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DECOLONIZING THE INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN SOCIO-CULTURAL PRACTICES

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Abstract

Indigenous Australians have lived on Australian land for more than 65,000 years. It appears that there are still stereotypes, prejudices and biases regarding Aboriginal people in Australia which suggests that their pre-colonial as well as post-colonial socio-cultural practices have not been understood or acknowledged. Their beliefs in bonding of humans and nature which were passed on generations through stories of Dreaming should be re-examined and re-valued. Based on the indigenous theory and theory of decoloniality, this article is an effort to contribute to better understanding of the Australian Aboriginal people's pre-colonial cultural practices. Furthermore, it presents some contemporary challenges experienced by Australian Aboriginals in preservation and continuation of their culture. It is proposed that the perspective based on the colonial assumptions that Western cultures are superior to Aboriginal ones should be changed in many aspects, and that embracing the Aboriginal perspective and knowledge can provide numerous benefits and contribute to better co-existence of people at the global level.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal cultural practices, bonding of humans and nature, Dreaming, indigenous theory, theory of decoloniality

Introduction

As Hannah Devlin, Science Correspondent for The Guardian reported on 21st September 2016, DNA studies on Aboriginal and Papua New Guinea people revealed that they are "the most ancient continuous civilization on Earth" (Devlin, 2016, n.p.). In 2017, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published in *The Conversation* a short essay "When did Australia's human history begin" written by Australian researchers Billy Griffiths, Lynette Russell and Richard 'Bert' Roberts (Griffiths et al., 2016). Publishing this essay was prompted by new archaeological excavations in western Arnhem Land which suggested that Australian Aboriginal people have lived continuously in Australia for 65,000 years. The essay was shared on various social media and online forums and the readers were invited to the discussion at a public event - *at the annual meeting of the Australasian Association for the History, Philosophy and Social Studies of Science* to be held in Wollongong later that month. The essay attracted much attention from the public and more than a thousand comments by readers were posted on Facebook and Twitter. Griffiths and Russell analysed the readers' comments and published their findings in 2018 in the article "What we were told: Responses to 65,000 years of Aboriginal history" (Griffiths & Russell, 2018, pp. 31-32). Their aim was to find out what Australians know about Aboriginal history and how they interpret what they know about it. As scholars and teachers, Griffiths and Russell approached the readers' comments in an anti-colonial and anti-racist manner and their analysis revealed that there are still lots of myths, prejudices and misinterpretations about Indigenous Australians' cultural history based on views which started with the European colonization in the late 18th century. Since non-Indigenous Australians lack more profound knowledge about the Indigenous Australians with whom they have been co-habitating for more than 200 years, it can be supposed that those who do not have much to share with the Indigenous Australians know even less. The aim of this article is to contribute to better understanding of the Australian Aboriginal people's pre-colonial cultural practices and their contemporary challenges in continuation of their culture with an attempt to change the perspective based on the colonial assumptions that Western cultures are superior to Aboriginal ones in many aspects.

Indigenous Australians are generally referred to as people belonging to two distinct groups – Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Aboriginal peoples come from the mainland of the continent, including Tasmania, while Torres Strait Islanders are from the region between the top end of Cape York and Papua New Guinea, encompassing more than two hundred islands. Since 1980, *"a person of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent who identifies as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander and is accepted as such by the community in which he or she lives" is regarded an Indigenous Australian (AIATSIS)*. It is worth mentioning that the term "Indigenous" is frequently being replaced by "First Nations People" or "First Nations Australians" in recognition of their continuous existence prior to the European or other nations' arrival to this continent. However, the term "Aboriginal" is applied in this article as it is most often used in relation to cultural practices like Aboriginal teaching, Aboriginal art, Aboriginal beliefs and so on.

Culture and cultural practices are based on the collective terms of reference which determine the adoption of core values through adhering to particular norms, beliefs, rules, interests or traditions shared by members of a particular society or community through which they interpret their environments. Socio-cultural norms of the past in the Western cultures were usually associated with male members of the society due to their involvement in creating and governing such rules articulated in laws, procedures, acts, and treaties. Male-dominated, patriarchal societies imposed authority within particular historical or territorial boundaries, while female contribution to establishing laws and rules was marginal and often negligible. Indigenous Australian communities, however, had a different approach to law, and their cultural practices, although gender-separated, were more inclusive and incorporated both male and female participants as well as other creatures – living, material or spiritual ones, which created an inseparable entity of human beings and the world around them.

Despite being labelled as "uncivilized", inferior human beings by the "civilized" British colonizers who occupied the Australian land based on the "Terra Nullius" jurisdiction and dispossessed the native inhabitants of their country, Indigenous Australians managed to survive living on "no man's land" for thousands of years, keeping a close bond with the nature and everything around them.

Conflicts, hardships, discrimination and other negative impacts of the two-hundred-year period of oppression led to disruption of Aboriginal traditional socio-cultural practices. For better comprehension of their relationship with nature, this article will present a short introduction to Aboriginal culture prior to the European settlement, with an overview of their beliefs, social organization and communication, including current debates and challenges experienced by Australian Aboriginals. To emphasize the importance of learning and sharing the knowledge to erase ignorance which is the root of so many fears, prejudices and contempt, it will be argued that cultural differences should not be threatening but knowledge and understanding why they exist and what they represent can be empowering and lead towards embracing them instead of obliterating them. In that respect, some recommendations to consider Aboriginal cultural practices to foster better relationships among people as well as with nature will conclude this article.

