

Maintenance of Culture

Introduction

- 6.1 A common non Indigenous misconception is that ‘real’ Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders are those who are ‘dark skinned and found in remote communities’.¹ This misconception denies urban dwelling Indigenous people their Aboriginality and ignores the fact that the majority of Indigenous people live in urban areas. Further, it depicts Indigenous cultures as frozen in time. Evidence to the Committee and described in this chapter paints a different picture of Indigenous culture (urban and non urban) as being one of ‘living, breathing, evolving cultures in the here and now’.²
- 6.2 In urban areas or where there has been a long period of European contact, surviving pre-contact elements of traditional cultures may be fragmentary or lost entirely. The continuity with traditional cultures will be most tenuous for Indigenous people who were moved or have moved from their traditional lands or dislocated from kinship structures by family separation.³ Urban senses of community identity will be further blurred where a population consists of people from many areas, each bringing their own differing traditions.
- 6.3 However, Aboriginal culture today is also infused with a shared history of the ‘aspirations and battles forged by Indigenous individuals and organisations in more recent times.’⁴ In its broadest sense this is a national

1 Queensland Government, *Submissions*, p. S1274.

2 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), Victorian State Office, *Submissions*, p. S589.

3 Australian Capital Territory Government, *Submissions*, p. S1180.

4 ATSIC, Victorian State Office, *Submissions*, p. S589. See also National Aboriginal History and Heritage Council, *Submissions*, p. S429.

rather than regionally focused Aboriginal culture that is ‘the sum of everything that we do as Indigenous people’.⁵ In this broader sense of culture:

Our community organisations are particularly important to us not only because they allow us to conduct our own cultural business but also because their existence is one of the ways in which we... are able to reaffirm our distinctiveness as the Indigenous people of this country.⁶

- 6.4 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are thus a mix, in varying proportions depending on location, of pre contact traditions and the post contact experiences that differentiate Indigenous people from non Indigenous people.
- 6.5 This chapter examines strategies for the maintenance of Indigenous cultures in urban areas: both in the lives of individual Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders; and as component of the broader ‘Australian’ culture. The Committee received comparatively little evidence on this term of reference, perhaps as a result of a reluctance by non Indigenous groups to comment on such a collectively ‘personal’ issue.⁷ Nonetheless, the chapter describes strategies to make it easier for urban Indigenous people to learn about and maintain their pre-contact heritage and also how to reflect and celebrate their contemporary identity.

Cultural Centres

- 6.6 One of the most frequent suggestions to the Committee for maintaining Indigenous cultures in urban areas has been to establish cultural and heritage centres.⁸ Similarly, Torres Strait Islander communities on the mainland want cultural centres ‘to act as a focus for the maintenance and promotion of Torres Strait Islander culture and its recognition by the wider community’.⁹
- 6.7 Cultural centres can serve many functions. They can act as museums and education centres where the local Indigenous history can be recorded and told and where sacred and utilitarian artefacts can be displayed in a

5 Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, *Submissions*, p. S376.

6 Aboriginal Housing Board of Victoria, *Submissions*, p. S376.

7 For example, see Burns Aldis Community Development Consultants, *Submissions*, p. S363. See also Grannies Group, *Submissions*, p. S150.

8 Also a common request to governments: see Western Australian Government, *Submissions*, p. S1142.

9 ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S685.

culturally acceptable way. This is of benefit to Indigenous people trying to establish their identity, for:

When local Aboriginal people record their culture and stories in ways meaningful to them, those without a knowledge of their culture can be reconnected with it and with the means to replace what is missing in their family system.¹⁰

- 6.8 In the same vein, cultural centres can act as mechanisms for community harmony, friendship and reconciliation, informing and sharing with non Indigenous people of the cultural heritage and history of local Indigenous communities.

Community initiative

Dreamtime Cultural Centre – Rockhampton, Qld

The Dreamtime Cultural Centre is a cultural and convention centre on the land of the Darambal people in Rockhampton.

