

# **Development, Environmental and Indigenous People's Movements in Australia: Issues of Autonomy and Identity**

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## **Abstract**

Indigenous movements in Australia are at a crossroad in their efforts to protect their intrinsic relations with land, nature and culture on the one hand and engaging with the reconciliatory and developmental dynamics of the state on the other. This paper examines the process of articulation and rejuvenation of indigenous identities that negotiate across culture, environment, sustainable livelihood and the developmental needs of the community. Locating these movements within wider socio-historical contexts it focuses on the tensions between a pro-conservation and a pro-development approach in grass roots indigenous movements. Three case studies are presented – drawn from the Sydney region. One indigenous group's struggle against a housing development, defined as a threat to indigenous and environmental heritage, is contrasted with an indigenous group that is internally divided over an agreement with a mining developer, and a third group that has engaged in constructing housing and welfare projects, and in part has itself become a developer. The article thereby addresses the reformulation of indigenous identities in Australian society as indigenous peoples' movements have renegotiated the contending pressures of environment and development.

## **The Problem and the Perspective**

As collective identity is constructed through contemporaneous processes of daily interactions and engagements and through the historicity of these processes it gets negotiated with local conditions, historical experience and interconnections with the wider society. As a complex and dynamic process of acquiring collective selfhood and constructing culturally-defined meaning with a sense of solidarity, identity also gets reformed and rejuvenated in the process of change and transformation in society. Identities are thus continually shifting descriptions of us (Hall 1996), and 'can be defined as differential probability' (Stryker 1990, pp. 873–74), formed and reformed with varieties of alternative 'choices based on reason, tradition or else' (Sen 1999, p. 22). These choices may be formed with several cross-cutting discourses of identity namely, class, gender, race, age, and ethnicity at a given time and space. They can also be articulated in different ways. Hence it is the very plasticity of identity that makes its cultural and political significance, since the shifting and changing character of identities chronicles the way that it gets transformed over time (Hall 1996).

The changing character of identity is rooted in its subjective construction paving the way for its transformation from 'structure to agency', and resurgence through 'changed self perception', and 'rejuvenation for the collective action' (Cerutti 2001). Here we see the 'creation of new meanings' for actors themselves, and by themselves (Castells 1997, p. 2). These transformations are linked to struggles against hegemony, and contestation of subordination and subjugation wherein people are located within oppressive structures of power, hierarchy and domination through interactions of racial, ethnic, colonial, class, caste, gender inequality and discrimination.

Identities, to Castells, are constructed in the varied contexts of power relationships. Accordingly there are legitimising identities meant to maintain the status quo, introduced by the dominant institutions of society to extend and rationalise their domination vis-à-vis social actors; resistance identities generated by those actors that are in conditions devaluated or stigmatised by the logic of domination, to build trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from or opposed to those permeating the institutions of society; and project identities constructed by social actors on the basis of whatever cultural materials available to them to build a new identity that redefines their positioning in society, and which in the process, seeks the transformation of the whole structure. These identities however are not discrete; rather in a historical context one may get transformed into another. Castells, for instance, maintains that "identities that start as 'resistance' may reduce to 'project' and may also in the due course of history become 'legitimising' identities to rationalise their domination by becoming the dominant institutions in society. To him there is *per se* no progressive or regressive identity except for its historical context (Castells 1997, p. 8). In the wake of globalisation, 'along with the technological revolution, the transformation of capitalism, and the demise of statism', as Castells puts it, 'we have experienced ... the widespread surge of powerful expressions of collective identity that challenge globalisation and cosmopolitanism on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment. These expressions are multiple, highly diversified following the contours of each culture, and the historical sources of formation of identity. They include proactive movements, aiming at transforming human relationship at their most fundamental level' (Castells 1997, p. 6).

### *Identities and Social Movements*

Social movements are the essential ‘connecting process of formation for collective identity and production of solidarity’ (Pizzorno 1978, p. 293). They “empower” members in defense of the acquired identity (Melucci 1992, 1996). Social movements are circumscribed by identities based on subjectivity, morality, emotion, value and cognition (Touraine 1981, Bertaux 1990, Eyerman and Jamison 199, Hegedus 1990) on the one hand, and also common interest, rational calculations and contentious politics (Tilly 1985, McCarthy and Zald 1977, Tarrow 1995) on the other. It is again that social movements, rather than becoming a reflection of collective identity, at times become the ‘public experience of self’ with the increasing quantum of mobility and shockwaves of fluidity in contemporary society (Urry 2000, cf. McDonald, 2002).

### *Indigenous Life, Culture and Identity*

The life and culture of indigenous people across the globe have largely been characterised by their intrinsic relationships to land, nature and environment and the ideals of solidarity of collective identity and autonomy that generate struggles for the preservation of these relationships and ideals. For them, collective resistance has become a continuous experience against historical and contemporaneous oppression by colonial and post-colonial powers that have encroached on their lives and autonomy within the public agenda of ‘civilising’, ‘modernising’, ‘mainstreaming’, ‘developing’, ‘educating’ and ‘globalising’ their specific ways of life, institutions and culture. The processes are experienced as economic and environmental dispossessions, cultural and political subordination, physical annihilation and forced assimilation with the colonial way of life.