Theoretical Framework

Postcolonial discourse aimed to deconstruct Western-based colonial discourse that "uncivilized" people were "civilized" only after they had been colonized by the Western "superior race". Led by Edward Said, whose work *Orientalism* (1978) is considered foundational to postcolonial theory, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who referred to the colonized as Other in the essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" (1988), postcolonial theories offered multiple analyses of the Western perception of the world which presented West as rational and ordered ("civilized") in contrast to the world of "others" perceived as chaotic, disordered, evil.

Theoretical framework that this article draws on will depart from postcolonial theory and encompass indigenous theory with its holistic approach that perceives humans and the non-human world co-existing in continuity in a circular manner (Kim & Berry, 1993; Moreton-Robinson, 2009) on one hand, and the theory of decoloniality stemming from anti-colonial and post-colonial theoretical framework which aims to decolonize previous knowledge and assumptions and reinstate the Indigenous peoples' views as equally valid and important (Shoemaker, 1998; Walker, 2000; Shoemaker, 2004; Mackinlay 2005; Christie 2006), on the other hand. The theory of decoloniality is both the theory as well as methodology aiming to deconstruct the colonial discourse and examine Western postulations of the correct or universal perspectives to knowledge.

Indigenous Standpoint Theory posits that only Indigenous people can authoritatively present their cultural practices and that Western-based perspective may not be effective or truthful to consider their real issues (Nakata, 2007). Unfortunately, due to detrimental British and later Australian government policies in the 19th and 20th centuries, many Aboriginal people were removed from their communities and could not get knowledge passed by their elders. We can agree that non-Indigenous people may not have deep understanding of experiences Indigenous people have been through; however, this exclusivity to present information from only Indigenous perspective should not prevent others from learning and sharing about the Indigenous culture(s) and practices.

On the contrary, the more we learn, the more accepting and tolerant we may become. "Decolonization learning can empower researchers, educators, and others. […] It is a life-long learning process" (Datta, 2018, p. 1).

Being a non-Indigenous person myself, geographically distanced from Australia, I could not conduct research based on a direct contact with Aboriginal communities. For that reason, the information presented in this article will be based on ethnographic studies, autobiographical narratives and research published by both Indigenous (Collard-Spratt, Morgan, Pascoe) and non-Indigenous (Flood, Lindqvist, Moriarty) authors as well as on information obtained from various Indigenous Australians websites.

From the 19th century, archaeologists, ethnologists and anthropologists, among others, have been working very hard to bring to light traditional practices of Indigenous Australians. Recently, there has been a surge in publishing activities written by Indigenous and non-Indigenous authors. Among them, some works need to be referred to as being progressive and well documented. *Terra Nullius* by the Swedish author Sven Lindqvist (2012) who travelled across Australia provides valuable insights into discriminatory policies of the Australian government towards the Indigenous people throughout the last century. Josephine Flood's T*he Original Australians* – The Story of the Aboriginal People (2019) shares the knowledge she accumulated in her fifty-year long career as an archaeologist in Australia. Flood discovered many Aboriginal artefacts in caves and rocks which told stories from the creators' imagination, but which also described social customs, rules and ceremonies that existed for thousands of years. During her archaeological excavations, Flood learned about the meaning of such visual messages from her personal contacts with Aboriginal people. Her extensive research connected the facts found in a number of European documents with Aboriginal oral (hi)stories.

Ros Moriarty is one of the modern-day Australian female authors, artists, entrepreneurs and promoters of Aboriginal culture who disseminates knowledge about the role of women in the Indigenous Australians' cultural practices. Her experiences and valuable insights from attending an Aboriginal female gathering in the Northern Territory in 2006, described in her autobiographical work Listening to Country (2010), will be used further in this article to exemplify the cultural bond between humans and the nature in the Aboriginal cultural practices.

Aboriginal social organization and the Law

Before the European settlement, Aboriginal peoples lived nomadic lives across the vast continent and on the neighboring islands, including Tasmania, moving from place to place according to seasons and changes in the food supply from natural sources. Their belonging to a particular place or country depended on their clan or family groups. Clans are based on a common language and a complex kinship system which refers to either patrilineal or matrilineal lines of descent and go beyond the Western idea of a family as a closed group of people related by blood, marriage or adoption. In the Aboriginal culture, clans share a common language and also an area of country where and how they live. Aboriginal kinship system is very complex and goes beyond the nuclear family.

> It determines how people relate to each other and their social, ceremonial and land-related roles, rights, responsibilities and obligations. For example, the kinship system determines suitable marriage partners, roles at funerals, everyday behaviour patterns and traditional land ownership groupings. (Kral, 2002)

All members of a clan would know these intricacies, which is another evidence of their highly developed social organization. To Europeans who settled or migrated to Australia in the 19th or 20th centuries, it seemed very complicated and, therefore, not being familiar with or unable to understand it, they referred to these socially organized groups as tribes, which is a term arising from their colonial preconceptions.

The process of male-female separation started at puberty, when boys were initiated and sacred rituals were performed only in a male company, and the same applied to initiation of girls. When the child matured, marriage arrangements would be made between different clans or skin - kinship groups. The deal would be that a boy from one skin would have a girl from another skin as his wife. These arrangements would be made by the clan elders much in advance. In order to prevent incest, the boy was not allowed to have contact with his future mother-in-law so that his future bride (who may not have been born by the time of the marriage arrangement) did not happen to be his own daughter. The bridegroom would spend some time in his wife's clan but then the couple would return to the man's own clan, where the bride would have to learn a new language and customs of the new environment. The children from their communion would learn the language of the father's clan.

