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Who Are Australian Aborigines and Where Are They at Today?

George J. Toepfer

History is gauged by significant events, timelines, and dates. Two such dates in Australian history are 1788 and 1967.

The 1788 date was the arrival of the First Fleet which heralded significant change to the new “Is-

land–Continent–Terra–Nullius” and/or the First People, the Aborigines, who roamed the land. Not noticing any permanent structures it was, therefore, assumed by these early settlers that the original inhabitants were both uncivilised and too primitive to form the basis of any productive society. The traditions and culture of these peoples were foreign to the newcomers and were ignored, deeming them insignificant to pursue or to incorporate in any useful way.

The other date of significance was the 1967 referendum which after years of process, albeit a very, very slow process, Aborigines were finally recognised as people and were removed from under the Flora and Fauna Act where they were treated as less than human. The process, in some ways, is still ongoing and many realise that a font of information has been neglected for too long. The new settlers, in general, did not seek the knowledge nor show and understanding of a culture that is drawn from over 40,000 years of tradition, experience, and observation and care of a land that was their nurturing home.

It has been discovered that in the last 50 years, just how vast was this Aborigines knowledge. As more information is gleaned and published, we are slowly understanding the lifestyle, traditional practices, cultural values, religious beliefs, and time-worn land experience of these First Peoples of Australia.

So what do we know about these people who roamed this land before White settlement in 1788?

Researchers do not all agree but it is believed by most that there are three categories of Australian Aborigines:

1. The Torres Strait Islands are located in Torres Strait, which separates mainland Australia from New Guinea. The Torres Strait Islanders are of “Melanesian” extraction, so they are not related to the Australian Aborigines. They are, however, categorised as Australian “Aborigines” and Australian citizens.
2. The biggest group of Aborigines occupying various parts of the *mainland* came to Australia from the north, probably more than 40,000 to 50,000 years ago. They migrated during the last Ice Age, when the spreading polar ice caps took up so much water that the general sea level fell and exposing more land. Scientists say that Aboriginal people came to Australia when the climate was very cold and the sea level was much lower. Around that time, Tasmania in the south and Papua New Guinea in the north were joined to the mainland of Australia. They crossed at least two stretches of water in canoes or on rafts. (Unlike our Polynesian neighbours, this part of Aboriginal history has not been “passed

down.”) Aborigines are classified as Australoids, a stock distinct from the main three groups of mankind: the Caucasoid (typified by the European), the Negroid (typified by the African Negro) and the Mongoloid (typified by the Chinese). As a distinct type, the Australoids probably became differentiated in Southeast Asia and possibly in the Malay Archipelago. There are isolated groups of people in Asia and the West Pacific with physical resemblances to the Australian Aborigines. These include some Aboriginal hill tribes of Southern India, the Veddas of Sri Lanka and the Sakai of Malaysia. There are also traces of Australoid groups in Celebes and New Guinea. Moreover, archaeology points to their presence probably 30,000 years ago in Java. The dingo, which the Australian Aborigines brought with them to Australia, is “believed” to be related to the pariah dog of India.

Although all Australian Aborigines share common features, there appear to be somewhat different regional types.

3. The Tasmanian Aborigines were categorized differently. In the book “The Origin of the Australians” (1976) edited by Kirk and Thorne, this concept is reinforced, and along with other researchers agree, that Tasmanian Aborigines were grouped differently. It was believed that with the death of “the supposed last *full-blood Tasmanian Aborigine*”, “Truganini,” in 1876, the Tasmanian Aborigines were extinct and, in schools and the message to the outside world, was that there were no Aborigines left in Tasmania, and for many years their place in society was not fully recognized or acknowledged. This is being currently redressed, but it is a slow educative and accepting process.