In the globalising world many of the modern states, despite their commitment to international obligations and popular mandates have seldom been successful in protecting indigenous social rights and cultural autonomy, to promote the ideals of their self-determination, to prevent their economic dispossession and political subordination, and to integrate them within its developmental and reconciliatory initiatives. In this article the view that indigenous social movements have constructed and rejuvenated indigenous identity through contestation and protest against the state, its coercive apparatus, and the dominant sections of society will be critically examined. Hence the major questions are: how have indigenous movements in Australia engaged with issues of culture, nature and development? Has there been any uniformity in the process of such formation? What has been the nature of transformation of

such identity? Towards this endeavour the following three cases from the Sydney region are examined: indigenous people's resistance against Sandon Point Housing Project in Thirroul, Wollongong; commercial mining on traditional lands to finance community development, and agitation against these initiatives in Worimi Land Council; and engagement with protection of land and welfare initiatives in Gandangara Land Council. The field work for this study was conducted during March-September 2010.

The process of manifestation of indigenous social movements, and the formation and reformulation of indigenous identities in Australia are rooted in historical neglect and injustice on the one hand and contemporary socio-political conditions on the other. Herein is a glimpse of this historical trajectory of the indigenous people in Australia.

### **Historical Trajectory and the Indigenous people of Australia: a Few Milestones**

The process of colonisation of Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait peoples by the British imperial power that took place in 1788 and continued unabated through the 18th, 19th and middle of the 20th century, led to the grabbing of the land of these people, robbing them of their livelihood and inherited linkages with nature, culture and environment, relegating them to the margins, as aliens in their own land. Prolonged colonial state policy of annihilation and exclusion and forced assimilation also saw the practice of confining the indigenous people in reserves and forceful removal of aboriginal children from their parents, that produced a hugely traumatised aboriginal 'stolen generation', who are the victims and witnesses to this 'blemished chapter' of British colonial history in Australia (Haebich 2001).

Colonial domination accompanied by the loss of land, autonomy, and human dignity, ethnic and cultural identity, generated resistance and discontent amongst indigenous people, manifested in organised social movements from the 1930's. The Australian state granted indigenous people voting rights in 1962 in the wake of increasing public demand for reconciliation. Though subsequently various land related acts were enacted, for instance the Aboriginal Lands Trust Act of South Australia 1966, and the Aboriginal Lands Act of 1970, indigenous people's movements were set back in 1971 when in the Gove Land Rights case, the court ruled that Australia had been *terra nullius* before British settlement, and that no concept of native title existed in Australian law.

Significantly on 26th January (Australia Day) 1972, a group of young Aborigines made history by erecting 'Aboriginal Tent Embassy' on the lawns of Parliament House in Canberra with the demand for the Northern Territory to be predominantly represented by the indigenous people, for indigenous land and mining rights and preservation of their sacred sites, and for compensation money for not returnable lands (Goodall 1996). The Whitlam Government in 1972 introduced the policy of aboriginal self determination with provision for aboriginal-controlled organisations, limited land rights and created a new Department of Aboriginal Affairs to look into the affairs of the indigenous people of Australia. The Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976 was later enacted to facilitate land claims, followed by the NSW Aboriginal Land Rights Acts in 1983 (Norman, 2007).

The rejuvenated indigenous movements gained significant political space in the 1980s and were further advanced with the judgment of the *Mabo v. Queensland* case in 1993, which declared that the previous legal concept of Australia as *terra nullius* was invalid, and recognised the native title of the indigenous people under common law. The paradigmatic shift in this judgment was followed by the enactment of the Native Title Act 1993 and the Australian High Court decision in 1996 to recognise the indigenous rights over pastoral leases. These developments led to the creation of the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) and subsequently the (State and local) Land Councils as statutory bodies to assist indigenous people with land acquisition and management and to achieve economic, environmental, social and cultural benefits.

With recognition of indigenous land rights, indigenous identities were rejuvenated in the later 1990s. The *Bringing Them Home* report (1997) of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission of Australia created a huge public outcry in 1999, and called on the Australian Parliament to recognise the mistreatment to the indigenous people by the British colonisers (Haebich 2001). The People's Walk for Reconciliation on 28 May 2000, with more than 250,000 people walking over the Sydney Harbour Bridge demanding a public apology and respectful reconciliation, marked a new departure for indigenous movements in Australia. Eight years later, on 13 February 2008, the Australian government apologised to Indigenous Australians, as follows:

'We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. ... To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and

communities, we say sorry..... We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation ....' (Rudd 2008).

Many indigenous people, however, are not reconciled with the healing process, and they continue to protest against the state, for instance by observing the Aboriginal Day of Mourning on the Australia Day (26th January) every year. Many indigenous people have protested against the Federal Government's Intervention in the Northern Territory, launched in 2007, and especially the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975, necessary to enable the Intervention. Lee Rhiannon, a Green NSW Senator in an interview for this project on May 16, 2010 stated that:

'the Northern Territory Intervention is a black mark on the government. It was done without consultation with the indigenous people. The army has been deployed, legitimate government has been suspended, and there have imposition of several policies on them. This is very unfortunate and needs to be stopped ...'

Similar concerns have also been expressed against Queensland's Wild River Act 2007 by the indigenous people as it has been perceived to be an encroachment on traditional practice and also betrays a lack of trust in indigenous peoples ability 'to keep the rivers as pristine as they have done for thousands of years' (Pearson 2010).

However despite these acrimonies, a visible shift has been marked in the reconciliatory approach of the Australian state towards the indigenous people. Such a shift has been influenced by the indigenous people's pressure from below and by the important declarations and regulations of the United Nations to which the Australian government is a signatory. The policies of accommodation and reconciliation that have been introduced in the wake of proliferation of self-conscious indigenous movements since early 1970s have opened up new possibilities and challenges in reestablishing linkages between the indigenous culture and environment. Have these measures for reconciliation been able to provide equal status to the indigenous people in the Australian society? We shall discuss this in the following section.

