

# Assimilating the Mabo-Jumbo

**A reflection/rave**

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The recent hysteria that has engulfed society in the form of the Mabo mass debate, has led me to ponder the nature of relations between Koori and non-Koori peoples in this country. Why is it that after almost three decades of an army of Kooris trying to communicate with non-Koori Australia in thousands of classrooms, books, TV shows, Royal Commissions, rock'n'roll concerts, and football matches, we seem to have failed miserably in our quest to educate Non-Kooris to understand us basically as people?

It's not as if Australians lack the capacity to understand and absorb another culture. Just talk to any average Australian teenager for five minutes and you will quickly realise how easily and totally Australia is becoming assimilated into the culture of the United States of America.

This Americanisation of Australia's youth is viewed with increasing concern by many non-Koori Australian parents, and yet these same good people who see the evil of cultural imperialism clearly when it relates to the USA and their own white middle-class Aussie kids, claim to not comprehend the same principle when we apply it to our situation as Kooris.

As Kooris, we need to be ever vigilant to the subtle undermining of our cultural values - values such as non-materialism, humanitarianism, compassion and the belief that the group is more important than the individual. These and other Koori ideas such as the proposition that living things might be more important than material wealth have always been considered subversive by non-Koori Australian society.

Failure to comprehend that Kooris are not white people with a black skin has meant that Kooris have been subjected to many decades of imposed, enforced

attempts to assimilate us into "white" Australia. It was always thought to be the best way of handling the "Abo problem". Of course Kooris were never asked their opinion unless they were already successfully assimilated, in which case they were held up as examples for the white community to admire and the black community to aspire to.

But the old overt Assimilation Policy of the past has never gone away. It has rather lurked in the sentiments and actions of powerful, behind the scene bureaucracy power brokers in Canberra for 25 years. Today the threat it poses to our Aboriginality and thus our spiritual survival in the Australia of tomorrow, concerns many Koori Australians more than the pseudo-debate over Mabo.

In "white" Australia today the free enterprise system with its attendant values, attitudes and myths, prevails. Any person expressing doubt in the fundamental tenets of the system is dismissed or marginalised.

A free-enterprise society exists on the assumption that all human beings are essentially motivated, as individuals, by a desire for wealth and material possessions. Further, that no meaningful human endeavour is possible without the motivation of money.

These are powerful and dangerous myths, especially when propagated by the potent symbols of modern western consumerism, and delivered direct to our children courtesy of the most powerful mind-influencing weapon of all - the TV set in our lounge, community hall or humpy.

When you superimpose that on the already ravaged Koori community and begin to promote propositions such as individuality and the desire to acquire more wealth and material possessions than your friends, family and neighbours, then you are attacking the fundamental beliefs, philosophies and values that distinguish Koori people from non-Koori peoples.

But every Koori person must eventually address the important questions that arise when Koori values are confronted by some of the ugly and dangerous aspects of non-Koori society. Increasingly, Koori's who pose these questions in both the Koori and non-Koori communities are no longer just the so-called radicals; these issues go to the heart of who we are as people, and the things we have a responsibility to protect for future generations of our peoples.

A free-enterprise style system is necessarily an alien concept to "Aboriginality". Therefore we must be wary in Koori Australia of those in our own ranks who promote free enterprise and capitalism for its own sake. Overseas experience has shown that the unleashing of consumerist forces on Indigenous communities only benefits a tiny elite, whose wealth then translates into power; something not always handled responsibly and well by people inevitably changed by wealth.

When people go from thinking, "What is ours!" to "What is mine!", there has been a major fundamental shift in their psyche. This shift is central to "Assimilation".

Government policies of Assimilation were conceived at a time when Kooris were considered, at best, to be irresponsible children incapable of making decisions for themselves, and at worst, sub-human. Aboriginal culture was characterised as "primitive" compared to that of Anglo-Australia, so Aborigines should be "educated" in the ways of the white man so absorbing the "white man's" culture and values and thereby becoming "civilised", abandoning their primitive ways and beliefs.

