

Whitefella Racism and It's Impact on Indigenous Attempts to Protect the Future of their Youth

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I would like to thank Murrochy Baramah for welcoming us to country. I acknowledge the Kapululangu women elders whose story I will tell you something today, and call upon my own Irish ancestors who have fought against English colonialism to be with me today.

I would like to thank the YANQ organisers for the great honour of standing before you.

Before starting I want to acknowledge the Indigenous people in the room and ask you to bear with me as my paper is primarily directed to those of us who are Other-than-Indigenous, particularly White.

I also want to clarify that when I speak of Whitefellas and White culture I am speaking of the practice of White culture in its dominant form, not of individuals. What I am interested in is the relationship between dominating and subjugated cultures or societies – in this case between White and Indigenous cultures.

I want to remind everyone that the theme of this conference is “Working Together for Young People: What Works? What could Work?”

On Wednesday YANQ's Siyavash Doostkhah laid down the challenge for us to take action to change the systems, to think outside the box and to ask ourselves whether what we have been doing for the past twenty years has changed the situation and that if we found that the answer was “no” then we must change what we're doing. We need to be open to trying something new.

Earlier at the Breakfast Murradoo Yanner called us to, and I quote, “Dare to dream. Encourage youths to do courageous things. Let them believe that they can do anything. Put the seeds in children to believe that they can change the world. That is the greatest thing we can do.”

I have come here from living with women elders in an Aboriginal settlement on the edge of Western Australia's Great Sandy Desert in the south-east Kimberley, at the top of the Tanami Track.

Wirrimanu has a population of 350 people. It was established in 1939 as a Catholic mission, and today has the reputation of being one of the most violent Aboriginal settlements in Australia. It is a place of extreme dysfunction, trauma and pain for its Indigenous residents.

While I was there at the end of last year I saw a young man cut and stab himself fourteen times. This took place within a context where Wirrimanu's youth have started to commit suicide. On 1 August

2002, a young man hanged himself from a tree in the kid's playground at Yakka Yakka, one of Wirrimanu's outstations – he was 16 years old. Since then there have been many other suicides and attempted suicides by young men, and women. All of these incidences were related to petrol sniffing. Children as young as eight are sniffing petrol and suicide attempts in Wirrimanu are becoming common.

It is important to ask, “Why are Wirrimanu's children and young people killing themselves?”

In an attempt to answer this question the Western Australian Coroner (Mr Hope) reported that the youth had killed themselves because “each had led lives characterised by illness, hopelessness, violence and alienation from their families and communities” (Chivel, quoted by Hope, 2003:3). He continued:

“Poverty, hunger, illness, low education levels, almost total unemployment, boredom and general feelings for hopelessness form the environment in which self-destructive behaviour takes place. That such conditions should exist among a group of people defined by race in the 21st Century in a developed nation like Australia is a disgrace and should shame us all” (Chivel, in Hope, 2000:3).

The Coroner recognised that Wirrimanu's young people suffer from low self-esteem and insisted that it is essential to provide the teenagers in Wirrimanu with hope for the future. The solutions he suggested revolved around factors impacting on health, social dysfunction (eg. family violence and child abuse), environment (housing and rubbish), education, employment, and administration. It seemed to be a comprehensive list of recommendations.

I don't want to disqualify the importance of these issues but the Coroner overlooked one vital element – something which Whitefellas overlook every time. He failed to recognise the significant role of White cultural racism.

Cultural racism is so ubiquitous and invasive that those of us who are part of the dominant culture (that is on the delivery end) often fail to recognise it. It occurs when dominant cultural norms are taken for granted, when dominant systems and lifeways – our structures (or institutions) and ways of doing and being (our customs and practices) – are simply assumed to be the norm.

Just to clarify, I am not speaking about transparent racism. I assume that all of us here today are fully aware of outright racism and have long worked on eradicating it from our minds and our lives. What I am talking about is structural racism – the racism which is inherent in our systems and lifeways – and which we don't often notice.

Cultural racism occurs whenever a colonised peoples' culture is denied them. It occurs when a peoples' culture is overlooked, ignored, marginalised, eroded, erased, neglected, denounced and disallowed so that the people whose culture is being censured received a deep message that they don't matter – and as a result their self-esteem and sense of worthiness is undermined and destroyed.

