

PETER PURCELL

The Corrupting Myths of Indigenous Origins

Forty-three years ago, the resident Aboriginal community declared that Noonkanbah Station in the Fitzroy Valley in northern Western Australia was their sacred land where their traditional laws had precedence over the constituted laws of the State of Western Australia. They objected to the drilling of an oil well on the pastoral leasehold station and, encouraged by their supporters, locked the gates and denied entry to the oil exploration companies. The dispute was orchestrated to put Aboriginal land rights in Western Australia on the front pages of the nation's newspapers and it succeeded brilliantly. The battle to stop the drilling was lost but the war was won, with Noonkanbah now widely seen as a pivotal event in the social conflict over Aboriginal land rights in Australia.

It was of no consequence to supporters of the protest then or since that the basic premises on which the land rights battle was fought at Noonkanbah were largely false: there was no traditional tribe living on the traditional land for millennia and practising their unchanging religious law, and to claim so was a ruse. Many of the people at Noonkanbah were descendants of desert clans who had migrated north into the river country and overwhelmed the river people demographically and culturally. These migrants brought their desert law with them and modified it to better suit their new residence in the valley. Their main religious fervour was focused on two "travelling cults", Woagaia and Djuluru, both twentieth-century imports. Woagaia, imported desert-based myths and rituals, was linked to Jinimin, a Jesus Christ figure who was ordering the people to renew their Aboriginality, and to Noah's Ark, said to be aground in the desert to the south, full of minerals and riches for the future when white Australians were all dead. The Djuluru cult, created in the Pilbara by a disciple of a self-proclaimed Marxist revolutionary, Don Macleod, featured Hitler and the Japanese bombing of Broome and promised the end of white Australia.

We have come a long way since Noonkanbah,

swept along by *Mabo* and *Wik* in ways unimaginable for most Australians forty years ago. Many consider the changes are for the good; many do not. A near mystical aura is now attributed to Aboriginality in the popular imagination and has been expressed in major legal and legislative decisions and in profound changes in social attitudes. Yet, much of what is popularly accepted as traditional Aboriginal culture betrays the same disregard for the truth that was manifest at Noonkanbah.

We now have "Aboriginal" as a self-identification almost free of the requirement of ancestry. Witness Bruce Pascoe, with a documented Anglo-Celtic ancestry dating back centuries, being accepted as an Aborigine by a federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, who was supposedly leading the nation towards a new truthfulness about history. We have an urban Aboriginal elite self-identifying by tribal name only, effectively denying their Anglo-Celtic heritage, while calling for truth-telling. We have urban mixed-race people with little knowledge of traditional Aboriginal culture claiming to be "traditional" custodians of the land. We have others protesting the "invasion" and wailing at an adopted family history of massacre and rape, seemingly oblivious to their predominantly Anglo-Celtic ancestry.

We have widespread acceptance that even the smallest amount of Aboriginal blood renders a person "Aboriginal" and accords them a spiritual bond with the land that goes beyond Western imagining. We have a High Court that believes this and makes new laws accordingly: witness the *Love* decision repolishing the old ruby that the Aborigines belong to the land. This should not be a surprise, of course, given geneticists who suggest that a unique affinity to the land might have osmotically curled into the Aboriginal DNA during their millennia of wanderings across it, and Aboriginal leaders who assert that Aboriginal people can somehow have genealogical links to the land. To the outside observer, this must seem a curious development

for a society whose laws and culture were derived primarily from the Christian ethos and Western Enlightenment. But perhaps the intention is to put an end to that.

Noonkanbah was not the triggering event for this socio-cultural revolution but it was a pivotal early battle in the campaign, especially on the western front. The “out-station” or “homelands” movement, championed by H.C. (“Nugget”) Coombs during the Whitlam years, had been passed into law (*The Land Rights Act*) in 1976 by the Fraser government, and Aboriginal groups were beginning to move out of the outback towns and stations into “autonomous” settlements, some on pastoral leasehold land purchased by the government, such as Noonkanbah Station.

The “homeland” initiative was undoubtedly a well-intentioned aspiration to improve the lives of Aboriginal people in remote towns and settlements, but it was underpinned by the age-old paradisaical myth in modern guise: the seductive fruit, in this instance, was Western society. The return to what is now called Country was the essential first step in the minds of Coombs and fellow travellers towards stopping the policy of assimilation and getting Aborigines safely away from white Australian culture and control. This movement would, in the romantic vision of the urban elite, restore dignity and self-esteem to Aboriginal communities. Coombs was a typical urban intellectual who hated civilisation and saw the Australian people as doomed unless they could open their hearts to the “deep Aboriginal identification with the sacred earth of this continent”. The intention was not to bring the Aboriginal communities into the modern Australian nation but to save them from it. It is arguable that little has changed.

No doubt there are communities where the return to isolated settlements in remote areas or fringing outback towns has worked, but there are many that are distinguished by rubbish and ruin, with houses in disrepair, car wrecks abounding, and beer cans and bottles the main flowers in the landscape. The movement gave little by way of self-reliance, of course: the settlements were built with taxpayers’ money and a large majority of the inhabitants were on some form of welfare. In most places, there was no prospect of gainful work or a sustaining sense of self-worth.

