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Aboriginal Spirituality: Aboriginal Philosophy The Basis of Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing

Vicki Grieves

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Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health
PO Box 41096, Casuarina
NT 0811 AUSTRALIA
T: +61 8 8922 8396
F: +61 8 8922 7797
E: admin@crcah.org.au
W: www.crcah.org.au

Authors: Vicki Grieves

Managing Editor: Jane Yule

Copy Editor: Cathy Edmonds

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This discussion paper argues for the centrality of Aboriginal Spirituality in the practice of social and emotional wellbeing and for applications in all areas of Aboriginal development. Although often mentioned in the literature on Aboriginal health and social and emotional wellbeing, *Spirituality* has been in danger of becoming one of the undefined terms—like *wellbeing, community, identity*—that are used in various contexts and with various meanings attached, and in ways that obscure the reality of Indigenous Australian knowledges, philosophies and practices. In common with terms such as *the Dreaming*, it has lost significant meaning when translated into English. This discussion paper importantly defines Aboriginal Spirituality by privileging the voices of Aboriginal people themselves and those of well-respected observers of Aboriginal culture. It demonstrates how those who are *well* exemplify Spirituality in everyday life and cultural expression. Having commonalities with international Indigenous groups, it is also deeply appreciated by non-Aboriginal people who understand and value the different ontologies (understandings of what it means *to be*), epistemologies (as ways of *knowing*) and axiologies (the bases of values and ethics) that Aboriginal philosophy embodies, as potential value to all peoples.

Spirituality includes Indigenous Australian knowledges that have informed ways of being, and thus wellbeing, since before the time of colonisation, ways that have been subsequently demeaned and devalued. Colonial processes have wrought changes to this knowledge base and now Indigenous Australian knowledges stand in a very particular relationship of critical dialogue with those introduced knowledges that have oppressed them. Spirituality is the philosophical basis of a culturally derived and wholistic concept of *personhood*, what it means to be a person, the nature of relationships to others and to the natural and material world, and thus represents strengths and difficulties facing those who seek to assist Aboriginal Australians to *become well*. This discussion paper questions the advisability of approaches that incorporate an Aboriginal *perspective* or *cultural awareness* as an overlay to the Western practices of dealing with mental health issues. Western practices have developed out of an entirely different concept of personhood, development of the individual and relationships to the wider world, and further research in this area, particularly incorporating the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is critical to ways forward.

This discussion paper originated as a literature review in 2007 for the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH) with the support and collaboration of Professor Judy Atkinson of the Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples. This has proven to be a very fruitful association and I am most appreciative of the collegiate relationship that we have developed. The project included a reference group, which advised on the shape of the project and commented on the draft, and which included:

Ms Louise Campbell
Aboriginal Education Advisor
Office of Catholic Education
Maitland Diocese, New South Wales

Mr Michael Williams
Director
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies Unit
The University of Queensland

Associate Professor Norm Sheehan
Research Leader
Centre for Indigenous Knowledge and Design
Anthropology
Swinburne University, Victoria

Mr Jim Everett
Aboriginal activist, writer and poet
Cape Barren Island, Tasmania

Mr Greg Telford
Rekindling the Spirit
Lismore, New South Wales

Dr Bronwyn Fredericks
National Health and Medical Research Council
Research Fellow
Queensland Aboriginal and Islander Health Council

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Many Elders from New South Wales remain as a beacon for me in my intellectual and Spiritual development. They include Mrs Mae Simon, Mrs Patricia Davis-Hurst, Mr Norm Newlin, Mrs Norma Fisher, Mr Jim Ridgeway, Mr Stan Grant Snr, Mrs Betty Grant, Mrs Beryl Carmichael, Mr Billy Rutter, Mr Roy and Mrs June Barker, Mrs Phyllis Moseley, Mr Bill Allen Snr and the late Mr Bobby McLeod. I also wish to acknowledge the influence of Associate Professor Irene Watson and her considerable knowledge on my thinking about the philosophical basis of Aboriginal culture.

It was conversations with Fred Maher my countryman that first started me thinking about the importance of Spirituality. Also important to recognise here are the many relations and friends for whom Aboriginal Spirituality is a central aspect of their lives and who are a constant source of inspiration to me: these include Genevieve Grieves, Josephine Cashman, Kieran Grieves, Yagan Grieves, Lillian Moseley, Gavin Callaghan, Mindy Avery, Eric Dates, Sandra Ridgeway, Irene Watson, Gary Williams, Richard Campbell, Bill Allen Jnr, Bonny Briggs, Gary Foley, Joe Brown, Calita Murray, Adam Hill, Jeanne Townsend, Paulette Whitton, Bronwyn Penrith, Alfred Coolwell, Lindy Moffat and others, too many to mention—thank you!

Vicki Grieves

Vicki Grieves
The University of Sydney
Redfern, NSW

Introduction

Wellbeing and Spirituality: A starting point

Although this discussion paper has been developed for people working within health practice, as it explains, the wholistic[1] philosophical basis of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that encompasses wellbeing has applications in every area of engagement with Indigenous Australian people. It addresses both the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health's (CRCAH) research outcome to 'explore how spirituality/beliefs/systems of value contribute to Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing', and the CRCAH's stated goal of health outcomes through:

> *Providing evidence that can be used by services and individual practitioners that address the social, emotional and cultural needs of Aboriginal communities, and which promote the resilience of children, youth and families (CRCAH n.d.:8).*

The evidence provided in this discussion paper is about the nature of Aboriginal Spirituality,[2] its relationship to wellbeing, and the ramifications of this to the application of social and emotional wellbeing policy and programs in Australian Aboriginal communities. The literature review for this paper has been comprehensive, sourcing a range of literature across disciplines that are concerned with this phenomenon, including Aboriginal philosophy and the range of expressions and practices that occur in the lives of individuals—despite living in a colonial regime. Literature that assists us to understand the complex interplay of cultures within a settler colonial society has also been sourced, including history, anthropology and social theory. A background and understanding of Spirituality as the philosophical basis of Aboriginal wellbeing, as offered here, will be of assistance to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike in redressing the damage done to Aboriginal people under colonialism. Importantly, and as will become clear, any discussion of Aboriginal Spirituality has direct ramifications for understandings of wellbeing, including social and emotional wellbeing.

Indigenous Australians include Aboriginal people of the mainland and Tasmania, as well as the people of the Torres Strait. Although there are differences in belief, practice and history between and within these distinct groupings of people, there are also many commonalities and some generalisation is therefore possible. However, the terms *Aboriginal people* and *Torres Strait Islanders* are used in this review when it is not appropriate to generalise across both populations. It is important to note that the author is an Aboriginal person from the mid-north coast of New South Wales. The focus is thus on Aboriginal cultural understandings of *Spirituality* in the lives of Aboriginal people as the author understands them. When the word *Indigenous* is used, its meaning is about Aboriginal Australians. With respect for Torres Strait Islander cultural expressions of Spirituality, it has not been possible to speak or write of these adequately, except in general terms.

Low standards of Aboriginal physical and mental health are widely acknowledged in Australia as alarmingly widely divergent from the health status of the general Australian community (Australian Health*InfoNet* 2007), and it is not the purpose of this discussion paper to revisit the vast literature that documents and substantiates these concerns. Rather, it starts with the observation that this literature is replete with references to the importance of Aboriginal *wellbeing*, as well as *Spirituality* in improving health and wellbeing outcomes for Aboriginal peoples. This discussion paper is designed to better contextualise these notions of wellbeing and Spirituality within an Australian Aboriginal context. Although there is literature on these notions available in other nations, relating to Indigenous people with similar colonial histories, it is the position of this discussion paper that these are concepts that are *culturally and historically specific* to particular peoples. Thus, although comparison is always fruitful, it cannot take place meaningfully unless the situations to be compared are adequately understood in their own right and, importantly, can only follow the discussion developed here.

[1] The word *wholistic* (rather than *holistic*) is considered more appropriate to be used in this review, developed from the word whole, which describes a matter in its entirety, and which is appropriate in contexts where Indigenous philosophy is being described.

[2] The word *spirituality* is written with a capital 'S' throughout this paper when it refers specifically to the philosophy that underpins Aboriginal ontologies (ways of being) and epistemologies (ways of knowing) and, therefore, Aboriginal personhood.

The starting point for wellbeing is always cultural in that it is defined, understood and experienced within a social, natural and material environment, which is understood and acted on in terms of the cultural understandings that a people have developed to enable them to interact within their world (Grieves 2006a:12–19). This is true of all peoples and, in recent decades in particular, people throughout the world have had to adjust to changes in their environments that, in turn, impact on their cultural understandings of wellbeing. Aboriginal Australians are no exception and, thus, the situations in which Aboriginal peoples find themselves in different parts of Australia today are varied, complex and changing.

This literature review draws on the notion of Indigenous knowledges as a reference to those experiences, knowledges and beliefs about the world—including from the multiple life-worlds and local experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples—that have informed distinctly Indigenous experiences of being and thus wellbeing. *Indigenous knowledges* refers to two forms of knowledge that now interact; the first is non-Western knowledges that Indigenous peoples held prior to and since their colonisation by people who not only brought a different system of knowledge with them but also declared it to be superior. In the process, Indigenous knowledges have been significantly devalued, disregarded and demeaned. Second, the ongoing fact of their colonisation—and the terror, violence and suppression of social practice and self-appreciation that this has entailed for so many—means that Indigenous peoples stand in a very particular relationship to the *Western* knowledges that have been used to repress and oppress them. This does not imply that Indigenous knowledge is necessarily antagonistic to Western epistemologies, only that it stands in a particular relationship of critical dialogue with the knowledge systems recognised by the dominant society within which Indigenous peoples find themselves.

It is thus a fundamental principle that an understanding of Aboriginal wellbeing needs to take into account the different ontologies (understandings of what it means *to be*) and epistemologies (as ways of *knowing*) that characterise the experience of colonised peoples. Aboriginal Australians today may live predominantly within one or the other of the ontological/epistemological systems, glossed as *Aboriginal* or *Western*. In either case, they have to contend not only with the existence and influence of the other but are continually dealing with a world in which these different ontologies collide. This has produced decades of immense tension as the pull to be one kind of person in one world conflicts with the pull from the other. Aboriginal oral histories are replete with examples, and anthropologists (von Sturmer 1982; Austin-Broos 2003; Sutton 2001; Macdonald 2000; Heil 2006, 2008 among others) have written about many of the traumas that the structural violence of this tension produces. Reser (1991) details the associated condition known as acculturative stress and references the work of Cawte, who 'set the ethnopsychiatric agenda in Australia, studying contemporary Aborigines as they struggle to evolve new social institutions to cope with catastrophic upsets caused by western influence'. Reser has no doubt that the area of Aboriginal mental health has been neglected and 'straight jacketed by prior and totally inadequate frameworks for understanding the other-culture realities of Aboriginal mental health' (Reser 1991:220–1).

Therefore, this discussion paper aims to provide an overview (which is all it can be) of the specific philosophical sources of Aboriginal understandings of what it means to be *a person*, to be a person in relationship with other persons, and to be in relationship with the wider world and the associated understanding of wellbeing. It aims to clarify what it is that Aboriginal people refer to when they speak of a wholistic view of themselves and the world around them. Although frequently mentioned in the health literature in particular, this concept of wholism is poorly understood and hard to articulate even for those who live it. Yet it is fundamental to the understanding of Aboriginal personhood, and thus to the health and wellbeing of a person. This literature review begins with cosmological understandings, moving on to social and personal dimensions in order to identify the wholistically conceived environment (through *Spirituality*) in which *wellbeing* can exist, be overseen and maintained. It also includes the strengths and difficulties confronting those who wish to assist Aboriginal people in the re-alignment of the conditions within which they live and experience their being as not well.

Indigenous knowledges development in the academy draws on this philosophical base of the culture of Aboriginal peoples in Australia. In spite of widespread disregard in Australian society, Aboriginal culture is strong and viable, containing prescriptions for the preservation and sustainability of the natural environment, the health and healing methodologies of the people, and ways of managing lives and interpersonal relationships, including gender relationships, over many thousands of years. The Australian civilisation is by far the longest surviving human society (Diamond 1998:320–1; ABC Radio 2002), an important consideration in a world that is now confronted

with extreme changes to the natural environment through human-made climate change. Aboriginal scholars, men and women of high degree, the inheritors of the lifeways, seek to preserve the philosophical basis of the culture and promote it as a possible and practicable way of interpreting our histories, explaining the present and moving forward into the future. Central to this philosophy is what Aboriginal people have come to refer to in English as *Spirituality*, the basis of our existence and way of life that informs our relationships to the natural world, human society and the universe.

This discussion paper about Australian Aboriginal Spirituality and its connection to social and emotional wellbeing moves from a description and explanation of Aboriginal Spirituality (including in the international Indigenous context) to considerations of the expressions of spiritualty in cultural forms, including considerations of *ordinary lives* lived well. What Aboriginal people and some non-Aboriginal people consider Aboriginal Spirituality has to offer contemporary society is also considered in the interests of throwing into relief the *normative* positioning of Western culture in Australian society. The concept of *Aboriginal wellbeing* is defined as having strong dependence on Spirituality, and has also had a strong, though mixed, impact on the development of policy and program approaches to the needs of the Aboriginal community. This leads into a discussion of ways of understanding cultural difference when working with Aboriginal Australians. Contemporary approaches to health and social and emotional wellbeing are then described, drawing on the literature of social and emotional wellbeing in practice.

Finally, this paper concludes with a discussion of the concept of *social and emotional wellbeing* as a policy and program objective, in light of the literature review of Aboriginal Spirituality and using as a starting point the CRCAH's 'Program Statement for Social and Emotional Wellbeing' (CRCAH n.d.).

The review includes extensive quotations from written sources—some time-honoured and celebrated descriptions of Spirituality by Aboriginal people and those who seek to faithfully represent their cultural philosophy—often translated from Aboriginal languages into English. It is clear that many of the non-Aboriginal people who write about Aboriginal cosmologies and practices, some of whom do so with great understanding, respect and sensitivity, nevertheless do so from outside its experience as personal and daily belief and practice. This review draws on their insights but brings to the fore those who have lived Aboriginal Spirituality to speak for themselves.

The wholistic representation of Aboriginal Spirituality that is aimed for in this discussion paper is culturally appropriate and encompasses various facets of Spirituality that can possibly impact on social and emotional wellbeing. The wellbeing of Aboriginal people is not easily compartmentalised into specific areas of life and social practices, as every area has the potential to have an impact. Similarly, Aboriginal wellbeing itself is wholistic and the concept of social and emotional wellbeing itself belongs in a wholistic framework. Thus, the literature review draws on a diverse range of sources including history, anthropology, sociology, literature, biography and autobiography, government reports, websites, and the writings of health and social and emotional wellbeing practitioners, describing their approaches to the implementation of programs.

In general terms, spirituality is known in Western contexts as coming from the Christian tradition, from the concept of non-material, invisible yet powerful and life-giving forces from God. Thus, Spirituality is described as being 'a deeply intuitive, but not always consciously expressed sense of connectedness to the world in which we live' (Eckersley 2007:54). This discussion paper develops a theme of the particularity of Aboriginal Spirituality; there is a sense in which the English term has been appropriated into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural meanings and has come to represent a definite set of knowledges, practices, and ways of being and doing that have their meanings deep in philosophical understandings of Australia's creation. This philosophy is inextricably linked to Aboriginal notions of wellbeing.

Methodology

Approach to the literature review

An Indigenous knowledges approach was adopted for this project in that the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were sought to define and explain Spirituality, including in everyday lives lived *well* and expressions of Spirituality in cultural activities. Sometimes these voices are heard through the filter of non-Aboriginal academics who have been trusted to adequately convey the beliefs of Aboriginal people in various places and times. As well as this, the voices of key international Indigenous people have also been incorporated as a complementary section of the review to illustrate something of the connections that Australian Aboriginal people have with other Indigenous people in the world, and to further illuminate the concept of Spirituality.

The Indigenous knowledges approach is such that the research focus remains on the functionality of research outcomes; that is, the research is to be of assistance to Aboriginal people in representing their approaches to issues that concern them. Thus, this discussion paper is conceived of as a resource and reference point in the development of Aboriginal knowledges, in a wholistic sense, including social and emotional wellbeing. For this reason, an Aboriginal reference group was established to provide advice and direction about the course of the project, and communication was maintained by telephone and email. This group included academics, community leaders and practitioners.

There were no preconceived notions of what Spirituality might mean, and no acceptance that *culture*, and therefore Spirituality, had been lost, which is a common assumption in Australian settler colonial society.

The approach to the research was to search for books, journal articles, videos, DVDs, radio and television programs, and audio interviews that mention Aboriginal Spirituality. The project was also informed by well-respected non-Aboriginal voices, anthropology, history and Christian points of view, and spread widely to gain an impression of the depth and breadth of information available. It was also considered that the bibliography for this project would serve as a reference point for those who wish to read further.

Data sources

Search engines:

- http://www.anzwer.com.au
  'Australian', 'Indigenous spirituality', also another search with 'Aboriginal spirituality'
- http://www.scholar.google.com
  'Australian Aboriginal spirituality', also 'Australian Indigenous spirituality'
- http://www.google.com.au
  'Indigenous spirituality', also another search with 'Aboriginal spirituality'

Websites:

- http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/

Catalogue search for 'spirituality':

- http://www.ahc.gov.au/publications/generalpubs/nourishing/index.html
- http://www.abc.net.au/arts/visual/stories/s459832.htm
- http://www.dreamtime.net.au/indigenous/spirituality.cfm
- http://www.maristlaityaustralia.com/spirituality/articles/miriam_aboriginal_spirituality.php
- http://auseinet.flinders.edu.au/journal/

Database searches:

- Informit
  Search query 'Indigenous' or 'Aborigin*' and 'spirituality'

Other research at:

- Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to gain access to archives, books, videos, journal articles and resource kits
- Gnibi College of Indigenous Australian Peoples Keeping Place to gain access to books and videos
- Southern Cross University Library to gain access to journal articles, books and videos
- The University of Sydney, Fisher Library, to gain access to online journal articles, books and videos
- The principal researcher's personal library.

Initial data analysis

The sources of information on Aboriginal Spirituality were sorted into sections according to themes, and these now follow many of the chapter headings in this work; for example, Aboriginal philosophy, gender issues, international voices, Christianity, and social and emotional wellbeing practitioners.

The findings that were not anticipated were, first, the quality of work of contemporary Australian social commentators who have been deeply influenced by Aboriginal people of high degree and who now subscribe to the value of Aboriginal Spirituality in contemporary lives. Second, the evidence found of deep considerations of Spirituality in the contemporary cultural life of Aboriginal people. Both of these sections needed to be included to provide a wholistic view of the impact of Spirituality on the contemporary social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people and its potential value to all peoples.

Extra research

It became apparent that to illustrate the role of Spirituality in Aboriginal lives it would be necessary to seek examples from the vast range of Aboriginal life writing that may not directly reference Spirituality in the title but which, nonetheless, was concerned with this concept. Moreton-Robinson's (1998, 2000) analysis of Aboriginal women's life writings and the subjugation of Aboriginal knowledges, including Spirituality, proved important in this. It was realised that it is not within the scope of this project to analyse the range of Aboriginal biography and autobiography for evidence of Spirituality, but it is important to flag this as an important component of lived lives and an area of rich potential for further research.

It became clear that since Spirituality has a central role in the wellbeing of Aboriginal people, a section on Aboriginal wellbeing would enhance the readers' understanding of this little-understood concept.

Further, since the research on Spirituality established the primacy of cultural difference in the concept of *personhood*, it became important to reference the research of anthropologists that explained this. So, too, was anthropology sourced for approaches to dealing with or working with *difference*. The ways in which culture is disregarded, or glossed as a *perspective*, has a critical impact in the lives of an Aboriginal minority in a settler colonial society and, consequently, on their social and emotional wellbeing.

Finally, it also became important to research and reference historical understandings of the nature of colonialism and the impacts of colonial ethics, practices and attitudes on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal people, as this is recognised in the CRCAH Program Statement for Social and Emotional Wellbeing (CRCAH n.d.) as having a crucial impact and is part of the wholistic conception of wellbeing.

Second data analysis

The publications of social and emotional wellbeing practitioners sourced as mentioning Spirituality were grouped according to the approach taken by the individual practitioners, and articles representative of these approaches were chosen. These were analysed against the following indicators: the definition or mention of Spirituality, the definition or mention of wellbeing, the approach taken to therapy or research, the client base or research cohort, and the results of research or the outcomes of therapy. The findings of this analysis were written into the section on practitioners.

Methodological limitations

Based on a literature review, this work in some senses only touches the surface of the practice of Spirituality in Aboriginal lives. The topic begs further primary research to source the knowledges and practices of various Aboriginal individuals and groups whose lives are recorded and not recorded, to be used in ways that assist them and future generations, as outlined in the concluding paragraphs. This is especially the case for those people who assist and heal members of their kin and broader social group. There is room for more Aboriginal research findings in certain aspects of the literature (such as autobiography) on this important, central consideration to their lives.

What Is Aboriginal Spirituality?

> *We are really sorry for you people. We cry for you because you haven't got meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift. We get blocked by politics and politicians. We get blocked by media, by process of law. All we want to do is come out from under all of this and give you this gift. And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself.*
>
> David Mowaljarlai, senior Lawman of the Ngarinyin people of the west Kimberley, addressing a gathering of white people in his country (ABC Radio 1995)
>
> *Many Australians understand that Aboriginal people have a special respect for nature… That they have a strong sense of community… That we are people who celebrate together. There is another special quality of my people that I believe is the most important. It is our most unique gift. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language, this quality is called Dadirri. This is the gift that Australians are thirsting for.*
>
> Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (Farrelly 2003)

Aboriginal Spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. These relations and the knowledge of how they are interconnected are expressed, and why it is important to keep all things in healthy interdependence is encoded, in sacred stories or *myths*. These creation stories describe the shaping and developing of the world as people know and experience it through the activities of powerful creator ancestors. These ancestors created order out of chaos, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness, and, as they did so, they established the ways in which all things should live in interconnectedness so as to maintain order and sustainability. The creation ancestors thus laid down not only the foundations of all life, but also what people had to do to maintain their part of this interdependence—the Law. The Law ensures that each person knows his or her connectedness and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for country (including watercourses, landforms, the species and the universe), and for their ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves.

