LIVING IN TWO WORLDS— RECONCILING TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN ABORIGINAL LIFE

The Jewish people offer a guide to how a distinct cultural identity can be maintained in the modern world, writes **Sara Hudson**

> [Indigenous Australians] ... can overcome the burdens of history and recent welfare dependence and dysfunction to become a prosperous yet distinctly Indigenous people whose children can walk in two worlds and enjoy the best of both.[1]
> — Noel Pearson

Regular readers of *The Australian* may have noticed that Noel Pearson often compares Aboriginal Australians with Jews.[2] For many, this may appear an unusual comparison. Beyond the obvious—that they are both minority groups who have faced dispossession and persecution—what have they got in common and what can be gained by comparing them?

The parallels in the history of Aboriginals and Jews are not replicated in how their stories have played out. Jews have experienced countless expulsions, pogroms and massacres over the centuries and still thrived as individuals and communities wherever they settled down, while many Aboriginal communities seem to be in a state of permanent paralysis—locked into deeply entrenched cycles of alcohol abuse and dysfunction.

A common misconception is that the social problems in these communities are endemic to Aboriginal people. This is not true. Many Aboriginal people are living successful lives. However, as they battle to participate in the wider world while still retaining their unique cultural identity, there are things that Aboriginal people can learn from the Jewish experience. In particular, the importance of education, attitudes and social controls over the use of alcohol, and how to reconcile communal loyalties with individual interests.

The maintenance of a cultural identity

Key to the maintenance of a cultural or ethnic identity is the passing on of cultural knowledge and fostering a positive self image among the next generation. For any minority group, two factors can prevent (or inhibit) this from occurring: racism and assimilation.

The negative effects of racism can leave victims feeling defeated with little sense of self-worth. Unfortunately, many Aboriginal people have bought into the common perception that *they* are a problem that needs fixing and fail to see themselves or their culture as an asset. This perception is fuelled by media that paint a picture of dysfunctional communities and squalid town-camps riddled with violence

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and alcohol abuse. Bad news sells, so it is little wonder there are few reports of the 60% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who are doing okay.[3] Except in the *Koori Mail*, there is hardly any recognition of the average Aboriginal battler who is working hard and trying to do right by his kids. They are the forgotten Indigenous Australians, who if they are remembered are lamented for having lost their Aboriginal culture and for becoming 'assimilated' into white society. The Jewish story highlights that traditional culture and modernity are not mutually exclusive, that with education it is possible to have the best of both worlds.

Jews—a success story

Over the course of history, Jews have experienced varying degrees of racism, from the overt to the more subtle. When racism is overt and people are persecuted, an 'us versus them' mentality develops, which serves to maintain a distinct cultural identity and helps to keep groups endogenous. However, when racism is more subtle or non-existent, the barriers that separate the two groups are lowered, making it harder to maintain a distinct cultural identity.

Pearson argues that unlike Aboriginal people, Jews have avoided succumbing to the negative views others hold of them.[4] But there have been occasions when Jews downplayed their Jewishness in an attempt to blend in. For example, many Jews living in Germany before World War II had become so assimilated that they no longer identified as Jewish until forcibly reminded by Adolf Hitler.

Prior to World War II, the survival of Australian Jewry was uncertain. The Jewish community largely consisted of English speaking Jews from England who took pains to emphasise their 'similarity' to Anglo-Australians. The majority of Jewish children could not read Hebrew fluently and knew little about Judaism, its traditions, practices and history.[5] All this changed with the influx of Jewish refugees and migrants who came to Australia in the years before and after World War II and who, confident in their Jewish identity, helped establish the Jewish day school movement.

The Jewish faith has always had a heavy emphasis on education—indeed, one of the commandments of parents is they educate their children, and if they are unable to do it themselves, they find someone who can. The literal translation of *rabbi* is teacher. Historically, the emphasis was on Jewish education but over the centuries, secular education also became highly valued.

With the introduction of the Jewish day school movement, the Jewish emphasis on education in Australia became two-fold. Today, not only is secular education deemed important, but even the least observant Jews ensure their children learn some Hebrew and study for their bar and bat mitzvahs. For those who don't attend a Jewish day school, there is Sunday school and after school Hebrew classes. The Board of Jewish Education also employs teachers to teach Hebrew and Jewish religion in public schools where there are a number of Jewish children. Alongside educational institutions, Jewish youth and sporting groups help foster a strong and positive Jewish identity.

