

## **Aboriginal Identity in Contemporary Society** **By Robert Stuurman**

### **Access to Indigenous Records National Forum**



**Title: Ancient pathways,**  
**Medium: Natural pigments, (Ochre) on parchment.**  
**Artist: Robert Stuurman**  
**Year: 2004**

#### **Story**

Ancient pathways, is a painting representing identity. That a persons identity is more than who the individual is, that a connection linked to the past runs parallel and in its own way shapes the future in how evident or not it seems to be.

To walk on the ancient pathway starts by the individual coming to terms with themselves. An unpacking and a letting go of cultural baggage to find the inner self is also the beginning of being in touch with yourself. Motivations and what drives you is realised as you begin your spiritual journey of self discovery.

#### **Description**

The top left hand of the painting is a pathway (white lines) going through a concentric circle, (meeting place). Two U shapes represent people. This part of the story is a life of journey growing up and meeting people, experiencing life in general and a life being lived. Dark hairline fractures represent the turmoils of life and towards the centre of the painting is a skeleton of an ancient fish representative of ancient land but also looking behind the life of people in the top left corner.

People in general today do not feel fulfilled because the society we live in does not allow for the celebration of humanity (a freedom of full individual expression). Like the skeletal remains of this ancient fish so are the lives that are lived today.

The turmoils of life filter down through the fish to the second pathway which is the ancient pathway running parallel with the life that is lived.

It is often the turmoils of life that drives us to the end of ourselves.

It is then when we come to the end of ourselves we then begin to live.

## Aboriginal Identity in Contemporary Society



**Title: The Learning Experience**  
**Medium: Natural pigments, (Ochre) on parchment.**  
**Artist: Robert Stuurman**  
**Year: 2004**

Link-Up Queensland Aboriginal Corporation presents its services to those who have been adopted, fostered, institutionalised, removed or separated due to past government policies and practices.

In each instance the individual has been separated from family, it also means a fracturing of their identity.

This paper seeks to identify, recognise and develop coping strategies for those affected in contemporary society.

The Identity of Aboriginal people links family and land. The land connection is like a bond to family in a parental capacity; the land is our mother and deserves our respect.

Separation from family is also separation from cultural belonging. The family is there to reiterate identity and culture.

Culture is the collective expression of identity, IE permission past on by elders for younger generation to express themselves in their up and coming role of adulthood, (initiation ceremony).

The tradition continues in the roles recognised, through story telling; (narrative identity affirmation).

Art; (the visual application of narrative identity).

Ceremony; (active participation of the narrative identity).

Identity is shaped, reaffirmed and nurtured by relational interaction of family and land. It is the affirmation of identity within identities; what's your name, where do you come from?

They are identified reference points for our spirituality.

Aboriginal identity is like the double helix model of DNA which constantly defines and redefines itself.

The constant state of flux in identity reaffirmation has ensured survival of the world's oldest living culture.

When a part of Aboriginal culture is fractured by Western constructs the result manifests as social problems we see today in many of our communities.

This process is enforced in the mainstream societal constructs most of us live in, the acculturation process of the dominate culture, trivializing and marginalising Aboriginal people. This dehumanising process creates feelings of inadequacy, inferiority, self doubt and the constant imposing of Western values, which are at odds with Aboriginal people and we become aliens in our own land and to ourselves.

Imposed values create frameworks of social conditioning, IE your identity is based on what you do and not so much who you are.

Stereotypical views such as, Aboriginals are good for nothing no hopers and that they are dirty and lazy are judgements based on assumptions from the seat of the arm chair critic. To be seen as slow, reactionary and angry is an assumption based on race transposed into the values and policy making imposed by Western Culture.

This constant bombardment of systemic racism transcends the conscious mindset of the dominate culture simply because most are not aware of it. Racism is a disease of the subconscious and manifests as irrational emotions in the form of hatred and racial ascendancy.

How ought Aboriginal identity be addressed in today's contemporary society and what survival skills help to recognise and develop coping strategies?

Education through knowledge and wisdom to use this knowledge effectively as Aboriginal people is to know who you are, where you come from and where you are going on life's journey. The purpose of knowing why we are alive and the individual roles we play lie in our identity.

## **Dynamics of Aboriginal Identity**



During my childhood my first recollected memory was seeing people driving cars. These people looked very busy, they are trying to prove who they are by the cars they drove. In those days the front ends of cars looked more like human faces. The two headlights are the eyes and the radiator grill looked like a mouth. Some looked happy and others looked sad. It was interesting because people drove the type of car as reflected in their facial expressions. I guess their attitude determined the look of the car they drove, their identity is enmeshed with their material possessions. Something is wrong, why were

these people so painfully busy, what was driving the people that drove the cars. There is something not right, something in fact very wrong.

I don't want to look like the people that drove the cars, they look like the living dead and are driven by evil forces. It is called Western Materialism.

My sense of sight, touch, smell, hearing and taste were limited, not that there was anything wrong but rather these senses made me feel restricted in the natural world. I felt where ever I went the world kept being defined through my senses and so a reconstruction of the world is and was constantly redefined to keep me from knowing the truth and to why people acted the way they do, a false sense of security. A darkness crept over me as I grew into boyhood I was becoming familiar with my surroundings on the slippery slope of time.

