

INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES FORMED THROUGH THE COLONIST LENS:  
HISTORY OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE'S

Introduction to Aboriginal Australia

La Trobe University

## Indigenous Knowledges Formed Through the Colonist Lens: History of Anthropology and the Indigenous People's

I have been asked to discuss Anthropology in the Australian context, regarding Aboriginal people's contribution to Australian society. For me, this is a potentially problematic question to explore without first recognising my place as a non-Indigenous Australian. My main issue with Anthropology in Australia is that it consisted of white colonists forming knowledges and ideas about the Indigenous populations being studied, without understanding the vast complexities of the Culture, Country, or People's, under the colonist lens. It is also of importance to note that these knowledges are created using Western structures, rather than the epistemologies used in Indigenous knowledge systems. Therefore, being a white Australian myself, I find describing, and in a way comparing to the non-Indigenous population, Indigenous People's contribution to colonised Australian society unsettling, no pun intended. However, I hope that I am able to highlight Indigenous voices and points of view throughout this essay, and demonstrate how Western society and its knowledge systems have affected and effected Indigenous Australia, and how it has been able to do so. I am going into this analysis as an outsider, and I acknowledge my place as such. This paper will examine; anthropology, as a practice, its Eurocentric methodology and its history within Australia (Nakata 1998); science, the experiments and ideologies; the idea of race, both biologically, and as a construct (Cowlshaw 1986); and their subsequent role in the Colonisation of Australia and the original People's of the land. As well as how Indigenous People's have succeeded in the hostile environment of the colonized western society that is Australia. Specifically, through our understanding of the Indigenous knowledges and epistemologies; and talking back to the institutionalised racism of colonized Australia.

The discipline of Anthropology in Australia is one founded in Eurocentric thought and practice. This is demonstrated specifically through a paper analysing the anthropological

reports brought forward by A.C. Haddon. Nakata (1998) presents these reports firstly as one of the “early attempts to document the lives and characteristics of a society of people before the onslaught of colonial expansion changed them forever and before Indigenous skills and knowledges were lost to the world” (p. 3). This appears to be a noble effort to learn and capture Indigenous knowledges from the people themselves before it is all lost. This is also the basis for most other anthropological studies of Indigenous People’s at the beginning of colonisation (Haddon 1903; Spencer & Gillen 1969; Stanner 1993). However, within these reports, there was no attempt to understand why the Culture was dying, or how it was brought about. The anthropologists do note the impact of European contact with the Indigenous People’s and how “much of these cultures had disappeared forever.” (Stanner 1993, p. 377). Nonetheless, it is the fact that some “wanted to help the Aborigines but did not examine the institutions which were most directly oppressing them” (Cowlshaw 1986, p. 6) that causes the main issue. They merely recorded and documented, using methods such as Ethnography (Hodson et al. 2011), the Culture and complex systems of knowledge and lore instead of looking at reasons why they were disappearing. The way in which the Anthropologists came to study the Indigenous People’s is not the only point of conflict I wish to explore. The formation of the knowledge was achieved using the “Western ‘order of things’” (Nakata 1998, p. 4), this is problematic as the anthropologists were collecting and curating Indigenous knowledges through Western forms of knowing. Nakata (1998), describes this in reference to the Haddon reports and how they presented the knowledge from the anthropological expeditions in 1935:

In forming knowledges on Islanders, he did so in a process that suspended them from both the political and historical context in which they lived and thought. That in this process he instituted ways for understanding Islanders

that inscribed them into the order of a knowledge system that was quite discontinuous with their own. (Nakata 1998, p. 7).

The anthropologists made no attempt to form the information in the context from which it was sought, rendering it as a disparate knowledge base. This becomes especially problematic when the research is used by Indigenous scholars to understand their own place within both the historical and current context of Australian society. As well as comprehending their own experiences, knowledges and ancestors with the juxtaposing anthropological literature (Nakata 1998). The reports' findings also frame how the wider Western society views the Indigenous People's and how the government shapes policies concerning them (Finlayson 2001). By placing the Indigenous People's into the format of Western knowledge bases, you remove them from their Cultural, Spiritual, and Sacred context. Thus, assimilating them into a palatable concoction for the European world, and diminishing the Indigenous People's in comparison.

