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# Aborigines and aboriginal women's identities in Australia: the damaging and painful meeting with others

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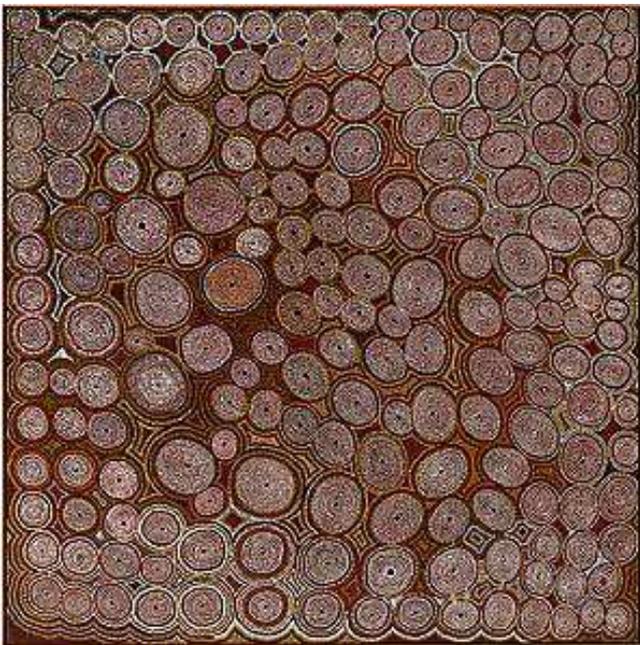
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Australian Civilisation

## ABORIGINES AND ABORIGINAL WOMEN'S IDENTITIES IN AUSTRALIA: THE DAMAGING AND PAINFUL MEETING WITH OTHERS



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May 2013

Supervisor: Sandrine Tolazzi

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<sup>1</sup> On the left: Anatjari No.1 Tjampitjinpa, Pintupi people, Australia 1927-1999. Caruana, Wally. "Anatjari Tjampitjinpa" nga.gov. April 18, 2013. April 2013 <<http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=169707>>.

On the right: Girl Shattered, Lin Onus, Australia 1989. Nma.gov. "Girl Shattered" nma. April 18, 2013. April 2013 <<http://www.nma.gov.au/collections-search/display?irn=145363>>.

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## **Note to readers**

This dissertation is particularly addressed to bilingual readers and is then written in English. Nevertheless, it is to be noticed that some quotations have been left in French. I have decided to do so in order to preserve the exactness of the conveyed messages.

Ce mémoire s'adresse tout particulièrement à des lecteurs bilingues et est ainsi rédigé en langue anglaise. Cependant, on pourra remarquer tout au long de ce travail, des citations en français. J'ai effectivement fait ce choix afin de préserver l'authenticité des messages communiqués.

# Acknowledgments

First of all, I would like to express a massive thank you to Sandrine Tolazzi who accepted to supervise my work and trusted me while I was a French assistant in Oxford this year. Thank you for her encouragements, her useful criticism and her support over the months of research and writing. I also owe special thanks to Mrs Wittick who successfully led me to be concerned about the past and actual complex situation of Australian Aborigines. Last but not least, I am extremely grateful to my family: my mother who shared with me her passion for the English language, my father for his true and lively encouragements and confidence, Clément for his clever comments and pieces of advice.

# Introduction

Once upon a time, there had been a naked man on a red hill. Strong and healthy, with his spears and family and dogs, with his law and religion. Then, another man had come, white and weak and diseased, with his beer and smokes and clothes and hatreds. He said to the first man, “Come with me and I’ll teach you things you’ve never seen the likes of”. So the Aboriginal had followed. Now, he died of white man’s pox and drowned in cheap wine and suffocated in prejudices and his laws were trampled by the white man’s law.<sup>2</sup>

In February 2012, the Australian newspaper *The Sydney Morning Herald* published a distressing article<sup>3</sup> showing the great increase of suicide among Aboriginal girls in Australia. “The increase in female suicide coincides with a rise in the number of Aboriginal women admitted to hospital in the territory as a result of domestic violence” the journalists explained. The level of brutality against women nowadays seems possibly derived from still unbearable past acts. If some Aboriginal communities have not succeeded in pulling through until now, it is largely because of the fact that in one century, the British settlers managed to destroy a sixty thousand year old culture.

The etymology of the very word *Aboriginal: At the origin of*, directly suggests we are referring to a population that encompasses the oldest traditions of the world on ancestral lands. They are called Aborigines when living on the continent, and Torres Strait Islanders when living on the islands in the North of Australia<sup>4</sup>. These traditionally nomadic communities of oral culture have constantly maintained a physical and spiritual link with their

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<sup>2</sup> Archie Weller, quoted in Chris Weedon, *Culture, race and identity : Australian Aboriginal writing*, London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1990, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Russell, Skelton. “Girls at greater risk of suicide since intervention” *The Sydney Morning Herald*. February 11, 2012. November 2012 <<http://www.smh.com.au/national/health/girls-at-greater-risk-of-suicide-since-intervention-20120210-1sksp.html>>.

<sup>4</sup> I use the word “Aboriginal” to describe the Australian native population, that is to say the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Throughout my work, the terms “Aborigine”, “indigenous” and “natives” are used to refer to the same people.

land through what we inadequately call the “Dreaming”, the time of Creation by the Ancestral Beings. According to this belief system, the Aborigines perceive time as circular: they continually live in the present and only exist with the other members of the community they belong to, according to a complex kinship system. However, when they arrived on this new territory they carelessly decided to appropriate, the British settlers brutally imposed the concept of individualism, John Locke’s philosophy<sup>5</sup> and European hierarchy upon the Australian natives, building fences to delineate private properties, and thus breaking every landmark the Aborigines had managed to preserve until then. The numerous attempts at cultural assimilation and biological absorption deeply injured the entire Aboriginal population, but native females were above all gravely offended in their own integrity and completely dehumanized. From then on, the Aboriginal identity collapsed irreversibly.

Moreover, since the beginning of modern western societies, women have had to bear an inferior position towards men. While they had to endure this condition for a long time, they had no other choice but to accept it until things started to change with the feminist movements. Despite an increase in open-mindedness and an evolution of mentalities throughout the centuries, this image is still ingrained in the western collective memory. In the eighteenth century, women went from one guardianship to another; their social existences were hardly recognized outside the family circle and all the structures of the society definitely showed male supremacy. Therefore, it was naturally but in a disastrous way that the British settlers established an even more discriminating hierarchy as soon as they met with Aboriginal women during the colonization of Australia from 1770. Furthermore, according to the theory of social Darwinism, men of colour and thus the Aborigines belonged to a race considered as inferior to the white one. Worse then, native women were at the very bottom of this hierarchy, considered to be even inferior to Aboriginal men for being both female and black. Nowadays, it is a forever wounded population which has fallen down in a country torn by shame, reluctance to accept or worse, denial towards the past.

Within this context, what we would like to analyze through this work is the extent to which the identity of Aborigines and particularly Aboriginal women was moulded by the successive policies established throughout the years of Australian history. We will first

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<sup>5</sup> John Locke, well-known as the Father of Classical Liberalism, expressed the idea of individual property being a natural right derived from labour, in Chapter V of his Second Treatise.

analyze the traditional role of Aboriginal women within the community. Then, we will show how the identity of these women was shaped by history, facing Australian society and colonization. Eventually, we will try to see how more recent governments have attempted to overcome the past and the effects of such attempts on Aborigines nowadays.

I hope this dissertation will promote a better consideration of the role and identity of Aborigines and Aboriginal women in Australia nowadays, and a greater awareness of how they continue to pay in the present time for the atrocities they suffered from the past.

Identity is first a paradox in itself in the sense that identity is what is identical (unity) but also on the contrary, what is distinct (uniqueness)<sup>6</sup>. According to Alex Mucchielli<sup>7</sup>, it is more precisely a body of criteria and definitions, describing an internal feeling. The latter combines unity, belonging and autonomous emotions organized around the desire to exist. However, identity cannot develop without relations with others, it is then crucial to be recognized not only by oneself or one's group, but also by the outside world. The individual, the group and the cultural dimensions are profoundly linked, respectively achieving a feeling of uniqueness, belonging to a group and cultural own. Every single person develops his or her identity gradually, through experiences and crises occurring from birth to adolescence. This definition of identity is of great importance in order to explain the evolution of self-definition among the Aborigines in general and particularly upon women through the years.

Since we are going to emphasize various cultural features, it also appears significant to point out that the rites and customs of Aboriginal tribes can be different according to the regions of Australia. Each group gathers people sharing the same language, traditions and general laws but these can vary greatly from one group to another.

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<sup>6</sup> Jean-Claude Ruano-Borbalan, *L'identité, l'individu, le groupe, la société*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France), 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Mucchielli, *L'identité Que sais-je*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 1986, 5.

# **I The traditional identity of Aboriginal women as resulting from their role within the community**

## 1) The Aboriginal representation of social organization

According to the Oxford dictionary, an Aborigine “is a person that has been in a country or region from the earliest times.”<sup>8</sup> We cannot question this basic etymology; nevertheless, we can add that an Australian Aborigine is any person proclaiming himself or herself as such and recognized by his or her own community<sup>9</sup>. In order to better perceive the identity of Aborigines and Aboriginal women today, built around lost and preserved traditions, it is first of all necessary to understand the ancestral role of these native females in their communities. This first part will help us to interpret the place these women used to occupy before the arrival of British settlers, because a great part of their traditional role was taken from them after this key event. We will observe the role of women throughout the different stages they have to confront throughout their lives and their traditional role in the different ceremonies. We will keep in mind that details always vary from one tribe to another.

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<sup>8</sup> Oxforddictionaries.com. “Definition of Aborigine” Oxforddictionaries.com. April 26, 2013. April 2013 <<http://oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/english/aborigine>>.

<sup>9</sup> J-C Redonnet, *L’Australie, Que Sais-Je*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), 21.

## a) Aboriginal social structure

The social organization of Aboriginal communities is regulated by mutuality principles and sharing notions. Traditionally, women are responsible for gathering fruit, vegetables, small animals, eggs, insects or shell fish, hence providing a reliable contribution to the subsistence of the community. They are also in charge of basket-making (*dilly bags*<sup>10</sup>), which represents a major help to amass victuals. Women then see themselves as useful and, more significantly, they are regarded as useful to the whole population. On the other hand, Aboriginal men take charge of hunting and catching large land or sea animals. The collected food is naturally dedicated to the nuclear family but also to all the members of the tribe. As a matter of fact, Aborigines make very little distinction between blood relatives and other members of the community: this is what is known as classificatory principle and according to Fanny Duthil:

Chaque Aborigène, dès sa naissance, se situe dans un réseau de cercle de parenté étendue qui se chevauchent. Le contexte familial ne s'arrête pas à la famille nucléaire mais embrasse également la famille au sens aborigène du terme, c'est-à-dire un système de parenté complexe, qui s'étend bien au-delà des parents, frères et sœurs afin d'inclure les grandes-tantes, les grands-oncles, les cousins aux deuxième, troisième ou quatrième degrés. La famille telle qu'elle est comprise par les Aborigènes est une famille de type classificatoire.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, nobody is isolated from the rest of the group and every single person is influenced by the whole community as an individual. Moreover, the very social organization of the natives' tribes is ruled by the *moieties* convention<sup>12</sup>. This complex social structure, being either matrilineal, patrilineal or generational, controls the kinships and behaviours between the Aborigines inside the community, for everyone is somehow related to everyone else. In short, the lineage or transmission system is based on the maternal or paternal origin

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<sup>10</sup> I have chosen to use italics for all the words in Aboriginal English, which have most of the time no equivalent in Standard English.