In contrast, although there are Aboriginal schools, many have not been very successful in either providing a good secular education for Aboriginal students or fostering a positive self identity among students.[6]

Aboriginal identity and education

Unfortunately, a common misconception is that as Aboriginal people become more educated and 'westernised,' all that will remain of their Aboriginality is their family tree. The underlying assumption is that the only 'real' Aborigine is the darker, remote Aborigine living 'out bush.'

At the extreme end of the spectrum, stereotypes of Aboriginal Australians basically take two forms—those who romanticise traditional Aboriginal culture and see the maintenance and preservation of a separate cultural identity of primary importance, and those who view culture as a corrosive influence, something that needs to be left behind if Aboriginal Australians are to move forward.

The problem with these two extremes of thought is that Aboriginal culture and modernity are viewed as irreconcilable. Those

who see cultural preservation as being of primary importance often vilify proponents of mainstream education, employment and private property rights for Aboriginal people. As if by advocating for these basic rights, they are guilty of committing a form of cultural genocide.

The belief that Aboriginal culture will only be kept alive if Indigenous children are denied mainstream education and are taught from separate curricula is exemplified in the following quote by Professor Jon Altman, the former director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University:

> Too much emphasis is being placed in the current debate on providing opportunity for indigenous kids in very remote Australia for imagined futures as 'lawyers, doctors, and plumbers' (as suggested by Amanda Vanstone) and too little for futures as artists, land managers and hunters living on the land they own ... rather than just seek mainstream education ... we should develop curricula relevant to local settings ...[7]

However, being well educated needn't equate with the loss of a person's cultural identity. Indeed, it is unlikely that Aboriginal university graduates somehow feel less 'Aboriginal' after graduating.

There are many Indigenous Australians who are successfully living in two worlds, such as Noel Pearson, Tania Major, June Oscar, Alison Anderson and others too numerous to mention. Many of them have come from remote communities and gone to boarding school. Though they are sometimes derided by other Aboriginal people as being a bit 'toffee nosed,' they have retained a strong connection with their family and community and still speak one or several Aboriginal languages. Pearson embodied his ability to live in two worlds in a speech on identity when he translated a section of Shakespeare's *Richard III* into Guugu Yimithirr (an Aboriginal language).[8]

Sadly, despite the existence of a few bilingual schools, there are not many Aboriginal children who would be able to translate English into their own Aboriginal language or vice versa. Children living in remote communities may be able to speak several Aboriginal languages but cannot read or write English very well because of appalling schooling. Conversely, while Indigenous children living in cities and towns speak English, many do not know their traditional languages.

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As Major recently pointed out in an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*:

> The tragedy is that too many of our young people today have no such sense of their own identity or place ... They don't know who they are or where they belong. They don't know their own language and all too many can't even speak standard Australian English.[9]

There is nothing wrong with bilingual education, provided it is truly bilingual. However, the problem with the bilingual schools in the Northern Territory is that they tended to view the teaching of English as assimilationist and delayed teaching English until students were in Year 4. Waiting until students are 10 before they learn to read and write in English goes against all research in this area. It is common knowledge that the younger children are when they learn another language, the better.

In some of the Far North communities, hardly anyone can speak English. This means that if children do not learn English at school, then they have little chance of learning it.

The failure of Aboriginal students to meet national benchmarks in literacy and numeracy saw the former NT Education Minister Marion Scrymgour announce that all schools in the

territory would have to teach English for the first four hours of the day.[10] Similar sentiments have been echoed by the current Minister of Indigenous Employment, Mark Arbib, who said, 'Indigenous Australians must be taught English ahead of their traditional languages if they are to get jobs.'[11]

Traditional language is important for maintaining a distinct cultural identity and should not be devalued.[12] At the same time, it should not be taught at the expense of a mainstream secular education, and it may be necessary to lengthen school days to incorporate both.