This ethnocentric (racist) attitude still lives on not only in Hugh Morgan and Tim Fischer, but also in the breasts of the most influential public servants.

I suspect, listening to and watching the Mabo "debate", that assimilation also is considered the "final solution" in the minds of vast numbers non-Koori ocker Aussies. After all, one of the most common bleats on talkback radio during the Mabo Debate (Debacle), has been "Oh, why can't they be treated like the rest of us? Why shouldn't they be like all other Aussies".

These views demonstrate yet again that Australia is still in the 1950s and '60s when it comes to issues concerning indigenous peoples. The "white" people of Australia have still not reached even a basic understanding of the nature of Koori Australia. Assimilation is an out-moded, discredited concept found to be both racist and genocidal by all peoples ever to have it imposed on them by a stronger society with a different culture.

Assimilation as a concept is necessarily racist because it presupposes that the

majority culture is inherently superior to the minority culture. It creates its own justification for the enforced imposition of the majority culture on the minority.

And for Koori people, the personal cost of assimilating is their "Aboriginality". If a Koori loses touch with his/her Koori identity by beginning to live in a way which contradicts the basic philosophy and values of "Kooriness", then that Koori person not only is no longer a true Koori, but they have damaged part of their soul. There are many examples in indigenous communities all over the world which show how native people who embrace the "white man's" values inevitably do bad things to their own people, directly or indirectly.

If you are a person who believes in the free-enterprise system, or in some of its basic tenets like individualism, competition, and accumulated material wealth, then you are by definition, not a Koori.

If this statement causes consternation in the minds of some of my brothers and sisters, then rather than attack me they should instead perhaps examine some of their own actions and seriously analyse their fundamental aspirations and motivations. If they have retained the Koori ability to be honest to themselves, some might be surprised and ashamed at what they find.

After all, it seems the past twenty years of intense; specifically targeted government funding (some \$20,000million in 20 yrs) has paid off. It has undermined the strong Koori political movement of the 1960s & '70s. A vast amount of that money was spent subverting, buying off and compromising the key people in Koori communities all over Australia. The primary inducement was money and material wealth, and in some instances, degrees of power and influence.

It is obvious from the report of the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that the \$20,000million spent did not benefit the vast majority of Aboriginal people who, according to the report, live in essentially the same situation they did in 1973.

Where then did the money go, I hear you ask?

Whilst vast sums were consumed by inept, inefficient, incompetent and at times,

corrupt, bureaucracies and their largely cosmetic, PR driven, politically expedient, short-term programs, a significant amount was also spent attracting large numbers of Kooris into government jobs and "mainstream" (read "assimilationist") Aboriginal education and employment programs.

As an aside, it is interesting to note that most of these "mainstream" Aboriginal education and employment initiatives have been monumental failures precisely because of the requirement that Kooris participate on "white" terms in programs conducted in "white" ways and more often than not conducted by non-Koori people. Failure of most of these types of expensive government programs is also evidence of the continuing passive resistance of Koori peoples to inappropriate schemes and scams over which the recipients have little say and control.

Attempts to impose assimilation, thus cultural genocide, on the Koori peoples continue unabated in 1993, the International Year of Indigenous People.

Over this period of high spending we have seen the emergence of a new class of Kooris. These are what I call the "black bourgeoisie" - people in highly paid positions in government and semi-government organisations who help to maintain the facade of government programs they serve. These people advise the government and bureaucracies, and at times, corruptly manipulate both to direct subsidies and grants to groups connected to, or controlled by, themselves.