“Culture” includes lifestyle, the sacred, intellect, the visible and invisible, the moral – all aspects of living. Culture is the life-blood of people – it makes them what they are. Because people identify so strongly through their culture, when this basic human need is destroyed through colonialism by another dominant culture the colonised people become dis-hearted – the literally lose their hearts.

This is what is happening to Wirrimanu's young people. Cultural racism tears you apart inside – you lose belief in yourself, you lose hope in the future. All of the factors which the Coroner had painstakingly identified were *symptoms* of the imposition of Whitefella cultural practices (Whitefella racism) and the diminishing value of Indigenous cultural paradigms!

These suicides should send out alarm bells ringing! There can be no greater indication of cultural wounding than for a peoples' children to kill themselves.

When the Indigenous collective soul is deeply wounded and the harsh realities of acute trauma tears individuals and families apart it is the Indigenous youth who feel the pain of cultural annihilation most intensely.

The Coroner did not comprehend the important role of cultural maintenance and revitalisation by Wirirmanu's women elders inherently at a very deep unspoken level know that only culture can help their children and youth withstand and heal the trauma which is tearing their lives apart. They know that culture is vital to their peoples' survival.

The elders were concerned that their grandchildren were increasingly turning to petrol sniffing and other forms of self-harm, including suicide. They believe that their children and grandchildren are experiencing intense trauma because they are losing connection with their land, and have had few opportunities to learn and practise their cultural heritage and thus to commune with the *Tjukurrpa* (the cosmic universal life-force, translated as "the Dreaming").

For the elders, the core solution to their young people's trauma lies in the reassertion and re-centralising of their Indigenous cultural practices, philosophies, values and beliefs.

Concerned that their youth are suffering from a fundamental shame for who they are, the elders wanted to grow their grandchildren up strong in pride of their Indigeneity in the hope that this would give them the strength to cope with their cultural pain.

They wanted to encourage the grandchildren and young people to learn culture – their peoples' unique customs, and Law – their cosmology which lies at the core of their peoples' identity and makes them special.

In 1999, I joined with the women elders (at their request) to establish a women's organisation with the objectives of creating opportunities for them to pass their cultural knowledge onto their grandchildren and the young people of their community. That organisation was called the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre.

The first thing we did together was establish a *tjilimi* (a women's camp) where we lived together – 13 women elders, a young grand-daughter, myself and 11 dogs – in a one room tin shed for two years.

The *tjilimi* consisted of the tin shed where I also had my office, a small shed which we built as a Keeping Place for sacred *tarruku* (ritual items), a fire place which was the hub around which our lives revolved, and a dancing ground where we held regular ceremonies.

The *tjilimi* became the heart of a vibrant cultural revitalisation initiative. Because it was located on the Women's Law Ground on the outskirts of the settlement and was therefore off-limits to men the women were free to engage in spontaneous ritual dancing and song, hold healing rites, and organise religious ceremonies celebrating *Yawulyu* (Women's Law). (Incidentally, Wirrimanu has a Men's and a Women's Law Ground both of which was off-limits to the opposite sex.)

The Kapululangu elders are respected, and feared, for their knowledge of *Yawulyu* (Women's Law) and their ability to manipulate the *Tjukurrpa*. They had lived in the desert before the *Kartiya* (Whitefellas) had arrived in their country and have retained their relationship with their ancestral lands and are passionate in their belief in the power of *Yawulyu*.

Life in the *Tjilimi* was a perpetual ceremony, and with ritual becoming a part of ordinary everyday life the women elders gained confidence to pass their cultural knowledge to their younger women and

girls. The *Tjilimi* became the cultural hub of women's creative energy and this enabled the elders to fulfil their obligations and duties as teachers, guardians, healers, providers and protectors, chief mourners and Law women of their people.

As their opportunities to connect with the *Tjukurrpa* increased, the elders' eagerness to practice *Yawulyu* was rejuvenated and this, in turn, inspired the full force of their Living Culture.