### **Indigenous People Today**

Indigenous people are disadvantaged in Australian society, both in absolute and relative terms. Over the past 20 years, the indigenous population has doubled from 227,593 in 1986 to 562,861 in 2009 and currently indigenous people constitute about 2.7 % of the total population of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010). In the process of colonisation,

the indigenous people of Australia lost control over their language and culture: only 12% can speak an indigenous language and only one percent practice within indigenous belief systems.

Though there is a higher proportion of young people amongst indigenous than non-indigenous people, the proportion of elderly people is substantially lower – 3% of the indigenous and 13% of the non indigenous people are aged 65 years and above, reflecting the poor health, education and economic status of the indigenous people of Australia.

Indigenous people have a substantially higher proportion of teenage mothers, with 20%, as against 4% amongst non-indigenous people. The infant mortality and maternal mortality rates are substantially higher for indigenous people and indigenous people have a lower life expectancy, of 59.4 years for men and 64.8 years for women, as against 78.7 years for men and 82.6 years for women amongst the non-indigenous population. 27% of indigenous people live in crowded housing in comparison with only 6% for non-indigenous people. More than 9% of indigenous people are homeless as against 2.5 % of non indigenous people.

The proportion of learners completing year 12 educations amongst indigenous people is 22% as against 47% for non-indigenous people. Attendance at university or technical college is 6% amongst indigenous people, as against 25% for the non- indigenous population. Similarly the employment rate for the age group of 15 years and above is 46% amongst indigenous people, in comparison with 62% percent amongst non- indigenous people. Again, 16% of indigenous people are unemployed and 46% are not in the labour force in comparison with 5% and 35% respectively for non-indigenous people. The mean gross individual income per week for indigenous people in 2006 was \$278, while for non-indigenous people it was \$473 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Indigenous people are also politically disadvantaged: despite gaining the right to vote from 1960, there was no indigenous politician elected to the lower house of the federal parliament until the 2010 parliamentary election (Reconciliation Australia 2010).

All of the negative markers for disenfranchised populations—imprisonment, domestic violence, alcoholism—are much higher for Aboriginal peoples. The *Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody* (1991) stated that Aboriginal disadvantage is directly associated with dispossession and forced removal from traditional lands. Such

dispossessions have disrupted connections between indigenous culture and the spirit of 'country', and have produced waves of discontent amongst indigenous people against the Australian state.

### **Development, Conservation and Indigenous Movements**

Developmental and reconciliatory perspectives have always been a contested terrain amongst indigenous people, as they try to integrate divergent values, ideologies, expectations and experiences. There are contradictory views on economic development, with some viewing it as a possible means of breaking the barriers of marginalisation, while others view development as a threat to the links between culture, land, environment and the dreaming story of indigenous people. Indigenous views on conservation and development at the grass roots generate conflicts, not only between the state and indigenous activists, but also at times amongst indigenous people themselves. In the wake of an emergent need for development, integration and reconciliation of indigenous peoples with the wider society on the one hand, and a continuing desire to preserve linkages with cultural heritage, nature and livelihood on the other, indigenous people's movements in Australia are now moving through a changing trajectory. In the context of these tensions, there has been a reconstruction of indigenous identity at the grass roots, both in terms of historical experiences and contemporary realities. The following case studies reflect on some aspects of these movements and reconstructions.

#### *Sandon Point*

Sandon Point, also known as the McCauley's Beach, comprises 61 hectares of open scenic space between the coastal villages of Thirroul and Bulli in the northern suburbs of Wollongong, on the east coast of NSW, Australia. The local indigenous people claim that the beach has been a traditional place of their worship, story-telling and tool-making: the place relates to their 'dreaming' and has been a burial site dating back 6,000 years. In 1998, a human skull-bone was exposed on the sand dune and the local indigenous people believed it to be the ceremonial burial remains of an aboriginal cleaver man, Kuradiji, a man with special spiritual status. The land was once public land zoned for mining and industrial use and had been zoned for public use since 1980. In 1995 the area was sold to a Sydney-based property developer, Stockland, for a proposed luxurious housing project of 1200 dwellings units. The sale sparked a series of protests from both indigenous and non-indigenous people.



Indigenous people agitated against the Sandon Point development in early 2000 in the wake of Wollongong City Council's finalisation and approval of the project. Protests and agitation compelled the developers to suspend development work in the identified site, pending an archaeological survey. In February 2001 the survey was submitted and Wollongong City Council (WCC), and subsequently the Land and Environment Court, allowed housing construction to resume.

Protesters felt that the archaeological surveyors were biased as they had consulted only one Wodi Wodi Elder, while other traditional owner groups representing Korewal, Illawarra, Jerrungarugh, Shoalhaven groups, were ignored. Protestors argued that the surveyor had not collected sufficient material from the appropriate places on the site. As a result, the agitation was intensified.

Under the leadership of Uncle Dootch Kennedy, a community elder and elected Chairperson of Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council, and with the overwhelming support of local indigenous people, the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE) was established in December 2001 by igniting sacred fire, erecting a tent on the site of construction, and maintaining a twenty-four hour vigil to stake their inherited claim. Meanwhile, to muster support from across Australia, the sacred fire was carried from the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy to Canberra, and elsewhere, and brought back as a symbol of indigenous unity, resistance and cultural autonomy. During an elaborate ritual Yurin elder Uncle Guboo Ted Thomas renamed the Sandon Point as Kuradji to reassert the indigenous claim. The Illawarra Local Land Council also declared the whole Sandon Point area as a place of significance for aboriginal culture and heritage.