There are, of course, many people of Aboriginal

heritage who are settled and successful in the broader Australian community in the cities and regional towns. Ministers of state and federal parliaments are among them, as are business owners, teachers, nurses, footballers and many others. They are indistinguishable from other Australians in their aspirations and sorrows, but increasingly the politics of identity is drawing many into choosing sides in the nation’s deepening racial divide.

In 1992, twelve years after Noonkanbah, the High Court discovered the existence in common law of “native title” on the Australian mainland while considering inheritance rights among Melanesian farming communities on the Murray Islands. *The Native Title Act 1993* gave legislative force to that decision, and the pursuit of title to “traditional” land became a nation-wide focus for Aboriginal communities, the urban-acculturated no less than the tradition-oriented. Now, in the twenty-first century, the push is for Reconciliation generally and a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament specifically, with a Treaty and Sovereignty already on the planning board, and activists fighting over the preferred order.

Forty years on from Noonkanbah, as we approach the referendum about the Voice, we are entitled to ask—indeed, have a responsibility to ask—whether these earlier initiatives worked out, given that current initiatives appear to be based on the same assumptions. Has the policy of establishing communities on “traditional land” been a success? Are the remote communities healthy and flourishing? Has dignity been restored, and pride renewed? And what of the urban communities? Are they happier now, given the pride of place accorded Aboriginal culture on the national stage? Are they less embittered about the past and more encouraged about the future? Or have peace and prosperity proved as elusive as dreams of cargo?

Since 1980, over thirty pastoral leasehold stations have been purchased with government funds for Aboriginal communities across the Kimberley and Pilbara regions. Approximately 93 per cent of the Kimberley region, including many of those pastoral stations, is now held under native title. This suggests that most of the Aboriginal people in northern Western Australia would now have the opportunity to live on their “traditional land”, in accordance with their own blending of traditional ways and modern community rules—an arrangement which

*Might some
of the problems
blighting Aboriginal
communities arise
not from the loss of
traditional culture,
as is commonly
claimed, but from
the contemporary
expression of it?*

the urban elite, Aboriginal and otherwise, has claimed for decades would restore pride and ensure the future. The reality in many places is substantial financial loss and appalling social deterioration. A review in 2018 for the West Australian government concluded that over 50 per cent of the stations were operating at less than half their potential, with many Aboriginal stations virtually run into the ground, with abandoned and collapsing homesteads, broken windmills and fences, feral cattle and stock sold off or dying of neglect. Some of these problems are slowly being addressed in various ways, including sub-leasing to large pastoral companies.

Despair, alcohol and violence

The commercial problems fade towards insignificance, however, by comparison to the social problems that prevail in the region: alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence are beyond crisis levels in many communities across the Kimberley today, and have been for years. Alcoholism and violence were so bad in Fitzroy Crossing that the sale of full-strength beer was banned in 2007, at which time the town had the world's highest rate of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (FASD), lifelong brain damage done to unborn children. Full-strength beer was also banned in Halls Creek. Many communities tried to solve the alcohol curse by electing to be legally designated as "dry", but sly-grog running has been a persistent problem and has included drugs for many years now. In many places, methamphetamines have replaced glue and petrol sniffing. The situation is worsening. Covid-linked restrictions on alcohol sales in remote regions have not significantly slowed alcohol-driven lawlessness and violence. Young people roam the streets of towns such as Broome and Carnarvon at night, breaking into homes and stores. Ramming police cars with stolen vehicles has become an entertainment.

This lawless behaviour appears symptomatic of individual and community collapse into despair. A 2016 review found that indigenous suicide rates in remote West Australian communities were among the worst in the world. Of the 125 suicides, 80 per cent (102) were indigenous people, 70 per cent of them male, most of them under thirty, and more than 25 per cent of them teenagers. The West Australian Coronial Inquiry into the suicides in the Kimberley between 2012 and 2016 of thirteen children and young adults, the youngest only ten, found that most were from homes marred by alcohol abuse and domestic violence. Several, including four of the children, had themselves used drugs or alcohol from a young age; several had been sexually abused.

This social breakdown is not limited to Western Australia. In Alice Springs lawlessness, a long-term problem, has grown exponentially since the Stronger Future alcohol bans were dropped in July 2022, allowing alcohol in many Aboriginal town camps for the first time in fifteen years, according to Marion Scrymgour, federal MP for Lingari. Adult fighting, among both men and women, is common, as are clashes between families armed with machetes, crowbars and bats. Daylight home invasions, vehicle theft, property damage and physical violence are the daily experience for townspeople. Hundreds of children, some as young as five, roam the streets at night, many drinking alcohol—including hand sanitiser—in soft drinks, or sniffing glue or petrol. As appalling as that is, Alice Springs Mayor Matt Paterson suggested that the children were probably safer on the streets and away from the alcohol and violence at home.

Tellingly, the same problems are manifest among the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara communities spread across a vast region spanning the South Australia–Northern Territory border. This is their "traditional land", which they own freehold and which they manage exclusively and according to their own traditions and preferences. According to the segregationist model, these should be ideal communities. Yet domestic violence and child sexual abuse are endemic. Street violence is common. Alcohol and drugs are routinely available, despite "dry" regulations. A 2008 report said the children lived in dysfunctional communities, with considerable violence and fear as well as drug and alcohol abuse. Death rates are high. Youth unemployment is very high, despite available jobs, reportedly because the young people don't find the jobs "meaningful".

