

HIST106- Assignment 3

Option 1- In what ways did the view of Australian Indigenous history and people presented at the site you visited support or contest the information presented during HIST106 this semester?

Australian Indigenous history encompasses several aspects of self-determination. This highlights the Aboriginal people's radical hope, which immersed from their life on the missions and reserves, as their drive for independency and autonomy progressed. However, some were more successful in retaining their independence, than others. Nevertheless, they were able to survive through the assimilation period of the 20th century despite the oppression they faced. Such oppressive measures by the Australian government and society included Assimilation policies, being controlled by the Board, and caste barriers. The support for "dying out" the Indigenous population is seen through the biological assimilations known as eugenics and the stolen generation. In terms of self-determination, it is particularly evident through activism, which focused on equality for the Indigenous people to achieve civil and human rights. Concerning, the 21st century Aboriginal Australian, there is a constant theme of recapturing culture, family and identity. In reference to the First People's Exhibition at the Melbourne Museum, it was evident that the information presented mainly concerned culture and identity with some reference to the assimilation period and activism.

First of all, the Indigenous people's radical hope, which according to Jonathan Lear is defined as "embracing it [the new world] realistically in an Aboriginal way" (as cited in Broome, 2010, p. 81). This radical hope is evident in the significant events that occurred on the reserve Coranderrk, as the Aboriginal people proved themselves as resilient, independent, and able to adapt to a new society. Although many converted to a new style of dress, housing, and even converted to Christianity, they "did not abandon their traditional values" (Broome, 2010, p. 84). This is evidence of their radical hope, as it is symbolic of their fight for identity and culture. Radical hope enabled the people to survive and be apart of both cultures. Notably, Coranderrk demonstrated this will of the Indigenous people, as with the help and leadership of William Barak and John Green who "allowed them 'to rule themselves as much as

possible" (Broome, 2010, p. 85). Evidence of this self-ruling concept is evident as a court was established at Coranderrk, where the residents took charge and decided the rules and punishments of the reserve. Due to the Kulin's people's efforts, they were able to make Coranderrk self-sufficient by 1875. However, during this time, the Aboriginal people of Coranderrk's radical hope was disparaged and their insecurity increased as the "Victorian government refused to give the Kulin individual blocks or title to their reserves" (Broome, 2010, p. 86). In 1875, the Board had intended to sell the land to the European settlers, and move the current residents, despite the Kulin's people's efforts to adapt and be independent. Fortunately, Coranderrk was made a permanent reservation under government law; therefore the Board had no legal merit at Coranderrk.

Although Coranderrk was successful in regards to radical hope and self-efficient, other reserves such as Poindie did not have the same success. Despite Poindie being self-supporting since the 1860s, the South Australian government gave the land to the European settlers (Broome, 2010, p. 91). Although the success of reserves and missions varied depending on their situation, the Indigenous people's actions and independence, despite the Board's determination to control the reserve, showed the Aboriginal population's resilience, and that the concept of radical hope was important for their self-determination. In terms of the First People's Exhibition, there was information regarding the discrimination of Aboriginal people on reserves as seen in the story of Eileen Harrison who was disregarded by the teacher when she asked if she could sit at the front of the classroom because of her hearing impairment (Melbourne Museum). Furthermore, this discrimination is noted through the establishment of the "Board for the Protection of Aborigines" and what this legislation entailed. The Board's purpose was to protect the Indigenous people on reserves; however instead, they controlled "every aspect of our lives" (Melbourne Museum).

This leads to the assimilation period of the 20th century whereby the suppression and controlling of Aboriginal Australians continued. However, this assimilation of Aboriginal people is apparent in the 19th century where Indigenous Australian, Woollarawarre Bennelong who was initially captured and taught English. However

eventually he was given freedom to move between the colony and his home. Bennelong became the Intercultural Ambassador for his people. Significantly, Bennelong and a fellow Indigenous person, travelled to England, unfortunately, Bennelong's companion died there, the first to die outside of his country (HIST106, Lecture 3). Bennelong's adjustment to the new society and importantly becoming the Intercultural Ambassador is symbolic of the adaptation Aboriginal people embraced during the assimilation period.

The 'Dying Race' Theory was disproved as Aboriginal populations were growing instead of declining. This concerned the government as it added to the costs for supporting the growing Indigenous population and confronted their policy of a "white nation" (HIST106, Lecture 6). This led to what is known as the assimilation period, which remained influential through the 1930s. In order to control the growing population, the governments began to classify who was an Aboriginal person and who was not. This influenced the events of biological assimilation, which included the concept of eugenics. Biological assimilation legislation involved stronger laws controlling interracial marriage, limited provisions governing soliciting and regarding alcohol. Stronger child removal provisions, a wider definition of Aboriginal people in order to control people under legislative law, unfair distribution of wages, and in some cases Aboriginal people worked for rations (HIST106, Lecture 6). Since the government widely controlled the Aboriginal people, particularly their finances, the Aboriginal people, as a result, became dependent on the government. In reference to the assimilation policies, these were not noticeably presented at the First People's Exhibition, as previously stated, the exhibition seemed to focus more on the culture, identity, language and family aspect of Indigenous history.