As part of the research for a project on the connections between Aboriginal wellbeing and cultural heritage in 2006, a focus group of members of the Aboriginal community in Redfern identified Spirituality as the foremost factor affecting their wellbeing. This group was representative of perhaps the most urbanised contemporary Aboriginal people in Australia at this time. The summary of their definition of Spirituality indicates the enduring nature of this belief system, despite more than 200 years of colonial rule in New South Wales that has discouraged Aboriginal Spiritual belief and practice:

> *Spirituality is a feeling, with a base in connectedness to the past, ancestors, and the values that they represent, for example, respect for elders, a moral/ethical path. It is about being in an Aboriginal cultural space, experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself, proud of being an Aboriginal person. It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and 'deep wellbeing'* (Grieves 2006a:52).

E. K. Grant (2004), a community developer from Adelaide in South Australia, identified that 'Aboriginal spirituality' is used 'by non-Aboriginals and Aboriginals alike without reference to its meaning and its roots', and that 'in itself it is a self-defining entity with each person defining it within his or her own framework of knowledge and experience'. She drew on the voices of Aboriginal people that she found in literature and summarised Spirituality thus:

> *Aboriginal spirituality is defined as at the core of Aboriginal being, their very identity. It gives meaning to all aspects of life including relationships with one another and the environment. All objects are living and share the same soul and spirit as Aboriginals. There is a kinship with the environment. Aboriginal spirituality can be expressed visually, musically and ceremonially* (Grant 2004:8–9).

Her research with the urban Aboriginal people of Adelaide establishes that Spirituality plays a pivotal role in community development and that when it is taken into consideration as one of the most important issues, there is more likely to be success (Grant 2004:25ff).

Creation—'originating from eternity'

The common core of Aboriginal Spirituality that exists in groups across the whole of Australia is the philosophy out of which values, ethics, protocols, behaviours and all social, political and economic organisation is developed. The basis of this philosophy is the idea of creation, the time when powerful creator spirits or spirit ancestors made sense out of chaos and produced the life forms and landscapes as we know them, and then sometimes lay down to rest or took to the sky (Johnson 1998; Tripcony 1999; Andrews 2004). Many non-Aboriginal writers and some Aboriginal people have recorded these creation stories from different parts of the country over time. These stories are often characterised as *the Dreaming* and, as with *Spirituality*, the English words are not equivalent to the meaning that exists in Aboriginal languages for the basis of the philosophy, and for the Spirituality that is encompassed within it.

Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, a late nineteenth-century anthropologist and an ethnographer respectively, translated the Arrernte words *altijira ngambakala* as 'dreaming', and *altjira rama* as meaning 'to dream' (Spencer & Gillen 1899). The linguist T. G. H. Strehlow, who grew up the son of missionaries among Arrernte at Hermannsburg in Central Australia in the early twentieth century, noted that the word *altjira* also means 'eternal', and so the idea of dreaming also includes the 'seeing' of eternal things during sleep. Thus, the more accurate translation would be 'originating from eternity' (Stockton 1995:54).

Further, the English word *Dreaming* is not equivalent to the meanings that exist in Aboriginal languages to refer to the time and events of creation and the laws laid down at the time, nor to the active and powerful ongoing work of these sustaining spirits. Nevertheless, the term *Dreaming* has become a gloss used within Australian English. As the creation stories contain the blueprint for all life, some Aboriginal Elders prefer to use the word *Law*. The *Dreaming* or the *Law* are so much more than either term can convey in English, and so much more than a philosophy confined to religion in the Western understanding. In English there is no equivalent understanding of the word. These English terms carry the burden of communicating what life itself is all about, in every manifestation and meaning, in all time, and as such they are not at all equivalent to the Aboriginal meaning.

The creation stories vary from region to region, in content and emphasis. They contain, however, the same basic elements; for example, the creative beings are responsible for the features of the land and the entire natural world, including the species and plant life. Their creative activity was formative and that which they created—the whole world, animate and inanimate—continues to be imbued with their life force. These creative acts took place over a period of time but the creator spirits pre-existed this work and continue to live an animate all life in their now non-visible forms. Creator spirits, in bringing all things to life, taught the people they created how they were related to the animate and inanimate world around them, and to the spirits themselves. These interrelationships are ones of interdependence and inter-responsibility (Tindale 1953; Stockton 1995; Havecker 1987; Marshall 2004; Unaipon n.d.; Nannup Karda 2006; Tripcony 1999; Hammond & Fox 1991; Mudrooroo 1995; Robinson 1968; Charlesworth 1998; Stanner 1968, 1984; Blundell & Woolagoodja 2005; Andrews 2004; Rose 1992, 1998, 2004; Neidjie 1989, 2007; Sveiby & Scuthorpe 2006; Voigt & Drury 1997; Warrawee'a 2002; Insight SBS 1998; Edols 1975; Koorie Heritage Trust & ABC n.d.; ABC Online 2007).

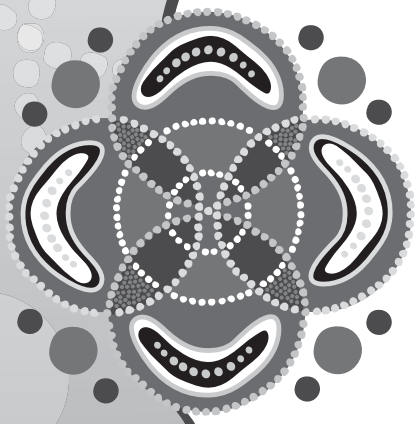
There are many different words in Aboriginal languages to describe this time of creation; for example, the word *Burruguu* is used by the Nhunggabarra people (Sveiby & Scuthorpe 2006:2–3). The creation ancestors are numerous and varied, and they interacted as they travelled. Perhaps one of the best known is the Rainbow Serpent. Although found in most parts of Australia, the Rainbow Serpent is of great importance in some areas but a lesser spirit in others. It is associated with watercourses, rivers, creeks and billabongs and is represented in rock art up to 6000 years old.

> *And that… is the resting place of the Rainbow Serpent, and all of the gullies and all of the lagoon itself was about the Rainbow Serpent created after he had created the universe and all the dry gullies is the tracks that he's made looking for a resting place.*
>
> Carl McGrady, Aboriginal Education Assistant, Boggabilla, describing the path of the Rainbow Serpent at Boobera Lagoon, northern New South Wales, 1996 (Australian Museum n.d.)

Another powerful creator, who is also one among many who all play a part, is Baiame, sometimes referred to as a Sky God or a Supreme Being. Any apparent similarity to Christian beliefs assumed by the use of these English terms is misplaced. Baiame is important for creating people themselves and when he completed his creative work he returned to the sky behind the Milky Way. Fellow creator spirits can be seen in the night sky where they, too, returned. The people of south-east Australia—including but not restricted to Kamilaroi, Eora, Darkinjung, Wonnaruah, Awabakal, Worimi and Wiradjuri, and also into north-western New South Wales for the Nhunggabarra people (Sveiby & Scuthorpe 2006:3)—commemorate places particularly associated with Baiame. One such place is a famous rock painting near Singleton in the Hunter Valley, the Baiame Cave, where he is depicted with large staring eyes and enormously long arms that hold representations of the seven tribes of the Hunter region under his arms (Matthews 1893). For the Nhunggabarra he is the first initiated man and the 'lawmaker' (Sveiby & Scuthorpe 2006:3). The town of Byrock in the north west of New South Wales also takes its name from his presence there. The stories of the sky gods, including Baiame, have different names for these creation ancestors in different areas, and sometimes the stories differ according to the beliefs of people in specific places. For the people on the adjoining mid-north coast—Biripi, Ngaku, Daingatti, and Gambangirr—it is Ulidarra who made the tribes and their boundaries and whose son, Birrigun, made marriage Law (Ryan 1964; GLCG 1992; Grieves forthcoming).

The specificities of these stories is more than can be covered here but it is fair to say that they encompass a similar script. Before life as we know it as human beings, there was a complex chaotic mass of matter that included these powerful beings. They were so powerful that they were able to change form and shape the chaos into form. They developed order and life out of the chaos by filling it with their activity and power. In intense bursts of activity, they were able to transform and develop formless matter into a landscape. The features of the land they brought into being hold in their names the stories of their own creation. And the ancestors in the same way gave rise to living forms, the animal species, all manner of plants, the landforms, watercourses (which, though inanimate, are understood to have their own *spirit* or being) and, of course, people. Each person or specific plant or place is linked to the spirit of its creation and thus to each other. This is a relationship of mutual spirit being, often referred to as totemism.

> *The period of intense creativity was as yet without law or morality, as different totemic ancestors in their travels and exploits negotiated, experimented, tested the options until they were finally closed and the boundaries were set for the living and the acting of the descent line. So the ancestral spirits gave to each living form its own Law, fixed for all time and written on the landscape. Some of these ancestral beings were culture heroes who taught humans how to hunt, to make fire and utensils, to perform ceremony and all that was important for survival.*
>
> *At length, after completing their tasks and overcome by weariness, they sank back into their original slumber. Some vanished into the ground whence they first emerged, others turned into the physical features of the landscape, leaving behind a trail of their life, the spirit-children yet to be born in the form of their ancestor. Though immobilized, these creator spirits did not cease to be alive, powerful and conscious. This creative activity continues through the life-force latent in their resting place, in sites of significance for their story and in their various transformations—not only specific landmarks but sacred objects of many kinds, totemic emblems, images, participants in ceremony and especially in their (human) totemic descendents (Stockton 1995).*



Professor W. E. H. Stanner, anthropologist, who learned of the deep meaning of the creation stories in the lives of Aboriginal Australians of Central Australia, has written:

> *The central meaning of The Dreaming is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither time nor history as we understand them is involved in this meaning…*
>
> *Although the dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot 'fix' The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen…*
>
> *Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of character of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man… It is a cosmonogy, an account of the begetting of the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how what was created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system (Stanner 1979:23–4, 28).*

The following is a short version of the creation story of the Anangu, people whose lands include Uluru:

> The world was once a featureless place. None of the places we know existed until creator beings, in the forms of people, plants and animals, travelled widely across the land. Then, in a process of creation and destruction, they formed the landscape as we know it today. *Anangu* land is still inhabited by the spirits of dozens of these ancestral creator beings, which are referred to as *Tjukuritja* or *Waparitja*. The journeys and activities of the creator beings are recorded in the landscape. Sites where significant events in their story took place are linked by what we call, *iwara* (paths or tracks). Some of the sites are so very significant that they are known as 'sacred sites'. Today our people still know where these sites and these *iwara* are and where they go although there is no physical road. Our grandmothers and grandfathers teach us this.
>
> The *iwara* link places that are sometimes hundreds of kilometres outside the Park and beyond *Yankunytjatjara/ Pitjantjatjara* country. So they are significant to other groups of Indigenous people too. For example, the *Mala Tjukurpa* involves three groups of *Mala* (rufous hare-wallaby) people who travel from the north to reach Uluru. Two groups then flee south and southeast to sites in South Australia. *Kuniya Tjukurpa* tells of the travels of the *Kuniya* (Woma Python) from hundreds of kilometres east of Uluru. Many other *Tjukurpa* such as *Kalaya* (Emu), *Liru* (poisonous snake), *Lungkata* (blue tongue lizard), *Luunpa* (kingfisher) and *Tjintir-tjintirpa* (willie wagtail) travel through the Park. Other *Tjukurpa* affect only one specific area. Many exploits of *Tjukurpa* involve ancestral beings going underground. Kuniya, the woma python, lived in the rocks at *Uluru* where she fought the *Liru*, the poisonous snake.
>
> *Anangu* landscapes are therefore full of meaning. They represent creation stories and associated knowledge of Law, relationships, plants, and animals represented in the shapes and features of the land. This knowledge has been passed down between the generations from grandparents to grandchildren. With the knowledge come responsibilities and obligations to care for the land and each other in the proper way.
>
> When *Anangu* travel across the land they do so with the knowledge of the exploits of the ancestral beings. Their knowledge of the land, and the behaviour and distribution of plants and animals is based on their knowledge of *Tjukurpa*. The elder people recount, maintain and pass on this knowledge through stories, behaviour, rituals, ceremonies, songs, dances and art.
>
> *Tjukurpa* is the basis of all *Anangu* knowledge. The deeper meanings of *Tjukurpa*, known to the old and most senior people, are the keys that underpin everything in *Anangu* life—knowledge, attitudes, relationships, economics, spirituality, physical and emotional wellbeing. *Tjukurpa* connects everything in life. Therefore changes to any part of the land or the relationships have ramifications for other things (DEWR n.d.).

A similar concept of fusion of identity and spiritual connection with the timeless present is the basis of Torres Strait Islander Spirituality. Melanesian by ethnic origin, these Indigenous people were seafaring and trading people on the islands between far north Queensland and Papua New Guinea, and their Spirituality and customs reflected their dependence on the sea. The people on the islands of the Torres Strait are united by their connection to the Tagai, stories that focus on the stars and the sea and provide common cultural and social laws. As with the creation stories of the Aboriginal people, the instructions of the Tagai provide order in the world, where all of

creation is connected and interdependent. Thus, the people of the Torres Strait share in a common worldview that the land, sea and other natural phenomena possess living souls and are spiritually connected to the people. The stories of powerful creation ancestors and the repository of knowledge represented in these stories shape Torres Strait Islander Spirituality, their Law and cultural and social behaviours (Davis 2004).

Aboriginal Australian Spirituality has been described as embodying a reverence for life *as it is*—it does not promise a life after death, salvation, nirvana or similar that is offered by other religions. For Aboriginal people, this is as good as it gets. Life is as it is, a mixture of good and bad, of suffering and joy, and it is celebrated as sacred. Living itself is religion. The remarkable resilience of Aboriginal people is partly explained by the legacy of a Spirituality that demonstrates 'an enthusiasm for living, a readiness to celebrate it as it is, a will to survive and to pass the baton of life to the next generation' (Stockton 1995:77–8).

Death as a part of life, the means of transfer of life, is respected, and assent to life is assent to death. Debra Bird Rose (1992) has reported the story of the Dingo and the Moon as told by the Yarralin, which explains how death came to humankind. It is simply because of the opportunity to live life to the full that we become mortal, like the Dingo:

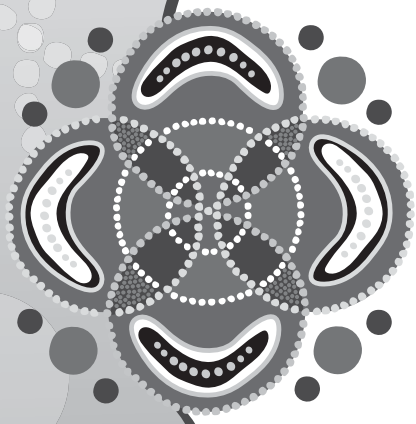
> *Dingo, like his human descendents, is open to life, sharing the finality of life and the continuity of parts… We are not descendents of the moon; he has none. Our ancestor dingo, opens us to the world, requiring that we come to an understanding of our place in it which is radically different from the moon's… Death and its corollary, birth, open humans to time and the sharing of life: we kill and eat, and our bones nourish country, giving life back to the places and species that sustained us… and death, for all that it may be unwelcome, is one of life's gifts* (Rose 1992:105).

Similar beliefs are expressed in the wish of urbanised Aboriginal people in the southeast, that when they die they be buried back in their own country. Stockton, who has been a priest working with urban communities in the south-east, was aware of these attitudes to *life* among urbanised Aboriginal people, 'a stock of meanings and understandings quite different from those applied to the same words by the wider community', and later found the same had been recorded in the anthropological record: 'a reverence for life, an assent to life as it is given, an enthusiasm for life and a keenness to pass it on to the next generation' (Stockton 1995:80).

Western religions are understood to establish a disconnection between the sacred and the profane: the profane characterised as *wholly other*. In many religious traditions the sacred is understood to be of another world, such as the idea of *paradise* or of *heaven*, whereas the contemporary world is the profane, chaotic and unreal. The sacred is in the role of providing order, founding the world, setting the standards, out of chaos (Bradbery, Fletcher & Molloy 2001:101–02). In Aboriginal cosmology there is not this distinction between the sacred and the profane; the sacred, while being a paradigm for *proper* existence, is also present in the contemporary world. It is the thread of interconnectedness between the Dreaming, humans and the natural world.

Further, it would be wrong to characterise the Dreaming as a wholly past event: it is *everywhen*; that is, in 'all the instants of being, whether completed or to come' (Stanner 1979:23–4). It can be characterised as an *underlining reality*, and the term *Dreaming* is often used to stand for Aboriginal peoples''experience and knowledge of the manifestations and the secrets of Divinity' (Stanner 1979:28). Although this can be construed as two co-existent realities—that is, ordinary and dream realities—Sansom (2001) argues that there is 'a single supervening reality that has "inside" and "outside" truths and stories and, therefore, 'Dreamings and people are co-presences in one world, treating knowledge as the great discriminating and modifying force' (Sansom 2001:2–3). Although humans cannot hope to grasp the full knowledge of truths that are embedded in the Dreaming, they have the opportunity to develop as visionaries, that is, as *clever* men and women who have a privileged understanding and can *see right through*, their vision penetrating *all the way* to the *inside*.

However, this idea of knowledge 'allows each person the opportunity to live a life of progressive revelations' and 'anyone who lives a fortunate life should come to participate more and more fully in the unity of the Dreaming' (Sansom 2001:2–3), without being necessarily a person of great insight. In fact, sudden and unasked for revelations of the power of the Dreaming can occur, something anthropologists call *irruptions*, and these are met with joy, manifest as laughter in the cases Sansom reports (Sansom 2001:2–3). In my experience in south-east Australia, the reaction is of agreed and pleased recognition, often with the remark, 'Well, there you are, see?' meaning there's the proof of the reality of the Dreaming in our lives.



Although the form of these creation beliefs varies from place to place across Aboriginal Australia—and the depth and quality depends on the status of the Aboriginal informant, and often on the way it is represented by Westerners who have collected them—the fundamentals of interconnectedness and the reality of the Dreaming in ordinary time are the same. From this belief system flows morality, ethics, governance, natural resource management, and social and familial relationships that are designed to ensure sustainability and effective governance and sociality.

Connections to land, sea and the natural world

> *Our connection to all things natural is spiritual.*
>
> Silas Roberts, Chairman of the Northern Land Council, 1975 (Bourke, Bourke & Edwards 1994:77)
>
> *Sacred place, all over our Aboriginal land was sacred, but we see now they have made a map and cut it up into six states.*
>
> Myra Watson (Gale 1983:35)

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say they have a spiritual connection to the land, sea, landforms, watercourses, the species and plant life, this connection exists through the Law developed at the time of creation that includes a system of totemism. The word *totem* comes from the Ojibwa people of the north central United States of America and south central Canada and was adopted by Western scholars as a term used universally, although Aboriginal people in Australia have their own terms to describe this relationship. Thus, many groups in Australia have problems with the use of this term, but some Aboriginal groups have indicated that they can accept its usage (Rose, James & Watson 2003:2; Rose 1996:28). The anthropologist A. P. Elkin summarised its importance: 'Totemism then is our key to understanding of Aboriginal philosophy of life and the universe—a philosophy which regards man and nature as a corporate whole' (Elkin 1933). Professor W. E. H. Stanner developed the definition:

> *What is meant by totemism in Aboriginal Australia is always a mystical connection, expressed by symbolic devices and maintained by rules, between living persons, whether as individuals or as groups or as stocks, and other existents—their 'totems' —within an ontology of life that in Aboriginal understanding depends for order and continuity on maintaining the identities and associations which exemplify the connection* (Rose 1996:28).

Thus, totemism essentially means that people are the same as the species/landform/plant life that is their totem. Being the same matter in different form, the attitude of people when approaching the totemic ancestors is not one of 'reverent humility… as passive mortals humbly receiving gifts from condescending, if kindly, supernatural beings' (Stockton 1995:55) as in the Judeo–Christian tradition, but rather:

> *The central Australian totemites certainly spoke of their totemic ancestors with an air of deep reverence and respect. But they had no need of prayer or sacrifice when approaching them: they themselves, after all, were composed of a large part of the same substance as the supernatural beings whom they honoured in their totemic ritual. During the performance of totemic ritual, transient Time and timeless Eternity became completely fused into a single Reality in the minds of all participants* (Strehlow quoted in Stockton 1995:55).

The totemic relationship requires that people must learn how to take responsibility for relationships with the species and the totemic, sacred site, which is connected to the totemic ancestor.

Among the communities of the Torres Strait the totems are called *Auguds* and vary in the same way as the totemic affiliations on the mainland. On Saibai Island the totems include a sweet potato-like tuber (*daibau*), the hibiscus (*Kokwan*), and a stone used for making clubs (*goba*), as well as legendary heroes, some in the form of a star (*titui*) and the first and last quarter moon phases (*kutibu* and *giribu*). The latter had been crescent-shaped turtle objects possessed by the creation ancestor *Kwoiam* (Nakata 2007:112–13). What is important about these, what makes them totems, is the Spiritual knowledges that are inscribed in them, the stories of how people are connected to them from the time of creation when the Law was laid down.

There is an intrinsic and wholistic link between Spirituality and relationships to land and landforms, including watercourses, since these are the tangible links between living humans and all that is unseen and eternal. This is where the creation ancestors rest and are still actors in the creation drama, releasing spirit children and the life force of their totem; the whole is sacred and contains sites of significance to the creation stories (Stockton 1995:56).