As the developers started fencing the area on February 14 2002, the community formed a human chain to prevent vehicle movements for construction in the area, and police arrested a large number of protesters. Uncle Dootch Kennedy then brought a legal petition to the NSW Land and Environment Court, seeking an injunction against development activities on the site. The injunction delayed construction, but ultimately the court upheld the development approval of Wollongong City Council, albeit with some conditions. Construction activities resumed in late 2002, however the speed of the construction was slowed down in view of sustained agitation.

The protesters approached the NSW Government, but also in vain. The NSW Minister for Planning approved the development plan at Sandon Point in December 2006, despite the significance of aboriginal heritage on the disputed site. Activists also approached the NSW Land and Environmental Court and in early 2007 the Court considered the impact of flooding due to rising sea levels, and declared the development concept null and void. Following an appeal by the NSW Minister for Planning, the Supreme Court of Australia over-turned the decision. Significantly, in May 2007 an appeal by the protestors for Sandon Point to be declared an aboriginal area to be protected under the National Parks and the Wildlife Act forced another suspension of construction work. However the Minister of Planning, as the ultimate authority on developmental planning, reapproved the project in October 2009. The indigenous activists again moved to the Land and Environment Court in November 2009, raising the issues of environmental hazards. In July 2010 the Environment Court rejected the appeal, and protestors took the case to the Supreme Court. Meanwhile on 8 April 2011 the developer Stockland was fined \$1500 by Wollongong City Council on the complaint of the Sandon Point Aboriginal Tent Embassy (SPATE) that recent heavy rains, which triggered floods in the region's south, had also caused a build-up of storm water at the McCauley's Beach residential site. The flooding vindicated the environmental concerns, but the complaints were rejected on several counts (Munro 2011).

The process of legal challenge and counter-challenge created a host of confrontations between the NSW Government and the developers on the one hand, and the indigenous people on the other. The protestors strongly felt that the issue was shaped by racism: that in a white-dominated Australian society it was very difficult for the indigenous people to get their collective concerns and voice recognised. To them the government was guided by the interest of the developers, and not by respect for indigenous culture and heritage. Such a feeling is reflected in the words of Dootch Kennedy, the Chairman of SPATE:

'We are marginalised as we are only a tiny minority in Australia...and our voice is not heard by them (the government)..... They have given this land to the developers to earn money. They are not the native Australians; they are not linked to the land... its ecosystem, its cultural heritage. They are linked to the land through extraction of natural resources to earn profit for them.... The government in Australia is run by the miners, developers, international companies who have little respect for the land heritage and culture of the indigenous people.... They are killing the aborigines like animals. They have destroyed our land, our nature our cultural heritage and we have lost control on our life. We are fighting with our own people to protect our heritage...' (Roy Dootch Kennedy interviewed August 1, 2010)

The protesters challenged the propriety of the state in damaging the indigenous people's linkage between land and culture:

'They call us savages, but they keep on committing genocide... Why have you robbed me of my heritage? Why should we continue to be robbed? Why is our mother earth to be sacrificed? What have you done and what are you doing to our land? All cultures in this earth have respect for their own land, why should we be deprived of such respect? We want them to stop disrespecting our culture and stop harming our land... our culture. They should repair all the damage they have done to our mother earth, our cultural heritage.... They don't understand and don't want to understand the way we speak and the way we do we think and the way we live with nature. What they have done to us, they can't repeat the same to our children.'

Through this movement the indigenous people wanted to preserve and rebuild their linkage to culture and environment:

'We need to establish the significance of indigenous people in the community in Australia. You are to recognise the cultural linkages of the indigenous people with the story telling, craft and tool making values that connect them to their country. .... While talking about assimilation you are to take care of indigenous values as well and you are to connect the country through their cultural heritage, and language. You have to believe in the adaptive nature of indigenous culture'.

The protesters were confident of the strength of their unity and optimistic about the outcome of their movement, despite the setbacks:

'We have lost in the court but there is the win in this loss. It strongly indicates that the aborigines can't get justice in Australia since the law and the state machinery is operated by the non-aboriginals. The journey does not end here. We are neither going to bow down our heads, nor throw our hands in the air saying that we have lost. The journey begins now. We are united – all aborigines of Australia are with us in the struggle for our land, culture and environment'. (Roy Dootch Kennedy interviewed August 1, 2010)

The campaign was remarkably successful in mobilising non-indigenous supporters. Echoing the sentiments of Kennedy, a non-indigenous resident described the situation as follows:

We give lip service to the issue of the aboriginal issue. We have a very limited view on the aboriginal interest in Australia. The land belongs to them. Even if the sacred site is out of the boundary of the development project, we should respect their sentiment... Belief is not guided by an artificial boundary..... We have played our innings... We have developed the country by destroying their culture, nature and everything. Let us allow them to have their say in the development" (Sandon Point Resident August 1, 2010)

The Sandon Point activists developed a common voice and identity through their collective action by mobilising indigenous symbols, rituals and comprehensive collective action. They not only developed responses against developers and the state initiatives, but also proactively developed networks of local indigenous people with the wider society in their efforts to defend the relations with indigenous land, nature, culture and environment.

*Sand Mining through the Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council (WLLC)*

Aboriginal Land Councils in Australia have emerged out of long drawn struggle of aboriginal people to protect their interests and aspirations related to land rights. As such, Land Councils are 'committed to ensuring a better future for Aboriginal people by working for the return of culturally significant and economically viable land, pursuing cultural, social and economic independence for its people and being politically pro-active and voicing the position of Aboriginal people on issues that affect them' (Merlan 2005).