The use of science and the idea of race was one used often to derogate the Indigenous population of Australia. The anthropologists of the early 20th century conducted scientific experiments concerning the physical and psychological attributes of the Indigenous People's and compared these findings to European standards (Campbell, Gray & Hackett 1936). This was a common explorative path for anthropologists at the time, and it was resoundingly linked to the biological idea of 'race'; "Aborigines were seen as a race, and the defining characteristics were to be discovered by measuring their bodies and bones." (Cowlshaw 1986, p. 3). These constant comparisons of Indigenous and non-Indigenous People's were at the forefront of European society and especially the field of anthropology. European anthropologists incorporated "the use of intelligence tests to "prove" the superiority of whites to non-whites." (Cravens 2010, p. 303). Anthropologists were not only studying physical and psychological attributes, but extremely specific aspects of the Indigenous People's; like their

metabolism (Hicks et al. 1931), and the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous People's skin temperatures in certain environments (Goldby et al. 1938). The European's were thoroughly documenting and conducting scientific experiments on the Indigenous People's, but for what purpose. Pure curiosity? A need to record civilisations history and people's? Or is it really just to reposition Western society at the top of the civilised world? This is where the idea of race as a social construct and Social Darwinism comes in to play...

There was virtually universal acceptance of the relative position of the European and Australian types of human kind. The former was at the highest stage of development and the latter at the lowest. (Cowlshaw 1986, p. 3).

Social Darwinism afforded the anthropologists and colonisers alike, the ability to deem any human with darker skin as inferior. Charles Darwin first wrote of the animal kingdom within the theory of evolution and natural selection, however, anthropologist Herbert Spencer took Darwin's theory and used it to explain humans as well. Social Darwinism "informed popular prejudice and structured the policy of colonial and, later, state governments in their dealings with Aborigines." (Francis 1996). These theories and institutions that placed white people at the top and people of colour at the bottom were created by white people and allowed them such power and control. All the way through instilling institutionalised racism in; schools, by not teaching the Indigenous history of Australia; prisons, through the overwhelming overrepresentation of Indigenous People's in the system; and even in the government, by still not having a treaty with our Indigenous People's (Rigney 2002). This all began with anthropologists taking this idea of Social Darwinism and using it to uphold the ideology of a racial hierarchy. F. J. Gillen, supposedly an expert on Aborigines said, "the Australian aborigines are the lowest in the scale of barbarian races, as well as the lowest in human intelligence." (Stone 1974, p. 119). These race biases were maintained through the

experiments that took place within the field of anthropology that I touched on earlier. Nakata (1998) explored other experiments, stating how when the anthropologists were faced with results that opposed their predisposed idea of where the Indigenous People's sat on the social and intelligence hierarchy, they "went to great lengths to sign off the achievements".

Comparing the findings to European people, as well as placing the Indigenous People's within the confines of Eurocentric systems, incorporated and sustained the racist ideologies of Social Darwinism into their apparently scientific studies of the Indigenous population, and subsequently into the minds of the wider - and whiter - Australian society.

Anthropology, overall, is about the study of culture and its people. It is more than unfortunate that anthropologists have mainly created knowledges that remove the people being studied from their cultural context into one that operates completely differently (Nakata 1998). Also, that they have greatly contributed to the undermining, denigrating, and largely the dismantling of the Indigenous People's and their Culture, and Country. Despite this, the Indigenous People's of Australia are still here, and through the anthropologist's recordings of the vast history of the People's, we know that they are the oldest living Culture and People's in the world (Reddy et al. 2013). It is through the qualitative ethnographic research collection of anthropologists that the Indigenous People's have been able to demonstrate the vast history of Aboriginal Australia before and throughout colonisation. This is by means of languages and dialect recordings (Thomas 2008), songs, paintings, understandings of country (Whitehead et al. 2008), and other cultural artifacts that represent their knowledges and ways of knowing, even though many have been taken and placed in museums all over the world, like has happened to many global Indigenous communities (Bryant et al. 2013). However, this is Indigenous People's contribution to Australian society. They have demonstrated a history of the land, as well as humans in general, that cannot be overlooked, as there is evidence of the Indigenous People's occupation of this land going back 60,000 years

(Holdaway et al. 2005). There is also a renewed interest in learning about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, perhaps not seen so much in our government policies, but through the everyday Australian. For example, the Invasion Day March that takes place every year on January 26th, it is not just Indigenous People's that are speaking up, all kinds of Australians are. Demonstrating the multicultural society that white Australia tries to forget, and Indigenous People's are a major part of this (Moran 2011), specifically in how we recognise Australia as a society and a group of people. Anthropology has allowed for this to happen, as we have ethnographic records not just of who the Indigenous Australians were, but how Europeans viewed them and placed them into these Eurocentric knowledge bases that we can now explore and question the fundamentals of (Langton 2011). Indigenous People's are able to talk back to the institutionalised racism of Australian society because of these anthropological writings.