<sup>11</sup> Fanny Duthil, *Histoire de femmes aborigènes*, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France , 2006), 73.

<sup>12</sup> Duthil, 17.

and therefore determines the group to which one belongs. We can observe a kind of equality between men and women concerning social groups, for the inheritance is not bound to be received through the father. This principle is of great importance in arranging marriages for instance. Men and women have very specific roles within these communities, as we have just seen; therefore, we are now going to develop more particularly the women's roles.

#### b) Initiation rites and marriage

After childhood, the first key stage in a woman's life is puberty and all the physical changes that follow. This period is marked by the initiation rites to which every Aboriginal teenage girl participates, women having their own ceremonies<sup>13</sup>. The females are usually promised in marriage long before their physiological maturity and the age at which women first marry is much lower than for men. Even if this practice is not to be generalized to all the communities, most of them engage their girls to much older men. Sometimes, the relation is not consummated and it is more a question of mutual care, the young woman looking after the elderly man who has to supplement her education in exchange of this responsibility<sup>14</sup>. Below is a poem written by Oodgeroo Noonuccal to illustrate this custom:

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<sup>13</sup> Fay Gale, *Woman's role in Aboriginal society*, (Canberra : Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies , 1974), 23.

<sup>14</sup> François Giner, *En terre Aborigène, recontre avec un monde ancien*, (Paris: Latitude Albin Michel, 2007), 231.

*The Child Wife*<sup>15</sup>, Oodgeroo Noonuccal<sup>16</sup>

They gave me to an old man, Joyless and old,

Life's smile of promise, So soon to frown.

Inside his gunya, My childhood over,

I must sit for ever, And the tears fall down.

This poem is a contemporary expression of a girl's uprising against customary law marriages and open protests have increased since the ancestral traditions have weakened. It is often said that girls strongly dislike the men they are promised to and elopement is sometimes one of the solutions chosen by girls to escape this lack of choice in the selection of a husband. Nonetheless, we have to keep in mind that the concept of duty towards the community is tightly related to Aboriginal women's identity. Therefore, we come back to the idea that the individual's identity is strongly linked to the group one belongs to.

c) Aboriginal mothers and spouses

All over Australia, a very important taboo is shared by the Aboriginal communities: tradition bans the son or daughter-in-law from coming close or directly talking to their mother-in-law<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the contact or communication is to be established through a third person. The food exchange is at the heart of this relationship since it symbolizes the matrimonial alliance. It is part of men's duty to supply game to women as a compensation for the fact that the latter provide them with children. This prohibition may be seen as prevention against father daughter incest. It can be better understood because each boy will be expected to marry one of the daughters of the mother-in-law which has been chosen for him. As a

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<sup>15</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal, *The dawn is at hand : selected poems*, (London: Boyars , 1992), 32.

<sup>16</sup> Oodgeroo Noonuccal was born Kathleen Jean Mary Ruska in 1920, in South-East Queensland, Australia. Part of the Noonuccal people, she started to work as a domestic servant at the age of thirteen. In 1950, she became interested in writing poetry and her first work was an immediate success. Until she died in 1993, she remained extremely engaged in social justice and in support of Aboriginal rights.

<sup>17</sup> Barbara Glowczewski, *Du rêve à la loi chez les Aborigènes: Mythes, rites et organisation sociale en Australie*, (Paris : Presses universitaires de France , 1991), 103.

consequence, if he had an intimate relation with his mother-in-law causing pregnancy, it could lead him to marry his own daughter<sup>18</sup>. If the mother-in-law taboo was transgressed, parental relationships would be confused and the whole social order, based on union, would collapse<sup>19</sup>. Here is a quotation by Levi-Strauss which can well match the incest conception of Aboriginal communities: “L’inceste est socialement absurde avant d’être moralement coupable.”<sup>20</sup>

Moreover, the mother plays a capital role for the Aborigines, in the sense that the future baby’s totem is defined with regards to pregnancy<sup>21</sup>. As a matter of fact, the totem originates at the very moment the woman first becomes aware of her pregnancy. The event is said to be unveiled in particular sacred places chosen by the Ancestral Beings. The belief that every person has a totem is part and parcel of Aboriginal spirituality. It embodies the relationship between an individual with anything related to the flora and fauna, earth, or the human body. For example, we can point out the significance of the eagle as a totem in the Australian movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence*<sup>22</sup>. A totem serves as a protector, companion or symbol of a particular person or group. It is thus forbidden to kill or even touch it as the union provides a direct connection to the spiritual world. To be clear, the concept of totemism is a manifestation of the Dreaming which is considered to be reality and part of the present for every Aborigine:

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<sup>18</sup> Encyclopaedia universalis. “Aborigènes Australiens, société et parenté” Encyclopaedia universalis. February 27, 2013. February 2013 <<http://www.universalis.fr/encyclopedie/aborigenes-australiens/6-societe-et-parente/>>.

<sup>19</sup> Charles-Henry Pradelles De Latour et Barbara Glowczewski. «La Diagonale de la belle-mère» *L'Homme* (1987): 27-53.

<sup>20</sup> Claude Levi-Strauss, *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, (Berlin : Mouton de Gruyter, 1967), 26.

<sup>21</sup> Duthil, 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Réal, Phillip Noyce, Interpr, Kenneth Branagh, 2002.

The Dreaming, which is an inadequate English translation, refers to the time of the Ancestral Heroes, and the institution of the Law (...) it often recounts the exploits of Dreaming Ancestors, who created all natural phenomenon (...) The Dreaming is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment (...). It is not something which had been consigned to the past but is lived daily reality.<sup>23</sup>

The fact that this totem is chosen during pregnancy shows the symbolic importance women possess in the society. Even more than that, the totem itself shows the strong links with nature and places, for the geographic points are determined from the birth of every child and are then considered theirs for life. This again explains the effects of dispossession on Aboriginal peoples resulting from colonization.

The families take into account both social membership and biological descendants when carrying out a rigorous system concerning marriages for instance. In fact, depending on the skin group they belong to, the Aboriginal man or woman cannot marry with anybody. A girl usually marries her first husband at the age of puberty. It is quite different for men who often have several wives at the same time. However, women will have different husbands during their life since they usually first marry much older men. In fact, as a direct consequence of this custom, it is common for a woman to be widowed at least once. Women in general are then still quite young when their husbands die and are used to remarrying with a male of equal age or even younger than themselves<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Christine Nicholls, *Kathleen Petyarre: Genius of Place*, (Adelaide : Wakefield Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Giner, 231.

## 2) Traditional world: the place of Aboriginal women in the ceremonies

### a) Corroboree

The *Corroborees* are basically the ceremonies of initiation specific to each sex, the contents being exclusively reserved to those who are supposed to take part in it. The notion of secret is indeed at the basis of the group's survival. The men's ceremonies are said to be more important than the women's since they both initiate the boys and perform the creation of spirit life for the whole society. The process for girls is less formal than for boys, since the natural transformations merge with the rituals. As a matter of fact, the point of the feminine initiatory support is for the girl to become a woman and to learn the female power that will promote her connection with the Dreaming as she grows. In fact, women's power increases with age, seniority and personality playing a large part in determining it. When a girl is designated as a beginner's future mother-in law, it then emphasizes the very separation from the baby girl she is supposed to give birth to: "Women have their own ceremonies, performed at life crises such as puberty, pregnancy, childbirth and sickness and also as love magic."<sup>25</sup> The *Corroboree* for boys are quite different but women play a supporting role in these ceremonies too, even if they are never the leading actors. For instance, mothers are sometimes required to try to turn away their children from the rituals to test their determination. It is true that just as the girls, young boys join the male ceremonial world experiencing the initiations, but they also undergo circumcision around the age of seven<sup>26</sup>. While they are undergoing this intervention, women, as mothers, are used to gashing their calves to accompany their children in pain. These masculine rituals are established because of the belief that Aboriginal men have to suffer like women do during the process of delivery or menstruation from which men are rigorously excluded.<sup>27</sup> During these gatherings, young boys are separated from their mothers and sisters, they learn the Law, the story of their land and ancestors<sup>28</sup>. Men are wearing their most

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<sup>25</sup> Gale, 23.

<sup>26</sup> Giner, 68.

<sup>27</sup> Nicolas Peterson and Marcia Langton, *Aborigines, Land and Land Rights*, (Canberra : Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1983), 25.

<sup>28</sup> Giner, 203.

beautiful finery and their bodies are painted, also decorated with the brightest colours and feathers, the decorative patterns symbolizing the geographic wandering of their totemic ancestors<sup>29</sup>. Above all the rites, the symbols, the rituals form and help to canalize energies, to deal with tensions and to regulate conflicts.



Fig. 1. Warlpiri women perform a traditional dance during the “Purlapa Wiri Aboriginal dance festival” in Alekarenge<sup>30</sup>

#### b) Public ceremonies

Contrary to the *Corroboree*, the public ceremonies gather all the members of the community both male and female but also all other Aborigines from other regions of Australia who have a link with the said rite. Most of the time, it is about funerals, which represent one of the most essential customs. The Aboriginal funerals are conducted in two stages embodied by two different ceremonies that can vary throughout Australia. The first one consists in laying the corpse on a wooden platform covered with leaves. After several months, once the flesh has rotten away from the bones, the second ritual takes place: the bones are collected, painted in red and scattered in different places. Each burial is organized around songs, dances and rituals to make sure that the spirit leaves the area peacefully and returns to its birth place. Moreover, decorations and ornaments carry a deep significance for the Aborigines and men

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<sup>29</sup> Barbara Glowczewski, «Guattari et l’anthropologie : aborigènes et territoires existentiels» *Multitudes* (2008): 84-94.

<sup>30</sup> Australia.gov.au. “Australian indigenous ceremony: song, music and dance” Australia.gov.au. January 15, 2008. April 2013 <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-indigenous-ceremony>>.

usually paint their body with white clay, white being the colour of death. In fact, they are well aware that a human corpse depigmenties and becomes white when dead. This is why the natives thought the British settlers were ghosts at first sight.