Invisible boundaries represented the land or 'country' to which members of particular clans or language groups belonged, and members of one clan would not trespass the grounds of other clans. These migrations were governed by unwritten laws well known to different clans and skin groups. Above the human social organisation, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people also referred to landscape as a "second skin". Even though members of geographically close clans could not communicate easily due to differences in languages which were greater than those existing among European languages like French or German (Flood, 2019), different groups adhered to similar practices and followed the laws of the belief system known today as the Dreaming. The term Dreamtime, which is a literal translation from Arrernte language meaning 'Eternal' or 'Law' was first used in the late 19th century by two men - Walter Baldwin Spencer, an evolutionary biologist, and Frank Gillen, an amateur ethnographer, who spoke Arrernte, one of the native Australian languages (Palmer, 2019, p. 147). The term was later changed to 'Dreaming' by anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner (Palmer, 2019, p. 148) who referred to this system as a complex network of beliefs, rituals and practices that passed knowledge and experiences to generations. This belief system does not correspond to the Western idea of time as a linear continuation, but interprets the world and life of all the creatures as being in a circular motion.

Aboriginal Dreaming and beliefs in Ancestral Beings can be referred to as belonging to immanentism. Alan Strathern (2019) makes a distinction between religious beliefs and practices in which believers believe that they coexist with the gods or supernatural powers and defines these forms of religion as immanentism, in contrast to transcendentalism which separates the believers from their gods as is the case in the major world religions like Christianity, Islam or Buddhism. In immanentism, believers believe that they can interact with their spirits, gods or supernatural powers for their mutual benefits. Their gods are part of their customs, environment, living beings or inanimate objects.

The traditional Aboriginal beliefs into being one with the nature is what connected people from different language groups across the continent. Most Aboriginal ceremonies focused on continuation of life and on after-life as they believed in re-birth. It was believed that death signified the end of the body and soul life cycle, so that after death they can return to their "'bone and soul country', whence the spirit may be reincarnated and again enter a woman's body to be reborn" (Flood, 2019, p. 188). Funeral ceremonies would be long and elaborate and the name of the dead person should not be mentioned.

According to ecofeminists, the wilderness fosters connections between human beings and cosmic forces (Mack-Canty, 2004). A special relationship with totems, or a spiritual association with particular plants, animals, or inanimate things that should not be harmed, killed, eaten or destroyed, was based on the belief that totems were assigned to individuals or clans during the creation period and that they also symbolised the relationship between clan members, but also a connection with their ancestors and the land (Flood, 2019).

Although women were supposed to accept the totem of the clan her husband comes from, they might have also kept their own totem (and be independent of the fate conveyed by the other one). Aboriginal poetess Oodgeroo in her humorous poem "Ballad of Totems" describes a situation that demonstrates the importance of the totems, but also gives a portrait of a stubborn (or mischievous) female who, instead of respecting her husband's totem (a snake), served it to her family for lunch (2021, pp. 25-26).

Aboriginal social organisation and gender-related practices

Traditional Aboriginal society was mostly egalitarian. There were no rulers or chiefs, and decisions were made based on the common consent of the whole clan. Parents or kins would address minor offenders and teach them what they should (not) have done, while punishments for serious offences would be decided by elders or tribal "councils". Incest and breaking sacred laws were major crimes (Flood, 2019), while rape was not. Punishment would include death or exile from the clan (which would have similar consequences, as survival of an individual depended on the support of the whole social group). Even though women may have had less influence in decision-making process, they were responsible for teaching about and application of some particular customs or rules. Women who pass the knowledge, lead rituals and ceremonies connected to the Dreaming are known as Law women.

Both men and women were responsible for keeping the tribe healthy and safe. However, it was believed that men possessed their healing powers that were derived from their spiritual links with the Dreaming, while women gained their hands-on experience from collecting bush medicine. Some Aboriginal languages also distinguish between masculine, feminine, neutral, and edible genders of nouns (Flood, 2019), which demonstrates that knowledge about the different plant or animal species was crucial to survival and women's knowledge was pivotal in that respect.

Law of the Dreaming was passed through stories which were sung and performed during rituals and dance ceremonies. Sacred places were visited, even at great distances, where members of different clans would meet at a corroboree (dance ceremony) and ensure that everybody learns about the country, the relationship between different skins, the moral code, and the Law. Some rituals were men-only, some women-only, some combined both genders, and there were also those which combined children and adult participants. Although there was this gender-based distinction, the rituals did not have hierarchical exclusivity or gender-based superiority. On the contrary, the Aboriginal people believed that men are responsible for some, and women for other things, and that their different roles stem from the same Dreaming Law which could not be questioned, changed, cancelled, nor forfeited (Flood, 2019). This perspective differs from most Western cultures which are based on religious teaching proscribed by different religious books which have patriarchal perspectives in relation to gender roles and which assign females a subordinate position. Aboriginal perspectives, however, show more gender equality in terms that men and women should not compete for power or the position, but that each gender is responsible for certain tasks and that their contribution to the survival and life enjoyment is equally important and beneficial for the whole community.