It has display centres and a museum, outlining the history and culture of the Darambal and displaying cultural artefacts. There are also lecture rooms, dining facilities and a lodge and motel complex. Torres Strait Islander culture is also recognised, reflecting the large Islander community in Rockhampton.

The Centre is owned and managed by the local Indigenous community and employs 26 people (in 2000) in the all Indigenous staff. It has trained and employed more than 50 others who have gone on to other careers.

The Centre has several thousand visitors taking conducted tours each quarter as a result of its own promotion and through agreements with local and state tour operators.¹¹

- 6.9 Cultural Centres can also act as a cultural repository and place to return the artefacts, objects and human remains that were taken in the past and deposited in Australian and overseas museums, libraries, archives and art galleries.¹²
- 6.10 Cultural centres are also used as meeting places and become a focus point for local activities. In this regard, they also act as a place where people can

10 Anglican Counselling Service, *Submissions*, p. S73.

11 ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S799; Correspondence, Administrator, Dreamtime Cultural Centre to Committee Chairman.

12 ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S639.

‘gather in privacy as a community in order to sustain and develop cultural identities’.¹³ As the Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils explained:

there is a widespread need for investment in land and buildings for meeting places, offices from which to run services, spaces to exhibit artworks and promote cultural activities and simply to be secure and community “owned”....¹⁴

Link Up

- 6.11 Specialised cultural centres of particular relevance to urban dwelling Indigenous people, are the national network of Link Up Centres. In 1997, the report into the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (‘Bringing them Home’) was presented to the Commonwealth Government.¹⁵ In its response to recommendations in the Report, the Government funded the Link Up Program. The Program established a national network of Indigenous family tracing and reunion services (Link Up) with one in each state and two in the Northern Territory. Link Up centres can be used by Indigenous people to re-establish links to family, and their traditional country and community.¹⁶
- 6.12 The Bringing them Home Report recommended that organisations, such as Link Up centres, which help people undertake family history research, be recognised as Indigenous communities for the purposes of certifying descent from the Indigenous peoples of Australia.¹⁷ Link Up centres are recognised as Indigenous communities for the purposes of proving two of the three parts of the proof of Aboriginality, namely: proof of Indigenous descent; and secondly, acceptance by the Indigenous community as being an Indigenous person (the third part of the test of Aboriginality is self identification as an Indigenous person).¹⁸
- 6.13 For many Indigenous people, particularly in urban areas, the Link Ups have provided the first means for them to publicly affirm their Aboriginality, which may have been impossible for them to do in the past. Link Up centres can also facilitate the acceptance of such people within

13 Hornsby Area Residents for Reconciliation, *Submissions*, p. S424.

14 Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils Inc, *Submissions*, p. S274.

15 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, April 1997.

16 See: www.atsic.gov.au/issues/bringing_them_home/bringhome/ (August 2001).

17 *Bringing them Home*, Recommendation 13.

18 See: *Bringing them Home*, pp. 300-01.

their local Indigenous communities and provide links for them to other Indigenous organisations.¹⁹ By providing these services, Link Up centres provide a useful mechanism for reaffirming Indigenous identity and allowing, particularly urban Aboriginals, to gain an understanding of their history and cultural heritage.

Languages

- 6.14 Language is at the core of cultural identity and is one of the pillars supporting the intrinsic sense of identity and membership of a group.²⁰ In urban areas where assimilation and dispossession have ‘almost totally silenced Indigenous cultures’, there is presently a ‘real yearning for the continual restoration and sustenance of traditional languages and other valued cultural practices’.²¹ The interest in re-learning traditional languages is present even where the traditional languages are no longer used as community vernaculars and need to be reconstructed. As was explained to the Committee, Indigenous people:

see [language revival] as being central to the sense of Aboriginality – they want to hold on to and reconstruct new identities that they want to find for themselves in urban environments.²²