Researchers cannot totally agree on the origin of Tasmanian Aborigines – theories abound that they migrated via New Caledonia and New Guinea via a “long chain of islands.” The Tasmanian Aborigines arrived in Tasmania more than 20,000 years ago. By 12,000 years ago, they had become isolated from the rest of Australia by the rising sea flooding “the Bass Plain.” The creation of Bass Strait brought about the cultural and physical isolation of the Tasmanian Aborigines. Archaeological sites show human occupation as far back as 25,000 years ago. At this time the temperatures were significantly colder than today; in fact, Tasmania represents the southernmost point of occupation in the world at a time when icebergs “littered” the waters and glaciers covered the highlands (Burnum 1988). But the people stayed and those who were still there 12,000 years ago lost the option to move as the “land bridge” disappeared. Tasmanian Aborigines of the nineteenth century were considered by early observ-

ers, like Roth (1899), and others, to be “the world’s most primitive people” and many early researches labeled them “Stone Age savages.” It has been suggested, however, that their use of a bare minimum of different tools may be more a testimony of skill. Tasmanian Aborigines survived 15,000 years of ice and they are believed to be the only people who remained totally isolated from other human population as result of this isolation for 12,000 years. (But 200 years of European occupation has proved the greatest trauma.) The isolation developed certain physical characteristics, which anthropologists used to distinguish them from “mainland” Aborigines. Those being: small to medium height; “woolly” hair and certain features related to size and shape of the skull, eye sockets, nasal openings, and palate.

The Tasmanian Aborigines were hunters and gatherers. They made tools and containers from wood, stone, bone, seaweed, bark, grass, and sinew. They managed their environment carefully, moving around their country to harvest seasonal food resources and using fire to maintain grasslands, which supported an abundance of wallabies and kangaroos.

Much has been written about Aboriginal people and their cultures. Until recently, most of these writers were not of Aboriginal descent and used a language, which is now regarded by Aboriginal people as, at best, paternalistic. The documentation of Aboriginal cultures was often inaccurate, negative, and stereotyped, and writers failed to take account of the feelings, views, and beliefs of the people about whom they wrote.

Today, Aboriginal people are writing their own stories, histories, singing their songs and presenting their viewpoints and perspectives on historical, contemporary, and educational issues. Also, many of the people who are not Aboriginal are now writing on these issues are aware of the need to consult with communities about whom they write, and consequently presenting a much more balanced and accurate view of the history, traditions, and culture of Aboriginal people. Aborigines believe it is essential to remember that Aboriginality is not defined by skin colour, by the term “part,” “blood,” or “cast” – these terms are deemed racist by the Aborigines. These words are the result of history and they are not the terminology used by the Aborigines themselves.

The term “indigenous” is often used instead of “Aborigine” in modern usage. In speaking with elders in Tasmania and from the mainland continent, they are not comfortable with the term and indeed find it offensive. (Currently, many educational institutions use “indigenous” as a generic term to

identify the people and to describe their learning place or unit. The term “indigenous” is used more often as a combined term for Aborigines and The Torres Strait Islanders. Koori or Koorie, meaning Aboriginal people, is a word, which some Aboriginal Australians in New South Wales and Victoria use to identify themselves, and has become a well-established term to mean “indigenous Australians from southeastern Australia”.

Whilst using the term “Aborigine” when referring to the people, it will be on occasion to note “full bloods” and “of mixed blood” for the purpose of explanation, they are nevertheless Aborigines as defined. Tasmanian Aborigine, Joe Smith stated (personal communication, May 2008) “The best way to describe an Aborigine is to use the coffee analogy – you start with a cup of black coffee and no matter how much milk or sugar you add to the cup – it is still a cup of coffee.” And so it is with the Aborigines – another added – it is like “*being a little bit pregnant* – you either are or you are not.” Many indigenous Australians dislike the terms “Aborigine” and “Aboriginal,” because these terms have been forced on them. They prefer to use words from their own languages especially in southeastern Australia.