The attendance of family and friends is of crucial importance for the Aborigines. It does not matter if the deceased was a relative or only an acquaintance, presence is absolutely compulsory. Even if hundreds of people take part in the ceremony, the absence of a kin or friend is to be noticed and thus considered an offense to the late person<sup>31</sup>. During these ceremonies, women usually hit their heads with a stone when before the corpse. As François Giner, a French researcher who lived within an Aboriginal community for twenty years describes it: “Toutes les femmes pleuraient, parfois sans larmes, certaines avec des hurlements aigus et modulés (...) Plusieurs dissimulaient des pierres dans le creux de leur poing et s’en frappaient une fois a l’intérieur.”<sup>32</sup> However, some serious accidents happen when close relatives use more violent means. Records show that dangerous tools are removed in some cases<sup>33</sup>.

We have observed that the traditional Aboriginal social organization is founded on an extremely elaborated kinship network. Every member of the community identifies in terms of the relation he or she entertains with someone else and defines his or her role in accordance. This system has a direct effect on women concerning their role as spouses and mothers in relationship to men. Aboriginal females thus perfectly know what the community is expecting of them and even young girls, personally affected, prepare themselves for their future responsible role in the tribe through ceremonies of initiation accompanied by the important women of their lives. In fact, there is no-one more important than a mother for a young Aboriginal woman: she represents a tie that will persist through all the significant stages of her life: from birth to marriage.

It is now obvious that traditionally, women enjoy an important role in the religious and social life of their community. The different connections to land, family, community or

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<sup>31</sup> Duthil, 189.

<sup>32</sup> Giner, 267.

<sup>33</sup> Giner, 268.

language cannot be separated, for these are the links which carve the Aboriginal identity and contribute to the sense of belonging to a coherent whole. The arrival of the British colonists in the 18<sup>th</sup> century will thus result into a complete clash between the two cultures. The division which broke out at the very beginning of colonization showed that the identities were totally discordant. As a matter of fact, the Aboriginal social organization, guided by rules and not by arbitrariness was in so many ways different to that of the European settlers' hence the coexistence of these systems could hardly be successful.

## **II Aboriginal women facing Australian society and colonization: an identity shaped by history**

### 1) Terra Nullius: the beginning of settlement and the unavoidable rupture

In the *Myth of the Lazy Native*, Syed Hussein Alatas describes colonization as “the imposition of foreign rule for the purpose of extracting economic benefits.”<sup>34</sup> Moreover, the establishment of settlements on a distant territory impacts on the colonists’ own way of life but also involves an imposition of ethics, social meanings and values which are at the core of a people’s self-definition. When James Cook and his crew sailed through Botany Bay in April 1770, Aboriginal women could not expect that this day was to mark a turning point in their life as human beings, never to be forgotten. Customs and roles would be deeply confused, altering their identity as well as their self-perception.

“A nation is not conquered until the hearts of its women are on the ground.”<sup>35</sup> This Cheyenne saying accurately stresses the theme of the second part of this dissertation: how women’s lives were shattered by the arrival of British colonists and how parts of their identity were lost, with the experience of Aboriginal women representing the very symbol of sexist and racist oppression.

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<sup>34</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *The Myth of the Lazy Native: a study of the image of the Malays, Filipinos and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th century and its function in the ideology of Colonial Capitalism*, (Abington: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1977), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Thinkexist. “Cheyenne proverb quotes” Thinkexist. May 2, 2013. May 2013 <[http://thinkexist.com/quotation/-a\\_nation\\_is\\_not\\_conquered\\_until\\_the\\_hearts\\_of/339950.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/-a_nation_is_not_conquered_until_the_hearts_of/339950.html)>.

a) The establishment of the European hierarchy and way of life

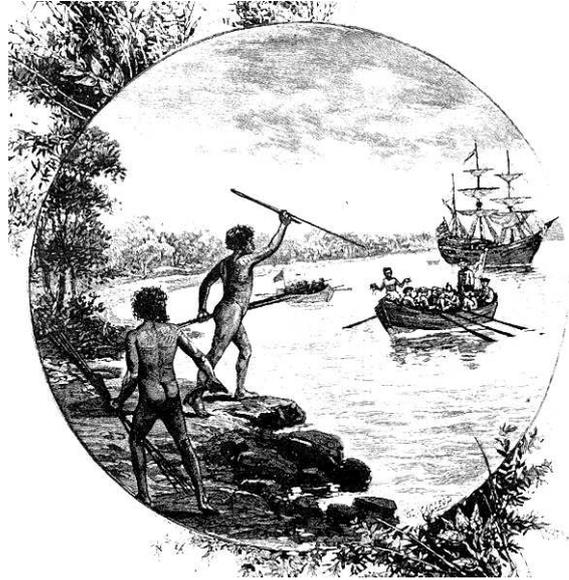


Fig. 2. An engraving showing natives of the Gweagal tribe opposing the arrival of Captain James Cook in 1770<sup>36</sup>

Australia was declared “Terra Nullius” (literally: land that belongs to no-one) and part of the British Crown during Captain Cook’s stay, since the newly discovered land was considered as “uninhabited” because it was not cultivated. The first settlers were actually convicts, the first boat being brought from Great Britain in 1788 under the command of Captain Phillip. The convicts were later joined by free settlers. Therefore, after Captain Phillip’s arrival, the settlers rapidly and easily recreated the environment they were familiar with, without being concerned by the compatibility of their lifestyle with the traditional inhabitants’ way of life. Australia was then colonized illegally, for about three hundred thousand Aborigines were living and moving around on what they believed to be everyone’s territory.

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<sup>36</sup> From Australia : the first hundred years by Andrew Garran, 1886. Wikipedia. “History of Australia” Wikipedia. April 16, 2013. April 2013 <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History\\_of\\_Australia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Australia)>.

From then on, farms, fences and new breeds flooded the huge and already well handled island under the bewildered gaze of the natives, who were not considered as the rightful owners of the land. However, the feeling of belonging to land and earth was and still is necessary for the Aborigines in order to keep, to build through life and to hand down a solid identity. Such a feeling of being an integral part of the earth was fiercely destroyed by the Terra Nullius strategy but also by the frontier<sup>37</sup> conception imported by the whites. But the colonists did not stop at this conception and the already overstepped marks exceeded the question of physical property and overcame the boundaries of self-consciousness. In fact, the British also took hold of the very representation of the Aborigines, first seen as the “noble savages” then soon as “all evil.”<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, it is a full-bottom problem for the native as a human being since the whites redefined his essence, dispossessed him of his identity and prevented him from asserting himself. As we have briefly seen in the introduction, everybody needs to be recognized by the Other to affirm himself.

The Aborigines were first denied, then rejected by the whites, a situation which led the natives to depreciate themselves and to lose their sense of identity. Aboriginal women were harmed in full force by the establishment of the European hierarchy in their social organization, since this patriarchal society deeply affected the traditional roles between men and women, the female being given the most inferior status. This reproduction reverberated in a dramatic way on every single native woman, leading to inhuman and unforgivable behaviours. In fact, it seemed that this particular order which governed relationships between men and women in western societies did not exist inside Aboriginal communities. Obviously, we can point out a significant respect from all the tribes to the elder members, currently called “auntie” or “uncle”<sup>39</sup>, who dictated the social and moral rules, taught the Dreaming stories as well as warned the young ones against punishments: “C’était une ancienne. Elle n’avait pas besoin de demander une autorisation(...) De ce point de vue, elle n’avait rien à demander à

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<sup>37</sup> Ce terme a été employé par Turner pour définir les limites qui séparent les colons de l’espace des autres dans le contexte de la conquête de l’Ouest.

<sup>38</sup> Duthil, 89.

<sup>39</sup> The words “aunties” and “uncle” do not necessarily refer to members of the family in Aboriginal English. They are often used to show respect to the eldest persons of the social circle.

personne.”<sup>40</sup> Apart from this special link, a certain notion of equality between men and women regulated the Aborigines’ everyday life. The roles were not really defined as inferior or superior but varied from one native to another, the point being the importance of each member towards the community. Men and women complemented one another concerning children, food, marriages or camps, either for caring, teaching, gathering or defending, initiating, hunting. In a nutshell, we can express the idea of reciprocal personalities. The special superiority from the spiritual world they believe in can explain the absence of real chiefs in Aboriginal communities.

#### b) Women scorned in their own moral and physical integrity

To understand how colonization affected women’s decency, autonomy and free will, it is essential to analyze the amount of loss which shapes the identity of these same women nowadays. The British settlers did worse than only projecting the European ideal of a woman, that is to say the severe Victorian standard, on Aboriginal females. Because the settlers believed in the full superiority of the white race, they placed them at the very bottom of the white conception of hierarchy, below Aboriginal men. Therefore, women were the first ones to morally and physically experience the savage behaviour of the colonist man. As a matter of fact, it seemed the settlers considered the social evolution of a society determined by how it treated its women and according to them, they had to hold the lowest level. First of all, it is significant to indicate the European settlers’ conviction that the Aboriginal body was dirty. Therefore, women were also believed to be sexually impure, a theory that will later justify the sterilization of Aboriginal women. The bodies, then seen as unclean, led to the conception that women were entitled to be raped and abused, since only the assault of virginal bodies was taken into account. Thus, Aboriginal women often became non consenting mistresses for the whites, who felt free to determine the manner in which they would deal with them, namely as sub-humans: “Aborigines who refused to countenance the use of their wives and daughters for sexual purposes found their position made almost intolerable. The women were taken by

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<sup>40</sup> Duthil, 225.

force, and they would have no effective redress and no means of protest.”<sup>41</sup> A pejorative word was even used to refer to these particular relations: Aboriginal women were then defined as the “gins” of the whites<sup>42</sup>. The settlers intimately thought that it was their legitimate right to possess women, not only on the fact of being a woman but also of being a native, as it was part of the conquest. Therefore, the appropriation of the female bodies led to the loss of the feeling of physical security essential to acquire a strong sense of identity. Nevertheless, we have to acknowledge the fact that some Aboriginal women experienced genuine loving relations with white men and had children as a result of these unions. All these relationships obviously generated numerous births from which a mixed population, later called half-caste (mixed-blood), increased, to the fright of the colonists and Aborigines themselves: “Ils nous ont pris nos filles et une nouvelle couleur d’enfants est arrivée, moitié aborigène et moitié blanc, un mauvais mélange.”<sup>43</sup> Naturally, because Aboriginal women were usually taken as sexual providers, most of these children were never recognized by their white fathers. The rejection and denial of a child by his father will most of the time lead to distressing consequences as the offspring did not receive the unique emotional and social contribution from his father<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, the child maturation proceeds through the acknowledgment of the two parents to solve the Oedipus and Electra complex.

From then on, according to the whites, it became an absolute necessity for the colonial body to be purified from this stain. And this at all costs.

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<sup>41</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Hidden histories : black stories from Victoria River Downs, Humbert River, and Wave Hill Stations*, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), 121.

<sup>42</sup> Duthil, 36.

<sup>43</sup> Giner, 69.

<sup>44</sup> Michael E Lamb, «L'influence du père sur le développement de l'enfant» *Enfance* (1997): 337-349.