The elders then turned this generative force to the benefit of their families, particularly their youth and grandchildren. We developed and ran a dynamic cultural program consisting of cultural classes and workshops for girls and young women at the *Tjilimi*, participation in hunting and rituals for young women, and cultural camps for girls and boys where the elders (women *and* men) taught them how to live with the desert. We travelled along Dreaming tracks performing rituals, and visited other Indigenous communities, and even travelled to Hawai'i and Canada on cultural exchange tours with other Indigenous peoples.

In addition to providing this inspirational place of learning for women and girls (including for the elders themselves), the elders also provided an Old Women's House (all of our residents were aged over 60 years), two were aged over 80 years, and we provided respite care to two women said to be aged over 100); a *Tjaatjurra* Healing Centre, where the elders used traditional methods to heal both women and men; a Safe House refuge for women and children at risk of, attempting to avoid, or recovering from family violence; and a Night Patrol service where they patrolled the community at night trying to discourage young girls and boys from petrol sniffing.

The women elders also encourage and supported the male elders in their tutelage of young men and boys.

As this Indigenous-instigated and -led project developed, the elders witnessed their grand-daughters becoming increasingly interested in their stories and memories, and in learning how to dance and hunt – and this gave them (the elders) an immense sense of achievement. As they passed their customs and philosophies, the elders saw the young girls taking pride in their identity, and this in turn stirred the elders' enthusiasm and ambition. They became inspired role-models for other women (and for men) in the maintenance of their cultural heritage.

As the impetus to practice and enjoy their customs increased so concomitantly did the strength of their Living Culture. The cycle, once promulgated, was repeating itself and strengthening with each turn. The project flourished.

“Living Culture” – and here I use capital letters: “Living Culture” – is the amorphous, unassailable cultural force which is created when people – bound together by kinship and immersed in their homelands – experience the fullest expression of their connectedness with the cosmology of their ancestors – with the *Tjukurrpa* – the Laws of the Universe. The vibrant soul-based energy of Living Culture is generated by people engaged in the simple act of living their culture.

Living Culture is a force so powerful that it stirs people's imagination and inspires them to transform their world even when to do so seems impossible. It gives rise to a courageous daring, a spirited determination, for cultural survival. It generates cultural resistance and the determination to maintain cultural integrity. And wherever it is present it taps a source of power within the souls of its practitioners which encourages and empowers them to persevere against and to withstand the volley of obstacles which have been set against their peoples.

The role of ritual and ceremonial expression in this evolution of Living Culture cannot be too highly stressed. By living in the *Tjilimi* and making ritual part of their everyday living, and the everyday part of their sacralised lives, the elders ensured that they lived in direct communication with and in total consciousness of their relatedness with the *Tjukurrpa*.

The importance of Law and Culture Centres - *tjilimi* and *yampirri*, the male alternative – to the maintenance of Indigenous cultural integrity was identified in 1999 by the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence* which called for “special places, including separate women's and men's centres” to be established for “the revival of culture and healing” through running “cultural re-integration programs” that can “help to redefine cultural identity” (Robertson, 1999:235; also Atkinson, 2002).

The Kapululangu elders know that a strong sense of pride in Aboriginality must be encouraged if their youth are to survive in their unenviable position of living between two worlds – Indigenous and White. They know that their culture must be lived if it is to be kept strong and vibrant, and they know that only when this is achieved can their people survive. It was in this spirit that the cultural project they (we) developed was dynamic, powerful and successful.

But the tragedy is that the elders have never been afforded the resources they have required for the project continue. The Australian and Western Australian governments struggle to solve the problems facing Wirrimanu's Aboriginal residents but they repeatedly fail because they continue to direct their energies and resources to the symptoms – to the limited extent that they are addressed them at all. As the Western Australian Coroner M Hope identified, “Millions of dollars are being provided [to Wirrimanu] for a relatively small number of persons, as yet with relatively little result” (Hope, 2004:33). Thus, for over twenty year the women elders have consistently seen their efforts undermined by the seemingly inherent inability of Whitefellas to recognise the vital role of cultural heritage to the health of the human soul.

The situation is extremely urgent! The elders are worried that there isn't much time to pass their cultural knowledge onto their young ones. Many of the elders raised in the way of the *Tjukurrpa* are dying and others are becoming frail.