For years Aboriginal education was perceived as a difficult problem area and methods of advancement in education had been through “a survival approach,” through assimilation – ignoring the fact that Aboriginal children learnt differently, and through self-determination and integration. The latter proving to be the method usually favoured. Even today, English is still a foreign language and where it can be done, concepts are verbalised in the mother tongue. This not only has implications for the whole teaching of English, but more importantly, it has implications for the whole learning process in *our* style and system of education, particularly in the conceptual development domain. In my experience and from that of my colleagues, we have found that Aboriginal children find it difficult to express and learn concepts in English.

Without exception, the earliest Europeans to catch a glimpse of traditional Aboriginal camp life noted the boundless joy, exuberance, and independence of the children. No other people seem to be as lenient or indulgent toward children as the Australian Aborigines, and many anthropologists have declared it to be the most child-centred society they have ever observed. As soon as a newborn infant returns to the camp with its mother, he or she becomes the unchallenged centre of attention. Older relatives and siblings as well as the parents continually show the child with affection. From the beginning, a

number of kin provide parental support. Although the child’s actual parents have primary responsibility, the child’s relationships spread throughout the entire clan or camp group. If the birth parents were to disappear, the child would experience no sharp loss.

The deep connection between Aboriginal people and the natural world influenced every part of their culture, including their food gathering, tools, trade, religion, art, music, language, and social organisation. I was told that when they were young, the whole bush, in the outdoors, was their school. They learned how to look out on the world, the country, and the bush, and listened to the wonderful stories that told, how everything came into being – the hills, the waterholes, the rivers, the places of importance, and the stories that went with them. The bush was their “book” and they were taught to read its signs – tracks of animals, signs that someone had passed that way.

They felt it was all so fascinating and educational and vital to one’s survival. They were taught how and what to hunt for food, to find the berries, seeds, and the bush fruit. They “grew in their knowledge” and they were happy. “Westerners” are often surprised to learn of the vast knowledge of the stars by the Aborigine peoples. For instance, unlike Western astronomical thinking, instead of linking stars by imaginary lines to form images, the Aborigines identified the “dark” areas and used the dust clouds to highlight Aboriginal thinking. For example, just south of the Southern Cross in the “Milky Way” the Aborigines have an image of an emu and use the time of the year to know when to harvest emu eggs or follow the emu to either hunting grounds or food areas. Their mythology is rich in stories derived “from the heavens” to be told by their storytellers and are part of their *Dreamtime*. The Aboriginal world is not constrained by time or space – the land is still inhabited by the same beings which were involved in its creation – the spirits of dead people are constantly present – ceremonies not only reenact the activities of ancient heroes but also recreate them. English words are inadequate to describe this historic and contemporary world.

Until the Europeans came, Aboriginal people had no written language, as we know it. Instead, Aboriginal people recorded their languages in songs and stories. They learned songs word for word, and passed them down, accurately, from generation to generation. The songs described parts of their culture, history, and the land where they lived. After the Europeans arrived many languages were forgotten. But in some areas, missionaries and anthropologists wrote down the traditional languages using their own alphabets. In modern times, people

have begun to write books in various Aboriginal languages, depending on the school community, and to teach people to speak, read, and record as much as possible before it is too late.

But the impact of colonization upon the language ecology of Australia was devastating. Some languages became extinct within a few decades, their speakers having died as a result of colonial brutality and disease. Others were suppressed and not passed on to younger generations because of official or unofficial rejection in the wider society. Aboriginal societies, traditionally multilingual, saw some languages strengthening at the expense of others. English-based contact languages, pidgin and kriols, arose, the pressure for language shift away from the traditional languages grew. Since the 1970s, there has been some widespread official recognition of the value of Aboriginal languages and, spearheaded by Aboriginal people, significant initiatives in language reclamation, renewal, revival, recreation, and revitalization have taken place over the past twenty five years (Partington 2001).