The appalling levels of physical and sexual violence against Aboriginal women and children have been known for a long time. Jacinta Nampijinpa Price, now a federal senator, has spoken courageously about this problem for many years. Louis Nowra's 2007 book *Bad Dreaming* sought to collect statistical and anecdotal evidence to attract attention to the scale of this national tragedy. Nearly two decades ago, the Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Task Force's 2006 *Breaking the Silence* report found that sexual assault of children in Aboriginal communities was widespread, affecting both girls and boys. In the Northern Territory child sexual assaults were four times the national average, and the reported cases "grossly under-represented the reality". Aboriginal boys were ten times more likely to be assaulted than other Australian boys. In Queensland, a 2006 survey found that 10 per cent of male youths were raped before they were sixteen. Sexually transmitted

THE CORRUPTING MYTHS OF INDIGENOUS ORIGINS

diseases are an added violation of these young victims. In Western Australia, the occurrence of gonorrhoea among Aboriginal children ten to fourteen years old was 186 times higher than the general population. In the Northern Territory, 30 per cent of thirteen-year-old girls had gonorrhoea or chlamydia. Nor is this problem limited to remote communities. In New South Wales, the Task Force found that child abuse was so widespread that no family in the twenty-nine rural and urban communities surveyed had escaped its touch.

Contrary to “Black Lives Matter” propaganda, the greatest threats to the lives of indigenous Australians are not white policemen but other indigenous Australians. Statistics spread across two decades show the awful and unchanging reality. From 1989 to 2000, Aboriginal people were 15.1 per cent of homicide victims in Australia and 15.7 per cent of all homicide offenders, despite being about 3 per cent of the population. Between 1989 and 2012, 951 indigenous Australians were murdered, 765 of them (80 per cent) by other indigenous Australians, with 504 being victims of domestic violence. In 2018 in the Northern Territory, 85 per cent of the 5100-plus Aboriginal victims of violent crime knew their attackers; over 50 per cent had been attacked by their partners, with 88 per cent of victims being women. Of Aboriginal people in jail, 70 per cent are there for crimes of violence against their loved ones. Nor have the adults managed to contain this violence among themselves: between 2007 and 2011, 26 per cent of deaths among Aboriginal children were from physical abuse.

What is the source of this violence? The popular answer is that it was learnt from the “invading forces”, fuelled by dispossession, compounded by the lost parenting skills of the “stolen generations” and fanned by generations of racism. An influential segment of Australian society sees all problems of Aborigines as the fault of other Australians, past and present. No fault is found with the offenders. Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, for example, the 2015 NAIDOC Person of the Year and Northern Territory Australian of the Year, suggests that Aboriginal “heritage is one of grace and nobleness” and Aboriginal communities would function perfectly were they not being deliberately destroyed by “a colonialist-born, neoliberal regime”. The problem is that the “nobility of the first peoples and their humanity and their spiritual truth” are not being considered when decisions are made. This is “noble savage” dreaming and it is part of the problem.

Despite all the promises, programs and expenditure, currently estimated at over \$30 billion annually, despite all the acknowledgments of Aboriginal culture, despite land rights and

Native Title and all the rest, the situation in many Aboriginal communities is worsening at all levels. Alcohol and drugs play major exacerbating roles, but it bears asking whether the cause of the ubiquitous violence might lie deeper.

Not too far from Alice Springs a century ago, a young woman was accused by male elders of disobeying their rules: she had wandered too close to the men’s secret place. For punishment they made her the sexual slave of all the men in the clan. In Alice Springs only a few years ago, Senator Jacinta Price has recounted, another young woman was accused by male elders of disobeying their rules: she had not cared adequately for her husband and he had died. For punishment, they made her for a time the sexual slave of all the men in the clan. It is hard to deny a nexus between these two atrocities.

Might some of the contemporary violence have its origins in the violence in the traditional culture? Might some of the problems blighting Aboriginal communities arise not from the loss of traditional culture, as is commonly claimed, but from the contemporary expression of it? Might the increased physical and sexual violence against women and children in recent decades be, in part at least, an unfortunate aspect of the revivalism that has swept through Aboriginal communities since the 1970s? The common “tradition defence”, whereby men plead not guilty of rape or sexual abuse by claiming traditional rights or entitlement shows that the answer is “yes”. These confronting questions have been raised in the past by Jacinta Price and others but, despite their greater importance, they never attract the attention given to symbolic issues such as the date for Australia Day.

Myths of origin

The major difficulty with these questions is their inherent contradiction of the paradisiacal myth now popularly accepted as the reality of traditional Aboriginal life and culture before the “invasion”. This myth sees a peaceful happy people, at one with nature in a land of plenty and, in that context, questions about tribal or family violence make no sense. There is a price to be paid for that, however. This denial of violence in traditional tribal life and the re-imagining of the past as an idyllic existence are both “myths of origin”, and history warns us that building a future on such myths often has a price in violence.