> *To understand our law, our culture and our relationship to the physical and spiritual world, you must begin with the land. Everything about Aboriginal society is inextricably woven with, and connected to, the land. Culture is the land, the land and spirituality of Aboriginal people, our cultural beliefs or reason for existence is the land. You take that away and you take away our reason for existence. We have grown the land up. We are dancing, singing and painting for the land. We are celebrating the land. Removed from our lands, we are literally removed from ourselves* (Dodson 1997:41).

Dodson goes on to argue that land rights flow from 'a traditional relationship to land in which spiritual, cultural and economic interests are integrated', and although traditional relationships to land are 'profoundly spiritual', they are also 'profoundly practical' (Dodson 1997:43). The spiritual relationships are also those that ensure the preservation and sustainability of the natural resource base of the country.

Professor W. E. H. Stanner also explains the inability of the English language to convey the essence of Aboriginal cultural relationships to land. He says:

> *No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland. Our word 'home', as warm and suggestive though it may be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean 'camp', 'heart', 'country', 'everlasting home', 'totem place', 'life source', 'spirit centre' and much else in one. Our word land is too spare and meagre. We can now scarcely use it except with economic overtones unless we happen to be poets… The Aboriginal would speak of earth and use it in a rich symbolic way to mean his 'shoulder' or his 'side'. I have seen an Aboriginal embrace the earth he walked on… a different tradition leaves us tongueless and earless towards this other world of meaning and significance* (Stanner 1968:230–1).

The call for Aboriginal land rights is often misunderstood by the settler colonial society, whose main concern with land is as an economic resource, to produce a surplus and so gain capital. Tasmanian activist Jim Everett explains:

> *Aboriginal land rights does not simply mean that the people are entitled to land. Nor does the term mean that the land owes anything to the people. Aborigines do not justify land rights in terms of economy, accommodation or possession, Rather land rights represent a whole set of responsibilities, among which is the obligation to preserve the unique essence of their Aboriginal law. Aborigines have the responsibility to be custodians of land, sea and sky. They must remain accountable to the ecological world, which accepts Indigenous intrusion and use of that ecology only on sound practices of interaction with the spirit of the land, manifested in strict rules of respect and tradition* (Everett 1994:xii).

When describing the impacts of colonisation on Aboriginal Australia, Deborah Bird Rose says:

> *Once a multiplicity of nourishing terrains, there is now a multiplicity of devastations. And yet, the relationship between Indigenous people and country persists. It is not a contract but a covenant, and no matter what the damage, people care* (Rose 1996:81).

In this connection it is important to note the primacy of returning to country, as well as to family and kin, for the children of the Stolen Generations. Archie Roach exemplifies this in song:

> *Back where their hearts grow strong*
> *Back where they all belong*
> *The children came back…*
> *Back where they understand*
> *Back to their mother's land*
> *The children came back* (Rose 1996:81).

As Father Frank Brennan, AO, the man an Australian prime minister famously called 'a meddling priest' because of his attempts to support Aboriginal people's rights to land, has asked:

> *Why does it remain so unthinkable that [Aboriginal people] should make some decisions for us when those decisions relate to their country?… We might then discover the full life-sustaining capacity of the land which is sacred* (Brennan 2005:45).

Law

> *Our law is not like whitefella's law. We do not carry it around in a book. It is in the sea. That is why things happen when you do the wrong thing. That sea, it knows. Rainbow knows as well. He is still there. His spirit is still watching today for lawbreakers. That is why we have to look after that sea and make sure we do the right thing. We now have to make sure whitefellas do the right thing as well. If they disobey that law they get into trouble alright.*
>
> Statement by Kenneth Jacob, Wellesley Islands Native Title claim, 1997 (quoted in Grieves 2006a:38)

Although the creation stories connect the elements of the earth, the weather patterns, the species, plant life, landforms and people, they also show the sacred Law and the penalties for not following that Law. As mentioned earlier, some Aboriginal groups prefer the word Law to that of the Dreaming to describe the religious philosophy because the rules of behaviour and how to co-exist and sustain the natural world are in the creation stories. It can be explained thus:

> *The rules of behaviour take shape in the creation stories at the point where the elements of the earth are created, when the chaos becomes order and the ways of maintaining that order are communicated from the creation ancestors through the stories. The pathways are connected by the animals that are the metaphors for different groups of people, both within the same language group and those beyond. Encoded within the shapes and markings of ancestral animals and plants are the plans of the sanctioning of the Laws and customs* (Drew & Harney 2004:96).

David Mowaljarlai has spoken of the gift of pattern thinking. An Aboriginal lawyer, Ambelin Kwaymullina of the Bailgu and Njamal people of the Pilbara in Western Australia, explains it:

> *Imagine a pattern. This pattern is stable, but not fixed. Think of it in as many dimensions as you like—but it has more than three. This pattern has many threads of many colours, and every thread is connected to, and has a relationship with, all of the others. The individual threads are every shape of life. Some—like human, kangaroo, paperbark—are known to western science as 'alive'; others like rock, would be called 'non-living'. But rock is there, just the same. Human is there too, though it is neither the most or the least important thread—it is one among many; equal with the others. The pattern made by the whole is in each thread, and all the threads together make the whole. Stand close to the pattern and you can focus on a single thread; stand a little further back and you can see how that thread connects to others; stand further back still and you can see it all—and it is only once you see it all that you can recognise the pattern of the whole in every individual thread. The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern that the ancestors made. It is life, creation spirit, and it exists in country* (Kwaymullina 2005:13).

In spite of this complex connectivity, the foremost value under the Law is the autonomy of individuals and groups. Those who are taught the meaning of creation and the means of ensuring the responsibility passed down through that Law is carried out, are the ones to see to that *business*. It is not appropriate to concern oneself with the *business* of others, as they are the ones to be in a position to know. If there are connections and intersections through Dreaming, and intermarriage, then there is an opportunity for negotiation and accommodation. Stockton reminds us that the objective of behaviours to ensure autonomy is peace, settled and harmonious human relations, as opposed to *noise*, that is, conflict (Stockton 1995:73).

It is the responsibility of groups to guard their own affairs, to keep private and secret the knowledges that are theirs through Spiritual connection to country. Some groups are increasingly sharing this knowledge in attempts to secure the ongoing viability of the natural world in terms of cultural heritage and natural resource management, areas that have also become of interest to governments.

As for methods of social control that are based in Aboriginal Spirituality, this philosophy encompasses a realistic view of human behaviour and recognises that the range of human behaviours includes the negatives as well as the positives. Therefore, conflict is not an aberration as such but is inevitable and so allowed to be expressed, but also limited by high levels of negotiation and ritual. On occasions when differences are such that they lead to fighting, there are understandings about the degree of bloodletting that will allow the dispute to *finish*. And *finish* means just that: it is done with; the issue does not get trawled over again. One side does not destroy the other but only contains it, while extracting sufficient retaliation (Langton 1991; Macdonald 1988, 1998a, 1990; Stockton 1995:73).

Central to Aboriginal Law is the responsibility to sustain the cultural landscape as it is set down from the creation stories. Sveiby and Scuthorpe express this as 'Mission: keep all alive' (2006:7). There is a highly developed sense of the interdependence of people on the species and all of life and a responsibility to ensure the survival of the species.

For further information, the *Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* has an introductory section, 'Foundations of Being', in which Aboriginal people and well-respected observers provide a comprehensive description of the diversity of Aboriginal culture and practice through time and space, providing an insight into the continuity of Aboriginal Spirituality into the present (Kleinert & Neale 2000).

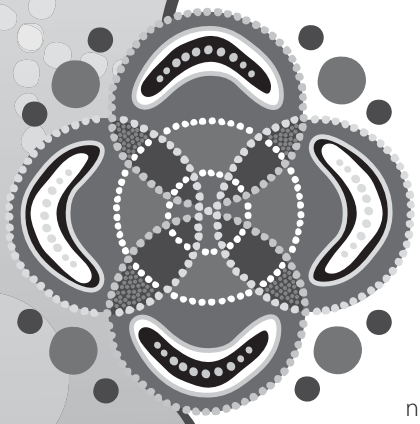
The role of women

It seems almost superfluous to include a section on the role of women because anyone who knows Aboriginal society well knows that women's Spirituality and social power are strong. However, a discussion of this aspect of Aboriginal social and cultural life also illuminates further aspects of Spirituality and its endurance over time. Although there is evidence of women's power having been diminished through coming into the ambit of the patriarchal colonial state, perhaps the greater damage has been through misconceptions and assumptions about a lack of power that arise from colonialist constructions of the nature of Aboriginal society and the role of women in it.

Aboriginal society is a gendered society—the roles and lifeways of women and men are separated by the realities of maternity, pregnancy, childrearing and gendered ways of relating to the natural and social world. The landscapes are gendered in accordance with the Law. Although early non-Indigenous male anthropologists, coming as they did from a strong patriarchal cultural base, originally documented issues such as women not participating in ceremonies with men as an indication of the lower status of women, later female anthropologists have been able to restore the balance by being able to work with the women (Bell 1983; De'Ishtar 2005; Ryan, Thomas & Bray 2001; Bell 1998; McConchie 2003; Rose 1992).

The first of these was Phyllis Kaberry who, with her classic ethnography carried out in the Kimberley in 1935–36, published *Aboriginal Woman Sacred and Profane*, which was groundbreaking in that it portrayed the Aboriginal woman as a full human personality with agency, a complex social personality with her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals and point of view. More recently, Rose (1992) has documented a 'symmetrical complementarity' between men and women in the cultural and social life of people of Yarralin and Lingara in the Northern Territory, whereby a person's Dream countries come separately from father and mother. This establishes a basis of two complementary lines of descent and connection to creation ancestors that is overlaid by other kinship connections and descent through marriage, and 'everything is at the same time a singularity, a multiplicity and a whole' providing a self-sustaining balance without centralising power to any one component (Rose 1992:221–4).

Nonetheless, the previously established anthropological orthodoxy, that women were excluded from any role in the important affairs of Aboriginal societies, is recognised as enduring in settler colonial society (Moreton-Robinson 1998). There has been a common misconception that the culture has embedded in it the systematic victimisation of Aboriginal women by their men (Windschuttle 2006), which has been addressed by several writers as without foundation (Grieves 2003, 2006b). Historical records of Aboriginal men offering their women to colonial men have raised speculation about the sexual trade of Aboriginal women as normative (Windschuttle



2002:383–5), and Aboriginal women have rejected this as myth. Such trade, rather, reflected the imperative for accommodation of the demands and expectations of colonial men, who outnumbered colonial women by as many as seven to one in the early colonies where this was reported (Atkinson 2002:62; Grieves 2003:16; Grimshaw *et al*. 1994:138).

Marcia Langton (1997) has drawn attention to the role of women in the spiritual connection to land and the inadequacy of the orthodoxy 'constructed from the emerging ethnographic literature from [the nineteenth] century', essentially though the lens of Western patriarchy. This view, that descent was patrilineal or at least determined by patrifiliation, she argues, is negated by the role of women who:

> *maintain Aboriginal traditions relating to land ownership by their politicking on matters to do with the constitution of contemporary customary corporations and nurturing of the social relations of the land tenure system* (Langton 1997:84).

Her experience in the Northern Territory, Queensland and parts of New South Wales is that 'women retain bodies of knowledge pertaining to the spiritual landscape' and that grandmothers have authority to make decisions 'with a mind to the future of their descendants', including the longevity and stability of social and territorial entities, their own power within structures of authority, the recruitment of kin to their own skin groups or allocation of them to others, and decisions concerning marriage arrangements (a key part of Aboriginal land Law). Further, she provides evidence of the land tenure arrangements and spiritual connections to land adapting to the disruptions of colonisation:

> *Since men have been the greater casualties of the colonial incursions: the flexibility offered by serial matrifiliation and matrilateral connections to land in Aboriginal systems ensure that there are others who can assume primary spiritual responsibility for the land on the extinction of the people who previously had the primary responsibility* (Langton 1997:96).

When analysing Aboriginal women's life writings, Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000) identified the importance of Spirituality and relationality, though subjugated, in the social relationships of these women. Aboriginal Spirituality comes from a moral universe distinct from that of Europeans: 'Indigenous women perceive the world as organic and populated by spirits which connect places and people'. Unlike constructions of Christian spirituality, she argues, 'Indigenous spirituality encompasses the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and physiography' and 'the spiritual world is immediately experienced because it is synonymous with the physiography of the land'. Moreover, Spirituality 'is a physical fact because it is experienced as part of one's life' and it leads to an understanding of personhood in very different ways to what is perceived as the norm. Life writings of Aboriginal women are not concerned with motivations and intentions but are reflective of a wholistic, interconnected understanding of themselves, their life contexts and events as being 'an extension of the earth, which is alive and unpredictable' and a construction of self that extends beyond the immediate family (Moreton-Robinson 2000:18–21; see also Thomas 2001; Fredericks 2003).

The international context

> *Traditional people of Indian nations have interpreted the two roads that face the light-skinned race as the road to technology and the road to spirituality. We feel that the road to technology… has led modern society to a damaged and seared earth. Could it be that the road to technology represents a rush to destruction, and that the road to spirituality represents the slower path that the traditional native people have travelled and are now seeking again? The earth is not scorched on this trail. The grass is still growing there.*
>
> William Commanda, Mamiwinini, Canada, 1991 (Stonees WebLodge 1996)

Shawn Wilson (1999), Opaskwayak Cree from Manitoba, Canada, working as an academic in Australia, noticed that the spiritual beliefs of Indigenous Australians and Canadians that originated at opposite sides of the world are similar. When speaking at a conference about education in the corrections system, he explained that:

> *Spirituality is a term that requires special care in its definition. It is important to recognise the difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality can be seen as an internal connection to the universe that includes a sense of meaning or purpose in life, a cosmology or way of explaining our personal universe and a personal moral code. Religion, on the other hand, could be defined as the specific practice and ritual that is an external expression of some people's spirituality. What is important here is that spirituality is your relationship to the universe around you. It is the relationship again that is important, rather that [sic] the objective form that this relationship chooses to manifest itself (that is what religion is). My relationship to the universe is unique to myself, and it would be unrealistic to expect anyone else to share exactly the same relationship. Thus Indigenous spirituality could be defined as Indigenous peoples' unique relationship with their universe* (Wilson 1999:1).

Further, Wilson recognises the commonality of Indigenous Spirituality that exists across the world:

> *For many Indigenous people having a healthy sense of spirituality is just as important as other aspects of mental, emotional and physical health* (Wilson 1999:1).

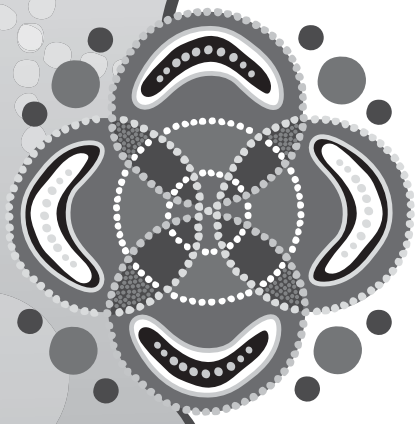
It is the case that Aboriginal Australians share a similarity of belief systems with other Indigenous people in the world in that their philosophies also tie them to the earth and the sustaining of the species and the natural world. In this, spiritual health is of foremost importance (United Nations 1993).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Māori academic, has produced a groundbreaking work on the subject of decolonising the methodologies of the Western academy, paving the way for Indigenous knowledges development. In this, she recognised that Indigenous peoples worldwide share the importance of Spirituality in their worldview and thus the key to the understanding of the context of their lives, historical and contemporary. Spirituality is the grounding of the essence of a person, the moral and ethical basis of their being that defines the path of their existence, their actions within the parameters of the context of their world. She writes:

> *The essence of a person is [also] discussed in relation to Indigenous concepts of spirituality. In these views the essence of a person has a genealogy that can be traced back to an earth parent, usually glossed as an Earth Mother. A human person does not stand alone, but shares with other animate and, in the Western sense 'inanimate' beings, a relationship based on a shared 'essence of life'. The significance of place, of land, of landscape, of other things in the universe, in defining the very essence of people, makes for a very different rendering of the term essentialism as used by Indigenous peoples.*
>
> *The arguments of different Indigenous peoples based on spiritual relationships to the universe, to the landscape and to stones, rocks, insects and other things, seen and unseen, have been difficult arguments for western systems of knowledge to deal with or accept. These arguments give a partial indication of the different worldviews and alternative ways of coming to know, and of being, which still endure within the Indigenous world. Concepts of spirituality that Christianity attempted to destroy, then to appropriate, then to claim, are critical sites of resistance for Indigenous peoples. The values, attitudes, concepts and language embedded in beliefs about spirituality represent, in many cases, the clearest contract and mark of difference between Indigenous peoples and the West. It is one of the few parts of ourselves which the West cannot decipher, cannot understand and cannot control… yet* (Smith 1999:74).

Thus Spirituality, the essence of personhood, inimical to Westernisation, and central to Indigenous identity, remains the last frontier of colonisation and, in a sense, the enduring last stand of Indigenous people in their resistance to the colonisation of their worlds. This is also the seed from which Indigenous knowledges can develop, in Australia as much as in any other part of the world. Many Indigenous academics are exploring ways of working within the academy 'in ways that support decolonising the mind and spirit' (Iseke-Barnes 2003).

Eva Marie Garroutte (2003), in her book *Real Indians: Identity and the Survival of Native America*, has explored issues to do with identity and Spirituality, especially in the area of research and academic developments, to 'bring together the project of Indian people to live together in communities in a good way *with* the project of the academy to cultivate knowledge' (Garroutte 2003:102). Her approach requires the development of a new intellectual perspective, dramatically different, with new ideas about the very nature of scholarship that she calls 'radical Indigenism'. The use of the word 'radical' does not mean a connection to Marxist theory, nor is it meant to be confronting. Garroutte uses this word from its meaning being 'the root':



Radical Indigenism illuminates differences in assumptions about knowledge that are at the root of the dominant culture's misunderstanding and subordination of Indigenous knowledge. It argues for the reassertion and rebuilding of Indigenous knowledge from its roots, its fundamental principles.

Further, she argues:

Radical Indigenism suggests resistance to the pressure put on Indigenous scholars to participate in academic discourses that strip Native intellectual traditions of their spiritual and sacred elements. It takes this stand on grounds that sacred elements are absolutely central to the coherence of our knowledge traditions and that if we surrender them, there is little left of our philosophies that make any sense (Garroutte 2003:102–04).

In similar ways, Indigenous scholars the world over, including in Australia, are seeking ways to work within the academy and remain steadfast in their adherence to their cultural and spiritual base.

Aboriginal Spirituality and Christianity

My mother said, they close their eyes in church… they go in there and they talk to spirit… this one they call God must be the same one belong you and me, and they started to work out that their spirituality here… it's a bit different and she couldn't understand they make a grand building especially to go in on Sunday to talk to this spirit, and every other day of the week they can do whatever they wanted to. And she said, poor silly buggers, they make a house for this one to go in and talk he's not going to lock up there he's everywhere, he's in the bush, he's where we're fishing, he's where we're hunting; every second of the day we're answerable to that spirit.

Mrs Wadjuelarbinna, Elder, Doomadgee, far north Queensland (ABC Radio 1999)

In contemporary Australian society some Aboriginal people express their Spirituality through participation in the Western Christian churches, and others choose a secular lifestyle with a strong undercurrent of belief in Aboriginal Spirituality (Pattel-Gray 1991, 1993, 1996; Pike 2000, 2002; Grant 1996; Kneebone 1991; Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997; ABC Radio 1997, 1999; Dodson, Elston & McCoy 2006). Many Christians are sympathetic to Aboriginal concepts of creation and, in particular, to the social justice issues that have arisen from the colonisation of Aboriginal lands (Brennan 2005; Trompf 1993; Hammond & Fox 1991; Slattery 2002; Gallagher 2002; Stockton 1995). In the 1996 Australian Census, almost 72 per cent of Indigenous Australians identified themselves as Christian and 16 per cent registered as having no religion at all (ABS Online). For those Aboriginal Australians who observe aspects of the Christian faith, it is often a way of continuing with their own spiritual beliefs and cultural lifeways. Many Aboriginal people of high degree do not reject Christianity outright but rather incorporate it into their existing belief structures. A telling example of this is illustrated in the film *The Serpent and the Cross*, where highly respected Lawmen from the Kimberley carefully explain how Christianity presents no theological difficulties, in fact it fits with existing Dreaming stories (Hilton & Nolan 1991).

Bill Edwards, who has been a missionary with Pitjantjatjara people and been closely associated with them over many years, has paid tribute to an Elder, the late Tony Tjamiwa, whose Dreaming connects him to Uluru, and who was also a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. Tjamiwa was remarkable for having been an initiated man and baptised into the church, becoming a church elder and preacher, and fulfilling his responsibilities as a Pitjantjatjara Lawman, including in ritual:

He remythologised the parables in the Christian scriptures with stories about tjala (honey ants), lukupupu (ant lions), and walawuru (eagle hawks). His prayers used the imagery of walytja (relationship) and of kurunpa (spirit) as walpa (wind) (Edwards 2002:3).

Edwards also warns against assuming that there is an Australian Aboriginal theology within Christianity because the deeper exploration of language and culture reveals a more substantial contribution to the contemporary Australian search for meaning (Edwards 2002:7). Thus, Aboriginal Spirituality cannot be grafted onto Western ontology as a 'perspective' and essentially a part of the same belief system—it is a vibrant and enduring tradition in its own right. It is important to consider parallels with other Western knowledge systems in this context, such as modern psychology.

Similarly, Edwards warns that most of the contemporary rhetoric about Spirituality reflects the modern emphasis on the self, individualism, with little or no consideration of others. In contrast to this, he quotes Aram Yengoyan, who says:

> *The reason why the spirit is so deep and meaningful to the Pitjanjatjara is because they have a deep sense of the collective, a set of ideas/rules/norms/morals that are binding on the individual (Edwards 2002:11).*

More than this, the *spiritual* is not compartmentalised into one section of life or a time for observance as it is in other societies. The concept of *Spirituality* pervades everything; it is ever-present in the physical, material world. Edwards explains further:

> *Pitjantjatjara people walk over the earth with care, respect and sometimes with fear as they have a consciousness of spirit presence in all that surrounds them… [and they have] a sense of relationship to all aspects of the environment… a common descent from the same spirit beings.*

And the Spiritual presence extends even further:

> *The one set of powers, principles and patterns runs through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system* (Edwards 2002:11).

