

Muddy Waters:

Archie, Mudrooroo & Aboriginality

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In a recent edition of the Sydney Morning Herald an article appeared which discussed 'the controversy surrounding what constitutes Aboriginality in the arts', and in particular the 'outing' of Mudrooroo, fellow writer Archie Weller and academic cum political activist Dr. Roberta Sykes, as being not of Aboriginal 'blood'. Furthermore, to further confuse and complicate matters, a few months earlier Aboriginal woman author Wanda Koolmarrie turned out to be a white man, Leon Carmen and WA artist Eddie Burrup was revealed to be a white woman, Elizabeth Durak. All of these matters have generated a debate about 'Aboriginality' and what precisely is meant by the term. I propose in this essay to examine the case of Mudrooroo, as he is an old friend of mine and also because he has written a response to the accusations made against him. In discussing Mudrooroo I also intend to examine some of the broader questions about Aboriginality and identity raised by Marcia Langton.

Langton points out that in Australia B.C. (Before Cook) there was no such thing as an 'Aboriginal', but rather Bundgelung, Wiradgeri, Eora and hundreds of other groupings of peoples. The term 'Aboriginal' homogenises all those people into a single group to whom a wide range of negative stereotypes and functions can be applied by the dominant culture. It must also be remembered that this is an English word which at once negates all five hundred words used by the different peoples in Australia to describe themselves. Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (who works entirely in his native language) has said,

... A specific culture is not transmitted through language in its universality, but in its particularity as the language of a specific community with a specific history. Written literature and orature are the main means by which a particular language transmits the images of the world contained in the culture it carries. Language as communication and as culture are then products of each other...Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we perceive ourselves and our place in the world...Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.

A single English word can effectively, in an instant, disembowel the vast 100,000 year histories and culture of about five hundred different peoples in Australia by naming us 'Aborigines'. That language was used by the colonisers as a weapon can be seen in the experience of numerous colonised peoples (here and in other countries) who were forced to use the

colonisers language. But it is also true that the subjects of colonial repression can subvert the colonisers intent with regard to language. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffen have described a two-part process by which writers in post-colonial situations can 'displace a standard language'. They call these two processes "abrogation" and "accommodation" and define them thus,

Abrogation is a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its aesthetic, its illusory standard of normative or 'correct' usage, and its assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning 'inscribed' in the words

Appropriation is the process by which the language is made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience...Language is adopted as a tool and utilised to express widely differing cultural experiences.

An example of how Koori people have appropriated the colonialists language is the way that the koori label "Invasion Day" has displaced the strength of the concept of "Australia Day" to the point where it seems likely that after the year 2000 this nation could well be celebrating its national day on a different date. So, whilst the colonisers language may seem an impenetrable edifice, it in fact can be creatively subverted to weaken its power over the colonised. It is interesting that since the 1960s in Australia, Koori peoples have almost completely rejected the term 'Aboriginal' in favour of the name of the tribal group from which they are descended, which is where the problem began for Mudrooroo and others who cannot demonstrate an indigenous lineage. This new strong assertion of indigenous identity began with the Koori political upheaval of the late 1960s and early 1970s which culminated with the "Aboriginal Embassy" in Canberra in 1972.

In the same way that Stuart Hall talks of 'black' (as in 'Jamaica is a black society) as 'an identity which had to be learned and could only be learned in a certain moment. In Jamaica that moment is the 1970s', so too is the "Aboriginal Embassy" the moment of the Koori community identity when 'Aboriginality' was learned. This outburst of Indigenous pride was a clear counter move to the dominant society's negative assumptions and stereotypes about 'Aborigines' as well as a rejection of the racist notions upon which the Assimilation policies were based. But in the process of seeking to break the hegemonic chains that bound them, many of the new young Koori political activists fell into the trap of embracing some of the genetic base notions of race. Suddenly, Koori 'blood' became important, and knowing your 'bloodlines' became one of the slogans of the largely urban-based Koori movement.

Kevin Keffe has argued that Aboriginality as an ideology has been defined by Kooris in two ways - as persistence and resistance. As persistence it highlights a belief in an inherently unique identity, the continuity of cultural practices that originate in traditional Aboriginal culture and the common sharing of these by all Aboriginal people in Australia. He says it is 'a notion of an essential, enduring and unilinear Aboriginal culture, transmitted through

blood, and constantly reproduced despite white intervention'. Aboriginality as resistance, according to Keffe, is a more dynamic concept in the way in which it is used by Aboriginal people. Jennings states,

It is not only a specific set of ideological elements, but also a living set of cultural practices which are in dynamic interaction with white society. Elements that are stressed are such things as resistance to white authority, political struggle and collective solidarity. Keffe sees the two notions existing as a duality. One may be submerged or muted by the other, or they may be in tension, at times competing for attention or contradicting each other.