In the first instance, if violent aspects of a culture are denied, and lies are told of peaceful tribes and brotherhood among men, then violent behaviour, when it occurs, will be seen as aberrant, and excuses will be sought elsewhere, when the truth is actually

THE CORRUPTING MYTHS OF INDIGENOUS ORIGINS

closer to home. Violent treatment of women, sexual relations of old men with young girls, even homosexual use of young boys, are all aspects of traditional tribal life. By not admitting this, the potential for recurrence is not foreseen or guarded against.

At another level, the ubiquitous presentation of traditional culture as a paradisaical myth, with Eden destroyed by colonial and capitalist invaders, incites resentment and violence in many of those who believe themselves the rightful owners from which it was stolen. Far from aiding a reconciliation of Aborigines with the broader Australian society, these fabrications are an increasingly divisive issue and are serving to worsen the violence in Aboriginal communities and against the broader community.

There are many myths supplementary to the overall paradisaical myth and, collectively, they now constitute the accepted “truth” about pre-colonial Aboriginal culture. These myths include the following: that there were hundreds of Aboriginal nations before the British “invasion”; that Aboriginal people are all descendants of a single migration that happened 40,000 to 60,000 years ago; that theirs is the oldest living culture and one of humanity’s great achievements; that tribes lived in peace and harmony with each other; that tribal lands have never changed since the Dreamtime; that traditional life in pre-colonial Australia was pleasant and peaceful; that all places associated with Aboriginal myths and culture are “sacred”, often of such degree as to need the protection of secrecy.

These myths purport to be an honest recalling of the past but there is much about them that is false, and knowably so, and they are clearly not proving a useful guide for the future. Truth-telling about the traditional culture will not magically cure the problems of the present but it might be a useful first step towards a better future.

The notion of nations

Some of the myths seem innocuous enough, but they can be divisive: the adoption of the North American “First Nations” terminology, for example. Since its promotion in the National School Curriculum a few years ago, this term has become the shibboleth for the correct attitude to Aboriginal history. Until recently it had been accepted that there was no ethnographic evidence for Aboriginal “nations”; indeed, even the notion of the “tribe” was questioned in some areas. Now, every tribe is deemed to be a nation in itself or part of a greater nation. Setting aside the nonsense that the “nations” terminology allows about international travel and trade (as displayed on signposts in Arnhem Land)

it might be seen simply as people exercising their right to self-classify however they choose. There is, however, a political subtext: the term connotes an entitlement to sovereignty and the right to sign international treaties with other nations such as Australia. There is also a divisive social subtext: that the founding of Australia did not displace hunter-gatherer peoples but destroyed nations and civilisations that had evolved over millennia—a falsehood that can add to the level of trauma felt by some Aborigines and fuel frustration at their personal circumstances and their anger at “white” Australians.

The single migration

Some myths, such as that of a single migration of ancestral Aborigines 40,000 to 60,000 years ago, persist in the public imagination regardless of clear evidence otherwise. Early concepts of multiple migrations of the ancestral Aborigines fell into disfavour in the 1970s, anthropologically and politically, and natural selection after a single migration became the preferred explanation of observed physical differences. DNA studies in recent decades have been interpreted as evidence for a single migration and multiple migrations, but the consensus remains for an initial main migration around 50,000 years ago and subsequently only “minor additions to the gene pool”.

The main recent migration, before the British, involved people from India about 4000 years ago, a time of seafaring adventurism by tribes from the Indus Valley. The dogs that arrived with these people spread slowly across Australia and evolved into the dingo. Whether people came here 50,000 years ago, or 14,000, or 4000, their journeys were among mankind’s great migrations and there is no reason, other than political activism, to deny those ancestral peoples their individuality and their remarkable journeys.

Oldest living culture

The myth of a single ancient migration feeds into the claim of being the world’s “oldest living culture” with the implication of an unchanging “sacred” tradition. In reality, Aboriginal culture changed considerably over the millennia in response to many influences, including major climatic events such as the Last Glacial Maximum between about 23,000 and 18,000 years ago. The first peoples brought with them a Palaeolithic hunter-gatherer culture, then presumably widespread on the Eurasian continent, and the modern claim of Aboriginal cultural exceptionalism is based on the

notion that this ancient way of life was isolated and preserved here, while agricultural and other cultures evolved in Eurasia, courtesy of the interchange of knowledge and technology.

Similar claims of a unique antiquity are made by people in other countries, including Papua New Guinea, through which some ancestral Aboriginal people likely passed, and Africa, whence all humans came. The original culture was not preserved intact, however, being subject not only to evolutionary change but also to revolutionary impacts associated with the arrival of new peoples and the importing or local invention of new languages, stone technologies and social structures. It has recently been suggested that the culture at the time of colonisation had evolved only in the last 2000 or so years.

Immemorially unchanging homeland and culture

The myths of a timeless unchanging traditional tribal culture and residence on the same “sacred” land since the Dreamtime are core beliefs of many Aborigines and other Australians. Indeed, they have legal standing: the Federal Court ruled against the Goorabarooloo native title claim on Dampierland in northern Western Australia because the claimants’ occupancy did not “go back to time immemorial”.