I also remembered my first lie, it didn't make me feel good. It felt like a social sickness that made people sad and angry. People would comment to my adoptive parents to have me checked out by a psychiatrist because I was a slow learner and therefore categorized. My best friend at that time was a boy named Raymond. He had downs syndrome and we were categorized together, our parents thought we were good company for each other.

My identity as a young child; too young to go to kindergarten, was already being determined. Society offers a plethora of roles to play and it rewards us according to how well we play the game.

Through the educating process values are determined and shaped by social, political, economic, religious and cultural milieu. Society through this plethora a matrix of roles played for children, teenagers, adults, workers, business people, politicians, priests, doctors, spouses, parents, unemployed, ethnic people, disabled people and Aboriginal people.

For Aboriginal people rewards are there at the expense of cultural loss and identity; assimilation policies.

## **Identity In Contemporary Society**

Each role attempts to determine part of a fixed identity framework. These fixed identities help society to manage, (divide and rule) people into groups, from groups to boxes.

A process of dehumanization occurs, people can become institutionalized, not so much through institutions of the past as our people have suffered, but rather society in itself becomes the institution.

The process is through information technology, computer files, categorized by number codes subject to government policy and manipulation.

Society functions on a structured system of fixed identities because they tend to be conservative and predictable and therefore easy to manage.

Variable identities are people who value the individual as unique which is shown through the emphasis of individual identity, what is your name, where are you from, who's your mob?

This is a sign of respect rather than interrogation.

Variable identities collectively are elusive, flexible, resistant and cultural assertive.

A society of fixed identities, tend to seek control by othering through the exotic (fuelled by romantic notions of social Darwinism and neo colonialism). Such a process is conducted through funding and welfare dependency. Although there is some trend away from this now but it is only through assimilation.

When Aboriginal people are squeezed into a fixed identity group assimilation is the desired outcome which has been the case in past government policy and practice. Individual identity becomes is in danger of losing its uniqueness and is reduced to a mediocre entity of passivity without a voice of the, "they say people."

When this happens people are easily susceptible for manipulation and corruption which the media reinforces through stereo types and therefore predetermine desired outcomes.

An element of this strategy is a process I call ghosting, the manipulation of time to wear our people down so that older generations will die off.

Those affected by the stolen wages issue and the reparation for stolen generations still have not been compensated despite decades of these issues not being addressed and all that is left are the ghosts of the past.

Aboriginal people have living identities that appear to be chaotic, extremely sensitive to change; government policy etc and external conditions, unpredictable and therefore free. Aboriginal Identity connects to place and family, if cultural identity is strong land connection is also strong.

Fixed identities are locked into pre-design ordered patterns- insensitive to change, predictable and therefore not free. The majority are fixed identity and assume all to be the same. It is ludicrous to assume in a so-called multicultural society to assume all people are of a fixed identity.

Systems of control are through drivers licences, ID cards, Tax File Numbers, Passports, Births, Deaths and Marriage certificates, Visas, Records, and Aboriginality Confirmation forms. When information is processed in computer databases it is used to data match information for the benefit of societies control and can be called the system of fixed identities.

The dehumanizing process of increasing use in surveillance cameras casts the assumption of potential criminals. Individuals must comply automatically and without question, to the rules based on the values as determined by the mainstream.

The system of fixed identity leads to thought manipulation through media control.

Soon after we are born we are moulded to enact identity frameworks presented but not to live as who we are. This inaction is absorbed by how much we are exposed or find ourselves living fixed identities rather than live as ourselves. Fixed identities are assigned by society and their characters outplay again and again a moral code of values and image through the entertainment industry, media and home entertainment. A multiplicity of Television, computers, DVD, CD's, Internet, video, cassette and radio reinforces a comfortable world of allusion.

## **Aboriginal Identity as Living**

Aboriginal people will never fully succumb to the values and beliefs as determined by the fixed identity frameworks. Political manipulation, lies, poverty and the need for basic human rights lead to questions of who are we and what is the purpose of our existence are thought pushed to one side. The demand to perform the role of the fixed identity is driven for the need of outcomes and drift along the continuum of time. We work, our families grow and we only experience glimpses of satisfaction and a great deal of stress.

The increase in social complexity and economic rationale only increases the number of roles we have to play. People find it increasingly difficult to cope and unbearable stress is generated. A drive to get out of the performance mode, out of the system becomes a deep desire. This drive becomes a quest for individual identity to be free. Many seek this after retirement and buy a 4WD and caravan to travel around Australia and get to know the country, (and themselves) where they were born in. This subconscious desire to be a variable identity ought to have been developed earlier in life.

Australian Culture is intrinsically connected to the land whether that is realised or not, it still remains a fact.

## **Identity Dynamics**

Factors of pushing and pulling of identity freedom determine attitudes that are for agents of dispersal and agents of unification.

Agents of dispersal create individual competition, by fighting for better positioning and step on the heads of others in order to acquire power, monetary gain and glory.