From the cross-cultural perspective, I argue that the corroborees adhere to Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory (1978) which proposes that children – as well as adults – learn from socialisation and collective activities being members of the group. In Australian Aboriginals culture, that means that through different tools – songs, paintings, rituals, or dance, members of different clans shared their knowledge accumulated through generations through songs and stories and learnt from each other despite the lack of a common language. Women's roles in such gatherings were as important as men's ones. In 2017, National Museum of Australia prepared an exhibition and created a book on *Songlines: Tracking the Seven Sisters* which showed how knowledge on different subjects and levels was shared by women (Palmer, 2019). More than a hundred female artists told traditional stories through paintings and songs, shared their experiences aiming to teach and protect their "young sisters".

Elders were responsible for the cultural guidance. Children upbringing was a joint affair and all members of the tribe contributed to teaching children the skills as well as the laws to be respected later in life. When adult members of the clan went away to hunt or find food, children stayed with grandparents or other members of the clan who taught them stories, songs, or dance steps. Indigenous beliefs that everyone should learn to enjoy being one with the nature and cosmos have driven Ros Moriarty to establish Indi Kindi program in 2011 to teach children through picture books about the Dreaming Law and how to live in harmony with the nature. The program is delivered in remote areas of Northern Territory (Moriarty Foundation, 2011). This is another example how embracing the Aboriginal perspective and knowledge can contribute to teaching young generations how to connect with the environment and cherish it for the future. Our planet is undergoing climate changes, most of them exacerbated by human negligence, unlimited exploitation of resources and brutal selfishness when it comes to thinking about the future, so learning how to preserve the nature so that human race can sustain life is one of the most important items on the global agenda of survival.

Skin system defines the roles of people of different generations and bloodlines within a clan. As Max Dillon, Kombumerri Traditional Custodian Contributor explains: "Our people are related on a skin lore system. It's a way of keeping peace but also it's practical because it's about the bloodline, it's about the gene pool and it's about respect" (Dillon, 2020, n.p.). As people belong to different skin groups, they also have their skin names that allocate particular roles – who can be called mum, dad, daughter or Big Brother, Big Sister. To Westerners not being familiar with this cultural practice, it appears that Aboriginal children have several mothers and fathers because they also call their maternal aunts "mother" and paternal uncles "father" (Flood, 2019). Furthermore, "as well as their key part in social organisation, skin names can be used as personal identifiers, like a first name in English […] and skin names can be used to refer to someone who is absent" (Kral, 2002, n.p.).

Female members have the role of teaching culture to the girls, and male members do the same for the boys. Protocol requires that an elder, regardless of the actual blood connection between them and the rest of the clan, is referred to as "Aunty" or "Uncle", which is their formal title showing their status and position not only within their social group but also how they should be addressed by others, non-Aboriginal people (Kral, 2002). Practices and traditions in relation to elders in different parts of Australia, for example in Torres Strait Islands or in the desert may differ significantly. Someone may be in their sixties and still not an elder. The status comes with the person's age, knowledge and reputation in the community.

Communication

Aboriginal existence and cultural practices before the arrival of the Europeans were not formally recorded in writing as the Indigenous Australians did not share orthographic symbols similar to other world cultures. Their knowledge and experiences were passed orally from elders to younger generations during ceremonies, as well as through songs, dance and visual media, namely through paintings on bodies, in the sand or barks, or carvings on rocks and in caves. After the arrival of the Europeans on "Terra Incognita" in 1788, some Indigenous Australians' customs were observed and documented, but mostly those related to the conflicts occurring between the native inhabitants and the new arrivals.

Pre-colonial Australia was a true multicultural society. More than 250 languages and 800 dialects were spoken by Indigenous Australians (Flood, 2019; AIATSIS; National Archives of Australia). It is, therefore, astonishing to notice that, despite speaking so many different languages before the colonization and living in an area covering over 7.5 million square kilometres, Indigenous Australians share a lot of similarities in beliefs and ceremonial protocols in their cultural practices, despite the fact that the neighbouring people could not understand each other's language. Language is closely related to Dreaming. As Laura Rademaker puts it, "from an Aboriginal perspective, land and language are inseparable; they were formed together. By recognising the language of the country, therefore, one also recognizes the speakers of the language as owning and belonging to the land" (2019, n.p.).

Similarly to musicians who may play in an orchestra and come from different countries and not share the common language but are able to read and play the notes and consequently perform multifarious musical pieces, Australian Aboriginals used various visual codes to communicate. Some of their rock paintings were figurative, while some others used dots and lines (https://artark.com.au). Different symbols, colours and shapes painted on bodies, drawn in the sand or bark, or carved into wood or stone told stories, and communicated secrets which Westerners could not understand and, therefore, interpreted them mostly as decorative arts. During 1980s, John and Ros Moriarty worked hard to promote Aboriginal culture and art throughout the world. In 1983, they started a family design business – Balarinji - Aboriginal-designed textiles for fashion and furnishings. Australian national airline Qantas was the first to carry the Aboriginal design – Wunala Dreaming (Kangaroo – John's totem) on their planes, and in 1994 Qantas 747-400 plane was "the most photographed aircraft in the world, featuring in newspapers, magazines, websites and television broadcasts everywhere" (Moriarty, 2010, p. 139).