## 2) The first government policies: beyond individual trauma

### a) Aboriginal assimilation policy, the Commonwealth conference of 1937:

#### Breeding out the colour

A phobic fear of being outnumbered by this new mixed race started to develop among the British settlers, who were terrified by the idea of losing their majority on the island. In the Northern Territory actually, the half-caste population exceeded the white one. Faced with this situation considered as worrying, assimilation and biological absorption policies were officially observed at the end of the 1930's to solve the "Aboriginal problem." Such a government policy was acknowledged at the Commonwealth Conference which took place in Canberra in 1937 and gathered all the Chief Protectors of Aborigines<sup>45</sup> of Australia<sup>46</sup>. At the end of this first national meeting described in those days as an "epoch making-event", the delegates unanimously agreed that "The destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin, but not of the full blood, lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and it therefore recommends that all efforts be directed to this end."<sup>47</sup> Aubert Octavius Neville was one of the prime architects of the assimilation policy because according to him "It was the duty of the British to bring Christianity and peace to the remote and barbarous parts of the empire."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> These Chief Protectors were first expected to rescue and protect Aborigines, even in remote places. However, the social control was soon added to their function, and these Protectors were then able to control marriages, places of living and to manage financial affairs. This duty was abolished in the 1970's.

<sup>46</sup> Duthil, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in, Paul Omaji and Quentin Beresford, *Our state of mind, racial planning and the stolen generations*, (Fremantle : Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1996), 30.

<sup>48</sup> A.O Neville, quoted in Paul Omaji and Quentin Beresford, 31.



Fig. 3. Mr Auber Octavius Neville<sup>49</sup>

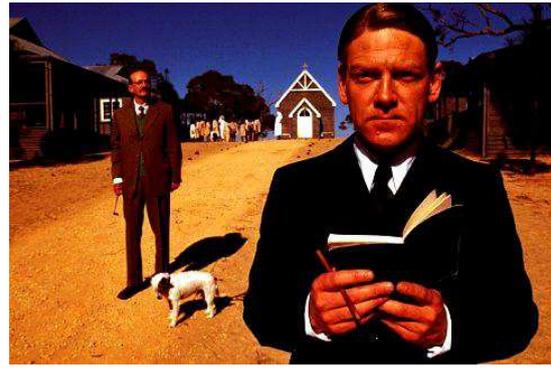


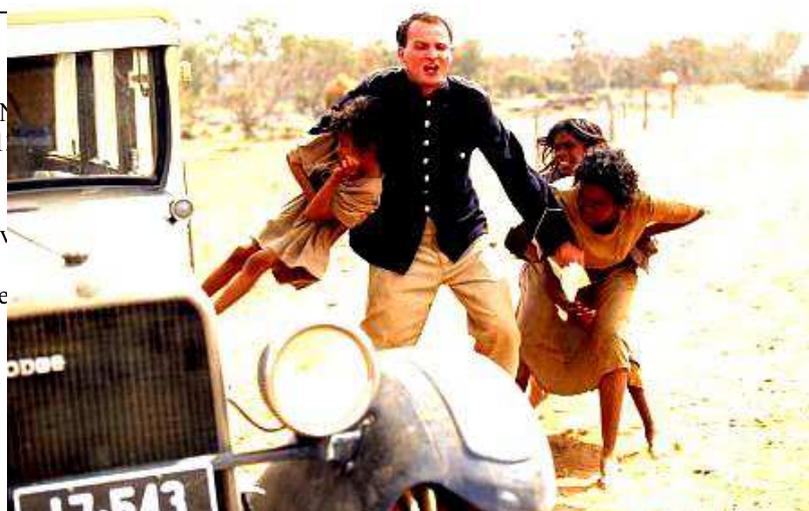
Fig. 4. Kenneth Branagh acting as A.O Neville in the movie *Rabbit-Proof fence*<sup>50</sup>

We are now aware that indigenous females suffered physical, sexual and spiritual violence, but the greatest inhumanity Aboriginal women experienced is probably the way they were treated as mothers. As a matter of fact, one of the methods to carry out these policies was the removal of children from their families which emphasized the first part of the racial plan. It goes without saying that the withdrawals were most of the time conducted by force and are nowadays commonly referred to as the Stolen Generations. The trauma caused by the removal of children had an unimaginable impact on the very nature of all these victims: “The experience of removal never leaves you. No matter how hard you try or how many times you talk about it, you always remember something different, something triggers up your memory.”<sup>51</sup> The aforementioned Australian movie *Rabbit-Proof Fence* is based on the true story of three little girls who were removed by force from their indigenous community and taken to the Moore River Settlement. They managed to escape from this camp, to go back to their Aboriginal family. This Native Settlement was a Christian mission opened by the Government of Western Australia in 1918 and was under the command of the then Chief Protector A.O Neville, to ensure the assimilation of half-caste children.

<sup>49</sup> Rosser, Debra. “The Rabbit-Proof Fence” <http://www.allmovie.com/movie/rabbit-proof-fence>. February 24, 2012. April 2013

<sup>50</sup> Allmovie. <http://www.allmovie.com/movie/rabbit-proof-fence>

<sup>51</sup> Trish Hill-Keddie 25



..gov.au. February

April 2013

Fig. 5. A kidnapping scene out of the *Rabbit-Proof Fence* movie<sup>52</sup>

We can hardly conceive how mothers went through this crisis, except by tirelessly asking the Aboriginal Welfare Board for a visit, not even knowing if their kids were dead or alive. It is a really tough task indeed to appraise the exact number of children removed. However, the official report “Bringing Them Home” directed by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in 1997, reckoned that every family was touched by this policy between 1930 and 1970 since between one third and one-tenth of the Aboriginal children were kidnapped. After having been colour-graded, (kids with lighter skin were thought to be even more disposed to be absorbed in the white population) these half-caste children were placed in Christian missions or in foster families.

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<sup>52</sup> Lifesgreatadventures. “Travel and film: the truth behind the tales”. Lifesgreatadventures. January 18, 2013. April 2013 <<http://lifesgreatadventures.com/travel-film-the-truth-behind-the-tales>>.



Fig. 6. Aboriginal children being colour-graded in a Christian Australian mission<sup>53</sup>

Still, the Department had a special rule of its own: the girls from the North were sent to the south of Australia while the girls from the South were sent to the North, so that the children could not find their way back home if they escaped. Moreover, the fact that these missions forbade the Aborigines to talk their own language and imposed Christianity on children led to break a weighty connotation in Aboriginal life. In fact, the feeling of being gathered around the same language and the same concept, that is to say the Dreaming, is a way to revitalize life, an essential feeling for the Australian natives for this notion governs their whole life as well as their relationships between them. In these missions also, colour classifications were organized. The body represents the very basis of the children's identification and this colour classification was then a traumatic experience indeed as the rejection of darker kids questioned what was thought to be an indisputable fact: according to them, the usual colour was the black one. Actually, the whites did not hold the same fate as the full-blood Aborigines, whose race was bound to disappear according to Darwin's concept

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<sup>53</sup> Aboriginesocialmovement. "History of colonization and the effects on Aboriginal women" Aboriginesocialmovement. March 21, 2012. April 2013 <<http://aboriginesocialmovements.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/colonization/>>.

of evolution through natural selection. The weak ones would inevitably be destroyed by the strongest and pure Aborigines were then placed in some reservations until it was thought the race would die. Beyond the individual trauma caused by the disruption of the family unit, one can detect a collective damage affecting the cultural, social and spiritual network of traditional communities. In a nutshell, the very identity of every Aborigine as an individual and as part of a group was ruined. The children were usually torn away from their family and placed in the missions before reaching the age of six. Yet, developmental psychology settles the personalism stage between three and six. This key stage of childhood is a transition between the construction and the achievement of personality, thus, the long-term absence necessarily disturbed the identification process. The imitation age was then the ideal period of time for the white authorities to accurately absorb the half-caste generation without any great difficulties. Little girls were separated from women in the dormitories, locked at night and the living conditions in the missions were harsh, physically and mentally. In fact, the crux of the matter was that the half-caste children completely broke with their Aboriginal traditions and culture.

Therefore, only English was accepted to communicate so that language links were soon destroyed. Ill-treatments were frequently experienced by the children, going from the simple oral scolding to additional chores or isolation. The assimilation policy was especially aimed at young girls who represented the mothers-to-be. It was a well-considered and a quite twisted strategy for the point was, as they grew up, that they absorb the European way of life which they were to pass on to their own offspring instead of their personal knowledge<sup>54</sup>. Apart from the pain suffered because of the separation, a critical issue arose regarding the preservation of the Aborigines' cultural legacy. As relatives, all these mothers and fathers, grandparents, uncles and aunties were unable to hand down the rites, traditions and customs of their spiritual ancestors. Donald Woods Winnicott used to maintain that "The mother gazes at the baby in her arms, and the baby gazes at his mother's face and find himself therein."<sup>55</sup> In other words, the child learns how to identify as a person through the adults' reactions around him. As a matter of fact, identity is especially more shaped through the relations or

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<sup>54</sup> Duthil, 47.

<sup>55</sup> Donald Woods Winnicott, *Mirror role of mother and family in child development, Playing and reality*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), 137.

interactions with the Other than with oneself. Therefore the children first forcibly removed and in constant connection with the whites, were hurt in their very own construction of identity, because some people at once decided to erase the singularity of a being they did not recognize and to model it in their way. Furthermore, as the notion of community and belonging to a group is significant for the Aborigines and particularly for women, the separation of the families broke an elementary sense of identification.

At the age of thirteen or fourteen, the girls were sent as domestic servants into some white families<sup>56</sup>. They were deliberately given the lowest social status jobs which maintained them in an exploitative and submissive environment. They naturally took care of the children, washing and changing them, but they never dealt with discipline, this right being reserved to the white parents. However, they could also be in charge of the poultry farming or the loading of sugar cane. The purpose was for the Aboriginal women to learn a certain kind of rigour and self-control to assimilate them definitely. What appeared to be the most difficult for women as domestics was the need for privacy, to spend some time alone. It is not to be forgotten that Aboriginal women were under the constant control, first of the Aboriginal Protection Board, then of the whites for whom they worked<sup>57</sup>. Concerning their employment, women had to stay a minimum of twelve months on every workplace. Furthermore, the whites succeeded into pointing out the intellectual inferiority of Aboriginal women because of the gap between the two cultures.

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<sup>56</sup> Duthil, 46.

<sup>57</sup> Duthil, 47.

Il était tout à fait clair qu'on n'allait jamais me laisser être une adulte ou prendre des décisions d'adulte. Toutes les décisions étaient prises pour moi. Ce n'était pas la vie que je souhaitais pour moi en tant que femme, ce n'était pas la vie que j'aurais choisie pour moi-même.<sup>58</sup>

Thus, women were always disparaged in their work, called silly, clumsy, and worthless all day long. The shock of brutal separation and control were such that it was extremely difficult for former mission victims to recover and free themselves. Growing up with these indelible and humiliating memories, their self-perception was built negatively, making the development of identity painful and laborious. Self-esteem is intrinsically connected to the definition and evolution of one's own identity. That is why the fact that Aboriginal women were constantly devaluated had a strong repercussion on the way they perceived themselves and others. The occurrence "esteem" means to determine a value and also to have a positive opinion of someone. Thus, the very expression "self-esteem" embroils the idea of appreciating one's own worth and abilities, building on self-awareness and self-knowledge. Aboriginal women then completely lost their self-esteem as they could not personally achieve themselves. Furthermore, white supremacy and the lowest status given to women had an even stronger impact on preventing them to evaluate positively and to feel useful.