They also serve as a political buffer for government and bureaucracy when things get hot. In recent years when inept, corrupt or idiotic bureaucracy programs come unstuck, we have seen increasing numbers of Koori faces on TV as the up-front apologists for a system in which they have no real power! This is a tragic phenomenon in some ways as it represents the final stage of "assimilation". Orwellian; it is always sad for me to see a Koori brother or sister reading a script devised by a non-Koori

But the numbers of Koori community leaders who are not compromised by government "bribery" are getting fewer. Today it would be difficult to name five Koori political activists in the country who do not receive government monies, directly or indirectly. Too many of our leaders are compromised. That is exactly how policies of the Fraser and Hawke governments neutralised the Koori political movement that had been so strong in the '60s and '70s.

Another factor in the undermining of Koori Australia was the deliberate ten-year refusal by all branches of the Hawke government to provide funds to Koori groups to maintain their established regional and national conferences to decide policy and strategy in a united manner. This robbed Koori groups of the ability to coordinate their efforts and thus destroyed the cohesion and effectiveness of that powerful national political lobby.

These policies of Hawke and Fraser must be understood to be parts of the ongoing process of assimilation that drags us as Kooris further from our fundamental being.

These issues are vital for the survival of the Koori way, yet they are not seriously discussed at the abundance of conferences and seminars organised inevitably by non-Kooris each year. Kooris have no say in running these non-Koori controlled conferences, sometimes they are even denied a voice - more evidence that pervading much of white Australia's official government approach to Aboriginal community affairs are the ghosts of the assimilation policy. It is vital and urgent for the non-Koori community to gain some insight into the effects its society, institutions and attitudes has on Kooris as people and communities. The difference between what Australians claim to know about Kooris, and what they actually know about Kooris, is huge.

On one hand the average talkback radio Aussie will rant and rave ad infinitum about "Why should I feel guilty about 200 years ago"? Or "why should the Abo's get any compensation, why can't they work like the rest of us?", or "The government gives the boongs heaps of money but they spend it all on grog.". But then ask these same people to name one of the 500 Aboriginal tribes; or if they have ever met a Koori; or if they know any Koori words; or if they know what happened to the Koori families who used to live where their houses now are; or if they can name an Aboriginal resistance leader of the stature of Geronimo or Sitting Bull (of whom they have heard); or asked them whether they knew about the concentration camp system under the old "Protection" (Apartheid) Acts until 1967 (No? Didn't know?... tut...tut...that was the German excuse!); or even if they know how much the Federal government will expend on Aboriginal Affairs this financial year, or, finally, do they know what proportion of that Federal budget allocation will actually end up in Koori hands.

They would be struggling to answer more than one of these questions, yet these

are the self-same, self-proclaimed "experts" on the "Abo's" who are ever ready to inflict their views on us. Is it any wonder it is so difficult to conduct a reasonable, logical and rational public debate on Mabo related issues today, given the extensive ignorance on the part of non-Koori Australia. Whilst most of us Kooris know your world; your society; your language and culture very well, you on the other hand know virtually nothing of our world and what affects us today here in Melbourne for example.

How is it possible for people so ignorant of the basics of the topic to participate and be taken seriously? How is it that anyone could even pretend that any semblance of intelligent debate could occur in the midst of such appalling ignorance? Well, to see the answer just switch on a radio or TV, or just read the daily newspapers.

As the mumbo-jumbo of the Mabo debacle clearly shows, white Australia has a hell of a lot to learn. It is ironic that they are such slow learners, and are capable of such major mental blocks, on an issue so important to the past, present and future of this country and all its peoples. Ironic because most Aussies could hold a lengthy discussion on issues of mind-boggling trivia, like footy or cricket statistics.

But there always has to remain hope, and the islands of sanity in the sea of madness of the Mabo Debacle have been more profuse than anyone might have suspected if their only source of information was commercial TV and radio. I believe that once the heat dies down, and more sensible heads prevail, this country stands not on the edge of a precipice into which we might all fall, but rather on the edge of a new era, borne of a just, honourable, equitable and mutually beneficial resolution of the oldest historical dispute that exists in this country today.

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