Yet, Aboriginal drawings and paintings are not just art. They share knowledge about the land and provide information to clan members about animals, humans, or landscape. Combinations of symbols and colours are different depending on who the story is going to be told to – children, elders, or new members of the clan. However, the meaning of the combination of dots, lines, circles, or shapes is not constant and is not shared by all Indigenous peoples in the same manner. These codes could be compared to the alphabet and their different combinations resemble the combinations of letters in Western languages. Yet, the sign and the signified may be very different from other languages, as it occurs in any language. Despite the differences or fluctuations in their meanings, visual symbols were communication devices that connected Indigenous Australians to their land, people and the Dreaming.

Since the newcomers to the Australian soil could not interpret these various combinations of symbols, they did not consider them as communication signs. Many languages from the past have been lost as those who spoke them passed away and children were separated from their families so could never learn the language of their skin group.

Settler colonisation occurred both externally – through possession of land and resources – and internally through imposing English language, customs and social practices. Rademaker notices that "given the importance of language in forming communities, settler-colonial projects also involve efforts to dissolve Indigenous ways of communicating, both absorbing Indigenous people into the language culture of the colonisers or muting them by its dominance" (2019, n.p.).

In order to keep record of the currently spoken Aboriginal languages for the future, some of the English language orthography rules are applied with the aim to keep them in the written form to preserve them for the future, and to make them easier to read and pronounce. The spelling system is based on the international phonetic system (one graphic symbol for one sound) but there are many variations both in spelling and in pronunciation. For instance, the name of language Ingada spoken in Western Australia has many different orthographic versions such as: Yinggarda, Ingara, Ingarra, Ingarda, Ingarrah, Inggarda, Inparra, Jinggarda, Kakarakala and Yingkarta. Unfortunately, this language is classified as a dying language since there were only five people who spoke it in 1981 (Collard-Spratt & Ferro, 2017, p. 155).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the latest release in October 2021, Indigenous people in Australia nowadays speak more than 150 different languages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 25. 10. 2022). Other sources mention that there are 123 distinct Aboriginal languages across the continent, out of which 109 are considered endangered (National Archives of Australia). As Flood reports, "the only speakers of some Aboriginal languages are now non-indigenous linguists" (2019, p. 190).

There have been some changes in recent years, though. Dictionaries – both in hard copies and online ones (including apps on phones) have been created to preserve the existing languages. National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI), the national standards and certifying body in Australia, provides interpreting services in 30 Aboriginal languages across Australia and there are 104 NAATI certified practitioners providing interpreting services for the Aboriginal population in the Northern Territory, Western Australia, South Australia and Queensland, but also for the film, television and other media productions – audio, video subtitles, voice over and back translations. Most of the practitioners are female.

Australian broadcasting services such as ABC, SBS or NITV often provide information about the Indigenous Australians' social, cultural and other practices to educate the multicultural Australia about other multicultural communities.

Women as mediators

The language barrier can account for cultural misunderstandings. As members of the neighbouring clans could not communicate due to significant differences between their languages, women acted as cultural mediators as they managed to learn languages spoken by more than one clan. Ros Moriarty mentions that "John's mother took with her fluency in eight Aboriginal languages" (2010, p. 6).

Many white settlers considered themselves superior to the dark-skinned Aboriginals, and consequently they did not make efforts to learn the natives' languages. Therefore, from the early days of colonisation, it was the Indigenous people – mostly Australian Aboriginal women – who learnt some basics of English and were engaged as negotiators between the English and the native speakers. Historical documents refer to some of them – Truganini, Pagerly and Drayduric (Dray) (Flood, 2019). Unfortunately, this practice did not accomplish better understanding between the collocutors as the conquerors and the conquered did not have equal share in relation to the position of power.

For instance, to save Aborigines from extinction in Tasmania, Truganini assisted in their resettlement on Flinders Island in 1830s and by doing so she has remained a controversial figure and has been regarded both as a hero and a traitor by both the whites and the Aborigines. Two years after her death, her skeleton was exhumed and remained publicly displayed in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery until 1951. Biography of this exceptional woman, *Truganini: Journey Through the Apocalypse* by Cassandra Pybus (2020), was the winner of the National Biography Award in 2021.

In 1988, Australia was celebrating bicentenary of the arrival of the First Fleet on the continent. Aboriginal communities across the country protested, and one of the most vocal political activists, Burnum Burnum from the Wurrundjeri people, made a significant point by going to England and posting the Aboriginal flag in Dorset, thus claiming the Aboriginal sovereignty over the English land. In his satirical "Burnum Burnum Declaration", in reference to Truganini, he declared: "We do not intend to souvenir, pickle and preserve the heads of 2000 of your people, nor to publicly display the skeletal remains of your Royal Highness, as was done to our Queen Truganini for 80 years" (Butler, 2023, n.p.). All "pledges" he stated satirized what the Indigenous Australians had been suffering from the English colonizers.

Aboriginal connection to land

Speaking of prejudices in his short story "Philosopher" (2000), Somerset Maugham noticed that those who do not know the same thing as others do are regarded simple, ignorant, and inferior by the latter. He shared this thought about a hundred years ago (the story was first published in 1922) but it applied centuries before it, as much as it is alive today. As Indigenous Australians did not have Western-style machinery, factories, rulebooks, money or possessions, their customs and traditions differed significantly from the Western ones and, for that reason, they were regarded as inferior, even uncivilised by those who occupied or migrated to their land.