The second part of Neville's plan was about marriages of half-castes. The delegates decided to prohibit the union between a full-blood Aborigine and a half-caste. Instead, they wanted to develop marriage of mixed race persons with white men or women<sup>59</sup>. The objective was the following: the offspring resulting from these relationships would become lighter in skin to the point that the Aboriginal part would completely disappear. However, if the government harshly attempted to control the sexuality and reproduction of women, it is substantial to argue that many Aboriginal girls also learned to develop great efforts to control their liv

<sup>58</sup> Ruth F

<sup>59</sup> Paul O



THREE GENERATIONS  
(Reading from Right to Left)

1. Half-blood—(Irish-Australian father; full-blood Aboriginal mother).
2. Quadroon Daughter—(Father Australian born of Scottish parents; Mother No. 1).
3. Octaroon Grandson—(Father Australian of Irish descent; Mother No. 2).

Fig. 7. The strategy of breeding out the colour<sup>60</sup>

b) The Aboriginal Welfare Board

The Aboriginal Protection Board was first established in June 1883, claiming to take care of the Aborigines. Actually, this department represented a well-organized, permanent and unbearable burden for the natives, especially for women. Through this committee, the government succeeded into appropriating the Aborigines' everyday life, controlling, checking and inspecting all of their actions. The Chief Protector of Aborigines, who had full power, also managed their money and took decisions regarding the mother's right to visit their removed children. The requests were most of the time if not always refused, "for their sake", of course. Whether as a domestic or in the missions, only marriage could give back women's freedom: "Alice Nannup avoue qu'elle s'est mariée trois mois après son retour à la mission: "En un sens, je me suis mariée pour échapper au gouvernement et je crois que beaucoup de femmes ont fait de même.""<sup>61</sup> The surveillance and supervisory control had the goal and the consequence to reshape the individual. Thanks to these strategies of alienation, the whites hoped for a quick assimilation of the Aborigines to the white Australian society. The religious

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<sup>60</sup> Jackson, Kathleen. "Breeding out Aboriginal blood" musingsofanwannabeintellectual. September 25, 2012. April 2013 <<http://musingsofanwannabeintellectual.wordpress.com/2012/09/25/breeding-out-aboriginal-blood-or-the-world-according-to-a-o-neville/>>.

<sup>61</sup> Alice Nannup, quoted in Duthil, 47.

and school education would help to destroy the least part of Aboriginality and to promote individuality against community.

The exemption certificate, abolished in 1960, was an official document delivered by the Chief Protector of Aborigines and was allocated after an investigation on every Aborigine who asked for it. The aim was to find out that the native asking for this certificate was able to behave like the whites and had reached a certain degree of civilization<sup>62</sup>. If this was proved, then the Aboriginal male or female was allowed to live without the weight of the Aboriginal Protection Board, was free to move throughout the island and could have the same rights as the Europeans: “Les ministères concernés sont heureux de vous conférer tous les droits d’une citoyenneté pleine et entière (...) Félicitations Miss Macdonald (...) maintenant vous avez les mêmes droits que les blancs. Vous pouvez boire.”<sup>63</sup> The effects on identity were considerable since the Aborigines were always losing something, one way or another. In fact, the natives were not considered as citizens of Australia without this certificate and the Commonwealth of Australia denied their identity. However, if they wanted recognition of their identity by the Commonwealth, they had to abandon their own identity.

The assimilation policies imposed on Aboriginal women in the thirties appeared to have entitled them with the right and necessary skills to enter white society even though they had to drop their identity and honour to succeed. If the government’s delegates were constantly claiming that the procedure was first to “rescue” the natives from their Aboriginality, they above all ensured that the absorption strategy would still confer the whites the ability to inflict social control over the indigenous population. Therefore, after having experienced suffering and loss, national consciousness has to wake up and change in attitudes has to materialize.

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<sup>62</sup> Duthil, 187.

<sup>63</sup> Duthil, 57.

### **III The Aborigines nowadays: the attempts to overcome the past and the effects on women**

#### 1) Government policies from the end of the 1960's, steps towards reconciliation

The late apologies and acknowledgements we are going to describe at the beginning of this third part were essential to eventually consider a true coexistence between the peoples. In the sixties in fact, attempts at reconciliation started with a rise of awareness and consideration around the establishment of the Aboriginal citizenship, the Native Title Act or the Bringing Them Home report. These need to be outlined first so that we can then analyze the impact and effects on the population. The second subpart will be dedicated to the analysis of Aboriginal identity and what is left today, after the transformation of their culture and the trauma due to assimilation policies.

##### a) The establishment of Aboriginal citizenship

Citizenship can be described as the use of civic rights related to nationality, or in other words, as the benefit of the whole private and public rights which constitute the status of the members of a given state, which recognized them as such<sup>64</sup>. Every citizen has rights, is subjected to duties and has to respect the law in the name of the general interest. Citizenship provides a sense of belonging to the same community as well as the possibility to actively take part in the public and political life of the country. Thus, when the Aborigines were granted Australian citizenship through a referendum agreed by ninety percent of the Australian population in 1967, it embodied a change in mentalities and a glimmer of hope in the recognition and rebuilding phase of the Australian natives. Moreover, at the same time, it was decided that the Federal government and not state government anymore, would be in charge of the Aboriginal policies. A citizen also participates to the vitality of political

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<sup>64</sup> Larousse. « Citoyenneté » Larousse. February 25, 2013. February 2013 <<http://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/nom-commun-nom/citoyennet%C3%A9/34196>>.

institutions and the Aborigines were then better integrated inside these organizations, even if they still involve a minority of them today. However, the refusal to give them a full-fledged citizenship until then reduced the Aborigines to a permanent minority, for every state had different laws for its indigenous people, who had few if any rights before that. And still, the strong symbolic significance of values associated with citizenship like equality or responsibility work to transform citizen identity to an abstract quality which conceals the actual social inequalities. In fact, the Aborigines remain on the fringe of civil society and Nation-State. They are expected to become responsible citizens as understood by modern democracies. But in the meantime, indigenous people perceive their responsibilities towards their own social order and it is hard to combine these with the citizen's responsibilities. Even though the Aborigines are recognized as Australian citizens, several of them refuse to adopt the sociality patterns awaited<sup>65</sup>. Far from being properly recognized, their differences and their ways to satisfy state policies are often considered as inferior, incapable or deficient. The topic of difference is then highlighted as well as the fact that at the heart of the nation, any contrast that escapes from state control or which does not fit the dominant moral code becomes an issue that must be normalized.

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<sup>65</sup> Sylvie Poirier, «La différence Aborigène et la citoyenneté Australienne» *Anthropologie et Sociétés* (2009): 101-122.

## b) Land Rights and the Native Title Act

The relation towards space is a significant element for a population which is considered as a homogeneous group; however, this element can sometimes be missing. We can then notice some communities settled in their very territory and some others were deprived of their own space, and enclosed into the space of other people in various forms<sup>66</sup>. Such is the case for the Aborigines who lost their ancestral territory overnight. The Aboriginal status within today's Australian society arouses many difficulties, far from being solved. In fact, one can perceive the singular and vehement projection of the distant and recent past in the present. Those who were slaughtered, decimated by diseases and deportations, now thoroughly intend to fight at a federal and national level in order to regain the legacy they were deprived of. Land deeply embeds the Aboriginal sense of identity. In fact, the ground is a vital element, a great symbolic value of the earth, the first and exclusive source of every being and existence, which unites the living and the dead. The Aborigine does not possess land but belongs himself to earth<sup>67</sup>. That is the physical and mental reason why it is of crucial importance that indigenous people of Australia finally win back the sacred lands of their ancestors. Apart from this particular relation Aborigines maintain with land, we have to point out that the geographic heritage greatly contributes to identity building for everybody no matter his or her origins and unveils other identity aspects. The quote from Tizon shows us the reasons why the Australian natives are so determined to get their land back: "Malgré la mobilité des hommes et la globalisation des enjeux économiques, il faut encore être et se sentir de quelque part pour agir et être reconnu."<sup>68</sup> Land is needed to keep the strength of community. It is not only a question of well-being, it is a question of surviving.

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<sup>66</sup> Pierre George, «Identité de groupe - identité de territoire» *Espace, populations, sociétés* (1984): 13-16.

<sup>67</sup> Martin Préaud, «La Terre à Plusieurs, territorialités autochtones et déterminations juridiques australiennes» *Multitudes* (2010): 82-90.

<sup>68</sup> Tizon, quoted in France Guérin-Pace, «Lieux habités, lieux investis : le lien au territoire, une composante identitaire ? » *Economie et statistique* (2006): 101-114.

The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act of 1976 was the first piece of legislation conducted by the Australian Government to recognize the Aboriginal rights to their ancestral lands in the Northern Territory. Nevertheless, if some ancestral territories were returned, the Terra Nullius conception, of extreme significance since at the basis of the colonization of Australia was still effective at this time. In 1992, the Mabo Case made Australia confront its colonial past and overthrew one of the fundamental doctrines of the country. Eddie Mabo was a Torres Strait Islander and a member of the tribe living in the Murray Islands. As he and his tribe could prove they had been there before the first settlers arrived, Mabo decided to claim their right to this land. Therefore, the Mabo lawsuit was the first case presented to the High Court of Australia to implement land rights and it directly called into question the notion that the island was uninhabited when the Europeans arrived. This was what the Australian anthropologist W.H. Stanner called in 1968 the “Great Australian Silence” or the “Culte de l’oubli à l’échelle nationale.” The following year, the Mabo Case paved the way to the establishment of the Native Title Act of 1993, allowing the Aborigines to launch procedures for title recognitions. This time, the act covered all Australia and gave the Aborigines the official standing of the original inhabitants of the territory. Some years before the Mabo case and as a result of the 1976 Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act, in 1985, Uluru also called Ayers Rock, was returned to its traditional owners “on the condition that it be leased back to the federal parks service for ninety-nine years”<sup>69</sup> so that both the Aborigines and the service could manage the very touristic sacred site<sup>70</sup>.

Nonetheless, these acts and movements of considerable symbolism did not end land conflicts in Australia and there were also considerable setbacks in terms of land rights under John Howard. It is still extremely difficult for the Aborigines to regain their mother land, for they need to provide the whites with the evidence that they have maintained a connection with the said land throughout the colonial history, which is full of contradiction. As a matter of fact, it is the whites who often pushed them away from their land and took it from them, so that they can no longer prove traditional connection with it. “L’espace est un doute, il ne

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<sup>69</sup> Uluru-Kata Tjuta, knowledge for tour guides. “Return of the land to traditional owners” Uluru-Kata Tjuta, knowledge for tour guides. February 26, 2013. February 2013 <<http://learnline.cdu.edu.au/tourism/uluru/background/history/anangu.html>>.