The human identity leans toward narcissism and this is revealed through facile management and body language

These facial expressions and conversation (including tone of voice) are to manipulate others for a desired reaction in order to social climb with attitudes of ravenous desire for admiration but contempt for those who provide it. Insatiable hunger for emotional experiences (ego stroking may include affairs), in order to fill a void in their life which can lead to the destruction of family relations.

The use of power to divide and rule presents a clear option and a division between rich and poor widens.

Those in responsible positions eventually become a law unto themselves and corruption incurs a fall from grace.

Agents of unification foster respect, are supportive listeners, the human identity celebrates differences between people groups.

A drive toward common understanding and a view of how we can make the world a better place for all, ("giving back to the community").

Agents of unification are self-referential, they rely on themselves at any fixed group identity no matter how it appears. In essence they do not lose their uniqueness and they share singularities in becoming emerging role models.

Self-reliant diverse individual identities become rich in character and creativity.

Role models lead to a new form of group identity – not fixed identity, but dynamic, that is open to evolve simultaneously with the co-involving individual identities collectively

known as the Aboriginal Community. These role models are obliged to reclaim moral agency against the system as part of the communitarian ethic,

## **Constructing Identities**

In Aboriginal Culture the role of story telling is held in high regard and is normally the role reserved for the elders as they are the spiritual gate keepers for cultural identity.

Story telling is a narrative progression, a verbal communication and re affirmation of every successive generation into their identity. The narrative frameworks are allegories, which portray meaning of the listener and emphasis of land. The link between the stories told and the lives that are lived are in parallel, culturally identity is clearly defined.

In the system of fixed identities the distance between the stories told and the lives lived are blurred. Cultural awareness training, re-visiting land and country, finding your relatives becomes increasingly difficult.

Coping strategies of survival is how to use power. Your identity becomes referenced point to develop your power base. Power however comes with a price and that is determined by attitudes and motivations. Self management is to reflect and question yourself constantly.

Depending on attitude power can be exercised in positive or negative ways. For example, Rollo May (1972) argues that power can be used:

<b>Over Others</b>	<b>Manipulative Power</b>
<b>Against Others</b>	<b>Competitive Power</b>
<b>To use others for one's own ends</b>	<b>Exploitative Power</b>
<b>For others</b>	<b>Integrative Power</b>

Power can be used to empower or disempower. For example,

Paul Coe (1975) claims the following:

The Blacks in New South Wales, over a period of fifty years, have been forced to live under what I call managerial suppression. The government had decided that that the Blacks would be put on mission stations. The land they were located on was usually of no value. I was brought up on one myself. You have to lose your self respect entirely because in order to do anything you had to ask the manager for permission. He was a big 'Bwana' figure, father and ogre. For fifty years they didn't let children grow up.

...Getting back to the cultural identity bit: it has come to the stage where it is managerial suppression which has totally destroyed dehumanized Aboriginal culture. One of the most surprising things to me is the dignity of the people who survived in conditions like this. On most mission stations, even now, they retain a sense of self-integrity and inner dignity.

...We have learned that institutionalized violence is carried out in many ways. You don't need a gun to kill a man: all you have to do is deny him his self-respect and over a period of years you will kill him, you mentally castrate him. The only way to counteract this thing, this slow death, is to enthuse in Blacks, very aggressively, a sense of Aboriginality, self awareness, a cultural and personal identity as a part of a national group, as an Aboriginal society. We see that Blacks are poverty stricken and completely defenceless as far as economic power is concerned, subject to manipulation by the white power structure, being used as cheap labour. We cannot counteract this white

structure. What we can do and what we are trying to do, is instil in the Black person a sense of self-awareness and self respect. This is the only way we can survive nowadays.

Paul Coe (1975) goes on to argue that the Aboriginal child in school:

Is sitting on the fence between white culture and black culture, not really belonging to either...

In going through a white school system, he (sic) has been forced to aspire towards lower middle class values. He has been conditioned to uphold and try to keep to white material values.

He is out in a position where he is caught in a tug of two cultures. There are two pulls on this black kid: he doesn't know which way to go. To forsake his Aboriginal identity and become an imitation white? Or to retain his Aboriginal identity and either get up and get his arse kicked in for standing up and live the rest of his life in poverty, or shut his mouth, be bought off and get an award like MBE or a Knighthood?

This is a challenge that is faced by Aboriginal people whose identity is threatened or suppressed. Should we consent; to oppression, domination, domestication or should we withdraw our consent? The balance of power lies with the choices we make.

In today's contemporary society what we have suffered as a people is a warning of how not to do things. That warning is by enlarge unheeded. I see greater fixation of fixed identities with themselves in the societies they have created fast becoming runaway trains.

Examples of this were in the nineties where suicides of Japanese businessmen felt they had failed and brought shame on themselves.

As Aboriginal people we more than clearly see the flaws in contemporary society and it is prudent for us to distance ourselves from the inevitable down fall. We can live in this society but not be part of it.

## **Disclaimer**

This paper has been based on both my experience as a stolen generation person as victim, as a caseworker for Link-Up Queensland and past study at the Queensland University of Queensland. Any failure to acknowledge sources or concepts in this paper is unintentional.

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