The Indigenous Australians experienced discrimination through legislations, society, being controlled by the Board, and "caste barriers". These discriminatory factors are highlighted in the account of the fair-skinned Aboriginal man who in one town "was arrested for being an Aboriginal vagrant and placed on the local reserve" however "during World War II he tried to enlist but was told he could not because he was Aboriginal" (Foley, 2000). In relation to the "caste barrier" which meant that Aboriginal people who did not live on reserves were subjected to a colour bar

system that “created two social worlds: one white, one black” (Broome, 2010, p. 178). This form of racism also took place in advertising such as the “Nulla-Nulla” soap advertisement, which mocked the colour of an Aboriginal person’s skin as “dirty” (Broome, 2010, p. 181). These discriminatory terms were not directly presented at the Exhibition, but rather focused on the Indigenous people’s fight for human and civil rights. However, some points of reference highlighted the racism aimed towards the Aboriginal cricketers team of 1868, who were no longer allowed to compete based on their racial background. Similarly, the more recent event of Nicky Winmar, the footballer who fought against racism due to racial abuse from Collingwood supporters. The iconic photograph of Nicky Winmar as a St Kilda footballer pointing to the colour of his skin is presented at the exhibition (Melbourne Museum).

Due to the oppression of the assimilation period and the racism that adjoined it, this led to the activism of the Indigenous people, particularly in the mid to late 20th century. Their purpose was to achieve equality including civil and human rights. Interwar activism occurred during the 1920s and 1930s, which involved several associations that addressed the local concerns but represented the concerns of the wider Aboriginal community. Fred Maynard headed the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association (AAPA), and William Ferguson and Jack Patten founded the Aborigines Progressive Association (APA) in 1937. These associations held similar key concerns such as the appalling conditions on reserves, the loss of reserve lands through grants to “white” farmers, and the issue of child removal, poor schooling and the exclusion from social welfare benefits (HIST106, Lecture 8). On behalf of the AAPA, Fred Maynard wrote a letter to the New South Wales State Government addressing the poor outcomes for Aboriginal people. This included family rights, requesting ownership of Aboriginal people’s homes, hostels or reserves, and that they be self-governed. Maynard also states that due to “the condition of our incapables, (which is) the direct result of contamination” and therefore they are the direct responsibility of the government as a result of neglect (Maynard, 1927). Other individuals, who took part in this activism, included William Cooper who petitioned lands to be granted to the people living on the Maloga Mission (HIST106- Lecture 8).

The significant event of the Aboriginal Tent Embassy (1972), whose activism supported land rights claims and emphasized that land are fundamental to the Aboriginal people's identity. The Aboriginal people found a loophole regarding the prohibition placed on camping on crown land in the Australian territories as Aboriginal people were exempt from this law (HIST106, Lecture 9). This demonstrated the disconnectedness between the Australian government and the issues concerning the Aboriginal population. Further fight for land rights is demonstrated by The Native Title Act of 1993 which had positive and negative outcomes for Aboriginal as on one hand the Act provided rights such as living, hunting, teaching traditions on land owned by Aboriginal people, however on the other hand, there was failure to protect sacred sites not on native title land (HIST106- Lecture 9).

The efforts of the associations and the significant events of the Tent Embassy and the Native Title Act were not presented at the Exhibition as they showed little or no evidence of the Activism that occurred. Nonetheless there was some photographic evidence of the activism for voting rights (Melbourne Museum).

In more recent times, there has been focus on what it means to be a 21st century Aboriginal Australian. There has been focus on recapturing their culture, language, family, and identity. This is evident through the actions of Matthew Bowen, who is of Indigenous descent, who along with his mother are teaching culture and focusing on traditional languages and knowledge. According to Federal Arts Minister Tony Burke, "preserving Indigenous languages... ensures that culture, concepts, and values remain part of Australia forever" (Pearson, 2013). This connectedness with culture is evident in the Murwillumbah dance group, which is led by Dennis Walker Junior, which keeps the "children off the streets and away from the drugs and alcohol" and brings families together (Burin, 2013). The First People's Exhibition also shows how Aboriginal people are reconnecting with culture through the efforts of the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre, where children participated in the Possum Skin Cloak Project, which symbolizes their culture, identity and family (Melbourne Museum).

The First People's Exhibition mainly presented the views of Australian Indigenous history through culture, identity, family and language, which was similarly presented earlier in this semester's unit of work. Other aspects that coincided in this unit, included the racial discrimination conveyed through Eileen Harrison's story and the establishment of the "Board for the Protection of Aborigines" and events of Nicky Winmar. However, the Exhibition seemed to neglect the majority of the accounts of the Assimilation and Activism period of the 20th century, although there was some evidence of the fight for voting rights. Overall, due to the evidence presented, the Exhibition focused more on culture, while the unit of work focused mainly on the Indigenous people's hardship and fight for human and civil rights.

References-

Broome, R. (2010). *Aboriginal Australians, A history since 1788* (4th ed.). *Chapter 9: 'Controlled by Boards and Caste Barriers'*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Broome, R. (2010). *Aboriginal Australians, A history since 1788* (4th ed.). *Chapter 5: 'Radical Hope Quashed'*. NSW: Allen & Unwin.

Burin, M. (2013, 24 June). *Aboriginal Dance Big Step in Learning Culture'*. ABC North Coast: NSW

<http://www.abc.net.au/local/videos/2013/06/24/3788118.htm>

Foley, D. (2000, 4 December). *Too White to be Black, Too Black to be White*. *Social Alternative*, Vol 19, p, 44-49.

HIST106 Lecture 3: *The Myth of Peaceful Settlement*

HIST106 Lecture 6: *Assimilation- Suppressing and Controlling Aboriginal Australians*

HIST106 Lecture 8: *Civil Rights 1- The Fight for Equality*

HIST106- Lecture 9: *Civil Rights 2- Land Rights and Native Title*

Melbourne Museum, *First Peoples*, (2013, 24, October)

Pearson, N. (2013, 13 July). *Indigenous pupils relish lessons in heritage*. *The Australian* p, 16.