<sup>70</sup> About 400,000 people visit Uluru each year.

donne pas prise immédiatement à l'identité (il ne nous est pas donné). Il faut "en faire la conquête."<sup>71</sup>

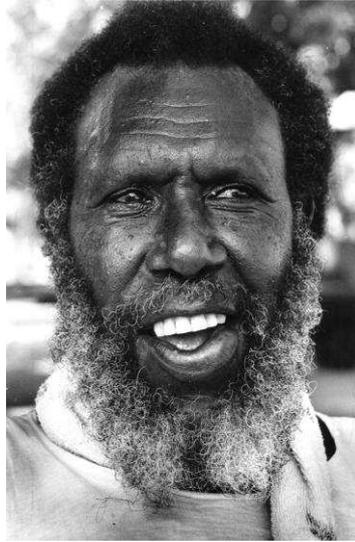


Fig. 8. Eddie Koiki Mabo<sup>72</sup>

With these late acknowledgements, the Aborigines could start to recover a consequent part of their torn identity in reviving their link with the land when they succeeded to win it back. Through the justice appeals, the Land Rights Movement and the Native Title Act have become a national issue which challenged the whole nation. The Australian past is reinterpreted in a logic of reparation. Finally, the Aborigines succeeded in denouncing the official historical interpretation.

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<sup>71</sup> Georges Perec, *Espèces d'espace*, (Paris: Galilée, 2000), 15.

<sup>72</sup> Adcq.qld.gov.au. "Mabo oration" adcq.qld.gov.au. May 31, 2005. April 2013  
<<http://www.adcq.qld.gov.au/newsletter/no21%28May05%29/Mabo.htm>>.

c) The Bringing Them Home report and the National Apology



Fig. 9. Kevin Michael Rudd (Prime Minister)<sup>73</sup>



Fig. 10. Kevin Rudd during the official apologies to the Stolen Generations in 2008<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Van Onselen, Peter. “Delicate rebound of Rudd” theaustralian.com.au. July 16, 2012. April 2013 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/delicate-rebound-of-rudd/story-e6frg6z6-1226426642893>>.

<sup>74</sup> Van Onselen, Peter. “Delicate rebound of Rudd” theaustralian.com.au. July 16, 2012. April 2013 <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/features/delicate-rebound-of-rudd/story-e6frg6z6-1226426642893>>.

“We took the children from their mothers”, Paul Keating acknowledged in December 1992 during a speech on reconciliation, “and this policy was undoubtedly one of the most cruel expressions of the prevailing belief of white superiority.”<sup>75</sup> The then Prime Minister of Australia pointed out the very fact that the removal policy is definitely as much a part of the present as a part of the past for every Australian. However, it was not the point of view of every government of Australia. In fact, according to John Howard for instance, today’s population must not at all be ashamed or guilty towards these removal policies since they had nothing to do with the past actions of their ancestors. However, these people did not consider that Aboriginal communities are still suffering and will for the rest of their lives. Finally, a report known as the Bringing Them Home Report was established in 1995 and as such delivered a national inquiry on the Stolen Generations. This act was aimed at giving a kind of reparation to all the indigenous victims. Nevertheless, the Aborigines and the Stolen Generations had to wait until 2008 to hear official apologies from the Australian Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. The national apology then constituted historic and essential excuses for all the loss and pain suffered by the Aboriginal population:

To the mothers and fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.<sup>76</sup>

To have waited such a long time for official apologies from the government is intolerable considering the Aborigines are still suffering the trauma of the past, which has been transmitted through generations. It is not only the question of a sudden traumatic event, it is also about a cyclic trauma which repeated and which is still present in the hearts and spirits. Actually, the crux of the matter lies at a temporal level between past, present and future. The assimilation and absorption policies are part of the past for the whites, whereas for the Aborigines, past injuries are still part of the present and will be part of their future<sup>77</sup>. It is

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<sup>75</sup> Paul Omaji and Quentin Beresford, 11.

<sup>76</sup> Australia.gov.au your connection with the government. “Apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples” Australia.gov.au your connection with the government. February 13, 2008. February 2013 <<http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>>.

<sup>77</sup> Duthil, 97.

then necessary to reconstruct and to close the huge gap between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

True reconciliation between the Australian nation and its indigenous people is not achievable in the absence of acknowledgment by the nation of the wrongfulness of the past dispossession, oppression, and degradation of Aboriginal peoples. It is simply to assert our identity as a nation. Where there is no room for national pride or shame about the past, there can be no national soul<sup>78</sup>.

What should be an ordinary development for a normal adult becomes the longest of journeys for the victims of the Stolen Generations. This represents a great personal reconstruction work and efforts to overcome the past.

Last but not least, in 1987, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was established by Prime Minister Robert Hawke, in response to a growing public concern towards an extraordinary number of deaths of Aboriginal people after being arrested by the police. Therefore, exhaustive investigations were carried out to sweep away the fear that prison officers were either killing or inducing Aborigines to commit suicide<sup>79</sup>. The cases of ninety-nine Aborigines who had died in custody between 1980 and 1989 were examined. Although it was found out that “system defects and failures to exercise proper care were casually related”<sup>80</sup> to a number of the deaths, one of the Royal Commission’s major findings concluded that foul play had not been involved in any of the deaths. Nonetheless, another death in custody was reported last September by ABC News<sup>81</sup>. Kwementyaye Briscoe was a young Aborigine of twenty seven and he was “dragged along the floor by police at the Alice Springs watch house after being taken into protective custody for being drunk in January.” Instead of checking on him, the officers were “on the internet or listening to music.” The death was finally considered as a tragedy that was preventable for Briscoe died of a lack of care. Moreover, according to Michael Kirby, a retired Australian judge:

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<sup>78</sup> Galarrwuy Yunupingu, *Our land is our life : land rights : past, present and futur*, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>79</sup> Ron Brunton, *Black Suffering, White Guilt? Aboriginal Disadvantage and the Royal Commission into Deaths in Custody*, (Perth: Institute of Public Affairs, 1993), 5.

<sup>80</sup> Brunton, 5.

<sup>81</sup> Horn, Allyson. “Lack of care by NT police led to death in custody” abc.net.au. September 17, 2012. March 1, 2013 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-09-17/lack-of-care-by-nt-police-led-to-death-in-custody/4264934>>.

Tout Australien de bonne foi éprouve un sentiment d'inquiétude et même de honte face au fonctionnement de notre système juridique lorsqu'il s'applique à l'Australie Aborigène.<sup>82</sup>

To conclude this part, I would like to set forth a definition of a particular kind of racism:

Institutional racism is an outcome of the functioning of social institutions such as law, health services, the education system and so on. Institutional racism is a pattern of distribution of social goods, including power, which regularly and systematically advantages some ethnic and racial groups and disadvantages others. It operates through key institutions, organized social arrangement through which social goods and services are distributed.<sup>83</sup>

As Barbara Glowczewski points out: "Ne serait-ce pas plutôt, comme dissent les Aborigènes, qu'il y a une justice pour les Blancs- les policiers jusque-là tous innocents des violences commises- et une pour les Autres ?"<sup>84</sup> The black Australian natives are stereotyped as violent but the violence then daily experience is of little interest.

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<sup>82</sup> Michael Kirby, «Un bicentenaire pour les Aborigènes australiens?» *Journal de la Société des océanistes* (1989): 115-117.

<sup>83</sup> Brunton, 21.

<sup>84</sup> Barbara Glowczewski, «Survivre au désastre "We Got to Move on", disent les aborigènes de Palm Island» *Multitudes* (2007): 57-68.



Fig. 11. Drawing by Bruce Petty for the Sydney Morning Herald<sup>85</sup>



Fig. 12. Workers demonstrating against black deaths in custody in Australia<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> The Sydney Morning Herald. "Bruce Petty" The Sydney Morning Herald. April 15, 2013. April 2013 <<http://www.smh.com.au/photogallery/opinion/bruce-petty-20090907-fdvy.html>>.

<sup>86</sup> Georgatos, Gerry. "Facts on all Australian deaths in custody" cpa.org.au. September 8, 2010. April 2013 <<http://www.cpa.org.au/guardian/2010/1471/19-facts-on-all.html>>.

#### d) More recent government policies

As the Aboriginal problem was increasingly and internationally representing a source of embarrassment for Australia and after revelations were publicly delivered on the desperate situation of Aborigines, the Australian Government started to be more concerned by the collapse of its minority. For instance, the Northern Territory intervention was introduced by the Australian Federal Government of John Howard in 2007, in response to the Little Children are Sacred Report. This very report was released to denounce children abuses in some indigenous communities of the Northern Territory, describing everyday life as being afflicted with drugs, violence and pornography.

The Stronger Futures is another initiative from the Australian Government, established in November 2011 and supported by Prime Minister Julia Gillard. According to the Government's website ([indigenous.gov.au](http://indigenous.gov.au)), the commitment is aimed at working "with Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory to build strong, independent lives, where communities, families and children are safe and healthy."<sup>87</sup> Creating more local jobs, tackling alcohol abuse and encouraging children to go to school every day are the more precise goals among others.

However, these government policies have been and are still strongly criticized by some Aboriginal communities and associations, struggling for Aboriginal self-determination: "Stop the NT Intervention, Stop Stolen Futures laws, Stop the expansion, No to another decade of discrimination!"<sup>88</sup> As a matter of fact, the consequences are seen as terrible according to some reported rates: attempts of suicide and self-harm. In short, these policies are seen as a backward step. Perhaps unconsciously, this continuation of the government control over the Aborigines and their land is then felt as an extension of colonization and then as a constant aggression and intrusion in the little spaces they succeeded to take back.

The persecution of Aboriginal people under the Intervention has had horrendous consequences. Reported rates of attempted suicide and self-harm have more than doubled.

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<sup>87</sup> Indigenous.gouv.au news, stories and information, "Stronger Futures in the NT" Indigenous.gouv.au news, stories and information, February 1, 2013. February 2013 < <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/stronger-futures/>>.

<sup>88</sup> Stop the NT intervention. "Stop the NT intervention, stop the expansion" Stop the NT intervention. February 4, 2013. February 2013 < <http://stoptheintervention.org/>>.

Indigenous incarceration has increased by 40 per cent. Large numbers of people are drifting away from their homelands as resources, jobs and opportunity are withdrawn from the bush.<sup>89</sup>

The cloak of silence which obscured the colonial and imperialist past of Australia has been partly unveiled and the invisible minority can now live out. However, the Australian Aborigines still need to unite their voice to control and protect their destiny, for the racial gap remains a chasm hard and complex to fill. Even if some integration steps were taken, thanks to citizenship, the Land acts and the Bringing Them Home report, they did not ensure success over the colonial past. The historical heritage combined with ethnocentrism and racism is still a great burden particularly when one remembers that the meeting between the Europeans and indigenous people began with a biological opposition. Nonetheless, the supremacy of the state towards its significant minority is starting to crack.