There are aspects of the Christian ritual and the story of the life of Jesus that resonate with Aboriginal spiritual values. One of these is the concept of sharing, generosity and fair dealing, which is not confined to goods and services: the meaning exists on a deeper level—as a minimisation of personal power over things and others, of making things *level*. When Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann speaks of the meaning of Christmas she speaks for many Aboriginal people who call themselves Christian:

> *in that Jesus shared our whole human experience from birth to death and he in turn shared gifts and blessings, ultimately himself, with us, even down through the ages in the Eucharist.*
>
> *{Jesus] lived and taught a life of sharing because he loved all without exception. Such love is the measure of true sharing… the sharing of Jesus strikes a resonance in my Aboriginal self and is a cause for rejoicing and celebration… As an Aboriginal I have life shared with my clan group. We received this life from our original Great Ancestor. It is the basis of our clan system. Even our animal totems in some way share this life, so that we call them 'brother' and 'sister'… Jesus shared his life with us. We share his life with one another—all of us brothers and sisters of Jesus and of one another* (Stockton 1995:71–2).

Cultural Expressions of Spirituality

Ceremony—called *keepara* in some languages of south-east Australia, and many other names across the hundreds of Aboriginal languages—incorporates stories, music, song and dance, by which the characters and events of the *eternity* or *everywhen* are brought into the sacred space of the everyday. Ceremony is the commemoration of the actions of creation. The act of identifying as part of these totemic ancestors releases a surge of life force and so it is ceremony that keeps the life forms, originating from within *eternity*, living. The ceremonial ground, *bora*, becomes the creation place itself, filled with the life force of the totemic ancestors. 'The dancer, painted with the same designs of his Dreaming, became a living icon, a pure embodiment of the Dreaming ancestor' (Stockton 1995:54).

The ceremonial life is a deep expression of spirituality in itself. Aboriginal culture has adapted and changed with colonisation and Aboriginal people take up new ways of expressing spiritual connection, though art, literature, film, dance and song. In these works, the essential expression of spirituality continues. The excellent reference *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* is recommended for a comprehensive coverage of Aboriginal spirituality and its cultural expression, and for 'the significant influences that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have brought to bear on Australian history and society' (Kleinert & Neale 2000:v). What follows is by way of a short introduction to the ways that Aboriginal people express their spiritual beliefs in cultural expression.

Art

Yiriwala (1894–1970s)—ceremony Law leader, Law carrier and healer of the Gunwinggu people of Arnhem Land—was a pioneer in the Aboriginal arts movement that was just starting around the time of his death. He received many honours and praise: Pablo Picasso said, on viewing his work, that it was what he had been trying to achieve all his life. For Yiriwala, his paintings were not *art* and he remained disappointed that the mindless dealing in Aboriginal art and artefacts degraded Aboriginal religion and Law. His art was like the pages of a sacred book: the stories of the travels of the creator beings. His concern went so far as to ask Sandra le Brun Holmes, an anthropologist, into his clan and ritual and to have her collect his paintings and stories into a book 'to make balanda understand' (Holmes 1992). One hundred and thirty nine of his paintings are now held in the National Gallery of Australia.

Contemporary Australian Aboriginal desert art, which had its beginnings in the 1970s and which has excited worldwide attention from collectors, is also showcasing the spiritual beliefs and lifeways of the people (Drury & Voigt 1999; Langton 2005a; Crumlin 1998; Tjakamarra, Marika & Skipper 1991; Holmes 1992; Myers 2002). Langton goes so far as to say that the magnificent artistic tradition of the desert societies, including Papunya Tula, is imbued with ideas about belonging to a place and:

> *engaging with the flora and fauna with which they share these wondrous landscapes, combined with their vivid iconography of a glowing, arid landscape, have crossed the boundaries of post-modernism with its attendant cynicism and ultra relativism* (Langton 2005a:138).

The paintings are, in fact, the sacred geography of these peoples; that is, they are authentic statements of 'their emplacement and embodiment in spiritual landscapes', which is of greater concern to artists, such as Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, than any financial remuneration (Myers 2002:1). This has resonance with the argument of Australian philosopher David Tacey (whose research into Aboriginal Spirituality is explored later in this discussion paper) that the Aboriginal artistic tradition, coming as it does out of a deep sense of spirituality, is a foil to the developments in Europe, where artists despair in the existential void and 'God is dead' (Tacey 2003:246).

Urban Aboriginal artist Bronwyn Bancroft provided a personal review of the exhibition *Emily Kame Kngwarreye—Alhalkere—Paintings from Utopia*, which was held at the Queensland Art Gallery early in 1998. Bancroft writes eloquently about the qualities of the works and the effects they produced in her, transporting her to the desert, making the air and the dust of the place palpable to her senses. She writes that even though works 'glowed with elements of land, nature, Spirituality and Aboriginality'; they were also 'paintings that allow for human commonality, the human touch that links people beyond race' (Bancroft 1998:196–8). These paintings are expressions of the Spirituality of the artist, her spiritual attachment to the land and her belief system.

Contemporary urban Aboriginal artists such as Bancroft also have Spirituality as a constant theme in their work. For example, the artist Julie Dowling, a Badimaya/Noongar artist from Western Australia, has connections back to land and country that have been interrupted by her family's dispossession from traditional lands around Paynes Find and Yalgoo in the Gascoyne region. This family history of dispossession is the subtext of much of her work, which documents the impacts on her family. The intimate familial activities of her life become a statement of the broader issues of loss and of retrieval of spiritual connectivity. For example, the black, wedge-tail eagle *Warridah* is a significant creation being for Julie Dowling's family, and its proud profile is a central image in her work. Another shows her great-grandmother standing resolutely in the landscape casting a bird-like shadow in the moonlight—family and country merging together.

Increasingly, Australian artists are drawing on the sacred paintings of Aboriginal people for their inspiration on several levels, not the least of which is to explore the relationships between spirit and place (Mellickwith & Waterlow 1998; Tacey 2003).

Literature

Knowledge

my necklace seeds
are sprouting subtle
grooves appear divide
smooth shiny shells—
the black cleft of hearts
against themselves

golden yellow tendrils
like pre-birth antennae
wind out along the string
swell split black pods
between beach pearls
do not know they are
adrift from nature

the island women
say they don't know
why my necklaces sprout
shouldn't happen they say
once the seeds are pierced
and strung

in my grandmother's country
earth is mother, woman
is earth she lives from inside
the land like she lives
from inside her body

perhaps
it is in the nature of seeds
to know this

Jennifer A. Martiniello (Kemarre Arts 2006)

Aboriginal writers are continually inspired by Spirituality. This poem by Jennifer Martiniello expresses the possibility of new birth of knowledge, as the seeds captured on the necklace sprout, even after being 'pierced and strung'. Her poem is an expression of the longing for spiritual knowledge that is shared by many contemporary Indigenous people. It is also a statement of certainty of that knowledge being alive, of never being 'adrift from nature' and, by implication, nature's beginnings, which never end.

There are far too many examples of such work to include here and for a full list of published literature by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see Anita Heiss (2003). However, it is important to note first of all that the expression of Spirituality by Elders is naturally poetic and contains deep feeling, even when it is written down. One of the most celebrated of these works is the wisdom of the late Uncle Bill Neidjie (2002:13), a Gagudju man:

I belong to this earth.
Soon my bones become earth… all the same.
My spirit has gone back to my country… my mother.
Now my children got to hang onto this story…
I hang onto this story all my life.
My children can't lose it.

This law,
This country,
This people,
All the same…
Gagadju.

The late Kevin Gilbert was inspired to write of his life experience and Spirituality through verse, drama and story. He edited an anthology of poetry by Aboriginal people in 1988, *Inside Black Australia*, which importantly included a poem by Tasmanian Jim Everett, who commemorated the return of ancestral remains originally removed to museums as part of the *scientific* study of *primitive people*. This poem demonstrates the filial obligation of the contemporary Tasmanians and the reasons for their struggle to have the remains returned, an expression of Spirituality:

Rest our spiritual dead

Red, black and yellow are the colours of our band,
Black is for the people of this Southern land,
Yellow is for the mighty life giver in the sky,
And red is for our people's blood, so onward we survive.

Rest our Spiritual dead at this sacred place,
We are returning you to rest here in peace
Your people here today know that you feel our love
Rest our Spiritual Dead here at Oyster Cove.

It's a long, long time we've struggled for your peace,
Those who hindered your return fill us with unease,
But your spirits give us strength to bring about this right,
We now return your spirits to this sacred site.

Forever after this day we will protect this land,
This very place you return to is now our sacred ground,
Now this place called Oyster Cove is where your spirits rest,
Tell the world that Oyster Cove is Aboriginal blessed.

Red, black and yellow are the colours of our band,
Black is for the people of this Southern land,
Yellow is for the mighty life giver in the sky,
And red is for our people's blood, so onward we survive (Gilbert 1989:105).

The late Jack Davis, Nyungar Elder from south-west Western Australia, a celebrated poet, playwright and writer, is also included in this anthology. His poem 'The Firstborn' expresses the relationship between the people and the earth, with the earth a living, feeling entity, expressing longing and even anger:

> Where are my first-born, said the brown land, sighing;
> They came out of my womb long, long ago.
> They were formed of my dust—why, why are they crying
> And the light of their being barely aglow?
>
> I strain my ears for the sound of their laughter.
> Where are the laws and the legends I gave?
> Tell me what happened, you whom I bore after.
> Now only their spirits dwell in the caves.
>
> You are silent, you cringe from replying.
> A question is there, like a blow on the face.
> The answer is there when I look at the dying,
> At the death and neglect of my dark, proud race (Gilbert 1989).

Perhaps the most celebrated of contemporary Aboriginal writers is Alexis Wright (2006), of the Waanji people from the highlands of the southern Gulf of Carpentaria, whose novel *Carpentaria* won Australia's most prestigious literary prize, the Miles Franklin Award, in 2007. Her work is representative of Aboriginal Spirituality in many respects, not least of all the way in which it was conceived, arguably in the tradition of a song cycle. She says:

> *From the start, I knew Carpentaria would not be a book suited to a tourist reader, someone easily satisfied by a cheap day out. I wrote most of the novel while listening to music… One of my intentions was to write the novel as though it was a very long melody made of different forms of music, mixed somehow with the voices of the Gulf. The image that explains this style is that of watching an orchestra while listening to the music. Within the whole spectacle of the performance fleeting moments occur, in which your attention will focus on the sudden rise in the massiveness of the strings, horns, or percussion* (The Australian 2007).

And further:

> *The book, she admits, is no easy read. 'I wanted to take Australian literature and throw it over the boundary… I always credit my own people for teaching me how to read and write in the first place, and not the universities I have been to.' Carpentaria is very much about 'giving something back to my own people', in as authentic a way as possible, without giving away that which is sacred to the Aboriginal peoples* (Dhar 2008).

Song

> How I wish I was back in the Dreamtime
> Hear the didjeridu droning in the night
> Where the corroborees are seen by the firelight
> Where the white man's ways won't bother me no more.
>
> Roger Knox, 'Streets of Tamworth', composed by Harry Williams, from the album Warrior in Chains (Knox 1993)

Song is an important and enduring part of Aboriginal cultural expression, with its roots deep in the spiritual practice. Strehlow, linguist of the tribes of Central Australia, became accepted by Arrernte Elders as a worthy recipient of spiritual knowledge during the 1930s and spent many months transcribing the sacred songs of the people, published as *The Songs of Central Australia* (Strehlow 1971). He wrote in the preface that this verse is original, primary and radical, that it is highly developed in terms of language, rhythms and forms, and that it incorporates universal themes (Strehlow 1971). Indeed, this work places Aboriginal poetry in 'the Greek and Anglo Saxon, Norse and Hebrew utterance… inhabiting poetic universals' and, 'it contains words of sacred beginnings… it is a hymn of praise… the work sings as it retrieves the ancient lore and poetry' (Hill 2002:6). Ronald and Catherine Berndt published the first book-length Aboriginal verse, the remarkable *Djaggawul*, in 1952. They had also published *The Moon Bone Song Cycle*, a translation from Arnhem Land (Hill 2002:489–91).

In contemporary times, many Aboriginal people have been developing song about their own places and their spiritual attachment to them. Some bands, such as the Warumpi Band from a settlement called Papunya, sing in their own language about issues that are important to them. The song 'Warumpinya' is one example:

> Yuwa! Warumpinya!
> Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya
> Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya
> Nganampa ngurra tjanampa wiya
> Nganampa ngurra Warumpinya!
> Yuwa! Warumpinya!
> Yes! Warumpi!
> They always say our place is bad
> They always say our home is no good
> It's our place, not theirs
> It's our home, Papunya!
> Yes! Warumpi!
>
> Warumpi Band, 'Warumpinya', composed by Neil Murray/Sammy Butcher, from the album of the same name, Spinifex Music (2006)

In an interview in 1988 Neil Murray explained the origins of the band and the song:

> *[Warumpi Band is] a name that was given to us. We were just a band from Papunya and the proper name for Papunya is Warumpi. It refers to a honey ant-dreaming site… the… important place there is not the buildings and the settlement, but rather the land. The most significant feature of that land to Aboriginal people is the nearest dreaming site, which is Warumpi, a small hill nearby where the honey ants come out of the ground. There's a waterhole there and there are places in the landscape people can show you that are charged with the story of the ants* (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2000).

This is but one example of the ways in which Aboriginal musicians continue to express their Spirituality and opposition to the 'dominant' Western culture. Sydney's Gadigal radio announcer Paulette Whitton has assisted with a list of examples of recorded Aboriginal Australian music that speak of Spirituality, including 'Dreamtime Baby' by Warren H. Williams, on the *Where My Heart Is* CD (CAAMA,); *Yugal: Gamilaraay and Yuwaalaraay Songs* CD by various artists (Coolabah Publishing, 2003); *Our Home Our Land* by various artists (CAAMA); 'Spirit Song' by Tim Gibuma and the Storm, on *The Gaba-Gaba Mawi* CD (CAAMA); 'Ngarrindjeri Woman' by Ruby Hunter, on the *Feeling Good* CD (Mushroom Label, 2000); 'My Land' by the Pigram Brothers, on the *Jiir* CD (Pigram Music Label); 'Ancestral Beings' by Pascoe Braun from the *Big Night Out* CD; Andy Alberts' *Gunditjmara Land* CD (Australia Council for the Arts 1998); 'Spirit of Place' by Archie Roach, on the *Journey* CD (Gumtree Music, 2007); 'One Mile' by Adam James, on the *Messages and Memories* CD (2007); 'Long Way Away from My Country' and 'Feel Like Going Back Home' by the *Bran Nue Dae* musical cast (BND Records, 1993); 'Daddy Where I Come from?' by Bob Randall, on the *Australian Aboriginal Experiences in Song* CD (Axent, 2000); the North Tanami Band's *This Land* CD (CAAMA, 2003) 'Spiritman' and 'I Love Coming Home for a Good time' by Johnny Huckle (2009).

Everyday lives

> *Dadirri [is] a special quality, a unique gift of the Aboriginal people, is inner deep listening and quiet still awareness. Dadirri recognises the deep spring that is inside us. It is something like what you call contemplation. The contemplative way of Dadirri spreads over our whole life. It renews us and brings us peace. It makes us feel whole again. In our Aboriginal way we learnt to listen from our earliest times. We could not live good and useful lives unless we listened. We are not threatened by silence. We are completely at home in it. Our Aboriginal way has taught us to be still and wait. We do not try to hurry things up. We let them follow their natural course—like the seasons.*
>
> Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann on the Heartland Didgeridoos website (Ungunmerr-Baumann n.d.)

The way that Spirituality enters the daily lives of Indigenous Australians is well documented in the range of Aboriginal biography and autobiography that is available and this is listed up until 2003 by Anita Heiss (2003). Some stories are explanations of Spirituality in people's lives. Others, although ostensibly concerned with the privations of the marginal and outcast Aboriginal minority in Western society, are also invariably stories of triumph over adversity, the restoration of their lives, families and return to country, in the face of forces that would seek to destroy them, a Spiritual journey (Derrington 2000; Randall 2003; Keefe 2003; Walker 2003; Isaacs 1995; ABC Television 2007; Clare 1978; Clark 1965; Langford 1988; Miller 1985; Morgan 1994; Morgan 1987; Pilkington 1996; Tucker 1977; Walker 1989; Ward 1991; Roughsey 1971; Reed-Gilbert 2002; Roughsey 1971; Roe 1983; Mathews 1988; Morgan, Mia & Kwaymullina 2007).

Ken Colbung, respected Nyungar Elder of the Bibbulmen people of south-western Western Australia, echoes the message of many of these life stories when he says, 'the spirit has more strength in it than the pigmentation politics the government has engaged in over the years' (Colbung 2007). He says:

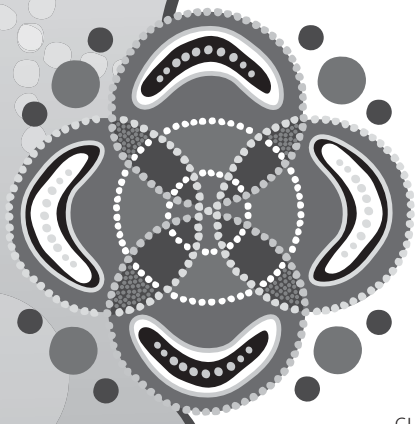
> *The spirit in Aboriginal people is very strong. I look at the world and I also see that I am a child of the universe. We are all children of the universe. All around the world there are people of different colours, from different races and we all make up the framework of the universe. We are the human element of the world. What we have to remember is that the spirit works right through. It comes from the earth. Women get it from the earth. They feel it. It works right through, from the inside out. People need to be more spiritually inclined. I am part of the oldest country in the world and I belong to the oldest culture. I am proud of that.*
>
> *… In terms of what I'd like to see in the future, well, there's one thing our people have to learn, and that's how to live with each other. We have to do that first before we can live with other people. Reconcile with ourselves first and then we can move forward together. We need to make a plan, understand we are part of the rest of the world, part of the universe—we belong in the bigger picture. When we understand that, then the gates will open… that's what we have to do as Nyungar elders, pass the heritage on. That's always been the ongoing flow of life* (Colbung 2007:78).

Colbung refers here to some issues that exist within contemporary Aboriginal societies. It is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal people themselves do not adhere to an idea of human perfection in contemporary society, although it is desirable; the template or paradigm for such perfection exists in the Dreaming and there is an acceptance that we are always striving to be as 'good' as the old people. Moreover, there are many and continuing challenges to be met, as the Tasmanian Aboriginal leader Jim Everett explains:

> *Contemporary Aboriginal society is changing at an incredible pace. Its amalgamation with western technologies and its yielding to social and cultural pressures create an immense threat to Indigenous relationships with the world ecological order. Aboriginal people are in the throes of a political struggle to have their land and rights restored. As modern society intrudes into Indigenous minds, introducing different values and directions, Aborigines can be expected to lose sight of certain principles in the process* (Everett 1994:xii).

However, in spite of the various inroads that have been made into its destruction, it is the enduring Spirituality of Aboriginal people that has allowed them to survive lives of dispossession, poverty and abrogation of their human rights. It also allows the lack of bitterness, often compassion and regard, for people other than their own family and kin. The concept of *sharing and caring* is so often quoted as what Spirituality means in Aboriginal society, that it is in danger of becoming clichéd. However, it belies a complex system of obligation and reciprocity that ties kin together in ways that leave no one as inconsequential (Macdonald 2000). This is demonstrated in families across the country and is an exemplar of ongoing Spirituality. Educationalist Lex Grey discovered that for Aboriginal people of the southeast:

> *The family is as tight and resilient a network for all its members as it has ever been with any people. Their family is their great strength—as it is their weakness… The large family of about eighty to one hundred and forty people of all ages lives in a geographically discernable, extensive community. They see the same faces day after day. The know every nuance, every gesture, the walk style, the words of every person in that community… Family is at times three generations, and at times a four generations group. It is a cousin-aunty-uncle extensive kinship group. Even among the third generation metropolitan living Aborigines, the family is as cohesive, as demanding, as exacting, as nepotistic, and as pondered as it has been anywhere at any time… Inside the family network children are sure—sure of foot, sure of speech, sure of behaviour, sure of belonging, sure of self. Outside of this family they are less sure—stumbling, inarticulate, withdrawn and shy* (quoted in Stockton 1995:68).



Ralph Folds, whose career has been in teaching in remote communities in Central Australia, most recently at Walungurru, and who has worked within a Pintupi community for almost two decades, recognises his complete lack of education in 'responsible behaviour' in Pintupi terms. He has been adopted into a Pintupi family but, being Western, does not observe the rules of obligation and reciprocity to the same extent as others. He recognises, too, that the central spiritual imperative in the lives of the people, *walytja*, which means family and the principles of obligations and reciprocity, and which does not have an equivalent in English, has primacy in their relationships, including with the government. Government persistence in dealing with the Pintupi as a subset of social welfare, and in not recognising the cultural differences, puts policy and possible opportunities for Pintupi 'development' at 'crossed purposes' (Folds 2001).

The project 'Indigenous Kinship with the Natural World in NSW' found that Spiritual practice, including the four main concepts of respect, complexity, creation and connection, is prevalent among Aboriginal people in New South Wales. People engage with special places and with different species, developing a caretaker role, and they also demonstrate resilience in their spiritual lives by preserving sacred geographies and by demonstrating a continuity of creation beliefs and Law. For these reasons the Aboriginal informants of the project were concerned about the artificial separation of the natural and cultural heritage of the state in New South Wales government contexts (Rose, James & Watson 2003:57–64).

