders telling Dreamtime stories) and observing (skilled hunters at work) than on verbalising. (Hughes, 1987) There is a lesson here for modern educators. Sometimes simply demonstrating is a far more productive way to teach a concept than spending a lengthy period talking about it.

The education of children – the objectives

Traditional education of Aboriginal children and young people was a process in which a student “...gradually acquired information about both the physical and spiritual environment(s), from advice handed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth.” (Havecker, 1987, p. 17) The educational process had two broad strands. One strand of learning involved moral and spiritual training. The other strand was concerned with practical life skills, skills for survival. These two aspects of Aboriginal education were meant to complement each other in the development of productive community members.

The spiritually-oriented information connected traditional Aborigines to the past and the unseen creators of the physical world. Moreover, this information gave young people knowledge of where they had come from with the aim of helping them understand their roles and responsibilities as emerging adult members of their communities. Knowledge of history and the benefits to be gained from learning history were clearly appreciated by the first Australians. The Dreamtime stories also contained moral instruction which guided young people, in very straightforward terms, toward a way of life that incorporated harmonious community relations as a cornerstone.

The information which focused on the physical environment concerned vital survival skills. We recall here the earlier discussion of how the Aborigines of the past were self-sufficient hunter-gather tribes whose children needed to learn how to find food, medicinal vegetation and water.

A clear example of where the teachings of the spiritual and physical worlds interacted can be seen in a basic rule of Aboriginal society that a hunter must only kill an animal when there is a need for food. Aboriginal children were very clearly instructed that killing an animal for no good reason was wrong. (Brehart and Vitenbergs, 2001) Why was this of such importance? The Dreamtime stories contained “laws” handed down from the ancestors of the people and these “laws” were meant to be obeyed and were designed for the survival of Aboriginal tribes. (Maddock, 1987) If a hunter only took what was necessary for one day, then hopefully there would be food available into the future. In today’s terms this was simply a sustainable use of resources. We could say there was commonsense advice in dreamtime stories, with moral/spiritual support.

The Crow and the Eagle – an analysis of a Dreamtime story

The story is supplied as an appendix.

The first things we notice are the elementary reading level vocabulary, the predominance of short sentences and the overall brevity of the story. Some of the reasons for this are quite obvious. For one thing the story is meant to be simple enough to be understood by children. For another, children everywhere are known for their short attention spans, so stories like this were better kept reasonably short. There is a less obvious reason for the basic characteristics of the story. It was told from memory, passed down from generation to generation. Human limitations served to restrict especially the complexity and quantity of detail in stories like “The Crow and the Eagle”.

Another feature of this story worth noting is the easy-flowing spoken style. For the sake of a written text the story was transcribed, but clearly was not edited to change it into a more formal written English format. Perhaps the idea was to maintain the feeling of a tale belonging to an oral tradition. The reader can just imagine some elder relating the legend to a group of eager young listeners.

Let us turn now to the actual lessons to be learned from the story. “The Crow and the Eagle” is, of course, not a modern scientific account. The story belongs to a people who, until recently, were living in the stone-age. It gives a mythical explanation for the origin of the black feathers of a crow. There is a human tendency, where scientific knowledge is lacking, for people to create their own answers to questions. What was perhaps of more importance in terms of application to everyday life in this story was the moral lesson to be learned. You should be generous, not selfish. Aboriginal people had a worldview which

included the idea that Mother Earth supplies food and other necessities to humans. By simple logic Mother Earth, not people, was the ultimate 'owner' of all food. It follows that if people did not really 'own' food, they had no right to selfishly hoard food when others were in need. We note that even these days it is common practice for Aboriginal Australians to share what they have, food, drink, money and housing, with family and friends.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have discussed traditional Aboriginal education and have seen that it was organised to try and meet the spiritual, moral and daily survival needs of the people. In other words, the teaching attempted to be relevant. It is interesting to think about this point while we consider contemporary debates about the appropriateness and usefulness of syllabus content and delivery styles in various modern educational contexts. Traditional Aboriginal education did not leave more or less everything to a selected, trained class of individuals. All tribal adults bore a responsibility for the training of the next generation of adults and leaders. Perhaps in today's world it might be useful for parents and other lay adults to become more involved in the education of children and youth. This task is too important, and huge, to be left to a small group, no matter how dedicated and well trained they may be.

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Appendix

The Crow and the Eagle

(a 'legend' from the Kukatja people of the Eastern Kimberleys, Western Australia)

Long ago in the Dreamtime the crow was white. The crow and the eagle were the best of friends. They lived together in the same camp. When they got up in the morning, the crow used to tell the eagle, "You go up into the hills and look for the big red hill kangaroo. I will go down to the billabong and see if I can catch some ducks for our dinner."

The eagle went up into the hills and the crow went down to the billabong and caught lots of ducks! He had a hairstring[sic] tied around his waist and used a long, hollow reed to breathe underwater. He'd jump into the water and sink below the surface. When the ducks were passing, he would grab them by the legs, one by one, and tuck them in the hairstring around his waist.

When he had enough, he'd get out of the water and make a big fire and start cooking the ducks. Every day he had a good feed there; then he would go back to camp empty-handed.

Every day the eagle came home and asked the crow, "Have you any tucker for me?" And the crow would say, "Sorry, I didn't catch anything today." He always told the eagle to go up into the hills to look for kangaroo. Then one day the eagle thought, "That crow is up to something! He's telling me lies."

So he came back earlier than usual but he didn't go into the camp. No, he went to the billabong to catch the crow at his tricks. He saw the crow rushing around hiding the cooked ducks under some leaves. When he came near, the eagle asked the crow, "Have you kept any food for me?" The eagle started rushing about, looking here and there as if he was trying to find something.

Then the eagle saw some grease on the hot ashes and around the crow's mouth, where he'd been eating, and there was grease on the crow's hands. "This fire has grease on it!" shouted the eagle. "So that's what you've been up to. You've been hiding my share of the food, and telling me lies!"

Eagle got very angry, grabbed the crow and threw him into the hot ashes. The crow jumped out of the fire but the eagle kept on throwing him back onto the coals, until he was burnt black all over.

Some of the eagles' feathers were burnt, too. That's why he's brown. The crow was punished for his greediness and that's why he's black today.

Notes

1. The *Dreamtime* can be defined as the history of many generations of Aborigines.
2. In Australia there are rivers which only flow during periods of heavy rain. As such rivers dry up after rains stop small backwater ponds are sometimes formed.
These ponds are called *billabongs*.
3. *Tucker* is a colloquial Australian term for food.