Contrary to this romantic notion, recent studies, notably time-series analyses of archaeological data, are confirming that the traditional world was not unchanging at all. During the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene (30,000 to 7,000 years ago) a sparse, highly mobile ancestral Aboriginal society was confronted by cold dry conditions during the Last Glacial Maximum and, to a lesser extent, the Antarctic Cold Reversal (14,500 to 12,500 years ago). The clans are thought to have survived by withdrawing into areas more conducive to survival, including the South East Highlands, the Northern Kimberley and the Arnhem Plateau. An estimated 80 per cent of the land area was abandoned during the Last Glacial Maximum in favour of residence in the well-watered ranges and major river systems. Sea-level slowly rose by about 120 metres after the glacial era ended, flooding 1.6 million square kilometres of coastal plains, much of it relatively pleasant habitat from which occupants were forced to migrate.

Wetter conditions during the Holocene Climatic Optimum, 9000 to 6000 years ago, led to an expanding population resettling large areas, and a new language and technology then emerged in northern Queensland at the southern end of the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Pama-Nyungan language (as it

is now called) spread across the continent, except for the Kimberley and Arnhem regions, and was accompanied by new stone technology and new rock art. It is not known if these changes were associated with the arrival of a new group of people. Some new social structures such as patrilineal kinship, exogamous marriage and multi-group rituals may have first emerged at this time.

Arid conditions returned about 4500 years ago and the population again withdrew into the more hospitable areas until the La Niña climatic amelioration around the start of the Christian era. The population then increased substantially, accompanied by new mobility and technological and social change. The complex social and religious systems present at the time of colonial contact—the classificatory kinship systems, geographic totemism, graphic art systems and formalised exchange networks—likely formed at this time, in the last 1500 years or so. Despite these indications of major demographic shifts, DNA evidence also suggests that people stayed in the same general region—south-east Australia, for instance—moving to different locations within their region as circumstances required.

These cultural and demographic changes are reflected in the layered mythology and iconography in many areas. In the Kimberley rock shelters, for example, the imposing Wanjina rain figures have locally been painted over the delicate Gwion drawings. The Dingari stories of the Great Sandy Desert are probably a mythologised memory of the migration there about 1500 to 2000 years ago, not 50,000 years ago, as the tribal dogma insists: the presence of Gunya Gudjara, the Two-dogs, in the mythic mob places the migration in the last 4000 years, after the dog arrived from India.

It is firm dogma that insists that Aboriginal tribal land has not changed since the Dreamtime, but dogma is not constrained by the truth. When change occurred, as it did often, the mythology was simply revised to validate the new situation. Thus, clans from Warburton in Western Australia who moved westward into the Mount Margaret area simply “dreamt” a new myth telling how their Dreamtime ancestors once journeyed to Mount Margaret and thereafter always insisted they were just following that Dreamtime path. As a further demonstration of adaptive ingenuity, they then imagined their children’s conception spirits not as traditional mythic beings but as motor cars and aeroplanes to be used in dreams to travel back and forth to the desert.

The challenge to the dogma of permanent residency can also be solved by what is known anthropologically as a contra-mnemonic—in pub

talk, a poor memory. In this way, by forgetting the past, identity becomes the lived experience, being “reterritorialised as it is relocated within the living landscape”, as one anthropologist put it. Again, in pub talk, you can come from where you choose to come from.

There has always been something inherently insulting in the myth of Aboriginal tribes bound immemorially to a constant landscape and mythology, as though they were incapable of seeing that the grass was greener on their neighbour’s lawn and desiring it for themselves. Land could always be acquired by amalgamating with other clans or when neighbouring clans died out, or even taken by force. In the late nineteenth century, for example, before white pastoralists arrived in Western Australia’s Fitzroy Valley, Nygena and Bunaba clans had moved onto river land “owned” by the dwindling Djaba tribe, with the Bunaba having earlier been driven from the western Leopold Ranges by Ngarinjin people. Around the same time, the Walbiri tribe defeated the Waringari clans in the Tanami area of the Northern Territory and forcibly took over their country.

Nor was tribal culture as rigidly unchanging as is now claimed. Even when the people were relatively sedentary, the culture “moved”. Extensive trade routes across Australia allowed the exchange of secular goods and religious objects, as well as women, and also facilitated the sharing of new myths and rituals. The multitude of myths nationwide associated with the Rainbow Snake evidences the syncretisation of the basic myth with pre-existing local beliefs. So too does the Kunapipi cult, which might have originated from an All-Mother deity introduced by Macassan seafarers to coastal tribes, and was traded extensively among communities in northern Australia, evolving in very different ways in different areas and at different times. This fertility cult had a strong emphasis on reproduction and rebirth and involved highly sexual components. In the northern Kimberley, the sexual elements were “extracted” into a new cult called Gurangara and merged with the powerful desert spirit, Djanba. By contrast, in the Central Desert areas, those sexual aspects were largely removed and the Kunapipi women, renamed Gadjeri, became subordinate figures in the male-dominated mythology of the Walbiri people. These

details are not important in themselves; the point is the diversity and dynamics of Aboriginal belief systems.

Harsh tribal reality denied in Eden

Among the most prominent and persistent of the myths of origin are those focused on a fantasised idyllic life in Australia before the arrival of the British “invaders”: “nations” living together in harmony since the beginning of time and all enjoying a pleasant and peaceful existence. Even a brief review of readily accessible and respected publications such as Ronald and Catherine Berndt’s

The World of the First Australians and Norman Tindale’s *The Aboriginal Tribes of Australia* provides clear contrary evidence, as very briefly summarised below, but the myths persist regardless, and they encourage major misconceptions about the extent of violence and cruelty in traditional Aboriginal culture.