We define “ways of learning” as the mental processes and instructional settings which a student uses while learning, and we define “learning style” as a way of learning in which the student has a strength. Aboriginal cultural customs, values, and codes of behaviour are an essential part of the lives of Aboriginal people. Yet they are obliged to send their children to mainstream schools where these customs, values, and codes are usually ignored. Not only the teaching styles, but the very cultural basis and assumptions of the schooling is often inconsistent with their cultural background. The National Aboriginal Education Committee (NAEC) emphasised that teachers and schools must: “... develop an education theory and pedagogy that takes into account Aboriginal epistemology. Only when this occurs will education for our people be a process that builds on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and identity ... To be effective ... skills and learning must be acquired in harmony with our own cultural values, identity and choice of lifestyle, whether we reside in an urban, traditional community or homeland centre” (1985: 4).

Life had changed for the Aboriginal people and was still rapidly changing, and they found themselves in the midst of what was called civilisation. Aborigines describe the Earth as mother, they sleep on her, they are born from her, and she feeds them. Aborigines have always been part of the Earth and “always in the moment” – the openness was there for them – it made them free. Walking “over Country,” as they say, made them alive and the constant moving around without a permanent home opened

their minds just like the land. Aborigines live in harmony with the land. To them the land was – and still is – sacred. Everything they saw – the trees the land, the creatures, and reptiles were family and one elder told me they walked around in a natural state, just like the trees.

Over the last forty years much painstaking research has been undertaken to improve learning delivery and to maintain standards. Many of the findings have resulted in producing practical, workable programs and positive suggestions on how to best implement them, but unless there is more support through resources, sound mentoring practices, and workforce monitoring, then all that research remains in limbo and remains just research. Education must be a priority for a country that is building a solid foundation in preparing for the future.

In summing up, I strongly believe in the words of an inspirational Aboriginal teacher, Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, who said (personal communication, September 2008):

We are convinced that culture, our culture, must reproduce itself and grow or else it will die. It must be authentic growth. We are convinced that education must become the principal agent in achieving authentic cultural growth. This is one reason why the whole community, but more particularly the Elders, want to be involved with their children’s learning. As well as passing on the culture of the centuries, they want to “continue to teach hunting skills and bush lore. We have thousands of years of culture behind us.” Aboriginal cultures are not static in nature. Aboriginal cultures, like the cultures of the other peoples of the world, undergo shifts in emphasis, in direction and in ideas and knowledge as people respond to the circumstances and situations in which they find themselves. We need more trained teachers to share the responsibility and the decision making in the area of education and better living. We have to move forward. We cannot afford to just sit around and let things happen. We need to take the initiative because if we just let time go by we will be left far behind in today’s world.

An important outcome of our efforts in education is that we are willing to take up the responsibility for our own problems. We do not want to sit and feel sorry for ourselves and make comments such as

“Poor bugger me.” We do not want the Government to feel sorry for us but we do need support. We need people from specialist areas to guide us; we need financial support for our housing projects if we are going to provide reasonable accommodation for our families. We are only qualified to do so much and we have a long way to go before our people will be sufficiently educated and experienced to a standard where they can handle all their own affairs.

We are bringing about change and adaptation in the school while working for cultural maintenance and reproduction. In the process, we will be able to break new

ground for our people and our community as teachers and educators. In doing so we will become a strong team as principals and teachers, a team of educators that is unmistakably Aboriginal, supported by our community.

To make this a reality – governments, Aboriginal communities, and pedagogues must agree on what change is necessary and priorities (including funding) must be addressed immediately.

So how do we go about working towards an effective Aboriginal pedagogy and thoughts of Ungunmerr Baumann to become an efficient vehicle for teaching and learning? The Aboriginal pedagogy should be embedded within the Aboriginal culture: Aboriginal educators and elders point in the direction of such a pedagogy. It should be developed through practical applications, and its effects monitored by schools with high proportion of Aboriginal students.

Putting Theory into Practise?