- 6.15 ATSIC administers the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages Initiatives Program which funds the operating costs of regional Indigenous language centres and management committees. These centres support the retrieval, preservation and revival of languages in contemporary contexts. ATSIC also funds the Language Access Initiatives Program (LAIP) which aims to improve the knowledge base for those languages with few speakers, particularly for those people who suffered cultural and language loss because of past government removal policies. LAIP funds the production of dictionaries and other language materials and the running of regional workshops engaging communities in language work.²³
- 6.16 ATSIC believes most Indigenous languages can be revitalised. It believes there is usually still sufficient knowledge of languages within communities and recorded in archival deposits, as well as technical

19 ATSIC, *Submissions*, pp. S781-82.

20 Federation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Languages (FATSIL), *Transcripts*, p. 112. See also ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S779.

21 ATSIC, Victorian State Office, *Submissions*, pp. S589-90.

22 FATSIL, *Transcripts*, p. 126.

23 ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S774.

expertise and community enthusiasm. In addition to preserving languages, the revitalisation of languages also acts to bring communities together.²⁴

- 6.17 When sufficient numbers of people speak a language to enable support documents to be produced, it may be possible to offer the language as a school subject.²⁵ In the urban context, the New South Wales Department of Education and Training is providing some of the more innovative language maintenance programs. In several schools, students in year seven and eight have been taught local Aboriginal languages through the national Languages Other than English (LOTE) program.²⁶ However, for the program to be successful with students, adults too need to regain the languages at the same time so that the skills learnt in schools can be reinforced at home.
- 6.18 Maintenance of language need not only include traditional languages as it can also include 'Aboriginal English'. Aboriginal English is a dialect of Australian English and widely spoken by Indigenous Australians. Aboriginal English differs from Australian English in pronunciation, vocabulary, idiom and in the ways in which it is used. Aboriginal English is also a 'key instrument' for cultural maintenance because:
- Aboriginal English... is a rich repository of Indigenous culture. It incorporates levels of meaning which relate to traditional Aboriginal values, relationships and ways of life. It also maintains Indigenous cultural patterns in genres and community based verbal art forms it incorporates.... Aboriginal English is a symbol of shared Aboriginality... it is a more reliable marker of Aboriginality than the colour of one's skin.²⁷
- 6.19 One disadvantage for school pupils speaking Aboriginal English is that teachers often assume the students are speaking Australian English badly and place them in remedial reading and writing classes.²⁸

24 ATSIIC, *Submissions*, p. S773.

25 In remote areas, particularly in South Australia and until recently, the Northern Territory, school curricula have been taught bilingually – as distinct from students having language lessons.

26 ATSIIC, *Submissions*, p. S776.

27 Edith Cowan University, *Submissions*, p. S177. See also FATSIL, *Submissions*, p. S420; *Transcripts*, pp. 126-27.

28 Edith Cowan University, *Submissions*, pp. S176-77; FATSIL, *Transcripts*, pp. 128-29.

Broadcasting

- 6.20 An important mechanism for promoting and reinforcing Indigenous culture and identity is via Indigenous radio or television broadcasts in English or language. While there are several Indigenous television stations, Indigenous radio stations or programs reach a far greater proportion of the population.²⁹ Regardless of the medium, Indigenous broadcasts provide news and entertainment of direct relevance to local Indigenous communities; facilitate Indigenous networks; provide access to local languages and can facilitate communication with other Australians.³⁰
- 6.21 For example, for two weeks during NAIDOC 2000, an Indigenous managed test broadcast was transmitted in suburban Melbourne. It provided music, Indigenous news, history, story telling and generally promoted pride in Indigenous culture.³¹ As a side benefit, broadcasting also provides employment and training opportunities for Indigenous people.
- 6.22 In remote areas, broadcasting is allowed under remote area community broadcasting licences (formerly, the Broadcasting for Remote Aboriginal Communities Scheme) that have been issued by the Australian Communications Authority.³² In other areas of the country, Indigenous groups transmit as mainstream community broadcasting services using temporary or permanent community broadcasting licences. Community broadcasters operate non profit services emphasising community participation, access to minority and special interest groups and promotion of the Australian music industry. Community broadcasters are licensed under the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992*. Licences are granted free of charge and managed by the Australian Broadcasting Authority.³³ Indigenous groups may hold their own community broadcasting licences or broadcast Indigenous segments on mainstream community stations.³⁴
- 6.23 ATSIC's Broadcasting Program funds organisations for broadcast related activities via Regional Council grants and through nationally funded projects. The 2001-02 budget appropriation for the Broadcasting Program is \$11.8 million. In most cases, the stations or programs supplement ATSIC funding with sponsorship revenue. However, community broadcasters are