Certainly, some clans and tribes had peaceful relations with their neighbours, sharing women and food resources, at least in times of plenty, but this was not everywhere and always the norm. In many areas, tribal boundaries were precisely known and strictly defended, with trespassers killed. Conflict between clans over women or to avenge a death ascribed to sorcery were common. Revenge killings were

virtually a way of life in areas as far apart as Arnhem Land and south-east Victoria. The practice was so common among the Aranda in Central Australia and the Arnhem Land clans that they had different words for the different tactics and killing methods. Major battles between tribes are reported from all corners of the continent, from Arnhem Land in the north to Encounter Bay in the south and the Hamersley Ranges in the west. Large-scale killings occurred: Aranda men reportedly massacred over 100 men, women and children at Irbmangkra in Central Australia and killed all members of another clan nearby, both being punishments for perceived sacrilegious acts. Some Dreamtime battles, such as that between Eagle Man and Crow Man near Wentworth in New South Wales, are thought to be mythologised memories of past tribal conflicts.

Tribal life was harsh in many aspects. An unforgiving belief in spirits and sorcery left people ever fearful of harm that might come to them by

An obsession with indigenous spirituality is not exclusively an Australian phenomenon. In New Zealand, for instance, the idolising of Maori spirituality has been described as a “metaphysical palliative” for the Anglo-Celtic community.

fault of their own wrong-doing or the black magic of another. Infanticide was widely practised, as was cannibalism. Taboos surrounding men's "secret business" were strictly enforced and violation brutally punished, including death and sexual slavery for women. Women were often stolen or traded, and their sexual favours were used in bargaining and peace-making, as well as in group copulatory rituals. Widows were obliged to become wives to their brother-in-law. Polygamy was common, with men in some tribes having more than a dozen wives. Incest was not uncommon. Marriages were arranged, invariably involving young girls being passed to the older initiated men. Many tribes practised sub-incision (slitting the penis along the underside; medically, known as urethrotomy or, more colloquially, whistlecock). Pre-teen girls were ritually deflowered, commonly by their promised husband, with a finger or stick. Various forms of genital mutilation were practised, including slitting the perineum and forcibly enlarging the vaginal opening manually or by lacerating it internally with a stone knife. This is not to say that family and tribal life were without affection and joy, especially when times were good and food plentiful, but it does caution against romantic notions of family bliss in a paradisaical garden.

Blood memory

Several complimentary myths go more directly to Aboriginality. In the first instance, there appears to be a widespread acceptance in Australia that Aboriginality is "in the blood", preserved in total regardless of the extent of "mixing" with European or other blood. This is accepted in Australian law, which recognises as Aboriginal any person with even a minor percentage of Aboriginal blood, if they choose to so identify. For some people, there is the conviction that "blood memory" holds intact the experiences and culture of their ancient ancestors.⁵⁴ Aboriginal blood is also seen in the popular imagination to be multifaceted, a source of both the sacred and the profane, conferring spiritual identity with the land but also a source of great sporting prowess: when Patty Mills led the Boomers to an Olympic bronze medal, it was attributed to his "sublime Indigenous blood". (To his credit, Mills referred only to his pride as an Australian.)

Sacred life and landscape

Underpinning and flowing from these various myths of origin is the now firmly entrenched belief that a "sacredness" is associated with traditional Aboriginal society and its contemporary

manifestations. Every geographic feature is a "sacred site". When Midnight Oil sings, they are standing on sacred ground. When the South Australian Premier visits drug-ravaged Central Australian communities, he is on sacred land. When Galarrwuy Yunupingu speaks to the Prime Minister he does so with Yolngu "tongues of fire"—notwithstanding the possible origins of that imagery with long-serving Christian missionaries in Arnhem Land.

This idea of the "sacredness" of traditional Aboriginal society began around the beginning of the twentieth century as part of a broader European re-interpretation of the spirituality of "primitive" societies. The perception of taboos—things "set apart and forbidden"—progressed in the Western mind from a pre-religious belief structure to a religion in embryo to a full religion in its own right. Mythology was no longer regarded as a primitive belief but as a sacred and fundamental truth. Aboriginal mythology was the "sacred" history of the Dreamtime, and traditional Aboriginal life, being conceptualised anthropologically as a re-enacting of that sacred past, must itself be sacred.

By the mid-twentieth century, in an amazing reversal of values, the loss of belief in these "sacred" myths was cast as the cause of an emptiness in the Western soul. This, of course, was but another example of Western intellectuals dreaming paradisaical myths of a golden past and noble man, but it underwrote much of the anti-assimilationist views that have driven the land rights agenda since the 1960s. It was soon widely heard by the broader Australian society and influenced the profound social changes that began at that time, including the popular romanticism regarding Aboriginal culture.