In deciding that the essentialist notion of 'blood' was a key criteria in determining 'Aboriginality', Koori political activists are privileging their Koori 'blood' over other 'blood' that runs through their veins (of course 'blood' is a fallacy as there is no way to tell Koori blood from other blood). The mixed heritage of virtually all Koori activists who seem most concerned about 'Aboriginality' means they are what Native American writer, Gerald Vizenor, describes as 'crossbloods', who, he says, 'loosen the seams in the shrouds of identities'. Mudrooroo says, 'few crossbloods in Australia have examined the problem of identity within themselves and the often unproductive way such problems are negotiated', and he reminds us,

The question of blood is what else but clinging onto Victorian classifications of race, classifications which reached their fulfilment in the Nuremberg race laws (1935), set in place by the National Socialist government of Germany and which led to the genocidal practices of Auschwitz...Race and racial theories have proved to be dangerous and too often rest on unsupported assumptions

As it transpired, this was precisely the grounds upon which certain Indigenous activists saw fit to persecute Mudrooroo. Perth 'activist' Robert Eggington challenged Mudrooroo 'to prove his Aboriginality' after it was claimed by Mudrooroo's sister that the family was of Afro-American descent. What Mr. Eggington did not seem to understand is that Mudrooroo is a different situation to, say Archie Weller, who, when challenged about his 'Aboriginality' resorted to invoking racial stereotypes and mythology, Richard Guilliat (revealing as much about himself as Weller) writes,

Anyone who has ever met Weller would find the question incongruous. He himself points to his broad nose, thick lips and halo of frizzy hair as physical traces of Aboriginal blood. Most of his friends are Aboriginal...

Archie Weller's notion of his own Aboriginality seems on par with numerous cartoonists who seem fond of the heavy eyebrows, broad nose look to denote Aboriginal people. Whereas Weller spent the first half of his life as the son of a non-Aboriginal West Australian pastoralist family that owned a 4000 hectare spread called Wonnenup, and boarding at exclusive Perth's

Guildford Grammar, Mudrooroo had spent virtually all of his early life on the margins of society and had his identity decided for him when Mary Durack wrote in the forward to his 1965 novel *Wildcat Falling*, that he was 'part-Aboriginal'.

What the critics of Mudrooroo seem not to appreciate is that to acquire an Aboriginal identity (regardless of how) in 1965 was not exactly something that people were queuing up to do. To be regarded by the dominant society of Australia 1965 as being a 'boong', 'coon' or 'Abo' was a passport to discrimination, prejudice and poverty, and many light-skinned Aboriginal people opted to assume a non-Aboriginal identity (Indian, afghan, Maori, etc) to escape the extreme difficulty of life as an Aboriginal person. To have been bestowed with an Aboriginal identity and then embrace and live that identity among Aboriginal people when times were tough is, for me, sufficient for Mudrooroo to be regarded as a member of the Aboriginal community. It ought to be remembered that many of those who (often opportunistically) opted to pretend that they weren't Aboriginal in return for acceptance in the white community were reviled by the Kooris, as Barry Morris found in Kempsey,

...there is a certain disdain for people who have been able to 'pass for white' but who found 'they had some blackfella in 'em after we got "the rights" 'cause they thought there might be somethin' in it for 'em'. Those who had 'gone whitefellas way' were described by younger people as 'coconuts' - black on the outside but white on the inside. Such a nominal identification with being Aboriginal by birth alone is rejected. In effect, those who deny notions of mutual aid and support and close ties grounded in familiarity are seen to behave like Europeans. (Morris 1989: 214)

So, the Dhan-gadi people in Kempsey NSW (my people's next door neighbours), feel that an important component of an Aboriginal identity are these 'notions of mutual aid and support and close ties grounded in familiarity'. Indeed, most Aboriginal people who have grown up in Aboriginal communities will tell you that these attributes of social responsibility and close family ties are far more intrinsic in an Aboriginal identity than Archie Weller's broad nose and thick lips. Again, Morris notes,

Social identity is based upon webs of resemblances. Past and present relationships are not perceived in terms of a biological model but are defined primarily in terms of cultural notions of interconnectedness. Relationships are grounded in continuity and duration. Social legitimacy is established through maintaining the emotional bonds that give expression to social connectedness.