29 See ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S784.

30 Productivity Commission, *Broadcasting*, Report No. 11, March 2000, p. 28.

31 ATSIC, Victorian State Office, *Submissions*, p. S589.

32 Limited to areas that do receive any other radio or television broadcast.

33 See: *Community Broadcasting* at: www.dcita.gov.au/text_welcome.html (August 2001); *Community Broadcasting and Radio* at www.indigenoustralia.com.au/nimaa/broadcasting (August 2001).

34 ATSIC, *Submissions*, p. S785.

not allowed to receive advertising revenue.³⁵ This ensures that community stations do not compete unfairly with full commercial stations, but also limits the self sufficiency of Indigenous broadcasters.

- 6.24 In recognition of the restrictions in the Act, the 2000 Productivity Commission inquiry into broadcasting recommended the creation of an Indigenous category of broadcasting licence in acknowledgment of the important social and cultural role of Indigenous broadcasting.³⁶ If implemented, the Commission's recommendations would allow greater flexibility for Indigenous broadcasters without the restrictions imposed by inappropriate community broadcasting licence arrangements.
- 6.25 Indigenous broadcasters provide an important mechanism for cultural maintenance. Broadcasts can also be used to effectively target and distribute information in a culturally sensitive way about government services, health promotions and the like to people who may find written information difficult to access. The Committee supports the Productivity Commission's recommendations and makes its own recommendation accordingly.

Recommendation 28

- 6.26 **Recommendations 8.5 and 8.6 of the report into Broadcasting by the Productivity Commission to establish a new licence category for Indigenous broadcasters and to reserve spectrum for this purpose be implemented by the Commonwealth Government.**

The Arts

- 6.27 Indigenous arts and crafts play an important role in affirming the identity of urban Indigenous communities and provide a link to the non-Indigenous community.³⁷ A problem facing urban artists is that many have difficulty convincing customers and galleries that their work is 'genuine' or 'real' Indigenous work. Most galleries and retail shops in south east Australia, for example, show work that is predominantly from northern Australia while only rarely showing the art of artists from the south east.³⁸ In an echo of the debate about the legitimacy of urban based forms of Indigenous culture, urban based Indigenous artists may have

35 Section 15 of the *Broadcasting Services Act 1992* specifies that community broadcasts 'are not operated for profit or as part of a profit making enterprise'.

36 Productivity Commission, *Broadcasting*, April 2000, recommendations 8.5, 8.6.

37 ATSIIC, *Submissions*, p. S637.

38 ATSIIC, *Submissions*, p. S637.

difficulty convincing others that non traditional art forms are still Indigenous.

- 6.28 ATSiC's national arts support program, the National Art and Craft Industry Support Strategy, focuses specifically on visual arts and crafts. The strategy principally funds the capital and operational costs of a network of community art and craft centres, although these are mainly situated in remote Australia.³⁹ ATSiC regional councils also receive funding under the strategy to allocate for local festivals and cultural centres.
- 6.29 The Australia Council also supports contemporary Indigenous cultural expression, primarily in the form of subsidies to individuals or companies, through the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Fund and Community Cultural Development Fund.⁴⁰ Similarly, state and territory arts and crafts councils provide funding, to greater or lesser extents, to Indigenous artists.

