

## INDIGENOUS PEOPLE AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

**David H. Bennett**

*Australian High Commission, Pretoria, South Africa*

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### Summary

This is a brief overview of some of the current inequalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia, a generalized Aboriginal worldview, and the relevance of abolishing of the doctrine of *terra nullius* to redressing some of the inequalities and recognizing elements of Aboriginal worldviews.

### 1. Introduction

A 1993 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission (ATSISJC) report notes that equity is “the commonplace experience of most Australians.” But Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the “most disadvantaged group within the Australian community, in most cases overwhelming so” says the *Intersectoral Issues Report* produced by the Ecologically Sustainable Development Working Group Chairs (ESD Chairs). In terms of health, housing, employment, education, and other social indicators, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are unacceptably below Australian standards. Of particular concern is the marginal economic status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and the declining labor market position of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Only 72% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and 44% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander women are in the labor force, that is working or attempting to find a job, as compared with the general population where 75% of men and 48% of women are in the labor force. Unemployment among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was 38% according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 1995.

The 1994 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) report *Indigenous People Today: A Statistical Focus by ATSIC Regions* stated that life expectancy for “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males at 57 years is 17 years below the life expectancy for the total Australian males [sic] population. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females the life expectancy is 65 years compared to 80 years for the total female population.”

Two percent of all Aboriginal private dwellings do not have running water; 2% do not have electricity or gas connected; 3% do not have a toilet; and 4% do not have bathing facilities in the dwelling, although half (2%) have access to a communal bathroom or shower, noted the Australian Bureau Statistics in 1995.

## **2. Land Tenure and Self-Determination**

Health, housing, employment, education, lack of self-determination, and dispossession from land can be turned into a self-perpetuating causal cycle. As the Australian Department of Environment, Sport and Territories recognized in 1993, this cycle also contains environmental problems “directly affecting a large portion of the population (not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and adding to social equity problems . . . [T]hose who are most environmentally disadvantaged are usually also likely to be the most economically and socially disadvantaged.”

The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody concluded that improved living standards in most communities would not be achieved without security of land tenure and self-determination. Enhanced environmental circumstances, community control, and improved delivery of health, housing, education, and other social programs also depends to a considerable extent on the security of land title and the perceived level of self-determination within the indigenous communities receiving these programs. The Commonwealth, State, and Territory governments have given support to, and in some instances implemented, the recommendations made by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody relating to land needs.

In other words, to address the cycle of health, housing, employment, education, and social inequities (the cycle of poverty) requires addressing, among other things, land needs. The reason for this lies in the foundations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander worldviews. The 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody states in its discussion on the importance of land: “Aboriginal attachment to land is non-transferable, and relates to the particular land itself, in a way which is connected with their religious beliefs and with the renewal of social life.” Aboriginal attachment to land is non-transferable because for each group there are specific ceremonies, songs, legends, and other cultural and spiritual ties that link a specific group to a specific “country” (see *Cultural Justice*).

### 3. Cosmological Beliefs (see *Cultural Relativism*)

#### 3.1. Dreamtime

To understand Aboriginal cosmological beliefs about the nature of humans, the condition of human life, and the existence out of which the diversity of the universe sprang, it is imperative to understand something of the complex interrelationships among living people, their country, their totems, and their ancestral beings as embodied in the principle of the Dreamtime or the Dreaming. Traditional Aboriginal ethical norms, values, and ideals are founded in the Dreamtime. The Dreamtime is both an active creation period, when the world was given shape and the norms, values, and ideals of Aboriginal people were fixed like the landscape, and a continuous passive time now “existing alongside secular time but not identical with it” that reaffirms the norms, values, and ideals set during the creation period, says Berndt in *Australian Aboriginal Religion*. In the creative phase the moral universe was established and fixed once and for all time. The Dreaming “determines not only what life *is* but also *what it can be*,” says Stanner in *White Man Got No Dreaming: Essays 1938–1973*.

In the Dreamtime genesis, the world was without form, but it was not void. Unlike the Biblical Genesis, creation in the Dreaming is not *ex nihilo* but a transformation and culmination of a formed but featureless world already existing. No explanation is given, nor thought needed, for existence prior to the Dreaming. Perhaps this is because taken as a whole the Dreamtime stories of the Aborigines “deal less with origins as such than with the instituting of relevances—the beginnings of a moral system—in a life which already was,” says Stanner in *On Aboriginal Religion*. The Dreaming is not a theory of mystical explanation of moral origins, but an account of what Stanner calls “the principle of assent to the disclosed terms of life” that governs the ritual behavior and descriptive statements about the moral relations among people, their “country,” and other species. In other words, Aborigines are not attempting to analyze why things are the way they are, but are accepting Dreamtime stories as demonstrations of the way things are.

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### **Biographical Sketch**

**David Bennett** has been the executive director of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the executive director of National Academies Forum, the environment officer for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, a bibliographer for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, a policy officer for the Department of the Environment, Sport and Territories, and the acting director of the Mawson Graduate Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Adelaide, Australia. He has taught philosophy and/or environmental philosophy at the University of Oklahoma, the University of Adelaide, and the Australian National University. Dr. Bennett has published on environmental philosophy, particularly environmental ethics, the ethical treatment of non-human animal species, and population issues relating to the environment. In relation to these topics, he has worked in Western ethics, Australian Aboriginal ethics, and Taoism (Daoism). With Richard Sylvan, Dr. Bennett co-authored *The Greening of Ethics*.