An obsession with indigenous spiritualism is not exclusively an Australian phenomenon, of course; it is common throughout the Western world. In New Zealand, for instance, the idolising of Maori spirituality has been described as a "metaphysical palliative" for the Anglo-Celtic community. For many people, Australians included, the idea of a sacred indigenous culture seems to be a reassurance of spirituality, even salvation, in an increasingly secular Western society. There are various explanations offered for this sense of longing for spirituality, notably the decline in commitment to the Christian religion and a loss of belief in Western society and its traditional values. These social changes have been greatly influenced by the intellectual class as it moved progressively from the counterculture of the late 1960s into postmodernism, critical race theory and cancel culture ideology.

The main social conflict over claims of Aboriginal sacredness concerns "sacred sites". The term was popularised in the 1960s by the anthropologist

Ronald Berndt, who called it a “handy abstraction” to express the Aboriginal man/land link, and later by Justice Edward Woodward, who retained it as the “most convenient” term for his report into land rights in the Northern Territory, despite considering “sites of special significance” to be a better term in most cases. Significantly, Woodward specified that the term should apply only to those “sites of such importance in the cult life of the clan that only the fully initiated men were allowed to visit there”. Within a few years, however, *The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* had re-defined “sacred site” as any “site of significance according to Aboriginal tradition”. Most other legislation followed suit and the term has become common usage.

The societal conflict arises from the discarding of Woodward’s recommendation that the term should not be applied to sites which were no longer part of traditional cult beliefs and rituals. When the myth is no longer a code of spiritual “law” and is better considered lore or legend, it ought not be considered a sacred site—but that case is lost: Australian law says the sites are sacred.

New myths emerge

Many nations and peoples have myths of origin and draw identity and unity from them. Many Australians, for instance, hold firmly to the mythology of a nation forged in the sacrifice of the Anzacs. But the unifying impact of these myths can change as the social or political fabric changes. Some Australians now see Anzac Day as “contested” and Australia Day has become an occasion of protest for a vocal minority. In recent decades, the potential for serious social discord flaring into violence has become particularly acute in countries which have a colonial past: the colonised and the coloniser have very different myths and very different requirements of them. The “old” myths of origin become increasingly symbolic of a bitter social divide, focused mainly on race.

New myths emerge in modern times when indigenous descendants seek to emphasise their Aboriginal identity and perceived rights by reviving their ancestral culture and customs. The product, known as *kastom* in Melanesia, is ostensibly a revitalising of traditional culture but is actually a reimagining of it in an idealised form, commonly by an urban indigenous elite, and bearing little

relation to what has been “documented historically, recorded ethnographically or reconstructed archaeologically”. The new myths of origin are written at societal and personal levels.

On a personal level, the process involves a reinvention of an inner Aboriginal self by digging up bits of the past, reclaiming bits of language and memories of place, and filling in the spaces with imagination, according to the prominent Aborigine Stan Grant in *On Identity*: “a construction, not entirely a work of fiction but selective in its facts”, and inevitably accepting of, and adopting, “a narrative of loss and exile ... rape, pillage and massacre”.

At a societal level, the colonial history is rewritten. The pioneer is torn down from the pedestal, metaphorically and sometimes literally. The new mythology focuses on the perceived evils of the “invading” culture and the unfailing goodness

of the indigenous culture which, in its reimagined form, owes much to Western romanticism and New Age dreaming. Wise ecologists and nurturing elders abound, and people live in harmony with Mother Earth, nature and each other. There is a wisdom beyond all Western science about land management and the stars and much else. All terror and evil are not so much forgotten as inconceivable. The world’s “oldest living culture” is said to have “the oldest constitution ... the oldest governance system on this planet”.

New rituals and symbols crafted to accompany the new mythology are soon deemed to be sacred, even

ancient, traditions. The ubiquitous welcome-to-country ceremony, created by the performers Ernie Dingo and Richard Walley in 1976, is an example. Dot paintings are fetishised and now appear on everything from football boots and aircraft to boomerangs made in China. The didgeridoo, found only in the Adelaide River area in pre-colonial times, becomes a nationwide symbol of Aboriginal music. Smoking ceremonies, now a political requirement at many events, including the opening of federal Parliament, are deemed to retain their ancient purification magic even as they can now be ordered online. Everything is packaged to overprint the new mythology on the old.

Inevitably, these changes in the national mythology are a source of societal conflict, with anger and resentment on both sides of the barricade. The ubiquitous celebrating of the new mythology is not welcomed by those comfortable with the old

On a personal level, the process involves a reinvention of an inner Aboriginal self by digging up bits of the past, reclaiming bits of language and memories of place, and filling in the spaces with imagination.

mythology of the nation's founding. Historically the majority, they see the authority of their perspective dwindling as society ages and becomes more multi-ethnic, and younger generations, having been groomed at school in the new mythology, adopt it enthusiastically. Their resentment progressively deepens and can easily turn violent. Ultimately, the battle turns on the level of support in the society overall for the aspirations of the indigenous community and their supporters. In Australia, that level will be tested by the referendum on the Voice—though the conflating of constitutional recognition and a constitutionally enshrined Voice will inevitably complicate that vote.

Many would argue that questioning these celebrations and symbols of the new mythology is unnecessary cavilling: the celebration of Aboriginal culture ought to be simply welcomed, traditional or otherwise. After all, the High Court has decreed that tradition is dynamic and will change with time and various influences. What was invented last year can be traditional today!