Most Jewish day schools start earlier and finish later than public schools so that children are not short-changed in their secular education due to their Hebrew and Jewish studies classes. In the same way, Aboriginal cultural and languages must be taught alongside a rigorous secular education, not instead of, as some of the 'culturally appropriate' and tragically 'dumbed-downed' Aboriginal curricula have tended to do.

Pearson is aware that in order for remote Indigenous students to make up the gaps in their learning, longer school hours are necessary. He has initiated a radical competency-based learning program in two Cape York communities where school starts at 7.15am and continues to 4.45pm.[13] Although it is still early days, this new instructional method has already achieved some success.[14]

Pearson recognises that for Aboriginal people to replicate the Jewish experience, they need to get more serious about education. In the Quarterly Essay *Radical Hope,* Pearson says, 'Our hope is dependent upon education. Our hope depends on how serious we become about the education of our people.'[15]

Getting more serious about education involves not only ensuring that kids go to school but also that Aboriginal language and culture are passed on to the next generation. Undoubtedly, various state and territory governments have a lot to answer for the failure of Indigenous education. But at the same time, it is important that Aboriginal people take some ownership of the problem.

While there are a number of successful education initiatives to improve Aboriginal educational outcomes, more needs to be done. Depending on the background and location of students different strategies will need to be used. In those remote communities where children learn numerous Indigenous languages from birth, English language instruction needs to be given priority at school. In urban areas, where many Aboriginal children have no knowledge of where they come from or their traditional language, a Board of Aboriginal Education could be established to promote Aboriginal languages in public schools as the Board of Jewish Education has done with Hebrew. Although somewhat tokenistic in the time that it allows, Aboriginal spirituality could be taught in public schools in scripture classes. Aboriginal people should not wait for government to implement policies to preserve and maintain Indigenous culture, but do it themselves like the Jewish people and Indigenous people like Noel Pearson, Chris Sarra and others have done.

The first step towards Aboriginal people enjoying the best of both worlds is to get over the belief that by becoming better educated, they are in danger of losing their distinct cultural identity. Unlike the Jews, many Aboriginal people have internalised negative perceptions of what it means to be Aboriginal, that successful, hardworking and Aboriginal are mutually exclusive terms. They accuse those Aboriginal people who have achieved success in mainstream society of being 'too flash' or a 'coconut' (black on the outside and white on the inside).[16]

One of the reasons why education is sometimes viewed negatively by Aboriginal people is because the trend is that the more educated Aboriginal people are the higher the rate of inter-marriage. Yet, education and intermarriage are not the biggest problems preventing the preservation of traditional Aboriginal culture, as usually the non-Aboriginal partner is brought into the Aboriginal world, not the other way around. Indeed, the biggest problem facing the maintenance of Aboriginal culture today is not education but alcohol.

Alcohol and culture

While there are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who do not drink and many Indigenous communities that are 'dry,' binge drinking—where the aim is to get as drunk as you can—is widespread.[17]

The fallout from excessive alcohol consumption is profound. Aboriginal culture is being lost as alcohol has had a severe impact on the teaching and practising of traditional culture.

The quest to obtain alcohol, the involvement in long drinking sessions, and severe intoxication often result in children being unsupervised, neglected and 'forgotten.' Even before they are born, children are irrevocably damaged by their mother's drinking. Children born with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) suffer from brain damage, behaviour disorders, and memory impairment. This is having a devastating impact on the maintenance of traditional Aboriginal culture, which is imparted orally and relies on a good memory.

Alcohol has such a stronghold over some Aboriginal people and communities that some people even believe that you are somehow less 'Aboriginal' if you do not drink, or use it to describe themselves, as illustrated in the following quote: 'We Aboriginal people, we alcoholic people.'[18]

Aboriginal people, like many other colonised people such as the Maori in New Zealand and the Native American Indians in North America, have struggled to find appropriate controls over the use of alcohol as it was not something they were used to. Having lost the social fabric of their traditional way of life and being unused to the strength of the alcohol of the Europeans, many Indigenous people did not have the resources to minimise the harm caused by alcohol and to control its use. Jews, on the other hand, have had thousands of years to get used to it. Although there are few teetotallers amongst Jews, there are also lower numbers of alcoholics than among the general population. One of the reasons given for this are the rituals surrounding alcohol (wine) in the Jewish religion. For example, a blessing over a cup of wine is recited as part of the meals on the Jewish Sabbath. Although there are occasions when Jewish people drink quite a lot, getting really drunk is generally looked down upon as something that a 'goy' (non-Jewish person) would do—not a Jew.[19]

Combating the scourge of alcohol in many Aboriginal communities and towns should be the number one priority, as without some sanctions and controls over its use any education reforms are unlikely to work.