The Worimi Aboriginal Land Council is made up of several indigenous peoples, Buraigal, Gamipingal and the Garawerrigal, and is recognised as one of the most vibrant and active land councils in NSW. It has been successful in acquiring a vast track of land by through land claims, and has also initiated business ventures, including a pleasure park to attract tourists. However in 2003 Worimi became bankrupt due to alleged corruption and mismanagement of land and resources, leading to an inquiry in 2004 into the loss of \$720, 000 of Land Council funds (Jopson and Ryle 2004). In spite of these financial issues, the Worimi Land Council has initiated a Sand dune touring company and a large-scale sand mining program. Though it obtained support from a majority of the indigenous communities and members of the Land Council for the venture, a section of the indigenous community elders, environmentalists and local administrators opposed the economic expansion plan, especially the sand mining activities.

According to the pro-development Land Council members the sand-mining project 'is expected to generate about 60 operational and contract jobs and a handsome revenue and ... the income that would generate out of these scheme would be used for the housing, health, employment and environmental sustainability programs for the Aboriginal community' (Andrew Smith, interviewed, August 25, 2010). However, the pro-conservationists allege that these initiatives are pushed forward by the vested interests and undemocratically, unmindful

of the significance of indigenous art, craft and heritage, and sentiments of the majority of the indigenous people. Reflecting this, there have also been claims and counter claims about the status of actual occupiers of Worimi land.

Aunty Carol Ridgeway-Bissett, a community elder, who claims to be the actual traditional occupier of the land, has strongly opposed the mining project, fearing that sand mining would not protect the traditional spiritual and cultural sanctity of the land. She has organised protests against mining and has gained regular support from the locals and the environmentalists. She asserted that:

‘Sand dune is a part of our culture, our heritage. The sand dunes are the ancient landscape of my ancestors; it is full of the bones and artifacts of my people. We get blessings from them, from these sand dunes. We would protect it....Who knows how much and how many have already been crushed and destroyed by the mining’.

She claims that the sand miners

‘conduct biased archaeological studies without consulting the actual owners of the land. These development and mining activities are anti-indigenous people, their culture and heritage....The Land Rights Act has not handed over land to the people who have links to the land. The Local Land Council and not to the actual owner of the land...The Land Council in connivance with the developers is destroying the aboriginal cultural heritage....’ (Aunty Carol Ridgeway-Bissett interviewed September 3, 2010).

Aunty Carol Ridgeway-Bissett is in the process of preparing an alternative archeological report. She is lobbying extensively with NSW politicians, appealing to Federal Ministers, organising a rally to stop sand mining and the other commercial ventures of the land council. Non-indigenous environmentalists have also been critical of the sand mining and have echoed the voice of indigenous people. Director of Total Environment Centre, Jeff Angel is of the view that coastal sand mining had run its course and ought to stop, arguing: ‘There has been enough devastation...Dune systems are dynamic and always moving. Interfering with them is something that ought to be approached with caution’ (Ray, 2009).

However Andrew Smith, the Chairperson of Worimi Land Council is a pro-development activist. He wants to use the available indigenous resources for the economic and social benefits of these people. He is personally enterprising, wants to take risks and learn from the experience. He says:

‘They [the Government] have given back our land. We feel good. However, we have also got lots of liability. We are to give tax...We have huge expenditure... . . . So we are to generate revenue by using our land, undertaking a cultural heritage program through the developers and through the extraction of sand from the sand dune. This money we use for education, for health, for fellowship and training program of the indigenous unemployed youth and also for the community awareness on environmental sustainability program’.

He explains that 30% of the revenue generated from sand extraction will accrue to the Local Land Council, the remaining 70% going to the State Land Council and the developers, yet sand extraction from the sand dune has an immediate practical purpose:

‘The sand extraction is done not for this little money alone, but also to protect the indigenous community from the disaster of ever expanding sand dune. The moving sand dome will engulf us very fast if we don’t stop it....’

Andrew Smith is also an assimilationist. Though he is very critical of the injustice historically meted out to the indigenous people of Australia, he is in favour of rebuilding indigenous society and culture through a synthesis between indigenous traditional values and the ways of life of contemporary Australian society and culture. He looks for a respectable assimilation of the indigenous people in Australian society. To him:

‘Assimilation however should not be the way that Australia tried to assimilate the Aborigines. They introduced a genocide killing millions of Aborigines.... We are so assimilated now that we don’t live the way we lived thousand years ago. We don’t wear lap-laps and live in the dunes. We live in houses, at the end of the day, we sleep in a bed, and eat at McDonalds, drive cars and watch TV...Despite all these changes we the indigenous people are still here with our own cultural heritage and our connection to the land and the country. We are struggling to get back our country of dreaming, our autonomy and independence. We want to preserve our culture and our linkage with nature and environment. However it should not be done by removing the community from the Australian society...’ (Andrew Smith, interviewed August 25, 2010).

Though the Worimi Local Land Council has been oriented towards developmentalism and reconciliation, an element of discontent against these processes has been shaped by the indigenous people to protect their cultural heritage and linkage to nature. The inner cleavage among the indigenous people however is not devoid of common concern for their plights, historical oppression and neglect in Australian society.