Making a critical appraisal of any kind of literacy requires a great deal of varied analysis. One looks at the intent of the program, at the style and the theme, the plot (where it applies), the intended reader/learner, the motive of the promoter/publisher, and so on. There are certain guidelines critics follow. When it comes to the study of Aboriginal literature, (and here I am referring to the myths and legends written by Aborigines, themselves), one must discard all set criteria since its uniqueness requires a unique and highly sensitive approach.

In order to properly understand that style of sociological and educational research variously called “participant observation,” “qualitative observation and interviewing,” “the case study approach,” and the like, it is necessary to begin with a look at the background from which the Aborigines come. In beginning at such a seemingly “remote” place, it is not my intent to wax philosophical but merely to place the minutiae of research in their proper human context.

I have endeavoured to look at what “characteristics” of the problems faced by the Aborigines when exposed to “modern” education. I have sought information re the “causes” of the problems and past and current understandings that form the bases for learning outcomes and I have tried to outline some of the “consequences” of the positives and negatives of the steps being taken to achieve the benchmarks desired.

The first point, re characteristics above is in the bracket of qualitative analysis – (the characteristics

of programs, curriculum put in place, circumstances, activities, meanings, backgrounds, participation, relationships, and settings, the forms they assume and the variation they display), and the two causes and consequences are in the bracket as quantitative analysis – both perceived and discussed causes and whether possible solutions (consequences) can be worked out for a win-win solution for the success of any program, curriculum, or teaching personnel put in place.

To begin with, the terms *myth* and *legend*, de-mean the true and sacred nature of these stories, implying that they may be fictitious or fantasy. These stories are as real to the Aboriginal people as the story of Moses is to the Hebrews. A. P. Elkin (1964: 244) supports the view that they are not myth and legends to Aborigines when he claims that, “they are not just a matter of words and records, but of action and life. Details of myth and legends are important because they enable the present-day men to walk the path with fidelity, which leads into the sacred Dreamtime, the source of life.” The use of the term, “stories”, is also inappropriate since it implies some sort of narrative designed to amuse a listener or hearer. Dreamtime accounts are certainly not meant for amusement or entertainment. Possibly the most inaccurate of all the labels is that of “literature”, itself, since the accounts of the Dreamtime are nascent in an *oral* and not written tradition. Most likely the true nature and meaning of these accounts can only be expressed and understood by Aborigines, themselves.

A. W. Reed (1978: 7) points out that it is difficult for “Westerners” to understand something that is inherent in the Aboriginal man. This vast understatement will hopefully become obvious by the end of this article. In some instances, these accounts are so sacred they are not intended for our (white fellas) understanding at all. Jennifer Isaacs (1986: 170) points out that, “most aspects of birth and genesis are so sacred they cannot be revealed to the uninitiated.” Wandjuk Marika, in the foreword of Isaacs’s book (1986: 5), expands on this by stating that, “we want to tell you a story, not of the inner secrets of our deepest beliefs, these we keep sacred for our generations to come so that our culture can remain whole.”

It seems to be the case that there is a growing body of written accounts, some intended for “white fellas” as well as Aborigines. Reed (1980: 7) cynically describes this growth as panic. “It is only when we are in danger of losing something that we begin to value it and the large number of books emerging is ample proof of this renewal of interest.” For the Aborigines, however, the growth and nature of

these accounts is crucial. With the dissemination of the Aborigines throughout Australia and the genocide of early settlement days, there are less and less Elders left, who can pass on the kudos of the sacred Dreamtime. In the same vein of thinking as Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann, Twila Herr (1982: 21) agrees that what is needed is an encouragement of, and a willingness for, the Aboriginal people, themselves, to become involved in the writing of literature for the young. She also believes that no European Westerner can do this with any authenticity or credibility. A. W. Reed, who is a European author of accounts about Aborigines, acknowledges this. "There is poetry in these stories – poetry that is difficult to capture in another language" (Reed 1978: 7).