That being the case, it might be hoped that the modern reimagined culture—evolved, if you prefer—could be a source of pride that would offset some of the pain of past prejudice and practices. But the screaming protesters on Australia Day and other occasions suggest it is also creating anger: idealising the past culture and seeing it celebrated on the national stage is, for many, not a source of reconciliation but of alienation. They are driven to rage by thoughts of a lost Eden which white Australians have stolen and despoiled. That is the point about myths of origin: there is often a price that is paid in violence.

Violent price of myths of origin

At the basic level, the denial of violence in the tribal past will see it reappear unchecked in the modern community, just as reimagining traditional life as idyllic at family and tribal levels will fuel anger at the “invader” society. There is also a multiplier effect from the broader society's adoption of the myths and incorporation of them into social and political protocols. When people are told repeatedly they have a unique relationship with the Australian land and a greater moral entitlement to it; when their flag stands prominently behind prime ministers and premiers at every speech, and flies atop the nation's prominent buildings and famous bridges; when every major sporting event or official function, every industry conference or Qantas flight acknowledges their tribal “ownership” of the land and declares respect for their elders, past, present and future—they will soon enough, human

nature being what it is, expect those assurances of greater moral worth to bring with them commensurate material entitlement. When that material worth is not adequate in its forthcoming, then bitterness and anger will build, and violence will inevitably follow.

The acknowledgments and ceremonies do not directly provoke violence, of course, but they reinforce the hopelessness that abounds in so many Aboriginal communities, both remote and urban. The alcohol and drug abuse and the violence flow from the sense of worthlessness and despair. It is an unintended consequence—but a consequence nonetheless—of a future built on myths of origin. That violence is directed both outward and inward. Outward, the violence is directed at the “white” society. In Western Australia, for example, the increased crime by Aboriginal youths in Perth and other urban centres is almost nightly news, and recent acts of counter-reactionary vigilantism have had fatal consequences. Inward, the violence is within the Aboriginal community, with clan and family brawling, with violence to family and self, with physical and sexual violence to women and children, even to the unborn through alcohol. Many are traumatised for life; too many find an end of life easier to bear.

Much is made these days of the need for truth-telling but, contrary to the popular wisdom, the greater need might be within the Aboriginal community. Admitting the harsh and brutal aspects of Aboriginal tribal life in pre-contact Australia obviously doesn't offer any solution to a deplorable social situation bred of generations, but it might be a useful first step towards dealing with any undesirable legacy. If the past is acknowledged, it can provide insight into the present and might offer some hope for the future. If we admit, for instance, the possibility that more Aboriginal people were killed during the colonial era by other Aborigines than by white colonists, then we might begin to see the origins of the very high number of Aboriginal crimes of murder and assault against fellow Aborigines. We might begin to understand why more Aboriginal women are killed by family members every year than die in police custody and start paying more attention to the former rather than the latter.

Honesty about traditional life allows people to be comforted where brutal practices have faded away, and to commit to their eradication where vestiges of them remain. The current violent situation in so many communities cannot continue. Change is needed. A new voice is needed. But not simply a voice that talks to Canberra about a future built on the same old myths of origin. That approach

THE CORRUPTING MYTHS OF INDIGENOUS ORIGINS

has been failing for a long time. “What clearer meaning could sickness, drunkenness, alcoholism, criminality, prostitution and psychic disorders have?” the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner asked, and that was fifty years ago. Romantic dreaming of a noble and happy past is a “wrongful turning”, to borrow from Stanner again. It offers a false view of the past, which means the lessons there will not be learnt, and an equally false view of the present, making any sense of personal responsibility very hard to develop. It is not the way to a better future.

Truth-telling and reconciliation are widely championed by the Aboriginal elite, but their aspiration appears to be largely, if not entirely, for a truth-telling confession by the Anglo-

European majority of the sins of the colonial past. If reconciliation is to succeed as a unifying dialogue that helps bridge the racial divide and the disadvantage “gap”, it will require as one of the first steps truth-telling by the Aboriginal community about, and reconciliation with, the reality of their own traditional past.

Peter Purcell is a geologist, with experience in Australia, Oceania, South-East Asia and East Africa. He has edited several books on Australian geology and authored many articles on geological, environmental and social issues. He has had a lifelong interest in indigenous culture. A footnoted version of this article appears at [Quadrant Online](#).

For Bayara Manusevitch

for being the only woman to survive Stalin, Hitler and the Harvard tenure process;
for her Armenian father, shot as “an enemy of the people”;
for her unthreatening first husband, shot as a threat;
for her third husband, a violinist for the Boston Symphony Orchestra;
and not so much for her second husband, whose existence we discovered from her obituary;
for persuading Senator John F. Kennedy to help her mother gain freedom from the Soviet Union;
for her dingy walls littered with framed photographs of writers and musicians;
for decades of widowhood and hours on her porch listening to symphony after symphony;
for luring our springers onto her lap with carrots and gentle words;
for that tenacious cat who adopted her with his owner’s permission;
for, when she fell or needed to be freed from her elevator, the way she greeted the men and women of the Belmont police and fire departments like guests;
for her mournful looks as her Italian slipped away, which left her with only three languages;
for publishing a memoir to kick off her second century;
for the grit and joy of her every day.

A.M. Juster