#### *Gandangara Land Council, Liverpool*

The Gandangara Aboriginal Local Land Council covers nine Local Government Area councils including Parramatta, Penrith, Fairfield, Auburn, Bankstown, Holroyd, Sutherland,

Campbelltown and Liverpool. It is located in the traditional area of the Cabrogal clan of the Darug nation and is considered to be a model Land Council that has acquired distinction for several of its activities. It excelled in providing employment and training to the indigenous unemployed youth, and in providing education, health and old age care and housing services. It has undertaken indigenous land care (for instance, at Mt Annan Botanical Gardens), and built a memorial to the stolen generations, and sought to strengthen cultural awareness amongst Aboriginal youth. The Land Council has taken initiatives to exploit community-held land resources to extract benefit for its members. In March 2009 the Gandangara members passed a resolution governing land use, and approved an elaborate business plan. A commercial housing project is a part of this plan, and is supported by all the members of the community.

The community members have developed a missionary zeal to initiate welfare and development activities. They meet regularly with the community elders, stolen generation members, young job seekers and others, to take proactive initiatives to build a new future for the indigenous community through welfarism. Overall, they have initiated a social movement to reconstruct their identity through the developmental process. Indeed, assimilation and integration have emerged to be a dominant perspective for them, even though they are not uncritical of colonial oppression and dispossession. Such views are reflected in the perspectives of several activists of the Land Council, such as Carole Brown, a member of the Land Council. Carole Brown is an Aboriginal assimilationist. She says:

‘My father is Irish and my mom was an aborigine, so I have a mix heritage. I have the best of both cultures with me. My mom told me to take best from both and I look the both. My first husband was black and second husband was white and I have two beautiful children from these two partners. They represent both world of Australia ...the Aborigines and the White. We have best of both the cultures....Abba-Gabba...’  
(Carole Brown, interviewed August 12, 2010, August 17, 2010)

However the indigenous people face several problems in White-dominated Australia. To her:

‘Being minority we face problems. In the growing up process the children lose confidence. We are forgetting our culture, language, songs, and music... We train the children to know our culture; we also let them know the other culture as well as to protect the indigenous cultural heritage. The Aboriginal people should maintain their own culture and be developed by their own rights...’

She adds, ‘.....this is unfortunate that a huge number of in the youth from mixed parentage are unable to speak the indigenous language. They are not aware of the significance

of indigenous culture in our developmental activities. ... Because of mixed parentage, and the long practice of child removal from the indigenous community, knowledge about cultural heritage is declining among the aboriginal people, especially among the youth.... Australian society has got too much technology, too much consumerism and too much of the comforts. Many of indigenous are forgetting their culture because of the pressure of these technologies, consumer culture, comforts....'

To remain rooted in one's own culture despite being historically uprooted in a multicultural context is a very difficult task: cultural protection can't be pursued against the development process of the community. What are the strategies? The Land Council has organised initiatives for cultural change and also for economic development:

We have also activities related to day care of the community elders. In the day care centre we keep them engaged with the activities like indigenous painting and drawing and making of indigenous craft and tools. We have also a health care centre that takes care of the health related issues of the Aboriginal people, especially for the elderly ones, who come here not only for health care service, but also to share each other's experiences. (Carole Brown interviewed August 12, 2010, August 17, 2010)

She adds: 'We have land development, land caring activities. We have identified a housing project that is supported by the community.... This housing is for all - indigenous and non-indigenous. The profit is supposed to help us for employment generation, age care, health and education program. The land is carefully selected and there is no problem'.

Within these developmental activities indigenous culture is carefully preserved by bringing a harmony. She says:

'It is a big thing that we have got the land rights now. In the hype of all these developments, the youth tend to forget their own culture. The indigenous people are to educate themselves about their cultural heritage. We need harmony between indigenous culture and development. We teach the young generation to be honest to you by a becoming respectful both the culture. This approach will bring a lot of harmony in society.' (Carole Brown interviewed August 12, 2010, August 17, 2010).

Within this urge for harmony, there is also the voice for discontent, which is historically rooted. Forceful removal of children has brought not only a traumatic experience for the victims but also to their parents. A victim of the stolen generation, Auntie Lily, associated with the Hoxton Park Elders Centre of Gandangara Land Council, had an horrific experience. She was united with her son 40 years after he was forcibly removed. She says:



‘You can’t simply explain what the torture is. .... It is emotional, psychological and physical. . Hundreds of thousand mothers in Australian lost their children. I am a mother; I also lost my child who was taken away from me on grounds of race. That was a new baby. I was kept in church in Brisbane to serve the Priests and others.... They have destroyed every thing... our culture, nature, our lives.’

Though her life is circumscribed by bitter experience, she looks for reconciliation through harmonious coexistence in Australian society. She finds a hope in the unity and activities of the Land Council. To her:

‘It is a time to rebuild... that is however is not an easy process. All the victims of the Stolen Generation, the children and the parents, should be given land under the Local Land Council, to maintain the eco-system. It is through this land that we will build connection between nature and our indigenous culture’. (Auntie Lily, interviewed on August 28, 2010)

The Gandangara Land Council while has emerged to be integrationist with the developmental perspective of the state; it uses this opportunity to revive the indigenous cultural ethos and idioms through these developmental activisms. Herein the criticality against the state is used to redefine indigenous identity and unity at the grass roots.

### **Conclusion: Dichotomies of Cooption and Contestation in Indigenous Collective Mobilisations**

The Australian historian, H. C. Coombs stated that, ‘throughout their history since 1788 aborigines have sought a “composition” with white society in which their links with the land and the essence of the “Aboriginal way” can be maintained’. Coombs talked about ‘the two streams of people, black and white, which are forming Australian society, each with its own origin and character but influencing each other, yet preserving even into the ocean itself, its own identity and its distinctive contribution to the character and life-sustaining capacity of the Bay as a whole’ (Coombs 1991, pp. 21-22). Though there are also contradictions in the construction of such symbol.