I support the notion of David Wescombe-Down (2009) who said: "Learning is not about teaching. It is about the development of beliefs, values, skills and knowledge as students prepare for the remainder of their lives. Learning therefore needs to be student-centred and student-driven as much as is realistically possible." He went on to say that "schooling is a social practice that advantages particular groups of students, teachers and aspects of the wider community, while at the same time marginalizing and disadvantaging interests and needs of some other students and societal groups" (2009). Wescombe-Down inquired as to whether inappropriate pedagogy, teacher attitude, and consequential teacher behaviour constituted a form of psychological child abuse. Care, therefore, must be taken on methods used in teaching Aboriginal children by conventional "Western" methods.

Although the data are not systematic, it appears that those who know something of the Aboriginal language, it should be obvious that they use very few words. Their accounts are simple, with few adverbs and adjectives as in Western literacy culture. Books written by Aborigines, themselves, are typically short and simple with short sentences and no Western-style eloquence. They lack plot and are more anecdotal statements of facts. By comparison, accounts of Aborigines, written by Westerners, are typically European in style. For example, in Reed's, "Aboriginal Myths. Tales of Dreamtime" (1978: 116), he says, "the joy of browsing through the undergrowth, discovering new plants and succulent fruits and berries, catching frogs and fish in the billabongs with their feet in the cool water, these and a hundred other delights, and not least the freedom to join in the dances unencumbered with wings was proof that she had been wise in coming down to Earth," *or*, as in Leslie Rees's, "Shy the Platypus" (1977: 19) "the dazzling orb of the Sun rose every day and crossed the blue-burnished arch of the sky,

frizzling the less hardy shrubs and making the tussock grass and river-oak leaves tough or brittle as tender ...".

European Western translations certainly have their place, especially when they introduce non-Aboriginal people to the Dreamtime, however, it is most important that children and adults, alike, are made aware of the "adulteration" that takes place whenever a European Westerner puts his or her signature on an Aboriginal account. A. W. Reed (1978: 8) explains this adulteration when he asks, "How can you put on paper an oral tradition that has no pretence of plot and that incorporates music and dance?" He adds that a literal account would frequently provide a text, which would have little impact on a reader of European ancestry or listener and that adulteration I justified: "... if by chance, they give enjoyment to others and some small insight into the treasury of Aboriginal lore, something will have been gained.

A valid point for a European, but quite possibly an insult to an Aborigine – the paintings, and oral and written accounts of the Dreamtime are all sacred to the Aborigines. Reproducing any of these or exploiting them is tantamount to sacrilege, regardless of rationale. Changing them to suit European tastes, as Reed does, is both tactless and insensitive. It is most fortunate that bodies such as the "Aboriginal Arts Board" are now trying to encourage Aborigines to preserve their Dreamtime accounts since non-Aboriginals, regardless of good intent, could never capture their authenticity. Imagine how a Catholic would feel receiving communion that had been blessed by a Hindu.

The intent of qualifying the data in this research is to show that the unadulterated and authentic accounts can have a significant impact on a non-Aboriginal, and in particular, a young reader or listener. Full impact cannot be achieved without exploring the total culture of the Aboriginal people. If we can at least understand why these accounts exist and they are the core of life, then they will be more than just "stories."

"Didacticism" is a key component of Aboriginal lore. Isaacs (1986: 176) points out that children learn many lessons of daily life listening to cautionary tales from the Dreaming from grandparents. David Mowaljarli's account of the Wuduu, for example, explains the different instructions given to boys and girls: "... before the Sun rises and before eating food, don't concentrate your gaze on the things of others. Don't forget from your father's ways, don't neglect your neighbour." Stories from the Dreamtime may simply enrich and enhance their knowledge of their environment and the ani-

mals and plants around them. A lot of oral literature deals with parent's responsibility towards their children and vice versa. Eddie Bennell, an Aborigine from the Bibulmun tribe of the southwest of Western Australia, together with Anne Thomas wrote in his own book, "Aboriginal Legends from Bibulmun Tribe," being inspired by the "tragic indifference of the younger *mixed-bloods* and their loss of respect for the old people, due to the influence of the predominant *white culture* in which they are now compelled to live ..." (Bennell and Thomas 1981: cover).