In his Cape York Peninsula Substance Abuse Strategy, Pearson describes the steps needed to overcome the alcohol epidemic facing his people. The first and the most important step is to rebuild social order and intolerance of abusive behaviour. To do this, he suggests that:

> We must harken back to the nature of our communities prior to the substance abuse epidemics taking over. We need to look to the past to find inspiration and to remind ourselves that the current dysfunction and lack of standards is not endemic to our society. We were not always this dysfunctional. Ours was a society governed by law and respect.[20]

Another step would be to manage time better. Often the excuse given for the excessive drinking among Aboriginal people is that they are bored and have nothing better to do. Pearson disagrees, arguing that remote communities are not inherently boring places to live—that people feel bored because of passive welfare, addictions and social dysfunction—not the other way around.

Well-functioning communities are already passing on a strong cultural identity to their children. For example, in Fitzroy Crossing, young people are taken to bush camps to learn from elders and work 'on country.'[21]

Life everywhere has moments of boredom. But the challenge is to find meaning and purpose in life, not to sink into chronic despair and hopelessness. The rich cultural and spiritual life of the shtetls (small Jewish towns or villages formerly found throughout Eastern Europe) illustrates what is possible in

even the most impoverished and inhospitable of places.

The challenge of learning about and perpetuating the richness of their cultural heritage to the young should be a source of pride and self-worth to Indigenous people. Instead of being perceived as places of dysfunction, remote Indigenous communities could become the spiritual hub—the centre of Aboriginal culture and tradition. Places of learning that provide a connection to land and culture for those Aboriginal people living in larger towns and cities to return to and visit.[22]

Community needn't equal communalism

For remote communities to become dynamic and interesting places to live, Aboriginal people need to throw off the shackles of welfare dependency and become the controllers of their own destiny. Pearson lists three key articles of liberal philosophy that are needed to bring about change: self-interest, choice and private property.[23]

Self-interest and choice go hand in hand with education. When people are provided with the benefits of education, they have the opportunity to choose a life that they value. However, these opportunities are stifled if people are prevented from exercising their choices. Remote communities are unlikely to hold on to their most talented young people if there is no reward for individual effort—for example, homeownership for those who work hard and save.

Communalism, even in the most favourable of circumstances such as the Israeli kibbutz (which held great prestige in Israeli society and received generous government benefits), has been a failure. Most kibbutzim originally followed strict socialist policies forbidding private property but had to lift these prohibitions because of the perverse incentives they created. Only by watering down its socialist principles has the kibbutzim been able to survive. The less famous moshavim were more successful than kibbutzim because members were able to own private property. Communal land still existed, but it was managed by rules to curtail free-riding and the 'tragedy of the commons.'[24]

Similar arrangements could occur with Aboriginal communities whereby parts of Aboriginal land are set aside for private homeownership and businesses, while other parts are kept for communal purposes.

Just as the kibbutzim only survived in Israel because they adapted and changed to suit the times, so it will be with Aboriginal communities and culture.

Misconceptions about culture

Some people dismiss culture as outdated or outmoded without recognising the presence and importance of culture in their own lives. Although culture is rooted in tradition and customs, it is not static but ever changing. Those who see culture as static (and sacred) lament changes as a loss of culture. However, culture is not frozen in time and preserved; it must be lived. Cultural loss will always occur over time as cultures adapt and evolve. This is not cause for regret. What should be regretted is when there are no modern versions of the culture being practised.

To retain a distinct identity, cultures have to retain some aspect of traditional practice, thought and beliefs. Jews survived diasporas probably because they maintained an orthodox or conservative centre. But although there are many rules under the Jewish religion about how Jews should live their lives, there are no strictures on how individuals and their families should pursue their interests. Nor is someone not considered Jewish if they no longer practise the religion. Indeed, there are probably almost as many different ways people celebrate being Jewish as there are Jews.