The concept of *totemism* is such that it includes relatedness—connection—to all living things: 'Nothing is nothing' (Rose 1998:22–31) or 'All persons matter' (Ungunmerr-Baumann n.d.:9) in a cultural and social system that puts family and kin first. Aboriginal people find it hard to understand the European value system, which is 'ready to sacrifice life and persons for political causes, material things, position and power' (Stockton 1995:69). The reception of newcomers to an Aboriginal community is often startling in its difference to Western forms of knowing:

> *How Aboriginal people are interested in people, how they like to know our names, our families, our country and all about us. Through the process of relating to us, they re-systematise us, make us free, slow us down, show us the stranglehold of red-tape and how it is more important to have good relationships than things* (Stockton 1995:69).

However, Aboriginal people have problems with *new-age* appropriations of Aboriginal Spirituality (Shaw 2003:256; Bounah Wongee n.d.) and with questions of claims to Aboriginality without spiritual, cultural and kinship connections (Everett in ABC Television 2007; Grieves 2008). The cultural reluctance to involve oneself in the *business* of others has been a factor in the deep consideration of these issues and the period of time it has taken people to act on them.

The endurance of Aboriginal spiritual values is exemplified in many lives, an example being the *gentle journey* of Jimmy Little, who is best known as an accomplished and celebrated musician. Although a popular singer of gospel songs, he resisted joining any one of the religious denominations keen to have him in their fold, as he believes that Spirituality is for everyone. Like Roger Knox, a celebrated Aboriginal musician, and many others who value their strong attachment to family and Spirituality above the trappings of celebrity (Indigo Films 2003), Jimmy Little's life is characterised by modesty and a lack of ostentation or displays of material success.

What Does Aboriginal Spirituality Offer Contemporary Australian Society?

> *Aboriginal society's model for sustainability has the longest proven track record on earth* (Sveiby & Scuthorpe 2006:xv).
>
> *'Spirit of place' is by now a cliché of journalism and a cash cow of tourism, but 'spirit place' is altogether different, a powerful visionary claim that smashes almost everything we know* (Tacey 2003:243).
>
> *Let these two worlds combine,*
> *Yours and mine.*
> *The door between us is not locked,*
> *Just ajar.*
>
> Jack Davis, in the poem 'Integration', quoted by Lorraine Mafi-Williams (1993)

The reasons for the debasement of Aboriginal philosophy—its relegation to the category of quaint myths and legends, suitable only for reproduction as children's stories—lie deep within settler colonial constructions of Aboriginal society as primitive, *stone age* and inherently backward, with nothing to offer the modern, progressive ideals of the colonial project. These ficto-narratives, including *terra nullius*, the myth of an empty land, are the necessary rationale for the take-up of Aboriginal lands and the salving of white consciences from the violence of the colonial project. The subsequent base poverty of Aboriginal Australians only adds to the constructions of their worthlessness as a people and the subsequent ignorance of the source of wisdom about ways of managing the natural resource base, and of human populations, held within Aboriginal Spirituality. Aboriginal Spirituality remains *unsettling* in its persistence and its very being:

> *The Dreaming [is]… the 'other' of the Australian awareness, for it embodies the hidden dimension or the shadow, that which is unconscious, strange and unknown to the mode of being which is Australian and white* (Cain 1991).

However, there is evidence to show that, in fact, Aboriginal philosophy, which incorporates Spirituality into everyday life and actions, has much to offer the contemporary world. Australian settler colonials, privileged by white race power, who have had the opportunity to spend considerable time with Aboriginal men and women of high degree, have, nonetheless, come to appreciate and admire the philosophy and lifeways of Aboriginal people, including the concept of *Spirituality*. An outstanding example is Professor W. E. H. Stanner (1905–81), who explored Aboriginal philosophy and the concept of *tjukurpa* with Elders of the Arrernte in the early decades of the last century. These men told him that the main problem they could see with others coming to live in Australia is that the 'white man got no dreaming'; that is, no real connection to the country and the species, hence the title of Stanner's book *White Man Got No Dreaming* (Stanner 1979). They also told him after much consideration that perhaps the English word *dreaming* was the closest that they could find for *tjukurpa* because the state between sleeping and wakefulness is the space that most connects people to the spirit world. *Tjukurpa* has meanings beyond any single word in the English language, which is restricted to the principal concerns of the materialist society that we now have. *Tjukurpa* means the Law and moral systems; the past, the present and the future all in one (what Stanner came to call *everywhen*); the creation period when ancestral beings, *Tjukaritja*, created the world as it is now; the relationship between people, plants, animals and the physical features of the land; and the knowledge of how these relationships came to be, what they mean and how they must be maintained in daily life and in ceremony (DEWR n.d.).

Contemporary Western thinkers are referencing Aboriginal Spirituality in their quest for meaning and in their critiques of Western materialist notions of progress. Richard Eckersley (1997/8), Honorary Fellow of the CSIRO, whose research concerns include wellbeing, says that:

> *Spirituality is the intuitive sense of what science seeks to explore rationally.*
>
> *My definition of that truth, of spirituality, is a deep sense of relatedness or connectedness to the world and the universe in which we live.*

He draws a relationship between Spirituality and science, particularly in the concept of *Gaia*, the notion of the earth as a single, self-regulating system or organism that is both scientific and religious. He cites physicist Paul Davies, whose description of the universe parallels, in some ways, the Dreaming in Aboriginal philosophy:

> *The true miracle of nature is to be found in the ingenious and unswerving lawfulness of the cosmos, a lawfulness that permits complex order to emerge from chaos, life to emerge from inanimate matter and consciousness to emerge from life… (T)he universe [is] a coherent, rational, elegant and harmonious expression of a deep and purposeful meaning* (Eckersley 1997/8:10–12).

He argues further that Western culture has been deeply influenced by the idea of a dead, mechanical universe and is yet to absorb the significance of this new model, that of 'an undivided, flowing wholeness' that is compatible with notions of Spirituality and connectedness to the earth and the universe in which we live and that fosters a sense of deeper purpose and meaning within ourselves. He questions the normative ideas of progress that exist within Western societies and that are essentially based on the attainment of material gains through economic expansion. The rapid economic growth in the postwar period has not meant an increase in human happiness and, in fact, a decline in happiness is measurable within Western societies. Surveys have revealed that the majority of Australian youth believe that life is getting worse and document 'the distress of a nation that is divided, anxious about its children and its future'. The issues of greatest concern embrace the moral, ethic and economic issues within our community, including the abuse of public trust, an increasingly violent and predatory world, and people's powerlessness in the control of their lives in the face of rapid economic restructuring and social change.

Moreover, indicators show that the young people are paying the price of *progress*; psychological and social wellbeing has decreased—as shown by increasing rates of suicide and suicidal behaviour, drug and alcohol abuse, crime and depression—alarmingly since World War II. Factors that contribute to this situation include an inadequate cultural framework of meaning, belonging and hope. To address this, Eckersley suggests that society as a whole needs to address the factors that arise from 'material progress and its social, economic and cultural consequences'. Importantly, such measures include moving beyond the contemporary political preoccupation with economic growth and efficiency to 'a renewed Spirituality, a sense of relatedness and connectedness to the world that transcends the material' (Eckersley 1997/8:10–12). Eckersley leaves no doubt that he sees Aboriginal Spirituality as a way forward to address such issues.

David Tacey (1997/8), Australian academic and philosopher at Melbourne's La Trobe University, has gone so far as to investigate Aboriginal Spirituality for himself and has received permission from the late David Mowaljarlai to talk about aspects of Aboriginal Law. This is a clear initiative of Mowaljarlai's policy of sharing cultural understanding. Mowaljarlai said:

> *What we see is, all the white people that were born in this country and they are missing the things that came from us mob, and we want to try and share it. And the people were born in this country, in the law country, from all these sacred places in the earth. And they were born on top of that. And that, we call wungud—very precious. That is where their spirit come from. That's why we can't divide one another, we want to share our gift, that everybody is belonging, we want to share together in the future for other generations to live on. You know? That's why it's very important* (ABC Radio 1995).

He told Tacey that he was keen to talk about spiritual knowledge so that such knowledge could be passed on rather than allowed to die with the Elders.

Tacey clearly admires Aboriginal cultural ways of bringing adolescents into adulthood and is convinced that:

> *in this sense the Aboriginal cultures are far in advance of the western; an ironic twist to the popular western prejudice that Aboriginals are primitives and we are more civilised and sophisticated* (Tacey 1997/8:15).

He uses the term *transpersonal* to describe the state of being of the successful initiate into adulthood, meaning transcending youthfulness and egocentrism. He maintains that Aboriginal society has much to offer in the way it prepares members for adulthood. Spirituality does not mean 'anything strangely occult or esoteric' but, he has learned, 'it is almost synonymous *cultural* or even *transpersonal*'. Tacey has discovered that in complete opposition to Western ideas of childhood, Aboriginal people allow childhood to be based around *the natural self*, personal wishes and ego desires, and when a state of maturity is reached this then involves cultural longings and transpersonal desires: subsequently, a new name, a new living arrangement with the men for male initiates, and a new life that includes responsibility to the community and the natural world. Above all, subordination to a higher authority 'life cannot be properly lived if we view our own personal authority with great seriousness'; and 'the initiated individual serves himself best when he serves the will of the collectivity'. He argues that Western education systems, and indeed family lives, are not concerned with such Spiritual transformation. Thus, it is:

> *hardly surprising that many in our culture find it hard to throw off youthfulness and egocentrism, since the shared spirituality and the great emotion that are necessary to make this transition are simply not present* (Tacey 1997/8:15–18).

Tacey's analysis of the predicament of youth and their attitudes leads him to assert that 'youth [seem to me to] demand an end to the privatisation of spirituality, and they want spirituality put back on the public agenda'. In this connection there is much to learn from Aboriginal culture:

> *The central paradox is that it is only (through) forging a connection with the not-self that a secure and solid foundation for the self can be provided. We have to learn to appreciate this paradoxical truth again, and to recognise that it is a mystery that defines who I am, it is wonder that defines my capacity to exist, and it is greatness that contribute(s) to, and helps to support, my own smallness* (Tacey 1997/8:15–18).

Tacey goes so far as to predict that over time 'religious experience in this country will be profoundly grounded in the realities of the earth and the body: an embodied religious sense, an awareness of the sanctity and sacramentality of nature' such as that currently found in Aboriginal Spirituality. He uses the example of the vigour of the Australian arts in comparison to Europe, where artists are attempting to come to terms with the death of God and the loss of religious meaning. The exhibiting of Aboriginal art overseas has led Tacey to remark that '[t]he whole curse of the modern world just doesn't seem to have imposed itself here in Australia. When the sky god expired, the earth gods were reanimated' (Tacey 2003:246). The 'earth gods' are the creation ancestors of Aboriginal philosophy.

Tacey is convinced that the fact of living in Australia means that non-Indigenous people will become incrementally Aboriginalised, not by appropriation, but by:

> *the dreaming and the wisdom of the ages, [as it] comes gradually and subtly towards us… the Aboriginal sacred experience becomes, whether we like it or not, our own cultural heritage as soon as we send cultural tap-roots down into [sacred] Aboriginal soil* (Tacey 2003:246–7).

He sees artists as being the catalyst for this development, since their concern is with the soul and they tend not to be hamstrung by politics or moral rigidities. He quotes the celebrated poet Les Murray, who, he says, has been misunderstood as appropriating Aboriginal cultural discourse and meaning:

> *In Australian civilisation I would contend, convergence between white and black is a fact, a subtle process, hard to discern often, and hard to produce evidence for. Just now, too, it lacks the force of fashion to drive it; the fashion is all for divisiveness now* (Murray 1984, quoted in Tacey 2003:247).

However, there is perhaps a fine line between appreciation, adoption and appropriation. It is most important that those people dispossessed and disregarded, the senior Lawmen and Lawwomen, are the ones who drive the changes, informing and indoctrinating settler colonial people into the Law and their place in it as they see fit.

Intellectuals are developing strong rationales for the adoption of Aboriginal ways of managing the natural environment (Rose 2004; Langton 2006), and it is clear that developments in the sustainability of natural resources and other cultural heritage, which are increasingly the preserve of government policy and program development, are drawing heavily on Aboriginal Law and Spirituality (Bradbery, Fletcher & Molloy 2001). Agencies such as the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Water Resources, and the equivalents in the States and Territories, are relying increasingly on Indigenous knowledges to inform land and natural resource management policy and practice (see, for example, Australian Government 1998, 2004; Smyth & Monaghan 2004). It is apparent from the Aboriginal testimony in these reports that Aboriginal Lawmen are sharing knowledge in order to progress the sustainability of the natural environment.

Similarly, Aboriginal artistic initiatives are increasingly demonstrating this concern with natural heritage management. Tasmanian Aboriginal Elder and poet Pura-lia Meenamatta Jim Everett has collaborated with the non-Aboriginal artist Jonathon Kimberley to produce *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny—Meenamatta Water Country Discussion*, a joint exhibition of Jonathon's art and Jim's poetry. Jonathon says that 'through my work, I am questioning and re-evaluating my own cultural heritage, in part by openly exploring the juncture between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal connections with country' (Everett & Kimberley 2007). He explores a transient connection to country symbolised by 'cloud glyphs' in his paintings. Jonathon also collaborated with the artist Patrick Mung Mung from Turkey Creek in the Kimberley on a joint exhibition, *Living Water, Travelling Water: Kowanji*, in 2004. Patrick expressed the differences between himself and the non-Aboriginal artist in this way: 'I am that living water, that spring water, you are that travelling water, that river water that comes with the rain and flows away' (Everett & Kimberley 2007). Jim Everett sees this collaborative work as a product of being 'beyond the colonial construct' and of being open to 'a deeper understanding of Aboriginality in a modern world, with concepts of place and connectedness' (Everett & Kimberley 2007).

Thus, it is that Mowaljarlai is not the only Aboriginal Elder who has sought to share the wisdom of Aboriginal philosophy with a wider audience. Another example is that of Sam Woolgoodja, an Elder of the Worora in the Kimberley area of Western Australia, who, in a film called *Lalai: Dreamtime* (Edols 1975), tells the stories of the creation ancestors, Wandjinas, including Namaaraalee, who gave the tribal Laws to the Worora. Woolgoodja narrates in Worora to his son, subtitled in English, while they visit the sacred site that embodies the story being told, and the film recreates the history and drama of the creation of their lands. Woolgoodja's narrative was subsequently published as a poem (Woolgoodja 1975).

In conclusion, it is appropriate to reflect on knowledge from Aboriginal Spirituality that informs us of our place in the world and its bearings on our futures. Rose (1998) describes the Yarralin idea of the Dreaming as distinguished from 'ordinary' or present life in that it came before the past three generations and, unlike transient 'ordinary' time and experience, it does not fade away or 'die'. The patterns that are laid down by the Dreaming endure and the truth of the Dreaming exists now as always. It can be conceived also as a parallel universe that exists alongside reality and that is sometimes made apparent in dreams, ceremony or in 'irruptions' as described by Sansom (2001).

Rose (1998) develops our understanding further by her work with the Yarralin—the point at which Dreaming becomes 'ordinary' is about 100 years before this generation. From a hypothetical location in the Dreaming, 'we would see a great sea of endurance, on the edges of which are the sands of ordinary time… [with] origins in the Dreaming but their existence is ephemeral', thus:

> *Dreaming can be conceptualised as a great wave which follows behind us, obliterating the debris of our existence and illuminating as a synchronous set of images, those which endure* (Rose 1998:110–11).

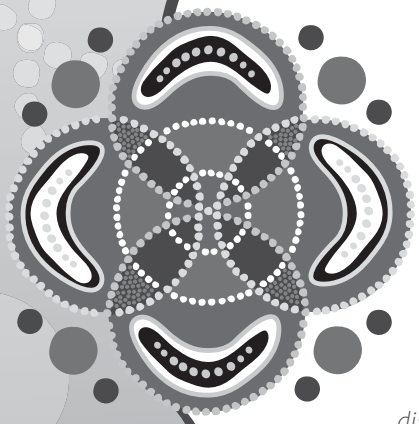
This means that people existing now are able to do so because of that which has come before, the patterns of which contain a template or paradigm for living and for ensuring the generations that come after. And people existing now are called the 'behind mob' in the sense of always needing to 'catch up' with what has come before (Rose 1998:111). As a Yolngu man remarked, he was working very hard to catch up with that which had come before, to be as right as the creation ancestors had decreed one should be. Thus, for the Yarralin:

> *Truth is revealed in myth and that people are capable of changing their society to conform to that truth. There is no 'new age' or 'new humanity'—there is us—and only us—as we are and as we can be. We have only to listen, to learn and to act* (Rose 1998:117).

There is a sense in which the Australian population as a whole is now the *behind mob* needing to work very hard to catch up, if ever, with that wisdom that has come before.

To add another layer of understanding, the Aboriginal lawyer Ambelin Kwaymullina of the Bailgu and Njamal people of the Pilbara in Western Australia explains for us the 'pattern thinking' that David Mowaljarlai also knows is a sacred gift:

> *This country is a living story. Whether Aboriginal or stranger, we all breathe, sleep, move, live in the world of Manguny, and in this country of difference, perhaps the greatest of all is between those who know it and those who don't. For in the end, all that seeks to uphold the pattern that is creation is the same good; just as all that seeks to destroy it is the same evil. In the learning borne of country is the light that nourishes the world; and if country and the world is to be helped now, it is this light that must shine the way home* (Kwaymullina 2005).



What Is Aboriginal Wellbeing?

> *Indigenous communities, peoples and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of the societies now prevailing in those territories, or parts of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop, and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions, and legal systems.*
>
> The United Nations Economic and Social Council's Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities, Working Group on Indigenous Populations (E/CN.4/Sub.2/1983/21/Add.8, para. 369/).

This internationally recognised definition of Indigenous people has inherent references to wellbeing: historical continuity, the transmission to future generations of knowledge of territories and identities, and the identification of material and non-material cultural heritage as a major preoccupation in Indigenous peoples' lives. This applies equally to Aboriginal Australians. Wellbeing is one of the intangible social values that has been associated with Indigenous cultural heritage:

> *Cultural heritage consists of places and objects which are valued by the community. As well as buildings and landscapes, it includes objects representing traditional ways of life and symbols of events which have touched communities* (English & Gay 2005).

Importantly, Aboriginal Australian peoples also have a unique heritage as the first people of Australia, which is acknowledged by the Australian Government as Native Title. Moreover, Aboriginal cultural heritage can include intangible factors that have their basis in ways of being and doing, also expressed in oral and performative expression, literature, art and in the lived ordinary, day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people. The basis of this heritage and the ways that Aboriginal people live their lives, their quest for wellbeing, often referred to by them as *Spirituality*, is the philosophy developed out of dynamic and changing Aboriginal cultures. Therefore, Spirituality as an expression of Aboriginal peoples' adherence to their cultural values and ways of being and doing is central to their wellbeing.

This has been borne out in research carried out for the New South Wales Department of Environment and Conservation in 2006, in which a focus group of Aboriginal people in Redfern, a highly urbanised group of Aboriginal people, identified Spirituality as the main factor influencing their wellbeing (Grieves 2006a:44). This research also identified that the use of the term *wellbeing* in Australian Government policy contexts is ill-defined and tends to be used in ways that assume its meaning in Western contexts:

> *Governments often use this term in the context of Indigenous health policy and program development as a factor that impacts on health status and that is missing from Indigenous contexts or needs to be developed further. It is used in ways such as, 'health and wellbeing', 'socio-economic wellbeing', 'physical wellbeing', 'cultural wellbeing', 'socio-cultural wellbeing', 'mental wellbeing', 'communal wellbeing', 'emotional wellbeing', 'spiritual wellbeing' and 'total wellbeing'. Generally, it is not normally well defined and is used without a developed sense of definition or accuracy; sometimes synonymously with 'health' and/or 'mental health' or even referring to being employed, having a high level of income, and the absence of political or social disruptions* (Grieves 2006a:12).

In fact, although *wellbeing* is generally a broad term tied to political, social, economic and cultural indicators, it is also intangible, not necessarily linked to material considerations in any way:

> *In the general use of the term 'wellbeing' there has been the question posed as to whether wellbeing can exist independently of standard of living and other material considerations. In fact, it is often a popular idea that a person may have considerable wealth but lack the prerequisites for 'wellbeing'. Similarly, it may be difficult to understand but it is possible for a person to be physically unwell, incapacitated or diseased and still feel a sense of wellbeing* (Grieves 2006a:13; see also Manderson 2005:15–16).

However, one cannot enjoy good health without wellbeing and, in concert with this, Aboriginal Australians recognise that *health* is a multi-dimensional concept that embraces all aspects of living and the importance of living in harmony with the environment:

> *When a person is fully alive the Yarralin say that that person is punyu—good, happy, strong, healthy, smart, responsible, beautiful, clean. It is used also of a people or country. This fullness of life is something to be nurtured, something which can be lost without actual death* (Stockton 1995:80).

And this shared Aboriginal understanding of wellbeing is translated into Aboriginal health policy:

> *Not the physical well being of the individual; but the social cultural well being of the whole community. This is a whole of life view and it includes a cyclical concept of life. Health care services should strive to achieve the state where every individual is able to achieve their full potential as human beings, and thus bring about the total well being of their community…* (NAHS 1989).

The concept of Indigenous wellbeing has been the concern of the World Health Organization (WHO), which has defined wellbeing in the context of human relationships to the natural world in such a way as to indicate how wellbeing is closely allied to health, but not entirely confined to the indicators that are usually used to chart the health status of people. The WHO definition is:

> *In many respects human health is a bottom-line (or integrating) component of well-being, since changes in economic, social, political, residential, psychological and behavioural circumstances all have health consequences* (WHO 2005).

And, further, the agency draws out the ramifications of wellbeing within changing ecosystems:

> *Basic determinants of human well-being may be defined in terms of: security; an adequate supply of basic materials for livelihood (e.g. food, shelter, clothing, energy, etc.); personal freedoms; good social relations; and physical health. By influencing patterns of livelihoods, income, local migration and political conflict, ecosystem services impact the determinants of human well-being* (WHO 2005).