From my research I have found that most Aborigines instil the fear of evil spirits or devils in their children at an early age, usually to prevent them from wandering-off away from the safety of their "home-camp." Trezise and Roughsey's account of "The Quinkins" (1978) and also "Turramulli the Giant Quinkin" (1988) are good examples of this. There are essential rules of behaviour also. Greed and selfishness are considered serious crimes and are seriously punished. To illustrate this, children are told of the Koala who stole water and was banished to the tree tops for eternity; the wombat received his flat nose for refusing shelter to the kangaroo who hit him in the head with a rock; the kangaroo, in turn, received his tail by being speared by the wombat in retaliation; when the water rat found fire and refused to share it with others, he was banished to the dark tunnels of the river banks. There are countless tales such as these.

Perhaps the most crucial element of the lore is the respect they engender in the Earth and its creatures and plants, which provide the people with sustenance. This element is also perhaps the most difficult to understand. Along with Bob Randall, an elder from Uluru, Isaacs points out (1986: 99): "no one [non-Aboriginal] can understand the relationship he has with the land. Perhaps it is best explained as *Aboriginals don't own the land, it owns them.*" "A man deprived of his land and therefore his Dreaming is a non-person." Tony Tjamiwe, of the Pitjantjatjara tribe of Central Australia (Isaac 1986: 99) reinforces the comments made by Bob Randall, when he speaks of Uluru (Ayer's Rock): "Ayer's Rock is holy. I am Ayer's Rock and these things are mine, and now the white people have broken that which is ours." One of the most moving (and aesthetically beautiful explanations, by European standards) is found in Herr (1982: 21 f.). It is written by Djambi (Ray Saunders – the first Aborigine who became an officer in the Australian Army): "The Aboriginal standing in the forest sees his brothers, the trees. He hears the talk of the river and sees his grandfather, the mountain. The wind in his face is a caress of his mother. The dingo mother fed his spirit fore-

bears with milk from her tits. The Dreamtime is the beginning. The beginning is eternal and timeless. To invade our sacred places violates the wishes of the *Creator-Spirits* and despoils our Dreaming. We want our lands to remain timeless. We only want the purity of the air we first breathe to remain pure for our last breath and when we return from our Dreaming we want to breathe that same pure air again and again ... We have no right to destroy the purity of its blood. To spit upon and ravage the land is to spit upon and ravage our fathers and mothers, because it is both our father and mother. How can we sell and barter that which we do not own?"

This ethos is common even in Aboriginal people (First Nations Peoples) from other parts of the world. For example, Chief Seattle made an environmental statement to President Franklin Pierce in Washington, in 1854, when the United States Government wanted to buy indigenous Indian land and put the Indians on reservations: "How can you buy or sell the sky, the warmth of the land? Every part of this Earth is sacred to my people. Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every clearing and humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. *We are part of the Earth and it is part of us.* The water's murmur is the voice of my father's father. You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the Earth is rich with the lives of our kin. If they spit on the ground, they spit on themselves."¹

In July, 1987, in the edition of *The National Geographic* magazine, there is an article about the Haida culture in Canada (Johnston and Jones),² who have a similar oneness with the Earth, especially with the giant red cedars that have been extensively cut down by nonindigenous contractors over the last 30 years to the point of endangerment.

When one becomes familiar with this way of thinking, one must surely become filled with respect and awe. These same people that we have and often still call "primitive" or "illiterate" or "uncivilized" have a didactic lore, which put non-Aboriginal literature to shame. They go way beyond reading for

1 Attributed to a speech that Chief Seattle supposedly made about sanctity of the land to the Suquamish tribe around Washington. There is a great deal of controversy surrounding this speech of 1854. There are also many sources of information, various versions of the speech, and debates over its very existence.