## 2) Regaining an identity as an Aborigine and a woman in Australia

### a) The weight of alcohol, drugs and destructive means

The acknowledgment of citizenship bestows the Aborigines the rights they naturally owe and which every human being needs to be recognized at the heart of society. This accession was partly pervaded with contradiction and aberration in the sense that the Government granted the Aborigines the right to be citizens in their own country. Barbara Glowczewski even describes them as some “refugiés de l’intérieur”<sup>90</sup>, the indigenous suffer so much. One can bear in mind the presence of an Aboriginal embassy on the lawn of the Old Parliament House in Canberra, which embodies for the Aborigines, this feeling of being “foreigners” in their own country. Nevertheless, the affirmation remained a great step forward in the recognition of the Australian Natives, a great step which unfortunately led up

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<sup>89</sup> Gaymarani Pascoe, George. “Stop stolen futures laws, no to another decade of discrimination” Stop the NT intervention. February 4, 2013. February 2013 <<http://www.stoptheintervention.org/>>.

<sup>90</sup> Barbara Glowczewski, «Survivre au désastre “We Got to Move on”, disent les aborigènes de Palm Island.» *Multitudes* (2007): 57-68.

most of the Aborigines to abuse their rights sinking into pernicious destructive means such as alcohol. So, did some prohibitions become objects of desire, or is it merely various means to escape the present reality and all the suffering that come along? In any case, it is nowadays reckoned that seventy percent of Aboriginal men and thirty percent of women are alcoholic<sup>91</sup>. Moreover, the devastating effects of tobacco compete with those of alcohol and some young people even sniff out petrol. As a matter of fact, the NT news website reported in an article in January 2012 that “Unleaded petrol has been banned for sale in the Gunbalanya community since June 2010 because of a Federal Government program to try to stop petrol sniffing in indigenous communities.”<sup>92</sup>

In the seventies, a survey carried out by a university researcher called Lorna Lippmann, showed that the four most frequently used stereotypes by white people to describe the Aborigines were: dirty, drunk, irresponsible and inferior<sup>93</sup>. Today, the media are mainly the source of the creation and spreading of these stereotypes. This categorization influences again the Aborigines self-perception. We can notice a heavy persistence with the fact that the Other does not recognize the Aboriginal identity or imposes a negative view of this very identity. The natives are then embroiled in considering themselves negatively. Although some images are based on actual facts, in any case, they do not have to be simplified and generalized to a whole group. Thus, we can definitely perceive that alcoholism in Australia has become a major public-health problem as well as a national issue. The attention paid to health challenges led to link these alcohol uses and the violence that come along to ill-beings, affiliated to the moral, familial or emotional context. These excesses are then often related to the consequences of tensions, frustrations and disappointments which cannot find any compensation or release. Moreover, the level of self-esteem and the sociability factor would also induce these inclinations. In the case of the Aborigines, it is a shame to observe that they barely could not escape this curse. The situation in which they were left after the disruption of their ancestral life, made almost compulsory, as a result, the state of total decline in which most of them are nowadays. As we

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<sup>91</sup> Giner, 14.

<sup>92</sup> NTnews.com.au. “Police probe banned fuel in Opal tank” January 16, 2012. February 2013 <[http://www.ntnews.com.au/article/2012/01/16/283431\\_ntnews.html](http://www.ntnews.com.au/article/2012/01/16/283431_ntnews.html)>.

<sup>93</sup> Duthil, 90.

just said before, the context and dispositions of any individual is intimately connected to his consumption of psychotropic. Most of the children or teenagers do not go to school and their fathers or mothers are often unemployed, they are then more inclined to drink to excess than other young Australians<sup>94</sup>. It seems that alcohol and other drugs consumption is now passed on like the traditions, the offspring imitating their relatives. The same is confirmed for the violence stemming from it, since it could be analyzed as an attempt of self-worth reconstruction by confrontation. For alcoholism is a social illness leading to antisocial behaviours. As a matter of fact, it is a well-known fact that alcohol makes the commitment to action easier: against oneself (suicide) and against others (murders and crimes).

If alcoholism affects more men than women, the same applies for suicide. Actually, we can point out the fact that alcoholism and suicide are the two symptoms of the same social illness, that is to say, a state of misery, or at least a moral and material lack, in addition to diseases and delinquency. Suicide has always been an individual fact. However sometimes, suicide is catching and almost collective in times of great changes, when the communities and traditional morals come apart, when some great collective slaughters totally erase the misery of death. The striking fact nowadays in Australia is the appalling increase of suicide among young Aboriginal people. For teenagers particularly, it represents an attempt at escaping an intolerable identity suffering as well as a tragic existential demand which, as a paradox, is aimed to die to live differently<sup>95</sup>. In such a context, we can speak of sacrificial suicides. It is an attempt to draw the attention of the world opinion on the unbearable situation of a nation. It is as if the risk-taking was made more attractive, for it constitutes a way of knowing one's own limits, to go beyond them and to come close to death at the same time, which provide a new identity feeling. Even subconsciously, the Aboriginal condition seems determined to convey its distress to the Australian and world society by achieving what colonization expected from them from the beginning: to disappear. If nowadays one gives up in the face of Aboriginal problems, and if as a consequence they die out for good, one would tomorrow accept the first conception and choice of British colonists and assimilation would have won.

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<sup>94</sup> Hugues Lagrange, «Violence, sociabilité, psychotropes et dépression» *Agora-Débats/Jeunesses* (2004): 10-26.

<sup>95</sup> Xavier Pommereau, «L'adolescent suicidaire: en finir avec quoi?» *Agora-débats/jeunesses* (2003): 42-48.

I would use the expression of “passive genocide” to consider the situation of most of Australian Aborigines today, even if this conception is not accepted unanimously. Despite some late attempts at integration, the wound is deeply anchored in the spirits and collective memory. Indisputably, a picture appears, that of a people which consciously or not, is desperately seeking to destroy itself but once again, Aboriginal women but also children are the first to be affected and harmed by male drifting. Moreover, the setting of a bureaucracy responsible for solving the Aboriginal miseries caused and then perpetrated a desperate situation of dependence, which emerged to be as the logical extension of an internal colonization method. Above all, Australian society, influenced by the media, still does not seem to be ready to give a chance to the Aborigine whether urban or rural.

b) Domestic violence and family issues: the consequence of the deprivation of identity

In their common work *Women's encounters with violence: Australian experiences*, Sandy Cook and Judith Bessant describe violence as “the intention to cause harm, destruction or death.”<sup>96</sup> There are definitely different types of violence: physical, emotional, sexual violence, but also harassment, bullying and stalking. One thing is for sure, Aboriginal women have always suffered from men's behaviour: first because of the British settlers, now because of their very husbands or male members of the community. There is an appalling social tragedy concerning the Aborigines' conditions nowadays which also discloses the shocking reality of domestic violence. Domestic violence can be exposed as physical abuses performed by one relative to another one<sup>97</sup>. We can put forward the assumption that the imposition of absolute male supremacy influenced Aboriginal males' attitudes, as they were considered to be superior to native women. It also goes without saying that domestic violence directly results from the predominant weight of alcohol in Australia today. Under the influence of alcohol, one kills more easily than intentionally: death occurs by chance, under accidental blows or

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<sup>96</sup> Judith Bessant and Sandy Cook, *Women's encounters with violence, Australian experiences*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 8.

<sup>97</sup> Serge Brochu, «Ivresse et violence : désinhibition ou excuse ?» *Déviance et société* (1994): 431-445.

during fights one tends to forget the often minor motive<sup>98</sup>. Some victims of domestic violence also suffer alcohol problems, thus we can then imagine the state of violence this can generate. The brutality to which Aboriginal women are submitted has reached an epidemic dimension and it now constitutes a continuing transgression of human rights. Therefore, as the potential of injuring and causing pain is great and above all because the assailants are often insouciant, this plague should not be underestimated. However, women are too often only seen as passive spectators or victims of male violence. The physical security was already torn apart by the successive rapes committed by the white settlers, however nowadays women are also losing this feeling through domestic violence. Aboriginal women and children are simply not in security anymore and are sometimes as brutalized by their relatives as they are by the police forces. They, who played before a well-defined role of their own which influenced the community in addition, as we saw in the first part of this dissertation, have now a confused idea of their self, identities broken by the events and the effects of colonization.

Moreover, a lot of Aboriginal people take advantage of their position as elderly to cause insurmountable harm to others. This can be the same in the name of certain traditions or virtues. Therefore, some Aboriginal men are still using the justification of cultural customs to completely get away with rape and murder<sup>99</sup>. The crux of the matter is to grasp the idea that it is not the Aborigines' problem, it is everyone's problem.

All these social unrests were certainly motivated by the past traumatic events Aboriginal communities experienced. Nonetheless, these had also more wicked and pervasive effects on personalities and identities as a result of brutal separations for instance. As a physical event, separation characterizes the distance of an individual from others. In this process, we can point out three important stages: protest, distress, and detachment. A separation can have long-lasting effects on the victims: juvenile delinquency for children who suffered from separations from early childhood, feeling more fear when facing a new situation. The effects are proportionate to the length of separation and furthermore, are cumulative. Therefore, the consequences of a longer separation are obviously stronger. Furthermore, the mother's

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<sup>98</sup> S Brochu, «Ivresse et violence : désinhibition ou excuse ?» *Déviance et société* (1994): 431-445.

<sup>99</sup> Louis Nowra, *Bad Dreaming, Aboriginal men's violence against women and children*, (North Melbourne Victoria: Pluto Press Australia, 2007), 7.

behaviour when the separation or the reunion occurs is a significant factor among every other that can affect the later behaviour of the child and his or her relations with the mother<sup>100</sup>. Jenny Aubry described accurately these situations when she asserted that “aucune rupture définitive n’est acceptable, même à l’âge de l’adolescence, lorsqu’elle est imposée par des tiers et que ses motifs ne sont pas compréhensibles par l’enfant.”

Socialisation is indivisible from separation. As a consequence, a child who has been wrongly separated can have complications in socializing properly, for it is necessary to elaborate some explanations around the rupture so that the child still wishes to encounter other persons without fearing other separations. Moreover, for many Aborigines from the Stolen Generations, family and parenting skills have never had the opportunity to be acquired and parents have been unprepared for their role in raising children, the family environment being foreign to many of them<sup>101</sup>. As Puyelo used to say, parenthood disabilities are often “prevented parenthood.” (“des parentalités empêchées.”)

### c) Accepting and asserting one’s roots

A trauma is a type of intense and brutal rupture which underlines a turning point in one’s life. The recall of this traumatic event makes it reappear at any time. For Aboriginal women, it is emphasized by the loss of family with the violent removal of children.<sup>102</sup> As seen at the beginning of this third part, the crucial problem lies at a temporal level as all the pain issued in the past is part and parcel of the present time for the Aborigines.

The modern history of Australia is more than ever about a people’s crisis and quest of identity among a proliferation of clichés and opposing conceptions<sup>103</sup>. As a matter of fact, many Aboriginal people are painfully torn between two cultures they don’t feel to be full members of.

