

Land and Culture: Necessary but not Sufficient for the Future. Identity in the 21st Century

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There have been many fine words written and spoken about aboriginal land and culture over the years.

I would like to heartily endorse all of the positive sentiment that has surrounded these writings and the good intentions of the writers.

It has long been argued passionately that without land we are nothing and the combination of land and culture provides us with the “compass’ to life.

If I look back at my past I can see where there is a picture of great cohesiveness within a tribal group that has arisen from a strong connection to land and culture.

It is in this setting that the caring and sharing was real.

In the past sacred objects were positioned in places where they were essential to survival.

The old people had the ability to read the environment and know when shortage of food or water or some other life giving force was imminent. They would tell us something was in short supply and we had to tighten our belts as it were. We were instructed not to hurt or take certain species until they had regenerated.

In these times there was a reason for discipline, skin relations, sacred songs and performance of ritual because it strengthened survival.

Today I am left wondering and as a leader I am torn by my heart and my memories and at the same time I have to be honest with myself and my people and face the realities.

When I visit my community now I no longer find cohesion. In place of caring and sharing I find sickness, violence and self-harm.

The sacred objects and the sacred ceremonies are few and far between. People are not attending, they take less time to learn and perform, stories are short cut. In many situations that I have been personally involved in where traditionally people mourned the dead and absolved the family and relations I now find people can't wait to split the limited possessions of the dead.

Where once I would pass my coolamon on to my grand-daughter now people are worried for the car, and the fridge and the clothes that are fought for around the graveside.

When I look for people seriously attempting to sustain themselves on the land, there are some who are hunting for recreational benefit, but few people seriously believe that hunting is more than this in sustaining life these days.

Some family are on small parcels of land but don't have a plan for that land even one that manages the availability of the resources on that land. There is very little denial in times of shortage and little adjustment to lifestyle or discipline involved in management of the environment.

We now want rewards in the form of money and possession, even though we don't convert these to new forms of wealth. Group hunting is gone, we don't bring common goods back to the community rather people stay out bush consuming things on their own.

The breakdown of law and order and the conspiracy of silence is a serious new issue to some. It is a concern to me that this has in fact been disappearing for some time and there is no longer a strong framework of land and culture to provide for and sustain the harmony and responsibility we were known for in the past.

It is the case that in many parts the only dreaming is that of the people who yearn for the past and wish to tie us back to that past. Here I include Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

Increased technology and mobility in cars and phones etc has hastened these changes – and we can't go back. Our Indigenous instinct has been to try to adapt and connect on our own terms – but it is increasingly difficult.

In essence I am proud of my memories and my history but I am not proud of what we currently see and the way our younger generation is responding.

We face a clash of cultures. We are all on personal journeys but ultimately we are all on a journey of change. We are not static museum pieces and we are now citizens of the globe not just our small 'nation' on traditional land.

The irony is that the nostalgic view of Indigenous people is that we survived through adaptability and resilience – yet in the face of globalism we appear unable to adapt.

Some of our young Indigenous response has been to adapt and resist by borrowing from other cultures. How did hip hop get in there?

So what is it that is important to retain in this process of change. In times where land and culture appear to have forsaken us, what is it that we need to establish more than anything.

I put it to you that if we are to accept change then it must not come at the expense of identity.

The concept of identity is complex and includes the symbolic importance of land and culture but it also allows for an individual response to change. Identity as an aboriginal person, acceptance of yourself, is the most important piece of knowledge that aboriginal people can have for the future.

Identity is not a right as such, rather it is something you develop yourself.

A lot of our people today do not know where they belong. They can't go forward and they can't go back and they are becoming aggressive and self-destructive.

You lose your culture through the choices you take or the choices circumstance forces you to take albeit reluctantly. Culture cannot be taken away; it is given away or reinforced with every decision that an individual makes.

The other reason I think identity is important is that it focuses on a personal approach to the future by providing a sense of self that can survive outside land and culture. If we rely only on identifying with land and culture we become tied to customary practice rather than facing the future and what needs to be done today.

We can no longer be tied to the land through the old ways, although there are many as I said earlier who think romantically that we should always respond to new situations through customary eyes and practices without adopting new approaches.

This is why the groups I am involved with have spent so much time working with desert knowledge because we need new knowledge and the situations we face are new situations.

The knowledge of the past is captured in the land and cultural practices that bound it together and made sense of it. Our knowledge for the future requires more than this.

As an elder if you ignore this reality you are not being real to yourself or a true leader to your people. We can't get our rich history back; in fact many of the older people I talk with don't actually want it back. People are responding with their feet where they can. Where people have new knowledge and full understanding of that they make responsible and good decisions that help them to further establish their identity as aboriginal people in 2006.

If we seriously look back at our attempts to live our culture over the changes of the last 30 years we would have to admit that we have not been able to sustain culture in the way I described it earlier. What it has done to our men, our women and our kids is now before us and it is not good.

I think we have reached a point where we need to know our culture to what ever level is appropriate for our particular living circumstances but then move on to the decisions we have to make today to enjoy the benefits of living in 2006.

Noel Pearson talks about our ability to move in different orbits. His comments are carefully crafted around Cape York history and opportunities.

I am worried about desert peoples.

In that regard one thing is sure. No longer is reliance on land and culture sufficient. People more and more use these as an excuse for not performing and not taking difficult decisions – they are locked into stationary orbit.

One of our problems is that everyone else is trying to think of the solutions for us instead of resourcing us to learn lessons and make mistakes on our own.

What I am finding in the shared journey through the desert knowledge work is that we are able to learn side by side more.

We are at a cross roads, we need to choose carefully and quickly.

I am hurting inside and I say this with huge pain – but for our survival this is where we need to go.

We are on a path of cultural suicide if we continue to smash up against today's world. We have to begin by accepting some blame ourselves for the choices and decisions we have taken and accept responsibility for our future.

Being a victim cannot be part of the identity that we seek. Political correctness will not get us over the line.

The keys to discovering our identity are in self-awareness, group awareness and our ability to access new knowledge through education and shared life experiences.

In the past we found identity through separateness. Our new identity has to be part of a much bigger picture. Aboriginal identity has to take us beyond land and culture.

Many people have been confused about the recent policy debates around viability and sustainability of communities and mainstreaming of services. These matters are seen by some as urgent issues.

It is my belief that the confusion will only be resolved through a new sense of identity, because through that people will connect to future pathways of local, national and international interests.

Government may shape the policy and funding environment, newspapers will provide commentary, but we are the ones who decide to accept or reject the opportunities presented.

I am sure that the significant population of Indigenous people in the NT will mean identity in desert Australia will be very different to the sense of identity on the east coast.

The catalyst of change that we talk about in the Desert Peoples Centre has to begin with individuals making decisions to change. Neither the decisions nor the changes can be forced. The DPC is not compulsory education – it involves choice, commitment and a desire for change.

For these reasons the DPC may be a point for debate and discussion but our desire is to bring a positive contribution to peoples journeys.

The DPC will work with people and create an environment where they can explore their identity as global citizens living in desert Australia.

Desert Knowledge provides space for us to develop a new kind of connection to country, across country and internationally.

My hope for the next generation is that we gather the new knowledge and make good decisions and make the change that will create our identity as a people of the world.