I argue that knowledge from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources is advantageous to decolonize previously held pre-colonial and post-colonial assumptions. In their work *Australia's First Naturalists: Indigenous Peoples' Contribution to Early Zoology* (2019), Penny Olsen and Lynette Russell explore the role Aboriginal Australians had in introducing Europeans arriving in the 19th century to the native flora and fauna. Unfortunately, the knowledge Aboriginals shared was not always acknowledged by the newcomers to the continent. As the authors notice, "the general European belief in their own superiority meant that the chance to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into Western Science was squandered" (2019, p. 55). Not only that – the species that the Aboriginal people assisted the newcomers to the continent to find and describe in their scientific works were rarely named after the Aboriginals but almost always after the English scientists, collectors or those who provided financial assistance for their explorations.

To decolonize the view that Indigenous Australians were not only hunter-gatherers, but also farmers albeit different from the Western ones, Bruce Pascoe in his *Dark Emu: Aboriginal Australia and the Birth of Agriculture* (2018) argues that Indigenous Australians did use tools for farming and applied some agricultural practices in the pre-colonial period. He based his theory on artefacts found during archaeological excavations which are still kept in museums labelled as "objects with unidentifiable purpose". Grinding stones found at Madjedbebe in Northern Australia are evidence of technological innovations that go back some 65 000 years (Hayes et al., 2022). The stones were used for grinding seed and using plants for nutrition and making tools. Furthermore, Pascoe argues that there was collaboration between humans and natural forces when seeds of native plants would be thrown during ceremonial dances and rituals and wind would disperse them across the country. His work has received both positive and negative criticism as it questions assumptions about pre-colonial Indigenous people's agricultural practices, but also because supporters of indigenous theory question his "pure" Aboriginal background. Referring to Pascoe's work, Barbara Glowczewski, an anthropologist with extensive experience in working with Aboriginal communities, asserts that it "offers avenues of hope for reinventing a world in need of repair" (2022, p. 91).

Indigenous Australians have been very closely connected with the land which they cherished, cared for and felt grateful for everything it provided. The land carried many different meanings, from "home", "family" to "country" and "us". However, the land was never possessed nor inherited and, different from the Westerners' practices, there were no claims, disputes nor wars over territories and their inhabitants. Aboriginals believed that the land was given by Ancestral Being to all and that it can only be passed on to descendants to live on it, but that it cannot be sold. This was one of the main arguments to win Mabo vs. Queensland case in 1992, and one of the important contributions that Aboriginal activist Koiki (Eddie) Mabo made to raise awareness that Terra Nullius is a Western concept not applicable to the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Australia because Indigenous people lived on Australian land and left evidence of their different cultures there prior to the European settlement in 1879. Winning the Mabo case led to recognition of the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia by official legislation – Native Title Act – passed by the government in 1993 during the leadership by Prime Minister Paul Keating. This Act entered into force on January 1, 1994.

For thousands of years Aboriginal elders have been involved in transmitting the message of the Dreaming to be one with the nature. The Dreaming links people with land, and all the living creatures and non-living things share the same rights to co-exist according to laws set up by the Ancestral Beings that took different shapes in the creation time. The Dreaming is associated with land in the sense of its connection with the circle of life. It has been regarded as "a powerful living force that must be nurtured and maintained" (Flood, 2019, p. 166). Larissa Behrendt further suggests that "Dreamtime stories that describe land movements and floods fit in with what later becomes known about seismic and glacial shifts from the geological record" (2016, n.p.).

Another argument to support decolonizing beliefs about Australian Aboriginal pre-colonial cultural practices is to incorporate their land management operations in protection and regeneration of the natural environment. Fire-sticks were used for thousands of years to control the fire and clear grassland.

Ash after the fire would serve as fertiliser for regrowth of vegetation which would later provide nutrition for humans and animals (Monroe, 2021). During the 2019-2020, disastrous bush fires destroyed much of the land inhabited by Aboriginal population in Victoria and New South Wales. Western methods of preventing and controlling bush fires were not efficient so Aboriginal people were invited to assist in the containment of ravaging bush fires. Since then, there have been calls to involve Aboriginal people in the future decision-making to prepare and respond to similar natural disasters in the future (Williamson et al., 2020).

Knowledge, experiences and perspectives of Indigenous communities in relation to the environment should be combined with Western-based scientific approaches to make progress in sustainability of our planet.

Cultural bonding

Talking about experiences can assist others to open up, to share knowledge and support each other in many different ways (Brooks, 2007). In 2006, Ros Moriarty joined a group of Aboriginal women going on their corroboree – ritual ceremony in the outback, and she recounts that extraordinary experience in her autobiographical book *Listening to Country* (2010). Ros Moriarty shares the knowledge and awareness of the importance of acknowledging the role of women in Australian Aboriginal cultural practices. "It was the women who showed me the view of the world fundamentally different from any other I knew" (Moriarty, 2010, p. 2). This work then can be analysed taking both theory of decoloniality and indigenous theory.

Moriarty does not identify herself as an Aboriginal, although there are some "dusky-skinned cousins" on her father's side and some "black blood" in her mother's family (2010, p. 24). She grew up in Davenport, Tasmania, where she had not known a single Aboriginal person in her youth. She met her husband John while working "as a twenty-one-year-old researcher at the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in Canberra" (2010, p. 29). John's father was Irish and mother Aboriginal, and he was one of the Stolen Generations children, taken away from his family at the age of four.