One of the prominent challenges is the perceptive cultural differences in the understanding of each others’ culture. Bennett argues that ‘Aboriginal people see their relationship with the Australian nation as requiring recognition of their status as its original resident and as different to-as superior to-the position of all others. Although the Western view of rights talks of each individual’s right to be treated equally with all others, Aboriginal people see their ‘first people’ status as demanding different treatment from that given to all others because

‘western legal systems have provided inadequate protection for the group rights of indigenous people. It is in respect of such views that Aboriginal people have had the greatest difficulty in having their message understood by other Australians (Bennett 1999, p. 10).

Indigenous peoples not merely ‘disadvantaged Australians’ or a ‘minority’ group, they are the First Nation Peoples of the country. They have been the victims of poverty and inequality caused by historic treatment and the persistence of systemic discrimination’ (Calma 2007, p.19). The issues of their discrimination and marginalisation now have been articulated through grassroots collective action, and they have been empowered in Australian society through an awakening and politicisation of social questions that challenge the parochialism and institutions of authority (Clark 2008, p.249).

Despite shared circumstances, Aboriginal communities in Australia remain intensely, and proudly, local (Behrendt 1995, p. 27). Despite such localisation, indigenous identity and social movements encounter a host of tensions in contemporary Australia which are caused not only by colonisation but also by the processes of modernisation, economic development and state policy of assimilation and reconciliation. As Sarah Maddison has argued, divergent experiences have produced great diversity in how communities engage with power structures, ‘as they grapple with the often-uncomfortable intersection of their fractured (but not abandoned) traditional and cultural life, the legacies of colonisation, and their own diversity across the continent’; Maddison continues:

‘These intersections of history, culture, experience and identity have produced an extraordinarily complex political culture. These complexities have produced tensions between autonomy and dependency; sovereignty and citizenship; tradition and development; individualism and collectivism; indigeneity and hybridity; unity and regionalism; community and kin; men, women and customary law; elders and the next generation; and mourning and reconciliation’ (Maddison 2009, p.xxiv).

Despite these challenges there remains the possibility of creating a common symbol, founded on indigenous people’s linkage between their life, culture and nature. Rowley’s (1973) observation holds the key when he says: ‘We of the West seem likely to destroy ourselves through our assumption that God gave Nature to man. Perhaps we have to learn, what Aborigines always assumed, that Man is no more than part of nature’ (Rowley 1973, p. 194). Thus there is shared logic of indigenous grassroots protest, assertion and initiative, defined by the tensions within indigenous society and their relations between land, nature and culture.

### *Logic of Grass Roots Protests and their Divergence*

The culture of indigenous social protest has emerged to forge vital links between indigenous people, the state and the civil society. These have been sustained and institutionalised in Australian society through the functioning of the Local Land councils, development initiatives of the state, and the formation of solidarities between indigenous social movement organisations, trade unions, environmentalists, students and many other groupings. Through these mobilisations indigenous people have developed distinctive orientations towards their own culture, nature and environment and the state. They have developed a variety of support bases for their collective action and have followed different strategies of collective action. They have articulated through their every day struggle distinctive solidarities and specific identities, and have received varied state and civil society responses towards their mobilisations over the decades. The variations in orientation, actions and attitudes reflect the kind of issues addressed in the mobilisation and specific framework of assimilation as propagated by the Australian state.

In Sandon Point the indigenous people united themselves to preserve their culture, nature and environment. In the process they have confronted developers and the state by forging solidarities amongst themselves, rejuvenating their identity in terms of traditional cultural heritage and its association to nature. Significantly, through these protests their association with nature and culture was reinforced ideationally, and their relationship with fellow indigenous people was rejuvenated and integrated with the wider network of civil society as represented by environmentalists, students, trade unionists, feminists and others from across Australia, cutting the boundary of localised resistance. Protestors have acquired a resistance identity against the logic of state and developer domination in a White-dominated society. Significantly, the attitude of the state towards this mobilisation has remained predominantly oppositional albeit allowing the space for review and appeal. The Local Land Councils of Australia provide the framework for assimilation of Australian Aborigines with the state and wider society. Though indigenous people are invariably critical of the European invasion, and the perilous treatment, humiliation and torture inflicted on them in by the 'settlers', they have strategically engaged with the process of assimilation (though by compulsion rather than by choice). However their approach and perception towards the state initiatives remains highly eclectic.

Notwithstanding a section of indigenous people viewing developmental initiatives as destructive to nature and indigenous cultural heritage, the dominant section of the Worimi Local Land Council aims to commercially exploit their cultural heritage, land and other assets to generate income. They look for a synthesis between conservation and welfare-induced development, defining a process of 'selective assimilation' and integration with the state, paradoxically pursuing self-determination of indigenous people without compromising the space for development. Though they are critical of past injustice and white domination, they are in the process of creating a space for their engagement with the reconciliation process. Thus amongst them the process of reconstructing indigenous identity moves like a pendulum between legitimising and resistance identity even though the tendency has been towards a 'legitimising identity with criticality'. Conservationists have rejuvenated a form of indigenous identity which is predominantly geared to local resistance. However at a wider level they recognise the state apparatus and look for legal remedies. Significantly, though, the state is indifferent towards the oppositional perspective of the conservationists, while it accommodates the pro-development activists' views and actions. In the process of mobilisation pro-development assimilationists have become more integrated with the state apparatus, while anti-development conservationists have become more interlinked with wider civil society networks.