Anthropology in the Australian context is a discipline that has managed to document the oldest living civilisation. However, it may have never been the European's place to do so, as the Australian Indigenous Knowledges, including; languages, stories, songs, and paintings, were constantly being inducted into a knowledge system that was very unlike their own. The anthropologists created culturally disparate knowledge; that of the Indigenous People's, from which it was sought; and that of the Europeans, to which it was taken. Not only this, but under the guise of science, anthropologists were able to take racist ideologies, such as Social Darwinism, and use them to marginalize the Indigenous population with specific experiments that would reposition European's above the Indigenous Australians. Despite all of this, the Indigenous People's of Australia have been able to demonstrate a vast and complex Culture that is ever-present, and ever-changing. Many of the Indigenous knowledges Australian society is common with, was formed through a colonist lens within the field of anthropology, but Indigenous Australians have been able to take these biased knowledges that were formed

and use them to talk back to the institutionalised racism that was created. Just like; Nakata, Cowlishaw and so many other Indigenous Scholars and activists in the community. This is Indigenous Australia's contribution to Australian society through, and out of, anthropology.

## References

- Bryant, L, Lewis, K, Puryear, M & Reiner, A 2013, 'Caught in the middle: intellectual property and indigenous communities', *Landslide*, vol. 5, no. 4, pp. 26.
- Campbell, T, Gray, J & Hackett, C 1936 'Physical Anthropology of the Aborigines of Central Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 106-139.
- Cowlshaw, G 1986, 'Aborigines and Anthropologists', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 1, pp. 2-12.
- Cravens, H 2010, 'What's New in Science and Race since the 1930s?: Anthropologists and Racial Essentialism', *The Historian*, vol. 72, no. 2, pp. 299-320.
- Finlayson, J 2001, 'Anthropology's contribution to policy formulation: the imagined other?', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 18-26.
- Francis, M 1996, 'Social Darwinism and the construction of institutionalised racism in Australia', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 20, no. 50-51, pp. 90-105.
- Goldby, F, Hicks, C, O'Connor, W & Sinclair, D 1938, 'A comparison of the skin temperature and skin circulation of naked whites and Australian aboriginals exposed to similar environmental changes.' *Australian Journal of Experimental Biology and Medical Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, pp.29-37.
- Haddon, A.C 1903, 'President's Address. Anthropology, its Position and Needs', *The Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, vol. 33, pp. 11-23.
- Hicks, C, Matters, R & Mitchell, M 1931, 'The standard metabolism of Australian Aborigines.' *Australian Journal of Experimental Biology and Medical Science*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 69-82.
- Hodson, R, Chamberlain, L, Crowley, M & Tope, D 2011, 'Coding Ethnographies for Research and Training: Merging Qualitative and Quantitative Sociologies', *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 54, no. 1, pp. 125–132.
- Holdaway, S, Fanning, P & Shiner, J 2005, 'Absence of evidence or evidence of absence? understanding the chronology of indigenous occupation of western New South Wales, Australia', *Archaeology in Oceania*, vol. 40, no. 2, pp.33–49.
- Langton, M 2011, 'Anthropology, Politics and the Changing World of Aboriginal Australians', *Anthropological Forum*, vol. 21, no. 1, pp. 1-22.
- Moran, A 2011, 'Multiculturalism as nation-building in Australia: Inclusive national identity and the embrace of diversity', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, vol. 34, no. 12, pp. 2153-2172.
- Nakata, M 1998, 'Anthropological texts and Indigenous standpoints', *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, no. 2, pp. 3-12.

Reddy, Y, Reddy, P & Reddy, G 2013, 'Social Darwinism vis-à-vis Aboriginalism: Australia echoing the Notions of 'Might is Right' and 'Might and Right'', *Asia-Pacific Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 1, pp.1–17.

Rigney, L 2002, 'Indigenous education and treaty: building Indigenous management capacity', *Balayi: Culture, Law and Colonialism*, vol. 4, pp. 73-82.

Spencer, B & Gillen, F. J 1969, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*, Anthropological Publications.

Stanner, W.E.H 1933, 'The Daly River Tribes a Report of Field Work in North Australia', *Oceania*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 377-405.

Stone, S 1974, *Aborigines in white Australia : a documentary history of the of the attitudes affecting official policy and the Australian aborigine, 1697-1973*, Heinemann Educational Books, The Netherlands.

Thomas, M 2008, 'Word territory: recording Aboriginal language with R. H. Mathews', *History Australia*, 5(2), pp.37.1–37.18.

Whitehead, P, Purden, P, Russel-Smith, J, Cooke, P & Sutton, S 2008, 'The management of climate change through prescribed savanna burning: Emerging contributions of Indigenous people in Northern Australia', *Public Administration and Development*, vol. 28, no. 5, pp. 374-385.