Conclusion

Deciding which aspects of culture to retain and which aspects to discard is ultimately up to each individual. But as Pearson points out, if Aboriginal culture is to survive, it must find a way, just as the Jews have, to maintain a sense of people-hood that incorporates tradition, language, connection to country, and Aboriginal spirituality while still enabling people to participate in the world according to their own interests, passions and beliefs.

Endnotes

1 Noel Pearson, Executive Chairman, Cape York Partnerships, Cape York Partnerships website.

2 Noel Pearson, 'Aborigines can learn from Jews how to preserve culture and prosper,' *The Australian* (15 February 2010); Noel Pearson, 'Adam Smith and Closing the Gap,' *The Australian* (24 July 2010); Noel Pearson, 'Conservatism, too, is relevant to our culture,' *The Australian* (31 July 2010).

3 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, 'You can't blame ethnicity for social ills,' *The Spectator* (11 July 2009), ix. The only newspaper that regularly shows this side of Indigenous Australia is the *Koori Mail* in its section 'My Family' where readers send in a photo and a brief description of their family. The diversity of the different families portrayed is great for shattering commonly held stereotypes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

4 Noel Pearson, 'Aborigines can learn from Jews how to preserve culture and prosper,' *The Australian* (15 February 2010).

5 James Jupp (ed), *The Australian People: An Encyclopaedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins* (Victoria: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

6 Helen Hughes and Mark Hughes, *Indigenous Education 2010*, CIS Policy Monograph No. 110 (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 2009).

7 John Altman, Letter to the editor, *The Australian* (2 June 2006).

8 Noel Pearson, 'Layered Identities and Peace,' Earth Dialogue Brisbane Festival (23 July 2006).

9 Tania Major, 'Why has Indigenous policy failed,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (28 July 2010).

10 Paul Toohey, 'Northern territory kids get four hours a day in English,' *The Australian* (15 October 2008).

11 'English first for indigenous kids: Arbib,' *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19 September 2010).

12 To emphasis this point is the following quote by German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder in an article by Noel Pearson, 'Conservatism, too, is relevant to our culture,' as above: 'Has a people ... anything more dear than the language of their fathers? In it lives its entire wealth of thoughts about tradition, history, religion and principles of life, all its heart and soul. To take from such a people their language or debase it amounts to taking from them their only immortal property, which passes from parents to children.'

13 Tanya Chilcott, 'Radical learning program changing Aboriginal kids' lives,' *The Courier-Mail* (28 May 2010).

14 As above.

15 Noel Pearson, 'Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia,' *Quarterly Essay 35* (Black Inc, 2009).

16 Chris Sarra, 'Strong and Smart: Reinforcing Aboriginal Perceptions of being Aboriginal at Cherbourg State School,' Thesis (21 September 2005).

17 Higher rates of income amongst Indigenous Australians tend to equate to lower levels of drinking. Mandy Wilson, Annalee Stearne, Dennis Gray, Sherry Saggers, 'The Harmful Use of Alcohol amongst Indigenous Australians' (Australian Indigenous HealthInfoNet, 2010).

18 Noel Pearson, 'Cape York Substance Abuse Strategy,' Developed by the Alcohol and Drugs Working Group established by Apunipima Cape York Health Council and Cape York Partnerships under the direction of Noel Pearson (September 2002).

19 Susan E. Luczak, 'Binge drinking among Jewish and non-Jewish college students,' press release (Syracuse University, 16 December 2002); *Time* magazine, 'Medicine: Jews and Alcohol' (17 March 1958).

20 Noel Pearson, 'Cape York Substance Abuse Strategy' (Queensland: Cape York Partnerships, 2002), 36.

21 Australian Government, 'Fitzroy Crossing: Looking to the Future,' *Indigenous Newslines* (September–November 2009), 5.

22 This is Pearson's vision for his people in Cape York. Noel Pearson, 'Aborigines can learn from Jews how to preserve culture and prosper,' as above.

23 Noel Pearson, 'Adam Smith and Closing the Gap,' *The Australian* (24 July 2010).

24 Ilya Somin, 'Israeli Kibbutzim and the failure of socialism,' blog (7 September 2007).