I have just returned from a series of meetings with the women of Wirrimanu where we talked about the future of Kapululangu. They have decided that they want to create a Kultja Kuurla (Culture School) as a framework for teaching their grandchildren, their youth and each other. We are now attempting to find the funds to make that possible.

The Kapululangu women elders' initiative has been, continues to be, an experiment in hope, to “grow up” in cultural knowledge all the generations under their care, to heal the past, reinstate pride in the present, and retrieve the future for their grandchildren.

As the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre has proven – and the Kapululangu Kultja Kuurla (Culture School) will prove – when the fullest breath of a peoples' cultural voice is allowed to flourish, this engenders cultural energy so potent that it touches the hearts of its members and stirs in them a conviction in their own completeness which, both unconquerable and impregnable, can heal soul wounds and refashion worlds.

As an Irish-Australian woman I am particularly interested in how Other-than-Indigenous people – service providers and policy-makers might work with Indigenous host communities to further their creative cultural initiatives which empower Living Culture.

It is essential that we find ways of recognising and honouring episodes of Indigenous Living Culture wherever it arises. We need to find ways of engaging with Indigenous peoples which validate Indigenous ways of being and systems of knowledge.

Recognising that Indigenous peoples have their own effective 'science' and resource use practices, their own knowledge and management systems, we need to work intimately with them to find practices, methods and strategies which centralise their ways of communicating and creating change.

There is no easy answer to this question, because our methods have to organically develop from each unique situation. But we do need to develop skills that makes it easier for those of us who are Other-than-Indigenous to find ways of navigating two divergent cultures, two ways of knowing and of being.

We need to be committed to Indigenous cultural tenets, be responsive and responsible to their needs (individual and collective, both immediate and longer term), aim to be culturally unobtrusive and flexible, and be prepared to work with them to develop projects which draw on their realities, their ways of knowing, their pedagogues and their concepts of the meaningful.

We have to ensure that our interventions resonate with their lives and their culture on a very personal level. To achieve this we cannot afford to shy away from being passionately present with the Indigenous youth we are working with, and with their elders and families. And this means adapting to their lifeways. It means stepping out from behind the safety of our own cultural paradigms. It means honing our skills to recognise cultural racism when it rears its ugly head, and to learn to cut it off and challenge it whenever we can.

We need to attune our projects and interventions to a series of principles and practices which respect Indigenous knowledges and practices. Cross-Cultural Collaborative abides by, but is not limited to, the following characteristics:

- Recognises cultural racism as a source of deep trauma which manifest in symptoms of dysfunction
- Is committed advancing the Indigenous Living Culture imperative
- Is committed to Indigenous Self-Determination/Ownership of the project – it is owned, initiated and directed by Indigenous people
- It is committed to producing tangible outcomes which immediately benefit the host community
- It resonates with Indigenous Law and culture,
- Is grounded in relationship – to kin, land and the *Tjukurrpa* (“Dreaming”).
- It is flexible, responsive and responsible to Indigenous needs (individual and collective)
- Is open to Indigenous knowledges, including of the metaphysical

In closing let me say that, from my experience I have come to regard the nurturing of Living Culture as an imperative for Other-than-Indigenous service providers wishing to build partnerships with Indigenous communities. This means developing a strong commitment to upholding the inalienable right for Indigenous peoples to practice, develop and maintain their cultural heritage to its fullest dimensions. Unless and until we can do that we who are Other-than-Indigenous will be part of the problem.

There is much more to speak about, many stories to tell about the Kapululangu Women’s Law and Culture Centre and the women elders who created it. But if you want to know more you will have to look out for my book *Holding Yawulyu: White Culture and Black Women’s Law* (Spinifex Press, August 2005) which considers the impact of White cultural practices on Indigenous women’s cultural heritage.

Thank you.

survive by reproducing themselves through influencing people's mental terrains and dominant cultures survive by imposing themselves on and subjugating other cultures, other peoples.

But the White cultural paradigms began to be threatened and since White culture survives by imposing itself upon and subjugating other cultures. Acknowledging that or of how cultures interact, but I can tell you that cultures can only operate through their practitioners. And as White ut

– and White people acting from within their Whiteness (their racism, their fear) reacted by attacking the Kapululangu Women's Law and Culture Centre. There is much to be said about this episode, but suffice it to say here