How does this definition relate to culture and Spirituality? WHO states that although the cultural services provided by ecosystems may be less tangible than material services, they are highly valued by all Indigenous societies, and that 'traditional practices linked to ecosystem services play an important role in developing social capital and enhancing (social) well-being' (WHO 2005).

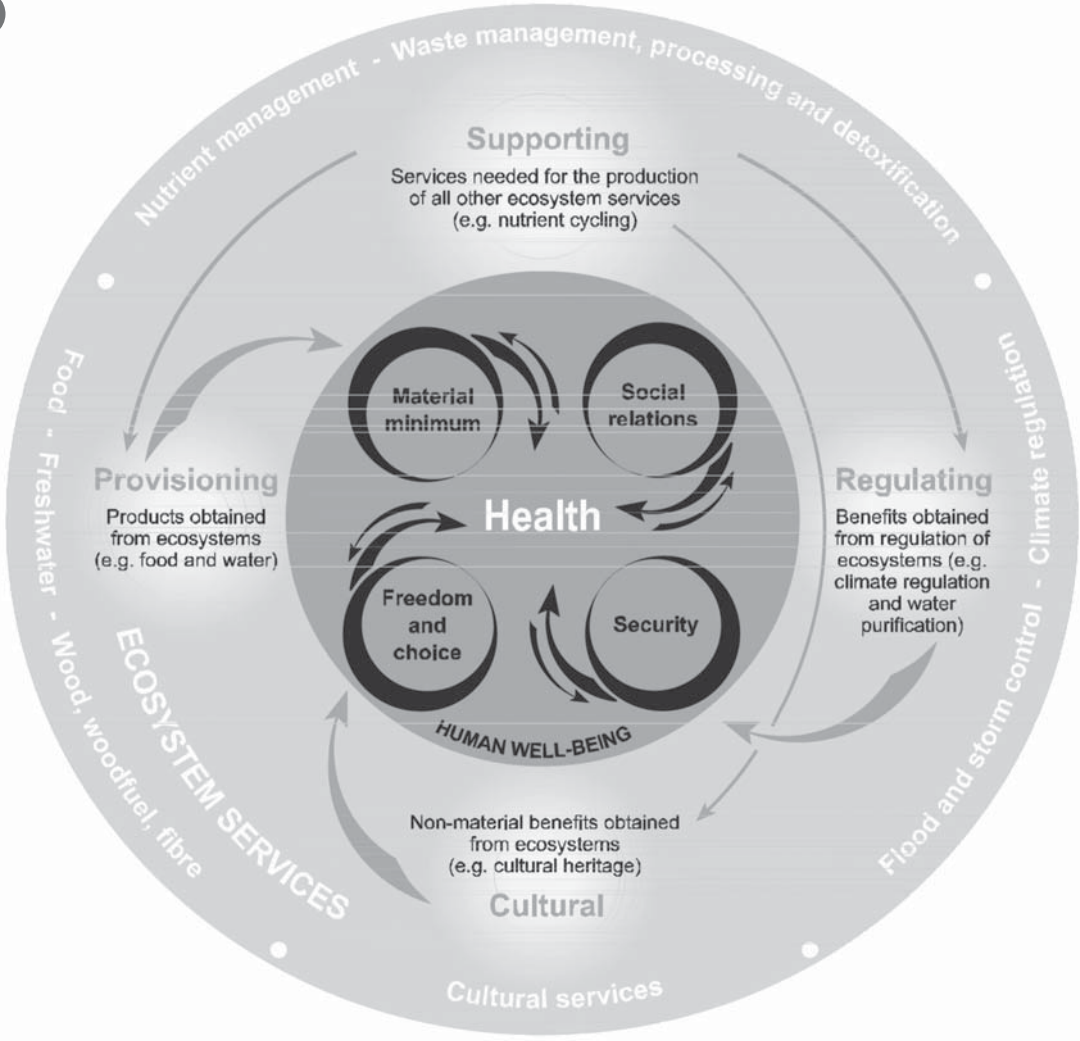
The WHO report, *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Health Synthesis*, also includes a diagram (reproduced below) that clearly illustrates the interdependence between health, human wellbeing, and supporting, provisioning, regulating and cultural (that is, non-material) benefits (such as Spirituality) from ecosystem services that are central to the lives of Indigenous people.

> *This diagram indicates a wholistic, interdependent basis for the provision of wellbeing through a relationship with the natural environment. The ability to be able to obtain food and other necessities, to have custodianship and support for ecosystems by providing services, regulating some aspects and practising and observing cultural heritage associations ensures a continuation of Indigenous wellbeing* (Grieves 2006a:15).

Thus, a people's cultural practices that are centred on their philosophies of attachment to the natural world, expressed by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as *Spirituality*, are central to the wellbeing of these people.

Diagram 1: Associations between health, other aspects of human wellbeing and ecosystem services

This diagram shows how non-material benefits including cultural heritage and cultural services are an important component of human wellbeing, which also includes health. Source: *Ecosystems and Human Well-being: Health Synthesis* (WHO 2005).



It is reasonable to accept that the issues of concern to Indigenous peoples are those that have the capacity to impact negatively on their wellbeing. In 1993, the International Year of the World's Indigenous People, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees sourced the following issues:

- land and resources;
- human rights;
- internal colonization;
- self-government;
- self-development;
- environment;
- discrimination;
- health;
- education;
- language;
- cultural survival;
- intellectual property rights; and
- social and economic conditions (YWIP 1992).

Although *wellbeing* and *Spirituality* are not expressly mentioned, they are embedded in many of the items listed above, including cultural survival, which is inherent in all the other factors listed. Cultural survival has at its core the continuation of cultural practices that spring from the philosophical basis of the culture, that is Spirituality; without the opportunity for this to occur, the wellbeing of Indigenous peoples suffers.

One of the factors mentioned of concern to Indigenous people is internal colonisation, and an understanding of the history of ongoing colonial practice in this country is crucial to understanding Aboriginal health and wellbeing. As Warwick Anderson (2007) has observed:

> *The contemporary health care of Aboriginal peoples is already thoroughly historicised. 'History' figures in most arguments about Indigenous health policy. Indeed, discussion of Indigenous health is now one of the few ways for historical narrative ever to gain entry to medical journals* (Anderson 2007:151).

This is reflected in the concerns of the social and emotional wellbeing practitioners who invariably state that in order to heal it is crucial to understand the colonial history and its legacies (Atkinson & Ober 1995; Atkinson 2002; Dudgeon & Williams 2000; Locke 1995; Phillips 2001, 2003; Wanganeen 1994, 2001). However, it is important to unpack this history in family, local and regional contexts to increase our understanding of the continuing specific impacts of the ongoing process of colonisation on Aboriginal wellbeing.

In Australia, internal colonisation has been characterised by the widespread disregard and denigration of Aboriginal philosophy, ways of being and doing, and, concomitantly, of the people themselves. This means that Aboriginal people have to carry and work through on a daily basis the Indigenous knowledges that the scholar Sheehan has labelled 'the burden of disregard' (Sheehan 2001). The historian Thom Blake (2001) has observed that this disregard has always been expressed in violence, not only the violence of the frontier but the ongoing violence of incarceration, slavery and the breaking up of families in the reserve systems set up under Protection Acts that endured for up to seven decades of the twentieth century. Violence and nihilism is also evident in the current disregard of Aboriginal culture and lifeways in contemporary Australian society, and has a profound impact on wellbeing. Blake finds an explanation in settler colonial psychology that has application in the present. In the following quote, the tense has been bracketed to highlight the fact that this analysis could apply to the contemporary situation for Aboriginal people in Australia and the bracketed past tense needs to be reviewed.

Aborigines (were) a source of discomfort and a disturbing presence in the cultural landscape. For white Australians, in their quest to tame the wilderness, the continuing survival of the first inhabitants of land (was) a reminder to Europeans that they were intruders and aliens in the land… Other means of control and subjugation (were) possible… less costly methods could (have been) used… Cultural forces alone do not account for the institutionalisation of violence and the obvious desire to terrorise beyond what (was) necessary to establish cultural hegemony. Rather it was those metaphysical aspects of European–Aboriginal relations that led to the removal of people from their country and sources of identity, the needless separation of the elderly from their family and kin, the separation of children from their families in dormitories, and the disregard for elementary justice and human dignity (Blake 2001:244).

In this connection, it is important to discuss the history of sexual politics, inter-racial sexual tensions, and sexual violence and its impacts on Aboriginal wellbeing, a subject that is complex, sensitive and difficult for contemporary Australians and Aboriginal people alike. Predominantly male colonial settler populations in many areas of the country over time led to the appropriation of Aboriginal women for sexual purposes, including rape, prostitution, concubinage and marriage (Grimshaw *et al*. 1994:138; Evans 1982; Russell 2007; Cole 1993; Grieves forthcoming). As discussed previously (under the sub-title 'The role of women'), this phenomenon is construed as being due to Aboriginal men trading their women or offering them as prostitutes. Australian feminist historians have recognised the impact of the colonial power balance: 'Consent was rarely an issue: if Aborigines resisted sexual demands, white men stole and raped the women anyway' (Grimshaw *et al*. 1994:138). The blatant sexual abuse of Aboriginal women has been the cause of conflicts and warfare over time and contributes to a sense of shame among many Aboriginal people today. They carry the *black bastard* tag and whether they come from such unions or not is immaterial to the social ostracism many experience (Perkins 1975).

By the late nineteenth century, increasing mixed-race populations led to a caste-like social system and sexual double standards whereby continuing white male sexual access to Aboriginal women demeaned and degraded the women, while Aboriginal men suffered huge declines in authority and status (Williams, Thorpe & Chapman 2003:25; Atkinson 2002:63). Moreover, these practices in sexual social relations, a 'racialised gender regime', have been so widespread that they have impacted on both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal family formations, forming the complex cultural basis of Australian racism, 'a central but hidden basis of the ambivalent stand white Australians take toward lighter-skinned Aboriginals today' (Williams, Thorpe & Chapman 2003:28). Evidence exists for the inversion of the Aboriginal family becoming 'a haven in a heartless world' where closeness and distance are no longer balanced, whereby the rage and terror of the worst impacts of colonialism can be acted out on family members (Atkinson 2002:237). The tensions that exist between fulfilling family obligations and retaining one's personal identity can be a veritable tightrope for many Aboriginal people (Williams, Thorpe & Chapman 2003:30–1).

Although aspects of the relationships between settler colonials and Aboriginal people could arguably have improved over the past decades with the settler colonial psychology and ideology modified or adapted over time, it is important to assess what seem to be positive changes in the cold light of settler colonial cultural hegemony. Sheehan has described 'the imaginary moral centre' that operates to conceal the past and its consequences in the present, to preserve the imagined moral centre of the dominant group: it is in the interests of preserving this moral ascendancy that the incidence of rape and other heinous crimes by Aboriginal individuals is described as culturally based (Sheehan 2001).

Although the success of Aboriginal art and performance could be cited as evidence of improvements in relationships, it is important to remember that the cultural activities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as a minority within a dominant Western culture has only recently shifted from being a group of anonymous artefact makers whose work was collected by individuals and museums to serious international acceptance as artists, performers, writers and dancers (Langton 2005b:1). It is problematic that Aboriginal cultural activity has been perceived as, and restricted to, performance, dance, art and associated easily identifiable *exotic* overlays to existing Western cultural ways of being and doing, which have now come to incorporate multiculturalism. It is paradoxical in the extreme that Australia showcases Aboriginal art and culture as part of its identity internationally and the

Aboriginal people themselves are disregarded to the point of nihilism. Little consideration is given to the fact that a viable and valuable cultural philosophy and belief system—that is, Spirituality—influences every aspect of Aboriginal lives, including relationships to others and the natural environment, and this fact is especially stark in government policy and program contexts (Grieves 2006a:21–38).

Therefore, behaviours often inexplicable from Western points of view have their basis in deeply different ontologies (ways of being), cultural understandings and practices that are also informed by history. Aboriginal people and their behaviours, the *other*, are overwhelmingly constructed by the dominant Western culture as marginal, deviating from the norm and inherently self-destructive, and so in need of welfare. Thus, only Western professionals are able to assist Aboriginal people to become more like the *norm*, and hence to enjoy more quality of life. However, as the anthropologist Stanner reflected on assimilation policy, it is too much to expect Aboriginal Australians to *unbe* and the expectation of this creates stress in itself. Important, too, is that this approach has been met with ongoing resistance from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the whole colonial period, exemplified in the stolen children who found their way back home (Pilkington 1996), and in the plethora of ways that families and individuals resisted government and social control (Wilson 2004).

Despite this, Aboriginal culture is now often viewed as a variation of Western ways of being and doing, and, in the extreme, is appropriated by 'third age' notions of Spirituality (Bounah Wongee n.d.). More specifically, it is incorporated as part of the concept of the (imagined) nation of Australia (Anderson 1991:6) as essentially the same as other Western nations but with an Aboriginal overlay/perspective that makes it somehow specially *Australian*. The use of Aboriginal cultural symbols and the promotion of the entertainment value of Aboriginal culture is essentially a cheap appropriation and serves to underwrite the settler colonial sense of belonging, while not disrupting the Western cultural ways of life that are considered normative, more civilised and more appropriate.

There has always been an expectation of absorbing Aboriginal people into the lifeways of the majority population, a process seen as normative and inevitable from the earliest days of colonisation and reflected in government policy in the present. As the Australian historian Bob Reece says:

> *These days we think of assimilation as a policy that was instituted in the late 1930's [as] a means of absorbing people of part-Aboriginal descent into the European population in the belief that those remaining of the full [racial] descent would inevitably 'disappear'. In fact, the idea of absorption was present from the beginning of European settlement in Governor Arthur Phillip's idea of 'attachment': that by encouraging the indigenous peoples to 'attach' themselves to European society, albeit at the lowest level as servants and unskilled workers, they (that is, the indigenous peoples) would take on the forms of the higher civilization and leave behind those of their own* (Reece 2002).

The assimilationist removal of children of mixed race was an attempt to bring about absorption and has been a tragic failure. Although often rejected and ostracised in white social contexts, children of mixed race have been readily incorporated into Aboriginal families and, thus, into the cultural lifeways of the family (Williams, Thorpe & Chapman 2003:28). Paradoxically, mixed-race populations are no longer viewed as authentically Aboriginal by a society that subscribes to racial rather than cultural determinism. That Aboriginal people have still not become *normative* is perplexing to most Australians and has led Brian McCoy (2006) to ask the rhetorical question, 'Why do we want to make Aborigines into images of ourselves?'. He finds that the old patterns derived from a violent contact history are repeating themselves in attitudes to *difference* and *culture*. He quotes Tonkinson (from his 2006 Wentworth Lecture), who locates the nexus of oppression and threat to Aboriginal wellbeing located in contemporary Australian internal colonisation practice: '"Difference"' is a two edged concept which has been employed by whites to both exclude Aboriginal people and to justify their assimilation' (Tonkinson quoted in McCoy 2006:2–5).

Although Australian aid to cultures of the Third World and multicultural programs within Australian society are predicated on the acceptance and respect of cultural difference to develop appropriate ways of working with these people, it is extraordinary, indeed, that the same respect and acceptance is not forthcoming for Aboriginal Australians (McCoy 2006:5–7).

Aboriginal resilience, that is, cultural resistance and persistence, has been remarkable by any measure. However, Australian history as it is written and initiatives that have been developed to address the dispossession of Aboriginal people have at their core the imagined *other* side of Australian nationalism. The beliefs that construct the nation include the belief that Aboriginal people have *lost* land, and thus their relationship to land, and

have lost their Spirituality, expressed through cultural ways of being and doing, and are now bereft of lifeways. Aboriginal Australians have come to be viewed as 'nowhere people' (Reynolds 2005), marginalised victims, and empty vessels to be filled with Western knowledges and ways of being and doing in order to be saved. This view is used as an explanation for the amount of perceived dysfunction in the lives of Aboriginal people, a view that is not developed as the result of research but is a known, normative assumption of the dominant colonial settler society. The expression of this power relationship in existing approaches to dealing with an Aboriginal minority has profound impacts on the social and emotional wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples.

Thus, in Australian Government policy and program development, Aboriginal culture and wellbeing is handled as a perspective, or a special consideration within welfare measures, to existing government programs. Settler colonial Australia has sought to address Aboriginal *disadvantage* (which has occurred through the process of colonisation and the fact of being an Aboriginal minority in a majority Western colonial settler society) by the introduction of *Aboriginal perspectives* to Western ways of dealing with social policy issues: that is, from within a Western normative position of what is important and what is not. The idea of incorporating mostly Western ideas of what it means to be Aboriginal—or at least superficial, generalised and undifferentiated understandings of the cultures and histories—into existing programs has gained currency as a way of making services to Aboriginal people more culturally appropriate. For example, in higher education some existing teacher education programs were given an Aboriginal perspective from the 1980s in order to encourage Aboriginal people to take up these programs and become teachers in schools. Also, in schooling itself (and in cross-cultural awareness training for teachers), an Aboriginal perspective has been employed in an attempt to make schooling more relevant to children and their families. After two decades of the application of these policies, the indicators for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander success in education have decreased (Johns 2001:20–1, 2006; NSW Department of Education and Training 2004; Australian Government 2007).

Centralised and generalised policies often override local understandings of what needs to be done to improve the situation for Aboriginal people. For example, Cowlishaw found that members of the Aboriginal community in Bourke did not consider themselves as 'victims of whitefellas', and disagreed with the teaching of Aboriginal studies in schools in such a way as to incite hatred of white people and overshadow local stories of accommodation and even friendship (Cowlishaw 2004:128).

Similarly, Aboriginal health policy and programs have been increasingly affected by the *Aboriginal perspective* approach from the early 1990s, when the responsibility for Aboriginal health policy was shifted from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (which had held responsibility for the development of Aboriginal-controlled health organisations initiated by the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in the 1970s) to the mainstream Department of Health and Aged Care. The mainstreaming of national Aboriginal health policy and programs has meant that an Aboriginal perspective to the activities of the government and health systems has become all the more important. The development of cultural awareness programs for non-Aboriginal health professionals and others who deal with Aboriginal people in various professional capacities, including education, is seen as an important way of increasing access to services and working towards successful outcomes. The inadequacy of this approach to dealing with Aboriginal disadvantage has been documented by analysing the outcomes of these programs, indicating that they can actually serve to reinforce existing prejudices rather than dispel them and that the level of understanding that can possibly be developed in such short periods of time is inadequate for the approaches required for successful outcomes (Fredericks 2006). There is a danger, too, that some cultural awareness programs can serve to reinforce existing prejudices and stereotypes, including that of Aboriginal clients as 'victims' without agency in their lives (Fredericks 2006).

Essentially, what is being argued here is that without deep respect and knowledge of what constitutes Aboriginal wellbeing, the centrality of Spirituality to that concept, and without the cultural basis of Aboriginal understandings of the context of their lives, there is little opportunity for governments, other agencies and Western-educated professionals to work meaningfully with Aboriginal groups in order to bring about appropriate developments, including *healing*. Moreover, the absence of such respect and understanding is deepening the problem that Aboriginal people have with the settler colonial society, and is having an immense effect on the social and emotional wellbeing of the Aboriginal population.

Although many colonised Indigenous peoples in the world have been able to de-colonise in the period since World War II—either by violent overthrow (as in Indonesia) or with the assistance of the United Nations (as in Zimbabwe) and even by democratic elections (as in South Africa)—settler colonial societies such as Canada, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand can only decolonise by the decolonising of the mind, that is by developing new understandings and appreciations of Indigenous culture and society, new and respectful ways of relating to Indigenous people and the incorporation of their lifeways into the idea of the nation.

The beginning of real change in Australia will be an appreciation of the inherent value of Aboriginal philosophy, what we call Spirituality, which is the basis of the cultural lifeways of Aboriginal Australians, the rationale for ways of being and doing, and for relatedness to others and the natural environment. Then perhaps Aboriginal communities will be resourced to legitimise, strengthen and promulgate existing understandings of Aboriginal Spirituality and associated lifeways. This has the capacity not only to impact on the wellbeing of Aboriginal individuals and their communities but to make a major contribution to the broader society.

Working with Aboriginal People: A Starting Point for Thinking about *Difference*

It is impossible to really know any culture except from the inside, as a native member or perhaps someone brought up between two worlds in which they become equally adept. When working with people from a different world, the problem is always how to overcome one's own cultural ethnocentricity or bias. This is particularly difficult for practitioners trained within the assumptions of their own taken-for-granted worldviews. At the heart of all cultural differences are not the external indices so often associated with difference, such as skin colour, language or clothing, but what it means, within that culture, to be a *person*. People within any cultural world are rarely aware of their own ontology (what it means *to be*), how their own systems of meanings and their cultural categories impact on their way of understanding their self-as-person, what it means to be in relationship, or what it means to be in the world. Most of us can live our whole lives without even having to be aware that our ways are distinctive to our *specific* cultural background—unless, of course, one is confronted with difference. If we belong to a powerful social group, there is less need to learn, as our ways represent the most powerful in our society.

For minority groups this is very different and they are much more aware of the differences and the impact these differences have on them. Such impacts are rarely positive; even when health professionals are well meaning, they still operate out of a colonial power base, with white race privilege. Fredericks' (2007a) case study of the experiences of Aboriginal women with the health system found that they experience trauma in this interaction, including in what become superficial relationships with female health professionals. One respondent coined the term *cultural tourists* for those women who:

> *have bits and pieces of clothing or jewellery they may wear and may sometimes even have a number of cultures reflected on the exterior of their bodies. [The respondent] said it also involved them talking about concepts that might be drawn from a range of cultures* (Fredericks 2007a: 26).