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<sup>100</sup> Michel Zlotowicz, «De la séparation à l’angoisse» *Enfance* (1973): 251-260.

<sup>101</sup> Paul Omaji and Quentin Beresford, 213.

<sup>102</sup> Duthil, 101.

<sup>103</sup> J-C Redonnet, *L’Australie*, Que Sais-Je, (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1994), 4.

You want to belong so much and you've got no base to start on, because if you start mixing with Aboriginal people the first thing they're going to say is, 'What's your name and where do you come from?' And if you can't answer those two questions then you're gone.<sup>104</sup>

Therefore, a lot of Aborigines find themselves asking existential but fundamental questions: Do I still come from this country? Where are my people now? The identity disorder is even more painful and intolerable for the persons who were hidden their Aboriginality during most of their life. It is then the whole self-consciousness which needs to be reorganized.

When I found out that I was Aboriginal, one of the biggest things that I had to start doing was looking really closely at all the things that I'd learned and the stereotypes. I had to look at things like being taught by white people-I don't just mean by that my family, I mean the school that I went to and the newspapers and just everything around me- the white culture that I grew up in.<sup>105</sup>

More precisely, because Aboriginal women were without any doubt those who suffered the most from white policies, they are the ones who today are determined to make their voices heard, in an unusual way concerning their orally transmitted ancestral culture: writing. Therefore, we can now find an increasing number of Aboriginal autobiographies. Insofar as young natives are often out of touch with the traditional culture, the transmission of skills and savoir-faire are not handed down orally anymore. The authors seem to have realised that knowledge is now passed on through writing in this new society. Aboriginal autobiographies then constitute authentic testimonies that above all enable these women to cure through writing and to seize back their own initial identity. This pursuit of identity is the very trauma the natives experienced, for these women do not consider themselves as Australian Aborigines, but as Aborigines above all. This absolute need to revive their ancestral culture explains the necessity to find the parts of a self lost, when these Aboriginal women still cannot be in agreement with themselves in white Australian society.

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<sup>104</sup> Carol Edwards, quoted in David Carter, Gillian Lea Whitlock and Colin Mercer, *Images of Australia*, (St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992), 95.

<sup>105</sup> Cherie, quoted in David Carter, Gillian Lea Whitlock and Colin Mercer, 95.

Ruby Langford ne se reconnaît pas (...) Elle a l'impression qu'il existe une dichotomie entre son corps et son esprit, révélant son incapacité à se définir dans le présent et dans la société australienne contemporaine. Ce décalage met en évidence la différence fondamentale entre l'apparence et l'existence, dévoilant une dissociation entre ce qu'elle est et la représentation de ce qu'elle est. Elle se pense aborigène, mais son reflet dans le miroir lui montre une réalité autre : quelqu'un qui ne lui ressemble pas.<sup>106</sup>

With this increase of life stories, it appears to the reader that the relations between the Aborigines and the whites will not evolve until the indigenous version is disclosed. Thus, works like these will contribute both to re-evaluate history and to create a database for the young and future generations: "Aboriginal writing is concerned with how Aborigines can fight at the level of culture for a new sense of value, history and identity."<sup>107</sup> In fact, the Assimilation policy had such devastating effects, that it is sometimes impossible to define the descendants of some Aborigines. Moreover, a lot of Aboriginal children were born from Aboriginal women and white men; it is thus through their mother that generations of Aboriginal people assert their Aboriginality: "They're always questioning our identity and we always have to prove our Aboriginality, but when have white Australians ever proved their identity?"<sup>108</sup> Furthermore, the constant attempts from non-Aboriginal people to categorise Aborigines are seen by the latter as continuing aggression. It is not difficult to understand that this feeling is strongly grounded in the lack of control the Australian natives had over self-definition in the past.

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<sup>106</sup> Duthil, 199.

<sup>107</sup> Chris Weedon, *Culture, race and identity : Australian Aboriginal writing*, (London: Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies, Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London, 1990), 1.

<sup>108</sup> Kevin, quoted in David Carter, Gillian Lea Whitlock and Colin Mercer, 95.

Among the numerous autobiographical novels, we can find *My Place* by Sally Morgan<sup>109</sup>, *When the Pelican Laughed* by Alice Nannup<sup>110</sup> or *Don't Take Your Love to Town* by Ruby Langford Ginibi<sup>111</sup>. Today these women carry a message of hope, the hope and strength needed to first gather the Aborigines themselves and along with them, the rest of the Australian nation: "Nous sommes la colonne vertébrale des communautés aborigènes et les gens devraient s'en rendre compte maintenant."<sup>112</sup> Nevertheless, literature is not the only way for Aboriginal women and Aborigines in general to reaffirm their identity: Aboriginal art has greatly developed in the last few years. It is a major and useful mean for some deeply tormented Australian natives: first, the violence they sometimes return against them can nowadays be expressed in their ancestral paintings and Aboriginal art can then become a source of release. Originally, these paintings, drawn on different supports (the body, rock walls, sand and more recently barks), were the manifestation of ancestral power in the sensitive world. They were most of the time abstract, representing episodes of the Dreaming, and ancestral ceremonies. It is also a good source of income of course as this very art enjoys nowadays an international success. However, another problem can arise from this accomplishment, for global commercial representatives are sometimes assailing Aboriginal communities, once again trying to seize their identity.

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<sup>109</sup> Sally Morgan, *My Place*, (London: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1988).

<sup>110</sup> Alice Nannup, *When the Pelican Laughed*, (South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1995).

<sup>111</sup> Ruby Langford Ginibi, *Don't Take Your Love to Town*, (Ringwood: Penguin Australia, 1988).

<sup>112</sup> Jackie Huggins, quoted in Duthil, 217.



Fig. 13. Sally Morgan<sup>113</sup>



Fig. 14. Alice Nannup<sup>114</sup>



Fig. 15. Ruby Langford Ginibi<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Laurie, Victoria. “An interview with Sally Morgan” unionsverlag. October 23, 1999. April 2013 <[http://www.unionsverlag.com/info/link.asp?link\\_id=6000&pers\\_id=91&pic=../portrait/MorganSally.jpg&tit=Sally%20Morgan](http://www.unionsverlag.com/info/link.asp?link_id=6000&pers_id=91&pic=../portrait/MorganSally.jpg&tit=Sally%20Morgan)>.

<sup>114</sup> Fremantlepress. “Authors: Alice Nannup” Fremantlepress. April 18, 2013. April 2013 <<http://www.fremantlepress.com.au/authors/506/Alice+Nannup>>.

<sup>115</sup> Fidler, Richard. “Conversations with Richard Fidler” abc.net.au. June 25, 2007. April 2013 <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2007/06/25/1961594.htm>>.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, it is now clear and understood, colonial history is a heavy burden in Australia and more precisely, the very government policies aimed at assimilating the Aborigines and which eradicated their culture: traditional and personal identities were broken, families were torn apart and children disappeared. Deprived of their spirituality, of their vision of the relation between man and earth, this population has now sunk into self-destruction. Although special efforts were undertaken by the Government from the beginning of the century to try to reduce inequalities with the rest of the society, particularly regarding health, the wound is still opened for the Aborigines concerning the intrusion of the Government on their lands. These ancestral identities once appropriated by the settlers are still trying to be assimilated to the modern Australian society and are still stereotyped.

Moreover, from the beginning of Australian colonization, the Aboriginal perception by others successively changed from gratefulness to oblivion and finally to ignorance. Until quite recently, the western populations had always been hesitant about their cognition of Australia, being torn between myth and reality. For a long time, information about this country and its inhabitants has been very scarce and interest has been lost.

Obviously today, Australian Aborigines refuse to consider themselves as a minority and to recognize themselves in the others' biased representations. Although they represent a small percentage of the general population, they are nevertheless convinced that the cultural founding principles, on which their communities remain, cannot disappear anymore. Despite everything, white Australians persist in the conception of a minority being defined by a numeric inferiority and forever difficult to be integrated or assimilated to the rest of the society. However, no one seems disposed to smooth down the tumult which is eagerly arising from the *bush* and the urban ghettos. It is a new challenge particularly for women and the young generations although between the communities, race and blood still constitute an elemental obstacle and race conflicts are still smouldering. In order to do our best to find a positive point towards the Aboriginal people's tragic destiny, we can point out that, even if all these ordeals Aborigines and particularly Aboriginal women were subjected to essentially caused pain and loss, it also strengthened their character, to the point they are now determined

to preserve and protect themselves above all. Nowadays, we have to admit and highlight the fact that some Aborigines and women in first line are uniting in a resistant movement against these assigned identities. Aboriginality has become a source of pride and the acknowledgment of the effects of the Stolen Generations has encouraged numerous mixed-race Australians to search for their origins. The Aborigines have to find again all the feelings that can bring them back an identity of their own: group, land, rites, physical security. They have to reclaim the humanity the whites destroyed in them along with culture, religion and environment.



Fig. 16. The Australian Aboriginal flag<sup>116</sup>

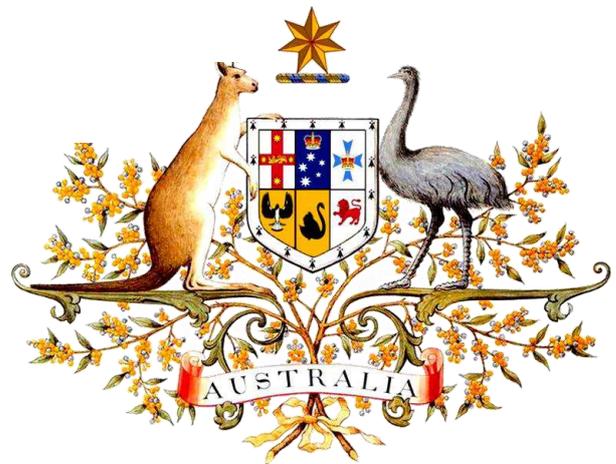


Fig. 17. The Australian Coat of Arms<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Itsanhonour.gov.au. "Other Australian flags" Itsanhonour.gov.au. August 26, 2010. May 2013 <<http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/symbols/otherflag.cfm>>.

<sup>117</sup> Itsanhonour.gov.au. "Commonwealth Coat of Arms" Itsanhonour.gov.au. November 5, 2012. May 2013 <<http://www.itsanhonour.gov.au/coat-arms/>>.

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## Summary

The experience of the colonization of Australia from 1770 had and still has tremendous consequences on the Aborigines' identities and more particularly on Aboriginal women. Through successive government policies, the culture and traditions of Indigenous communities were destroyed, children disappeared and families were torn apart. The deep trauma resulting from these years of ignorance and depreciation represents an open wound for every Aborigine although a rise in consideration and special efforts have been undertaken by the Australian Government since the 1960's. Nowadays, the Aborigines continue to struggle through associations, literature and art to give a new meaning to life and to bring a message of hope for the future generations.

## Key words

Australian Aborigines

Aboriginal women

Community

Dreaming

Identities

Assimilation

Colonization

Government policies

Stolen Generations

Domestic violence

Trauma

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