Morris' finding that nominal identification with being Aboriginal by birth alone was rejected is also very interesting, and it should be said that the converse also applies. There have been several instances that I know of in NSW where non-Aboriginal children have been adopted into Aboriginal families, brought up with an Aboriginal identity and today consider themselves (and

are regarded by the communities they live in as) Aboriginal people. This would seem to undermine the detractors of Mudrooroo as it establishes that 'blood' has little to do with 'Aboriginality', at least in terms of what Marcia Langton terms the first 'category of the three broad categories of cultural and textual construction of "Aboriginality"'. More important, it seems, are the social responsibilities and being part of a community or group of people who consider themselves Aboriginal. To quote Morris again,

The central importance of notions of togetherness and sharing in the contemporary situation, however, is that they perform a dual function - they act as symbols of distinctiveness and of resistance to the processes of individuation and incorporation within the wider society. The notions of sharing and togetherness provide a counter-critique of the perceived materialism and egoism of the dominant society. As one woman put it, 'Blackfellas always sharing, whitefellas even let their own starve before they'd help 'em.' For this woman, relationships between Europeans are egoistic in nature because they are informed by a concern to satisfy only one's own wants and the setting apart of oneself to the exclusion of others. To satisfy one's needs is to place primary importance on the private domain and to ignore wider social relations. The major criticism levelled at Europeans, and the distinction drawn between them and Aborigines, is that their outlook is focused upon the self-interestedness of the enclosed, individuated family at the expense of wider social relations

It is instructive to examine how both Mudrooroo and Archie Weller each reacted to their respective challenges to their identities, and presented themselves to a non-Aboriginal audience. This non-Aboriginal audience is where both Mudrooroo and Weller had constructed and represented themselves as bone-fide 'Aborigines', and it constituted the 98% of the readers of their work. On one hand the non-Aboriginal, Perth rich kid, Archie, declared in a Sydney newspaper,

Proving descent should be a 'detail' in deciding who is Aboriginal...If you grow up in a West Australian country town and you think you are Aboriginal and people think you are Aboriginal. You bloody well are.

Weller's dilemma is that no Aboriginal people in his country town seemed to recall thinking he was Aboriginal, so it seems that the question of identity is not as simple as self-declaration, at least in terms of Aboriginal identity. Mudrooroo, writing an 'afterword' in a new book, on one hand was in part amused by the furore and asked whether now he had been declared a 'black American' should he wear his cap back to front? He says he doesn't necessarily feel uncomfortable if he had to adopt a Black American heritage as, 'Most of the music I listened to was Black American, my favourite writer as Black American and I had direct influences in my life from Black Americans.' On another level he states, 'I had discovered that identity is a fragile thing and can be taken away, just as it can be given', and then challenges, with a question, those in the Aboriginal community who consider purity of blood so important,

...are those persons who claim some genetic connection to the indigenous people of Australia ready to accept their polyglot origins and release a culture on the world which reflects the many strands of Australian society and thus enters that postmodernist clash of cultures which is the world we live in?

In conclusion, it seems that Mudrooroo has responded in a more constructive way to the externally imposed denial of his identity than has Archie Weller. That Weller considers his situation a 'predicament' shows that he both fails to understand the nature of identity as a transient thing, and has never appreciated the importance of convincing others of the group with which you seek to identify to accept your identification. Mudrooroo has the capacity to survive the 'threat' to his identity because he understands what Marcia Langton means when argues that the cultural and textual construction of 'Aboriginality' consists of at least three broad categories that include experience between Aboriginal and Aboriginal (in context of their own world); between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal in a context where 'inherited, imagined representations' infused in the white consciousness dominate the exchange; and the third situation where there can be an actual dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.

This necessarily means there are multiple constructs of Aboriginality occurring daily in the life of a Koori person, and that each construct is determined by a given situation that exists in that particular time and space. Even within Langton's first category (Aboriginal to Aboriginal) there can be a multiplicity of constructs of Aboriginality determined, for example, by whether each Aborigine comes from the community in which the encounter takes place, where the two speak the same language, whether one is an urban, city-dweller and the other is a remote community person, all these factors and many more contribute to the particular construction of 'Aboriginality' in any of Langton's given encounters of the first kind.

Because there are still numerous Aboriginal people in Australia (including me) who regard Mudrooroo as an Aboriginal person, he knows that rather than oppressing him and creating a 'predicament' for him, the attempted confiscation of his identity has in fact liberated him to function as whoever he wants to be. This after all has been an important attribute for him in his life and work as a novelist, and it enables him to straddle the many worlds that make up his being. When I first met Mudrooroo in 1973 his primary identity to me was that of a Buddhist. This did not affect my understanding of him as an Aboriginal person, and I understood then that 'Aboriginality' was a more fluent and diverse concept than many of my fellow Koori political activists would have conceded. To me Mudrooroo has lived the life of an Aboriginal person, displayed Aboriginal values, and will always be regarded by me as an Aboriginal. He will not have to reconstruct any aspect of his identity in his interaction with me. I cannot feel the same about Archie Weller.

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