The respondent outlines how the *professional* relationship is one that seeks out information about Aboriginal people:

> *They are like leeches and suck people dry, they need to keep taking, they don't give … it is the same way they become a cultural tourist… it's not just one culture on their sleeve. They con me up quite quickly, they are nice and friendly on the top surface, exchange, locate where you are from, then it's like they have known you forever, and then they put it out there… it's totally disempowering… sometimes in the first instance you can think that you'd like to get to know this person, they have some deep and meaningfuls that you can exchange but you soon learn that you are the only one giving… they work in health a lot, comes into this thing where it is just you and them, when it is a client relationship they have with you, you are the only one giving, they do not disclose anything about themselves* (Fredericks 2007a:27).

The tendency for many people from the dominant society, confronted with differences in attitudes or behaviour that is strange or odd, is to demean people from other cultures in some way, or to construct them as *exotic* and therefore worthy of further inquiry. This is due to the fact that most people are brought up as *ethnocentric*. There is nothing inherently wrong with this—we are all socialised to be able to cope within our own cultural context. However, this makes it difficult to even appreciate how different *difference* can be. *Your* commonsense may not be commonsense at all for another person. Ethnocentrism influences how we think, observe, interpret and understand. It can influence how we diagnose, how we treat, and how we evaluate outcomes. We need to suspend our judgments of difference to understand others *in their own terms*.

Health practitioners frequently find themselves working with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, and there are many stories they may humorously and good naturedly tell of the oddities of their clients or patients, the frustration they experience when people don't react as expected to what seems like good advice (cf. Heil 2006, 2008; Heil & Macdonald forthcoming). Yet it is not always realistic to expect people working in multicultural contexts to understand the ontological differences of people they find themselves working with—this requires immense time and commitment. However, what is *essential* is that a health practitioner appreciates what *difference* is and realises that it *will* impact on his or her work with others of a different cultural background. It will be necessary, at the simplest level, for instance, to ask more questions and listen more carefully to the replies. The starting point is always to avoid one's own taken-for-grantedness, to problematise it, and to find out what is and is not similar for that other person one wishes to engage with.

It also requires the person who is helping/assisting to be there for the other and not to be there for the purposes of their own inquiry. Fredericks (2003) found some Aboriginal women angered by some women health professionals who 'sucked information' from them about Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal women went to the service for help, not to educate the white women who were supposed to be there to help them. They also found that some of the suggestions made by the female health professionals were totally useless, as the suggestions sat too far outside the cultural context of their lives (Fredericks 2003). This raises the question of how well equipped the health professionals were to *help* in the first place or whether they assume they can because of a perception of inherent neediness of Aboriginal women and their own normative status.

A tendency to see cultural differences as inadequacies, a lack of education or sophistication, bad manners, hopelessness or even as exotic is a form of racism: it belittles difference instead of trying to understand it, by giving it equal weight to one's own way of being in and of comprehending the world. This form of racism is a common experience of Aboriginal Australian peoples, whose cultural differences have long been devalued, demeaned and subjected to all forms of interventionist social engineering. This has resulted in many Aboriginal people feeling devalued, lacking in themselves, and bewildered by the contrary messages their complex worlds offer them. Wherever they are in Australia today, they live within a world of Western values and practices that are hegemonic in that these control most of the institutions with which Aboriginal people have to deal. This does not mean, however, that their sense of being, as a person in the world, changes. It does mean that it can be unsettled or can lose its traction when more powerful people define as unacceptable certain valued social practices. A mental health practitioner can, inadvertently but easily, add to such distress by simply *being themselves* and assuming they share the world of meanings of an Aboriginal person. They will only be able to do so if one person in the relationship is bi-cultural enough to deal with the differences. This is often not the case.

However, it is also no easy matter to define what being a person means in another cultural world: it is to understand beliefs, philosophies, values, norms, socialities, economies and a host of other meanings, practices and attitudes. Also, cultural systems are dynamic, changing as the people who form them find their own worlds changing and are required to or wish to respond to changes. A helpful introduction to understanding the Aboriginal world of difference can be found in Bodley (2000:25–39), and the notion of the *person* in different cultural contexts is well positioned in the introduction to Clifford Geertz's (1973) famous essay, 'Person, Time, and Conduct in Bali' (see also Bodley 2000; Carrithers, Collins & Lukes 1985; Fortes, 1987; Reser 1991).

Because our ideas about the world underpin all our everyday actions, one way in which to appreciate *where people are coming from* is to learn more about their ideas, their worldviews. As outlined in this discussion paper, Aboriginal people have co-opted the term *Spirituality* to try and communicate their worldview to others; it is designed to convey an *Aboriginal* reality, a worldview, and this is what this review aims to convey. Of necessity, it is generalised and sometimes too superficial in order to maintain its accessibility to those who are outsiders to these views. Nor should it be assumed that Aboriginal people, who are no more homogeneous than Westerners or Europeans, would share all facets described here, any more than Christians all share the same characteristics. For some Aboriginal people, these are ideas they have been grounded in all their lives. For others, they have been alienated from them and seek to relocate themselves within them. These are certain key principles of cultural difference that one can expect to find among the vast majority of Aboriginal people from coast to coast. Some examples that can be extrapolated from the literature, include:

- Aboriginal people share a *social* understanding of personhood that differs considerably from the emphasis on individualism valued in the Western tradition. They become whole selves through their interactions and not apart from them. The quality of their social lives as lived within their cultural understandings of living *well* is integral to their overall wellbeing (Munn 1970; Myers 1986; Macdonald 2000; Austin-Broos 2003; Rumsey 1994a, 1994b);
- Aboriginal people are not understood as apart from the material and non-human animal worlds. Wellbeing is a sense of being in a right relationship with all aspects of one's social and material environment (Poirier 2004; Munn 1970; Rumsey 1994);
- *Responsibility for* one's self and others is more important than *responsibility to* others—which can create various kinds of dilemmas when living within a Western colonial regime (Myers 1987; Peterson 1993; Macdonald 2000);
- Respect is given to people who *earn it* through being responsible for the quality of their relations with others. It does not come with roles. Elders are not always *socially* recognised. They are the people respected by some, but that may not mean that all respect them (Myers 1987; Palmer 1990; Macdonald 1996, 2004); and
- In Aboriginal society, one person cannot represent any other person unless he or she has specific permission to do so. To ask a person to speak for others risks placing them in an untenable position vis-à-vis those others (Sansom 1980; Macdonald 1996; Palmer 1990).

These indicators illustrate how differences of belief held by Aboriginal people necessarily impact on the ways in which a person understands him or herself as a person and acts on that understanding in his or her daily life. The sense of wellbeing that comes to any human social person through knowing that he or she is, in his or her own cultural terms, a whole person must start with the notions of person and wholeness specific to that person's own cultural world, which for Aboriginal Australians is based on the cultural values derived from the philosophy glossed as Spirituality. This includes the ideas that in turn inform what a person will understand by being well. For example, Heil (2006, 2008) writes of the difference between 'wellbeing' and 'being alive well', arguing that the Aboriginal people in western New South Wales she has worked with understand 'being alive' in distinctive ways, and thus what constitutes 'being well' is also distinctive. She argues that healthy social relations which constitute Aboriginal wellbeing may take precedence over personal physical health, basing her argument on her observations of the ways in which Aboriginal people interact with health professionals and why.

Understanding cultural difference and being open to learning more about the differences that exist within the diversity of Aboriginal people, and between them and mainstream societies' taken-for-granted values and behaviours, is most important for finding ways to appropriately relate to Aboriginal people and assist them to negotiate survival in a majority Western society that is also a colonial regime.

Contemporary Approaches to Aboriginal Health and Social and Emotional Wellbeing

> *Dream country is belonging. Every person has a place in the world in which they are needed, and in which they are 'healthy'.*
>
> Deborah Bird Rose (1992:122)
>
> *Health, to Aborigines, is not a simple matter of good fortune, a prudent lifestyle or a good diet. It is the outcome of a complex interplay between the individual, his territory of conception and his spiritual integrity: his body, his land and his spirit.*
>
> Janice Reid (1982:xv–xvi)

In the wholistic framework of Aboriginal philosophy, it is difficult to separate many things; in particular, health is inextricably tied to wellbeing, and wellbeing for Aboriginal people is, by its very nature, spiritual. In this connection, it is important to understand that the nature of wellbeing means that it can exist independently of health but health does not exist independently of wellbeing. And, Aboriginal wellbeing relies on a belief system, that philosophical basis of ontologies and epistemologies known as *Spirituality*.

Atkinson, an initiator of therapeutic practice privileging the importance of psychosocial factors and their impact on health, has argued that reliance on biomedical indicators of Aboriginal health 'fails to embrace the less easily measured aspects of community living and wellbeing, now deemed to be of prime importance by Aboriginal peoples and public health researchers alike' (Atkinson *et al*. 2002:286–7). These less easily measured aspects include the intangible cultural heritage factors of Spirituality and wellbeing. Atkinson (2002a) has explained:

> *The closest word for health within the Aboriginal languages is well-being. The word punyu, from the language of the Ngaringman from the Northern Territory, sometimes translated as well-being, explains the concept and functions of well-being. Punyu encompasses person and country and is associated with being strong, happy, knowledgeable, socially responsible (to 'take a care'), beautiful, clean, safe—both in the sense of being within the lore and in the sense of being cared for.*

And she quotes Mobbs (1991:298):

> *In Ngaringman cosmology the known universe constitutes a living system, the goal of which is to reproduce itself as a living system. Each part of the cosmos, country, Rainbow Snake, animals, people, etc. is alive, conscious, and is basically either punyu or not punyu. That which is punyu is not just alive but also contributing to life* (Atkinson 2002a:40–5).

Western, colonialist approaches to health, relying wholly on the philosophy of *scientism*, have devalued traditional forms of health maintenance and healing that are implicit in spiritual belief and practice. For example, although Aboriginal people know that their methods of maintaining health by the use of natural products from plants and animals are desirable, these have been superseded by the imperative for the use of Western medicines in order to deal with the spread of infectious and *lifestyle* diseases, such as diabetes and diseases of the circulatory and renal systems, which have occurred since colonisation. Although these Western treatments are necessary for some health conditions, this does not have to lead to the devaluing of all Aboriginal philosophy and methodology of health maintenance, cure and recovery. For example, Janice Reid's important book on Aboriginal health, suitably titled *Body, Land and Spirit*, contains three contributions that detail the efficacy of traditional healing practices; Myrna Tonkinson describes cures effected by Aboriginal healers; Diane Bell reveals the way in which women's healing ceremonies bring about social reintegration of the patient with consequent improvement in health; and Neville Scarlett, Neville White and Janice Reid list many 'bush medicines' still used by people from Arnhem Land (Reid 1982).

Many of the traditional ways of maintaining health and healing work for Aboriginal people, and can also have broader applications. The benefits of bush foods and various practices have been *discovered* by Western scientists without acknowledgment of the Aboriginal knowledge sources, from the spiritual philosophy of the people, the Law. Professor Tess Cramond, Director of the Multi-Disciplinary Pain Centre, Royal Brisbane Hospital, has given a surprising example of this; she says:

> *The terms 'bush' and 'traditional medicine' are sometimes equated but quite inaccurately with naïve or unsubstantiated health practices. In fact, the opposite has been the case. Indigenous Australians had been using mouth-to-mouth expired air resuscitation for hundreds of years prior to white settlement. However, it was not until the late 1950s that it was taken up by the western medical profession and later extended to the general community resulting in many lives being saved* (ABC Radio 2007).

There is an issue, too, in that although modern medicine can *fix* some identifiable illnesses, it does not necessarily help people to *recover*. An example of the way in which recovery is aided by the use of spiritual techniques is the initiative of Yolngu women from the Gove Peninsula. Doctors gave Gulumbu Yunupingu's daughter very little hope after a very bad accident, but her mother persisted with bush remedies, including massage with special liniment prepared from bush plants, special foods and a technique similar to *sauna*. Her daughter has regained 60 per cent of her mobility, is living independently and has started to read again. From this, the Yolngu women have worked out for themselves that what is needed is a mix of mainstream and traditional medicine, physical and psychological, and they have established a Place of Healing combining the two. Gulumbu Yunupingu says:

> *When this colonisation started we were regarded as whatever until in the late 60s when we were recognised as citizens. All the knowledge that the Yolngu have is not recognised, scientists they go overseas, but what about the Yolngu who live in Australia and know the land and know everything?* (ABC Radio 2007).

Many doctors are recognising the value of spiritual healing, including Dr Oscar Whitehead at Nhulunbuy:

> *Bush cockroaches are very handy, you find them in any old piece of dried pandanus. If you've got a cut you basically squeeze them and a bit of clear fluid comes out of their bottom and it works as an anaesthetic and an antiseptic. The beach morning glory contains an anti-histamine in the leaf and people use it for bites and stings and if you heat the leaf up on a fire and then put it on your bite then it takes the pain away. That's one side. Another side I think is based more around some ceremony, I'm not privy to a lot of that but from what I understand it helps to reconnect people mentally and spiritually with the community, with their homeland and recharges them* (ABC Radio 2007).

The Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women's Council Aboriginal Corporation (NPYWCAC 2003) makes a special mention of the role of Dr Kerry Gell:

> *She is our number one doctor and good friend. She cares for us all. She was the first piranpa doctor to listen to us ngangkari and to work in collaboration with us. She is our true friend.*

The health maintenance and healing practices of Aboriginal people are an ongoing representation of the importance of Spirituality in the lives of Aboriginal people.

The Ngangkari of the Anangu in the Western Desert of Central Australia continue with the spiritual healing work as taught to them by their grandparents. They also work independently of the medical service and they continue to heal and assist the recovery in people affected by *dis-ease*. Explaining that their work involves careful listening, deep understanding and touch, Arnie Frank and other Ngangkari have recently turned their attention to understanding the impacts of petrol, wine and marijuana on the spirit. Frank is concerned that the problems of the commonplace use of these substances among the people should be faced head on: 'We need to look at the problem with our eyes and ears wide open' and not pretend that it does not exist. When Ngangkari begin to deal with this problem, they will do so in a wholistic sense, taking onto account the Spirituality of individuals, and their place in the culture and society (NPYWCAC 2003; Ronin Films 2001).

Mental health results from an adjustment to one's life circumstances. This adjustment allows *ease* instead of *dis-ease* and can be developed further into the idea of self-actualisation. Darcy Bolton (1994), Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing counsellor in Rockhampton, Queensland, argues that for the mental health of any community, there needs to be 'a perpetual opportunity, public and private, to exercise and develop every

individual in a self-focusing way' (Bolton 1994:166-8). As discussed elsewhere in this discussion paper, this is most difficult for a colonised minority Indigenous population in a predominantly settler colonial society. For example, there is much evidence of the negative impacts on Aboriginal mental health from the stresses of carrying 'the burden of disregard' (Sheehan 2001) in a nation state that is reluctant to accept the fact of a surviving Aboriginal population with viable and valuable philosophies and ways of living.

In Australia Aboriginal people continually have to defend their culture and authenticity. Macdonald (1986, 1996, 1998b), working with Wiradjuri people in central New South Wales, has demonstrated over many years the continuing, if changing, importance of kin and country in south-eastern Australia. She has argued that the refusal to 'allow' Aboriginal people to change, locking them into a past-oriented traditionality (Macdonald 1998a, 2001, 2007), similarly results in an underestimation of their ongoing understandings of selves and country, of sharing and caring, and of the consciousness of cultural difference captured by the term 'the Koori way' (Macdonald 2000). In refuting the idea that culture is 'lost' when it changes, she has been able to acknowledge the centrality of spiritual awareness in many Wiradjuri people's lives, notwithstanding changes in their social and material lives (Macdonald 1996, 2008b). She is conducting analyses of how the impacts of government policy actually prevent Aboriginal people from living according to their own spiritually, socially oriented values and understandings. She is documenting how much cultural stress this puts people through (Macdonald 2000, 2004, 2008a).

Colonialism creates a situation where the introduced philosophies and methodologies of heath have primacy, as the normative position, and this can lead to the defining and categorisation of that which is *new* to Western epidemiology (though not new to Aboriginal practitioners and communities)—and not yet understood—as abhorrent. Van Gent (2003) establishes that conceptions of health and dis-ease develop over time and are not fixed or unchanging. David Biernoff takes issue with those psychiatrists who claim to have discovered that Aboriginal communities contain many individuals manifesting mental illness. He suggests that these psychiatrists are making judgments based on their own society's behaviour patterns and fail to understand the Aboriginal framework of social relations and social control (Biernoff 1982). Phillips has found that Western systems of diagnostic and treatment practices are normative and, in fact, may be retrogressive to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal communities. Local Aboriginal solutions to local Aboriginal problems are not valued by bureaucratic health systems, which tend to apply policies such as harm reduction in substance use, which Phillips has assessed as being an accessory to self-inflicted destruction (Phillips 2001).

Practitioners are increasingly developing approaches to Aboriginal mental health and social adjustment that take into account the impacts of colonisation on the spiritual essence of the people, and that utilise methodologies which attempt to address the spiritual needs of individuals in their recovery. These practitioners include psychologists, community developers, social workers, doctors, social and emotional wellbeing practitioners and substance misuse workers, some of whom have written about their experiences, beliefs and research. It is difficult to give this group of writings as a whole the title of *research*; there is some research in the sense of academic research protocols among this body of work. Evaluation and review to develop the effectiveness of different counselling approaches was an explicit recommendation of the *Ways Forward* report (Swan & Raphael 1995) but no focused research of this nature has been able to be sourced for this literature review. Practitioners themselves often cite the lack of a research base in this area (Phillips 2001, 2003; Westerman 2004). McLennan found that the literature does not provide detail as to the interplay of Spirituality and wellbeing, but tends to either (a) fail to establish the relationship, or (b) lack advocacy for tangible ways in which Spirituality as a possible dimension in wellbeing can be incorporated in Aboriginal health promotion practices (McLennan 2003a:32).

Practitioner approaches to Spirituality

A range of 15 practitioners' writings, which are representative of approaches to the application of Spirituality in social and emotional wellbeing practice, has been analysed in terms of definitions of *wellbeing, Spirituality*, the therapy they work with (if any), their client base and their findings or results of their work or research. These practitioners' writings include Armstrong 2002; Atkinson 1997, 1997a, 2002; Atkinson & Ober 1995; Briskman 2007; Carroll 1998; Dudgeon & Williams 2000; Grant 2004; McLennan 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; McLennan & Khavarpour 2004; NPYWCAC 2003; Phillips 2001, 2003; Roe 2000; Swan & Raphael 1995; Tse *et al*. 2005; Wanganeen 1994, 2001; Westerman 2004; Vicary & Westerman 2004.

Many practitioners underline the importance of Aboriginal Spirituality in dealing with Aboriginal people who have health issues (Armstrong 2002), substance misuse issues (Phillips 2001, 2003; Locke 1995; Carroll 1998; Roe 2000), mental health issues (Wanganeen 1994, 2001; Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000; McLennan 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Roe 2000), community development issues (Grant 2004), social work interventions (Briskman 2007) and occupational therapy (Tse *et al*. 2005). Aboriginal practitioners such as Phillips, Roe and Atkinson and Ober, work in a wholistic way that addresses the need for community development through the healing of mental health, substance misuse and health issues. This understanding of Spirituality, being at the core of practice, is qualitatively different to the idea of *cultural appropriateness* and *cultural inclusiveness*. The latter approaches are often described as making Aboriginal-friendly premises, providing cultural awareness training for practitioners and the inclusion of Aboriginal workers (Westerman 2004; Vicary & Westerman 2004; Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000; McLennan and Khavarpour 2004). These initiatives may be well meaning but do not go far enough. Phillips points to the defining difference when he explains the need for an entirely different approach:

> *Something much more radical is required—something, which simultaneously decolonises Indigenous experience of the biomedical system and develops a complete theoretical base for new programs is required. At issue here is our beliefs about medicine, healing, sickness and how culture mediates those beliefs and explanatory models* (Phillips 2001:11).

There is even more at stake. Challenges to culturally derived personhood from therapies based on Western concepts of personality development and normative assumptions of the individual's relationships and beliefs—challenges that eschew wholistic views of the world and the role of Spirituality—can be dangerous. The application of Western-derived therapies to Aboriginal individuals can cause disjunction: that is, a state of being separated, which occurs when an individual has to incorporate competing values, beliefs and worldviews into their sense of self. That is, in effect, the collision of cultures, trying to sit together within their ways of being (Reser 1991).

It is notable that Aboriginal respondents in a research project designed to ascertain Aboriginal knowledges of Western psychological services in two locations in metropolitan and rural Western Australia were concerned that the Western models of treatment do not account for the Aboriginal worldview and cultural beliefs about mental illness. They also were of the opinion that depression could not be addressed by Western treatments and were fearful of the Western mental health system. The authors also recognise a dissonance between Western and Aboriginal conceptions of mental health (Vicary & Westerman 2004). In this connection, Bolton points to the importance of understanding Aboriginal personhood in the light of an entirely different philosophical and cultural base for the development of personality when he observes that:

> *Today, Aborigines may wear the white man's clothes, speak his language well, and adopt some of his customs, but it is necessary for us to go beneath the surface of conformity, for it is here that we can discover what it is that Australian Aborigines refuse to part with. Here you have the key to Aboriginal psychology… the change is only on the surface* (Bolton 1994).

These superficial changes that belie the subjugation of knowledges that Moreton-Robinson (2000) has identified in Aboriginal women's life writings, and the continuing intangible cultural values and ways of being in urban communities (Grieves 2006a), though often 'unseen, unheard, unspoken' (Grant 2004), are already associated with other stress factors from psychological disjunction in the lives of the Aboriginal minority in a settler colonial society.