John reunited with his family and culture during his thirties. Ros Moriarty and her family met the Aboriginal community at Borroloola, in the Northern Territory, where they learnt about Aboriginal culture. Referring to importance of that inclusion of Indigenous knowledge, Moriarty states:

> I felt sorry that most Australians could not experience what I'd discovered about our country. What lay beneath the deprivation and the pain of our nation's first people. I knew it would change the negative view so widely held about the Aboriginal community, and could create a very different dynamic about how we see ourselves as a people. (2010, p. 99)

Ros Moriarty attended the traditional Law ceremony together with 150 Aboriginal women and spent a week observing and participating in the ceremonies. Even though she had to abide by the traditional rules of the Law and could not describe in detail nor divulge any of the ceremonial secrets to those who do not belong to the Aboriginal community, Moriarty reiterates the power of human connection when material things are removed from the focus of the community's attention. She shares memories of a number of Aboriginal women attending the ceremony at Borroloola. They describe their childhood in the bush, explain different customs and tell Dreamtime stories.

> You can't swear where *bujimala* – Rainbow Serpent – might drown you. And don't call the name *bujimala* when you are travelling in the sea. […] On sacred islands, you can't kill snake or lizard or anything. That's mean that wind might come, you know, like a cyclone and all that. (2010, p. 114)

Although the survival of the tribe is often associated with men (Mack-Canty, 2004) and their capacity to control and dominate nature, it is the females that make survival of the culture possible - from the very reproductive capacities they have, to building and maintaining relationships with others. To emphasize why she decided to tell this story, Moriarty states that there is:

> something of the spiritual wealth that wraps these [Aboriginal] women tightly together, and which has taught them the rules for happy lives. […] To reveal a glimpse of the philosophy they have gleaned along humanity's pathway of more than forty thousan years, set down by the oldest living culture on Earth. I felt that in this story others would find moments of inspiration and revelation along their own life journeys, as I had. (2010, pp. 2-3)

Moriarty thus shares that which is culturally specific to the Aboriginal females and demonstrates that where there is an open heart and willingness for (ex)change, boundaries can disappear and horizons stretch (Suljić, 2013). She shows her hope that:

> in some small way we could build a bridge for others to enter the magical spirit of place that is the culture of Aboriginal Australia, and so open the possibility of more open exchange. It would be a dialogue about community, respect for place, and celebration of human spirit. (2010, p. 99)

Moriarty makes a strong statement that by exploring Aboriginal spirituality and practices she was able to intertwine both the Aboriginal and her own culture and learn from each one. She asserts that being different can be empowering for individuals' sense of identity and belonging. *Listening to Country* is an objective expression of the willingness to understand and accept cultural differences, which is crucial for fostering good relationships. As Gudykunst states, "giving is not a sign of weakness, rather it reflects tolerance, self-control, flexibility and maturity" (2003, p. 15).

Moriarty is reiterating that from the European colonists' perspective "Aboriginal customs were seen as an impediment to the transition from black society to white, particularly as they restricted time available for employment" (2010, p. 159). Her work "provides insights into the Aboriginal history, culture and laws, and into the women's Law business in particular, making a statement in regards to the Aboriginal relationship to the land" (Suljic, 2014, p.276). Therefore, Moriarty demonstrates that she is not only a skilled storyteller, but that she is also a politically and socially conscious activist who shares multiple voices of all those who have been silenced for too long.

C**onflicts, survival, and reconciliation**

The estimation is that six hundred tribes co-existed on Australian continent, and as each tribe consisted of maximum four hundred fifty people, the population of Aboriginal peoples was between 250.000 and 300.000, which dropped to roughly 60.000 in 1921 due to the deadly diseases brought by Europeans such as smallpox, tuberculosis and syphilis, and also due to conflicts and massacres of the natives who did not possess weapons or strategies to fight back the colonizers with the same strength (Flood, 2019). Furthermore, the Indigenous people were killed under pretext that they had to be punished for their savage attacks against the European new settlers, while the real reason was colonial expansion so that the land or resources they lived on could be occupied and possessed by the Europeans. As Ros Moriarty explains, "those falling under the guns were seen as miserable specimen of the stone age, remnants of a bizarre and worthless culture, when in reality they were the custodians of the longest continuing human tradition on the history of the planet" (2010, p. 62).

After the period involving violent and armed conflicts, another period of imposition of European laws and customs aimed at annihilating the tradition, culture, and existence of the first inhabitants of the Australian continent started in 1930s (Lindqvist, 2012).

This was planned through the policy of assimilation. Missions were established with the purpose to convert Indigenous people to Christianity. Indigenous people, however, were mostly attracted to missions not because of religious teaching they provided, but because of their supply of food, alcohol, and tobacco, which brought new negative consequences to their communities. Sugar or white flour were not part of their diet, and as their bodies did not have enzymes or mechanisms to process such food, diseases like diabetes decimated the population. Alcohol addiction and violence brought more problems that previously had not been part of their culture. The final strike came with the policy which planned to remove Aboriginal children (either 'pure blood' or 'mixed-race' ones) from their families and put them in institutions where they could only communicate in English language, learn "English ways", and finally be assimilated in the society as "ordinary Australians". Victims of this policy are nowadays referred to as Stolen Generations. This policy led to the extinction of many cultural, traditional, or customary laws that identified original Aboriginals and is also termed as "cultural genocide" (Flood, 2019, p. 284).