Recommendation 29

- 6.30 **The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSiC) consider mechanisms to further promote urban based community arts and craft centres.**

ATSiC should also take a leadership role in coordinating funding arrangements for urban arts and craft centres with the Australia Council and state and territory arts and culture organisations.

Non Indigenous Support for Culture

- 6.31 Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders do not live in isolation and they face the 'the constant battle of maintaining [their] cultures while surrounded with non-Indigenous urban mores'.⁴¹ There is much that the wider community can do to help Indigenous people maintain their cultures and reinforce their place in the wider community. These include traditional welcomes at official events; flying Indigenous flags at offices or during NAIDOC week; or displaying local art in building foyers.⁴² Local

39 ATSiC, *Submissions*, p. S798.

40 The Australia Council for the Arts, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Arts Fund: About the Fund*, www.ozco.gov.au/atsia (August 2001).

41 ATSiC, *Submissions*, p. S615.

42 See: ACT Government, *Submissions*, p. S1180, Council of the City of Wagga Wagga, *Submissions*, p. S371.

Governments can also dedicate parks and open spaces to reconciliation and streets and suburbs can be named after Indigenous people or local places.⁴³ The Australian Capital Territory Government, for example, is placing signs acknowledging the traditional owners of the land at major road entrances to the Territory and officially recognising traditional titles of prominent landmarks.⁴⁴ Governments of all levels can support cultural festivals and acknowledge significant events in the Indigenous calendar such as NAIDOC week, National Sorry Day and the Coming of the Light Festival for Torres Strait Islanders.⁴⁵

Partnerships

Telephone Art – Dubbo, NSW

Telstra agreed that local Indigenous artists could paint three public telephone boxes in Dubbo.

The painted boxes are a symbol of mainstream recognition of the presence of Aboriginal people and their culture in Dubbo.

The phones have been free of vandalism since they were painted.⁴⁶

- 6.32 A greater appreciation and acknowledgment of Indigenous cultures in the mainstream can also help counter racial intolerance. This was observed by an Aboriginal group that discusses Indigenous culture at nearby schools:

What has been particularly pleasing has been the observation by Indigenous children that racial taunts and other discriminatory behaviour from fellow pupils had lessened considerably following the lessons on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture presented by members of our group.⁴⁷

- 6.33 The Committee also sees significant benefit in Indigenous studies becoming a core component of school curricula. While primary and secondary school curricula are a state and territory responsibility, the

43 Council of the City of Wagga Wagga, *Submissions*, p. S371; Brisbane City Council, *Submissions*, p. S1060.

44 Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory, Minutes, 30 August 2000, p. 1.

45 NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islanders' Day Organising Committee) is used to widely refer to events and celebrations that go under during National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Week (from the second Sunday in July). Coming of the Light Festival is in the week before NAIDOC week.

46 Anglicare Australia, *Submissions*, p. S609.

47 Grannies Group, *Submissions*, p. S149.

exposure of non Indigenous students to Indigenous cultures and history would improve racial tolerance and mutual understanding.

- 6.34 Mainstream recognition of the presence of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in urban areas is an important part of reinforcing Indigenous culture and building community relations between the two cultures. This is particularly so as 'urban dwelling Indigenous people generally have a lack of visual cultural identity in the eyes of the wider population'.⁴⁸

Conclusion

- 6.35 The Committee has been impressed with the dynamism of Indigenous cultures in urban areas and, most significantly, the desire of people to preserve and rediscover their heritage and history. While maintenance of Indigenous cultures is ultimately a responsibility for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities, there is also clearly a role for governments to assist in this task.

48 ATSIC, Wongatha Regional Council, *Submissions*, p. S109. See also: Anglicare Australia, *Submissions*, p. S609.