Although Aboriginal psychologists can criticise Western psychology from a wholistic perspective and see it as failing to deal with the whole person (Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000), they are yet to interrogate the very basis of this psychology and develop the new radical approaches that Phillips has called for. The main position seems to be that the approach can be 'eclectic' and draws on Western and Aboriginal approaches (Dudgeon, Garvey & Pickett 2000); that it can be modified by changes at the practitioner and system levels of service delivery to increase the access of Aboriginal people to mental health services; that it can become more culturally appropriate by the introduction of minimal standards of cultural competence for practitioners and ongoing cultural supervision with monitoring and the use of cultural consultants (Westerman 2004); and that by incorporating Aboriginal people into the design of culturally appropriate health services, 'ultimately a blend of Indigenous and Western psychologies [can be] delivered by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal practitioners' (Vicary & Westerman 2004). There is no doubt that such initiatives are valuable and necessary and that a variety of approaches needs to be

developed to make services accessible and to fit the particular needs of diverse individuals and communities. However, the concern expressed is for an interrogation of the basis of Western practices and the advisability of their application in Aboriginal contexts, and the support and development of practices based on Aboriginal concepts of personhood.

Dudgeon and Williams (2000) suggest that the anthropological theory of bricolage, whereby Indigenous cultures have been found to adopt Western artefacts into culturally appropriate forms for functional purposes, could be applied to psychological practice. This is an inversion of the anthropological understanding of bricolage. It suggests that what is a *natural* appropriation by Indigenous groups of Western artefacts into their cultural practice becomes a contrived appropriation by Western psychology, the premise being that Western psychology is the baseline from which developments are to occur in the mental health treatment of Aboriginal people. This would be an appropriate application of the concept of bricolage if the Yolngu of Nhulunbuy, the Ngangkari of the Anangu, or the Marban of the Wonggai of the Western Desert, who operate from within their own cultural base, were to begin to appropriate Western forms into their healing practices. As Locke has described, this is most likely to happen by the incorporation of new characters and stories into their repertoires of healing practices, rather than by changing the philosophical and cultural basis of their practices to incorporate Western ontologies (Locke 1995). The bottom line is an understanding that Aboriginal culturally based practice is valuable and produces desirable outcomes for their people (NPYWCAC 2003; ABC Radio 2007).

Atkinson has explored the history of trauma in Aboriginal families that have experienced colonisation and, while culture is a dynamic process, the impacts of trauma become ingrained so as to produce cultures of pain and disorder, sometimes called 'cultures of poverty' or 'cultures of violence': families can exist with multiple levels of pain, which she, among others, calls 'transgenerational trauma' (Atkinson 2002). Many social and emotional wellbeing practitioners stress that in order to heal it is crucial to understand the colonial history (Atkinson & Ober 1995; Atkinson 2002; Dudgeon & Williams 2000; Locke 1995; Phillips 2001, 2003; Wanganeen 1994, 2001). Atkinson promotes cultural healing as the way to overcome the impacts of transgenerational trauma, with the understanding of one's own Spirituality at the core of this practice:

> *Spirituality is a quality of being rather than an activity of belief. Spirituality is influenced by principles rather than conditioned by rules and beliefs. It is the spiritual that makes the person. By spiritual what I mean is in the universe, our connection with the creative, life-giving forces, spiritual life is about the whole person: it is about wholeness and completeness* (Atkinson 1997:8).

In this connection, Shawn Wilson, whose research and practice is with Indigenous people in prisons, maintains that:

> *Spirituality is important [in education] as a means of rebuilding people's connections to their environment. It is the spiritual death of many Indigenous people that has led them to be imprisoned in the first place* (Wilson, S. 1999:2).

Similarly, Val Carroll, an Aboriginal substance misuse worker, believes that substances are used as relationship enhancers and set up a 'false spiritual connection' between people; substance misuse also has the capacity to interfere with the spiritual relationships that do exist, between family members, and so may deny people their reason for existence (Carroll 1998:5–7).

From reviews of literature produced by social and emotional wellbeing practitioners, it appears that although there is considerable support among practitioners for the incorporation of Spirituality, Aboriginal philosophy and concepts of personhood into social and emotional wellbeing practice, there are still some major breakthroughs to be achieved. Although the majority call for the appropriate positioning of Spirituality and culture at the core of approaches to dealing with Aboriginal clients, there is a lack of definition and explanation for these concepts, and often a *window-dressing* or perspective to Western practices.

Those working within the constraints of Western psychology are having the greatest difficulty in making real gains in establishing an Aboriginal client base and effective ways of working with this group of clients. Aboriginal attitudes to Western mental health practice need to be taken seriously, rather than being seen as evidence of a gap in their education or awareness. The cultural practice of Aboriginal Australians is about connectedness and relationships, law and protocols, responsibilities and reciprocity, and so approaches to healing that incorporate groups seem to be the most appropriate and effective.

There is also a real need to develop approaches for dealing with Aboriginal clients based on Aboriginal concepts of personhood. More particularly, these approaches need to be locally based and developed according to the needs of the Aboriginal groups therein. This involves targeted research to establish the social and emotional wellbeing needs of local Aboriginal populations and how they may be best addressed; the people need to have the opportunity to speak and be listened to, their knowledges grounded into real change in approaches.

Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing—Ways Forward

> *Recovery, as a spiritual path, can be seen as a journey by which people with psychiatric disabilities rebuild and further develop their connectedness to themselves, to others, to their living, learning and working environments, and to larger meaning and purpose. This journey is also a means of personal empowerment* (Spaniol 2002:321).

> *At best our understanding is indirect and patchy, informed by a number of sensitive ethnographic accounts and the occasional lucid and eloquent statements and observations by Aboriginal individuals and cultural brokers. These statements suggest that mental health in an Indigenous context is better thought of as a qualitative index of the integrity and strength of an individual's relationship with his or her natural, spiritual and social world* (Reser 1991:222).

The term *social and emotional wellbeing* is a recent construct that has been developed by policy makers, service providers and researchers as 'an integral component of the health reform agenda' (CRCAH n.d.:2), and is designed to forefront Indigenous social, cultural and historical understandings of this state of being. The most important of these, the baseline, is the normative cultural positioning of 'complex social relationships in which individuals and groups are intimately bound to each other and the environment' (CRCAH n.d.:2). The rationale for such relationships, and the opportunity to have a social life that provides a framework for social, psychological and economic security (CRCAH n.d.:2), comes from Indigenous Spirituality, the philosophy that is the basis for the concept of personhood in Indigenous culture.

Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing programs cover a range of interventions 'providing key resources to support social and emotional reconnection'; that is, to increase 'Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing' (CRCAH n.d.:8). The connectedness that exists in Aboriginal society—to family, kin, the natural world and the universe—is to be found in Spirituality, the blueprint for culture. Social and emotional wellbeing activities potentially cover a range of 'helping services':

> *From grounding activities at the family and community level that establish, restore and maintain good social and emotional wellbeing outcomes, to health promotion and primary, secondary and tertiary interventions that address health and wellbeing issues through the life course, and in response to diverse social, cultural and economic circumstances… the emphasis of CRCAH funding will be on the 'grounded' end of the spectrum, the full range of social and emotional wellbeing activity will be included within the program, as it is not possible to separate the grounded activity and the acute psychiatric care* (CRCAH n.d.:6).

Helping individuals, families and communities to help themselves involves the promotion, support and maintenance of Aboriginal Spirituality, demonstrating trust in the ability of the culture to provide for its members.

This is the preferred basis for effective approaches 'to promote better developmental outcomes and to promote family and individual strengths' (CRCAH n.d.:6). The CRCAH recognises that the skills and capacities required to achieve this are 'not easily developed within existing health services including clinical mental health care and mental health promotion in the clinical context' (CRCAH n.d.:6). The CRCAH program focus is on:

- building the capacity of health and community services to move beyond the limitations of the focus on individual clinical case management and acute care and to integrate prevention and promotion of social and emotional wellbeing; and
- intersectoral and community-oriented capacity building aimed at sustaining initiatives that are preventive, resilience promoting and culturally contextualised in respect of Indigenous communities.

The CRCAH Program Statement for Social and Emotional Wellbeing indicates that initiatives in clinical mental health care will be supported by CRCAH to the extent that they:

- *Incorporate a focus on developmental prevention [sic];*
- *Engage families and communities in care oriented to enhancing social and emotional wellbeing;*
- *Entail intersectoral, community oriented capacity building; and*
- *Demonstrate the objective of building social and cultural competence in services aiming to support social and emotional wellbeing* (CRCAH n.d.:7).

For this to occur, the concept of Spirituality needs to be at the core of clinical mental health care, informing the diagnosis and treatment of mental health conditions.

The CRCAH's social and emotional wellbeing program is concerned with mental health issues among Indigenous people—from social adjustment and maladies identified as depressive illnesses, and the self-medication that occurs with alcohol, petrol, marijuana and other drugs, through to acute psychiatric care. And it is concerned with making available to Indigenous people services that are appropriate to their cultural ways of interpreting the world and their relationships within it. Approaches informed by Aboriginal philosophy, and the meanings and behaviours drawn from it, are crucial to the successful treatment of Aboriginal people. Reser, a psychologist who has researched Indigenous mental health issues and worked extensively with Aboriginal clients, explains that an adequate understanding of psychopathology (among Aboriginal people)

> *will be realised only when there is a more widespread and genuine understanding that there exist basic cultural differences with respect to how the world, the self, and distress are experienced and responded to* (Reser 1991:221).

He argues that a shared humanity is not sufficient to be able to understand 'the causes, meanings and consequences of disturbed behaviour in another culture' (Reser 1991:221).

The CRCAH Program Statement for Social and Emotional Wellbeing rightly identifies colonialism as the root cause of a loss of wellbeing:

> *bringing radical social, economic and cultural change, forced disruption of social and cultural systems of family life and welfare through policies of assimilation and child removal… and the development of distinctive but limited forms of economic participation* (CRCAH n.d.:3).

The impacts of colonialism have been profound and are ongoing. The ways in which Aboriginal Australians have been incorporated into the workforce have been highly exploitative (Kidd 2007) and involved the violent take-over of Aboriginal lands (Reynolds 2006). It is also important to consider the wholesale denigration of Aboriginal philosophy and the associated lifeways of Aboriginal people as *primitive, stone-age* and unable to change to meet the challenge of *modernity* as contributing greatly to a loss of social and emotional wellbeing. This attitude to Aboriginal culture has also led to the idea that Aboriginal people should be grateful that they were colonised because this saved them from a kind of stone-age hell. As an Australian Minister for Immigration said, 'We're dealing with people who were essentially hunter-gatherers. They didn't have chariots. I don't think they invented the wheel' (CNN.com 2001). So there is another manifestation of disregard and the ongoing nexus of oppression.

Although the impacts of colonisation have been pervasive, it is also important to recognise these as not necessarily *collective* but as encompassing a diversity of impacts over time and geographical space. Similarly, the responses to colonialism have not been uniformly negative and it is important to emphasise the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of responses to colonialism, and this can best be achieved by a regional, local and family approach to the histories of Aboriginal people. For example, the historian Crawford found that the people of the northwest Kimberley were, in their opinion, the victors in the colonial war: 'We won the victory!' (Crawford 2001:15). Although this is a result one would not expect to be common, the fact remains that the colonial take-over of Aboriginal lands and lives has been played out in different ways and to different effect in the diverse and various parts of this country.

The impacts of racism, a core value of colonialism, have also been thoroughgoing. It is extremely difficult for a minority Aboriginal population to deal with a *mirror image* reflected from the majority population, through media and government policy, of a people stereotyped as inherently wanting and incapable. The Australian Psychological Society's important position paper *Racism and Prejudice: Psychological Perspectives* identifies how convoluted such attitudes can be: 'to the extent that Aboriginal culture is respected, it is only the so-called traditional culture as existed 200 years ago, pre invasion' [*sic*] and there is not an acceptance that this culture can change and still be Aboriginal (APS 1997:25). Thus, people are identified and disregarded as being Aboriginal and then doubly demeaned by being categorised as without culture. This can occur to people who are remote, not of mixed race and living on their own land as defined by governments. Povinelli (2000) identified the 'cunning of recognition' as played out in the ongoing opportunity for settler colonials to exercise inordinate power. The Aboriginal people at Wadeye (Port Keats) in the Northern Territory are expected to identify with an impossible standard of 'authentic' Aboriginal culture in order to be recognised as Aboriginals (Povinelli 2000).

Thus, the ongoing processes of colonisation, in their many forms, have brought stress, trauma, grief, anger and mental illness to Indigenous populations (CRCAH n.d.: 6) in unprecedented levels, leading in some cases to the use of substances to self-medicate these conditions and the playing out of self-hate, anger and violence within the home and community.

Although there is no doubt that colonisation has brought adverse impacts, social change in itself is not necessarily problematic. All cultures change over time and the resilience of cultures is manifest in the ability of the cultural basis to adapt and change with pressures and challenges placed on the people, while surviving as a distinct culture. It is the case, though, that change under colonial rule is sometimes wrought so rapidly as to produce *culture shock* in some Aboriginal peoples. The CRCAH Program Statement rightly points to the resilience, esteem, identity and endurance of many Indigenous individuals, groups and populations and the need to identify and build on these strengths (CRCAH n.d.:6). The concepts of resiliency, risk and protective factors identified by the CRCAH as 'central to research (that is) aiming to build knowledge and understanding in the area of social and emotional wellbeing' (CRCAH n.d.:6) are conceivably to be found in the philosophical basis of the culture, in Spirituality and the lifeways that are developed in concert with this, to produce wellbeing. Therefore, 'the pathways and methods whereby resilience can be built on and enhanced to measurably improve the wellbeing and outcomes or life chances of individuals, families and groups' that the CRCAH identify as the focus of the social and emotional wellbeing program (CRCAH n.d.:3) are those that promote and enhance Spirituality.

As Hunter (2004) has identified, and referenced in the CRCAH Program Statement, successful approaches to the heightening of Indigenous wellbeing incorporate a wholistic approach; social justice and reconciliation at the social/national level; empowerment through community development approaches at the community level; family wellbeing and parenting programs; and, for the individual, culturally appropriate therapies, including a mix of Indigenous therapies, adapted and appropriated therapies, and culturally appropriate *conventional* therapies. However, caution is recommended in the application of adapted and appropriated therapies or an Aboriginal perspective to conventional therapies. There is a need for more research in this area. The reason for caution is that such therapies come from a Western cultural philosophical base (glossed as *normal*), predicated on an entirely different view of the nature of personhood and appropriate belief systems and behaviours. The application of an Aboriginal perspective to such approaches is not going to be adequate, as previously discussed. Further, the nature of Aboriginal philosophy suggests that solutions that lead to the legitimising, strengthening and promulgation of Aboriginal Spirituality, and notions of personhood from there derived, including collective approaches, are likely to produce real outcomes and enhance wellbeing.

Further to the mix of approaches identified by Hunter, this paper indicates that the need for decolonisation at the national and regional levels can be broadened—for example, through initiatives such as the introduction of Indigenous knowledges development within universities, which will serve to develop a body of knowledge based on Aboriginal philosophies and also gradually to have an impact on Australian intellectual and cultural development generally. Of equal, if not greater, importance is the preferencing of Aboriginal Spirituality at every level of social change policy and program development within governments, as this is crucial to bringing about a heightened Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing.

The CRCAH also identifies the need for specific programs to improve Indigenous social and emotional wellbeing, including:

- targeting those areas of family and community life that enhance the quality of life;
- improving detrimental outcomes for children;
- reducing harmful impacts of violence and substance misuse; and
- leading to improved capacity for social participation generally.

The CRCAH also states that the scope of these programs:

> *should concentrate on contributing to 'good outcomes' for children, youth and families particularly in promoting better understanding of the unique [my emphasis] family, community and institutionally based characteristics, interactions and structures which support Aboriginal child and youth resiliency, and contribute to establishing, restoring and or maintaining Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing throughout the life cycle* (CRCAH n.d.: 6).

Further, the CRCAH states that these interventions comprise 'key resources to support social and emotional reconnection', not to presume that all vestiges of this connection are 'lost'; but recognising the need to target appropriate interventions where the cultural basis of relationships are not operating appropriately, where there is 'less emphasis on Aboriginal ways of knowing and doing'. Moreover, the CRCAH believes that 'the challenge is to identify and build on family and community strengths' (CRCAH n.d.: 6).

The unique characteristics and *cultural contextualisation* to which the CRCAH Program Statement refers spring from Aboriginal cultural philosophy—Aboriginal Spirituality—and this needs to be directly recognised and acknowledged in the program statement, and in society more generally, in such a way as to make clear the centrality of cultural ways of being and doing, ways that cannot be accommodated by a *perspective*.

Again, research indicates that wellbeing programs need to be directly targeted to the legitimising, strengthening and promulgation of existing understandings of Aboriginal Spirituality and associated lifeways of Aboriginal individuals and their communities. Importantly, such programs need to be delivered to adults, as the responsible members of Aboriginal society, for disseminating these values to the children and youth. This is an important consideration in terms of not disrupting the family life of Aboriginal people any more than has been the case already through colonial interventions that target the children. This approach is notably missing from the priorities of the program, which importantly includes 'building on what we know' but privileges 'the theoretical underpinning of empowerment', not here defined (CRCAH n.d.:8).

Thus, there is a strong case for the CRCAH Program Statement for Social and Emotional Wellbeing to directly privilege the importance of Aboriginal philosophy, Aboriginal Spirituality, as the basis for maintaining and improving wellbeing. Currently, the CRCAH positions 'social life' rather than the cultural basis for wellbeing, whereby 'the organisation of the people and the land within frameworks of law and ceremony, family organisation and system of belief known as "the dreaming"' operate to ensure 'social, economic and psychological security' (CRCAH n.d.:3). The statement also describes this social and cultural system in the past tense, while defining the importance of resilience as an area of continuity of culture (although not directly stating this), a concept that is 'characterised by good outcomes in spite of serious threats to adaptation or development' (CRCAH n.d.:3).

The evidence indicates a widespread belief among practitioners that the rebuilding of spiritual relationships with others and the natural environment is important for rehabilitation from the varied forms of dis-ease that can exist and the maintenance and reconstitution of wellbeing among Aboriginal Australians. There is a need for these approaches to be reviewed and evaluated and for Aboriginal practitioners to be recognised, valued and supported, drawn into the ambit of social and emotional wellbeing practice with all of the opportunities that this brings for adequate resourcing. Research to ascertain the ways in which psychological practice can be developed out of the cultural base of Aboriginal Australians, incorporating Spirituality, is urgently required.

Joseph Reser's groundbreaking 1991 article 'Aboriginal Mental Health: Conflicting cultural perspectives' can be seen as setting an agenda for research in Aboriginal mental health and a review of progress in this research would be timely. The research base in social and emotional wellbeing needs to be expanded to incorporate the approaches of anthropologists, as well as psychologists, doctors, other health professionals and Indigenous knowledges academics, to issues to do with the outcomes of the incorporation of Western psychological practice into Aboriginal healing practices and the desirability of developing and maintaining intrinsically Aboriginal ways of dealing with dis-ease.

The voices of the people in local Aboriginal groups, themselves, need to be privileged in social and emotional wellbeing research; it is important to develop community development approaches to ascertain what they see their needs as being and how they envisage that they would best be addressed. Indigenous knowledges focus group methodology is recommended as an important culturally appropriate approach that transcends ineffective community *consultations* by grounding the knowledges of Aboriginal groups into real research outcomes (Grieves 2006a:9–12). Important, too, is the incorporation of historical research to assist in understanding family, local and regional histories and ethnohistories for the benefit of Aboriginal groups. Historians and anthropologists can also assist in developing understandings of the endurance of Aboriginal Spirituality and cultural ways of being and doing that can be recognised, maintained and promulgated within existing Aboriginal populations. However, the most important focus and prescriptions for approaches to these issues will come from the Aboriginal people themselves.

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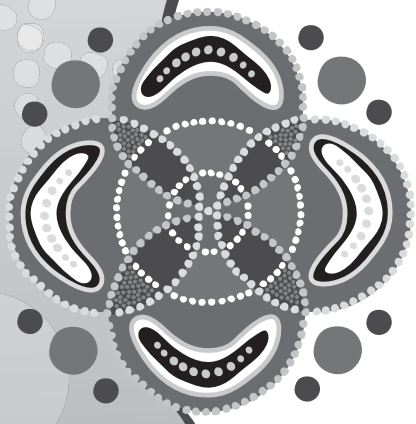

Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health: Discussion Paper Series

The Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health (CRCAH) has instituted this Discussion Paper Series (DPS) as a forum for its researchers, students and associates. The purpose of the DPS is:

- To make informed and evidence-based contributions to critical policy debates affecting the health of Aboriginal people.
- To disseminate the research findings of CRCAH researchers, students and associates quickly, without the delays associated with publication in academic journals, in order to generate comment and suggestions for revision or improvement.
- To provide CRCAH researchers, students and associates with an avenue to present preliminary documents, circulated in a limited number of copies and posted on the CRCAH website, intended to stimulate discussion and critical comment on the broad range of issues associated with the CRCAH research agenda.
- To allow CRCAH researchers, students and associates to draw out the key issues in Aboriginal health research through literature reviews and critical analyses of the implications for policy and practice.

Submission criteria

Submission to the Discussion Paper Series is open to all CRCAH researchers, students and associates working on either funded or in-kind CRCAH projects. The research findings in discussion papers may already have been presented at conferences or workshops, but generally will not yet have been published in journals. Authors should try to ensure that the discussion paper will be sufficiently different from any future journal article that they plan to write so as not to create a redundant publication.

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All discussion papers will be reviewed either by internal CRCAH reviewers or, where appropriate, external referees. The CRCAH's editorial committee will assess the suitability for publication of all submissions and select reviewers for successful papers. Reviewers will include relevant scientific expertise, and representatives of governments and the Aboriginal health sector.

Feedback

The Discussion Paper Series is intended to promote the rapid dissemination of research results prior to publication; comments submitted directly to the authors are therefore welcomed. However, as results are often provisional any citation should take account of this.

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Discussion papers are published on an *ad hoc* basis throughout the year (3–4 p.a.). They are available both in printed and electronic formats (as pdfs that can be downloaded from the CRCAH website: <www.crcah.org.au>). The views and opinions expressed in the Series do not necessarily reflect those of the CRCAH.

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