The Gandangara Local Land Council has essentially taken a pro-development approach even though they are critical of the state at the historical injustice meted out to them. They are protective of their cultural heritage and simultaneously in favour of commercial use of the land, and are selectively conservationist in relation to environment as they use development initiatives to bring change in the economic, health and educational status and life style of indigenous people. As such they have developed a model of a 'legitimising identity with criticality' and are in process of getting integrated with the state apparatus for development and welfare of the community. As noted, the state is accommodative of the aspiration and the activities of this indigenous people.

In brief, indigenous movements in Australia are in a fast process of transition at the grassroots, causing diverse orientations towards indigenous cultural heritage, nature and environment, inculcating and attracting specific support bases, initiating distinct collective actions, constructing varieties of collective action, solidarity and collective identity, forming specific attitude towards the state and thereby inviting distinctive state responses. The

distinctive forms of indigenous protests, identities and state responses discussed in this article are summarised in Table I.

**Table I: Diverse orientations of three Indigenous People’s Movements in Australia**

Cases	Orientation to Indigenous Culture	Orientation to nature/ Environmt	Support base	Nature of Collective Action	Attitude towards State	Attitude of State towards Protests	Nature of Indigeno us Solidarity	Nature of Identity
Sandon Point	Protective	Pro-conservation	Indigenous people, Environmentalist, students, Trade Unions, feminists etc	Agitation, symbolic rituals, legal petition, blockade , Tent Embassy	conflicting	Oppositional	Total Solidarity	Resistant
Worimi Land Council	Selectively Protective	Selective conservation	Sections of Indigenous people, Environmentalist, students	Agitation, legal action	Partly conflicting partly integration	Accommodating	Part Solidarity	Predominantly Legitimising
Gandangara Land Council	Selectively Protective	Selective conservation	Indigenous people	Collective development initiatives	Integrating	Accommodating	Total Solidarity	Legitimising

Indigenous people’s linkage to land, culture and environment is intrinsic and locally circumscribed, as are their protests against historical and contemporary oppression. While within the developmental and reconciliatory dynamics there has been resistance against development initiatives that threaten these linkages, there has also been a legitimising process through the cooption of indigenous people’s initiatives within the welfare domain of the state. The resistance and the legitimising processes have created tensions not only between indigenous people on one hand and the state and developers on the other, but also within the indigenous society itself. The pro-conservation activists across the investigated areas, guided by their sensitivity towards cultural heritage, rejuvenate their indigenous identity in resistance to the state and developers, producing solidarities and political agency with non-indigenous groupings. They propagate for autonomy and self-determination, in terms of indigenous cultural heritage, protocol, and pre-colonial historicity.

Significantly the policy of reconciliation as propagated by the Australian state since 1990s has provided space for the integration and cooption of many conflicts and initiatives of indigenous people in Australian society. State-mandated mechanisms like Local Land Councils provide space for democratic development at the grassroots and solidarity amongst the indigenous people for their collective assertion, and have paved the way for the cooption of indigenous initiatives within the state apparatus, creating the framework of legitimising the

initiatives of pro-development activists. In the process of cooption a degree of compromise with cultural heritage and environmental sustainability has emerged. Here, indigenous society encounters tensions from within. These tensions moreover are compounded by the localised specificities of the indigenous culture, their heterogeneity and the diverse contexts of social and economic development, leading to divergent identities and collective mobilisations. The sustained mobilisation and rejuvenated identities strengthen solidarity in terms of historical experience to develop resistance and politically question social injustice and persistent marginalisation, challenging emerging state perspectives on reconciliation, integration and development. Within the same context, indigenous identity is reformulated to legitimise state perspectives. Despite the differences, sustained mobilisations on land rights and cultural and political autonomy and the common experience of historical oppression, and concern for cultural heritage contribute to articulate and rejuvenate indigenous identities. These identities are in the process of creating space for their engagement with Australian society by maintaining autonomy and respect for each other's culture. This dynamic is reflected in the following statement from Roy Dootch Kennedy, Chairperson of SPATE:

We need a major change in the mindset. That is a mountainous thing and not going to happen so immediately... While talking about assimilation you are to take care of indigenous values as well, and you are to connect the country through cultural heritage and language... The government should now have serious dialogue with us..... The journey begins now.

In this changing trajectory the processes of forming of identity and solidarity amongst indigenous people, as pointed out by various scholars, is affected by emergence of an indigenous middle class and by the overwhelming tendency of that class to become absorbed professionally into government and by the increasing welfare dependency of a large section of indigenous population (Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982, p. 224, cf. Merlan, 2007). However neither the pattern of middle class emergence and nor welfare dependency has been uniform in Australia. These assimilationist forces are positioned within eclectic social and economic processes and differentiated levels of economic development and engagement with the state and wider civil society. There has also been a varied quantum of mobility and migration. Thus the processes of social and cultural integration, economic development and political empowerment at the grassroots through the Local Land Council have produced multiple identities across localities, which are in the process of constant construction and reconstruction, formation and shifting. Within these processes, in term of historical experience, indigenous people remained aligned with resistant identities, while in terms of

contemporary reality one section has shifted from a resistant to a legitimising identity (Castells 1997). These identities become solidified and are institutionalised in a new context (Pizzorno 1978; Melucci 1992, 1996). In the context of social movements while the conservationists are guided by a subjectively moral commitment to culture and indigenous values, a section of pro-development protagonists are guided by common interests, and rational calculations of earning revenue for their immediate economic betterment. These divergences reflect the diversity of available resources and institutional contexts in which the place and identity for indigenous peoples are sustained and empowered in Australian society. Thus, despite the formation of conflicting identities, whether resistant or legitimising, there has remained a continuity in the dynamic of indigenous identity expressed in the aspiration to reestablish linkages between land, environment, culture and autonomy.

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