Some of the authors of Aboriginal descent and their works describing denial of their Aboriginal cultural heritage have gained international recognition. Sally Morgan's autobiography *My Place* (1967) describes Morgan's growing up not being aware of her Aboriginality and how she was affected by her loss of connections with the Aboriginal culture. Aunty Rhonda Collard-Spratt's autobiography co-written with Jacki Ferro *Alice's Daughter: Lost Mission Child* (2017) speaks of the author's forced removal from her Aboriginal family and placement into the mission and her later re-connection with her Aboriginal roots. A collection of autoethnographic essays *Growing Up Aboriginal in Australia*, edited by Anita Heiss (2018) also shares stories of the Stolen Generations and how the loss of cultural bonds affected Aboriginals' sense of identity.

Some critics argue that decolonization attempts to reconcile settler guilt (Tuck & Yang, 2012, 3). The recent attempt to acknowledge the First Peoples in the Australian Constitution and give them the role of advisory body in relation to the Indigenous populations needs from their own perspective was made in the October 2023 referendum. One of the arguments for the "yes" campaign was that all Australians would benefit from having representatives of the Indigenous people in the parliament to hear their voice in relation to matters related to them. Unfortunately, this was not recognized by the voters as the matter of crucial importance and the majority voted "no".

> The referendum was a chance the Australian majority to right some wrongs, or at least show the traditional owners of the land that they too deserve a voice in how the country operates. However, overwhelmingly, division prevailed over reconciliation (Dayman, 2023).

Failure in the Voice Referendum demonstrates that more education and political good will is needed and, in order to decolonize previously held beliefs, people need to be properly informed and become aware of the consequences of the past wrongdoings. Understanding different perspectives can lead to better co-operation between members of different ethnic, religious, or cultural groups which can contribute to better co-existence of people at the national as well as the international levels.

Conclusion

The sense of unity with the land, the sense of belonging to the country, but also the co-existence of all human beings and non-human creatures is present in the Aboriginal cultures since earliest times. One of the reasons may be that Aboriginal people did not share the materialistic sense of the world around them; they did not possess the land, or cultivate it, or domesticate animals. Anything a person had was shared with others during his or her lifetime but would be destroyed after his or her death. In the Aboriginal culture, the land could not be owned because it belongs to all who inhabit it – to the living and in equal terms to the spirits. Therefore, they did not have the sense of property, of possession of the land, or anything in relation to the living beings or non-living objects on the land and did not have the need to divide the land, fence it or possess it in any manner. This was not or could not be understood by the English who took sovereignty of Australian land in 1788 and who asserted that Aborigines had no legal or moral claim to the land as they had never owned it or used it in a productive manner (Mitchell, 2004). Australia was regarded as unowned land, or t*erra nullius*, which according to European legal interpretation meant "land of no sovereign power". However, that legal term did not encompass the people living on that land, and even though *terra nullius* meant "land not owned by anyone" it did not mean "uninhabited land". As a result, the English taking sovereignty over the land included sovereignty over the Indigenous peoples without their consent (Lindqvist, 2012). Nevertheless, thanks to archaeologists who discovered Aboriginal artworks, and anthropologists and ethnologists who published their experiences in encounters with the Australian Aboriginal peoples who showed them their rites and ceremonies, the process of decolonizing Indigenous Australians is in progress, demonstrating that their land was not "nullius", but that it has been inhabited by Indigenous people for thousands of years.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states: "Recognizing that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment" (United Nations, 13.09.2007). This article provided evidence-based arguments why embracing the Aboriginal knowledge could enrich modern global societies. These are some of the recommendations that Aboriginal cultural practices should be considered further and adopted for mutual benefits. Their contribution to preservation of natural environment and building communities connected with nature should be acknowledged and some environmental practices should be incorporated in the modern agenda of sustainable living. Their knowledge in controlling bush fires and maintaining safe environment could assist in keeping the Australian land free from hazard and catastrophic consequences of such natural disasters. As bush medicine collectors and healers, they contributed to safe and healthy preservation of their communities. Learning from their experiences could also assist in providing solutions to improve the overall health and wellbeing of the world population in the times to come (Bourke et al., 2018).

The inclusion of women in the Aboriginal traditional practices through history could be seen as much advanced compared to their Western counterparts. The role of women in continuation of their culture is undeniable. Feminist ideology of equal opportunities did not exist in Australian communities, but it was effectively practiced in accordance with the Law of Dreaming. Aboriginal females have continued to fight for the human rights, told their stories to wider audiences, worked as political activists, educators, interpreters. In fact, they continued doing what they have been doing for thousands of years – albeit unacknowledged in the patriarchal society of the West: they have invested themselves in the continuation of their cultures through promotion of co-habitation, emphasizing the importance of dialogue and education – learning about oneself and about others, without discrimination or biases. Therefore, women at the global level should take more prominent roles in mediation, negotiation, and solving disputes as the Western cultures are still struggling with ideas like - who(se) am I, where is my place in the hierarchy of importance, do I possess enough material evidence (money, land, weapons...) to prove my status or importance.

Australian Indigenous populations have co-existed for millennia without the need to make armies, fortresses, or trenches. They practised what they believed – that being one with the nature connects people from different language groups and territories; that elders' status in the community is based on their merit, not on manipulative economic or political powers; that they all strive for benefits of the community, not for personal gains and interests; that all beings share the same right to co-exist. These practices should be acknowledged and followed by others – not "subaltern others" in Spivak's terms – but by all those who may think that their view of the world is the only correct one.

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