2 The Haida territories comprise the archipelago of Haida Gwaii (formerly referred to as the Queen Charlotte Islands) in British Columbia. In the Haida language "Haida Gwaii" translates to "islands of the people."

information and pleasure (pursuits which are, I'm sure, inherently good) or storytelling for mere entertainment and leisure. It is literally the core of life on this planet.

As stated previously, to achieve a positive outcome for which we strive, three main areas need to be carefully worked through, along with patience and financial backing, to support this outcome. Researchers agree that children are not empty vessels who merely come to school to be filled by information that the curriculum has prescribed.

Teachers need to have a sense of what children bring with them that defines their readiness to *osmose* and learn the subject matter that is placed before them.

I believe that the three areas that need to be looked at carefully are

- (a) quality teaching;
- (b) the pedagogy needs to have a child-centred approach, and
- (c) an appropriate curriculum that is sensitive to the learner.

With "quality teaching," the teachers in both areas, whether it be in remote Aboriginal schools or in mainstream Western-type schools in teaching any form of Aboriginal Studies, need to be prepared for the way they manage learning and educational delivery. A close scrutiny re pre-service teacher preparation needs to be addressed and monitored to ensure the correct protocols are being followed to the mutual understanding of all.

The second area, "the pedagogy needs to have a child-centred approach," also may need closer analysis to ensure that learning is relevant and not inhibited by outdated and inappropriate pedagogy is offered. The third point of "an appropriate curriculum that is sensitive to the learner" needs to be worked through with joint co-operation and input from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources.

Much discussion at the "grass roots" level, has centred around the curriculum and method of delivery in remote Aboriginal schools. The two areas of most concern in the continuing debate re learning delivery are bilingual education and the use of a tweaked ESL method of information. Because both need extra money to succeed, both needing people resources along with support resources and these are not cheap. I believe that if education is deemed to be the core of our nation's future, then this should be a priority to not something to skimp on, but secure this prime resource as an investment in a positive future.

I have stated previously re the case of bilingual education as expressed by colleagues "in the field" and their overwhelming desire for the practice to

continue. Despite positive responses, it is deemed by those who "hold the purse strings" that money could be channeled elsewhere, despite continual evidence that the successes outweigh the negative outcomes. As with everything, I believe, not enough publicity about positive successes reaches the "front page" or is a media highlight. It is possible that the tweaked ESL program, in various parts of the Northern Territory, takes into consideration the sensitive nature of environmental and cultural capacity of the learner. It also is aligned with helping the learner and assists in building learning blocks without marginalizing the learner.

There is change happening in Aboriginal studies but it is still too early for this author to evaluate the outcome of changes to the curriculum. I am, however, concerned that the curriculum has not ventured deep enough and resources do not adequately match the information to be delivered. It is agreed that Australia managed to "survive" the recession relatively unscathed and I, therefore, believe now is the most appropriate time to prepare for the future by providing strong educational resources to ensure this expectation.

It is very encouraging to hear of many programs set up to raise awareness of the plight of select Aboriginal youth that have been helped. *Generation One*, led by entrepreneur Andrew Forrest, a mining magnate, and like-minded friends who are attempting to improve the learning capacity of Aboriginal youth by providing jobs; *Fountain for Youth*, sponsored by ex-Olympian Ian Thorpe, to improve the health and education of Aboriginal children and in Central Australia, station owners are bringing unemployed Aboriginal boys to the stations to teach them almost forgotten skills of stockmen-jackaroos as modern processes are sadly depleting those skills for basic animal husbandry and craft with the use of helicopters and "motorised horses."

It is well and good that entrepreneurs feel they are able "to help" with their own money where needs are perceived but what about the grass roots of education which seem to slip through unnoticed until a problem showing inadequate preparation in the early learning stages and the problems are exposed when it is almost too late. It is time "to bite the bullet" as it were, and resource heavily the basics to help education overcome its "bits and pieces" support experienced at present.

There is much positive change happening but more listening needs to be done to "grass roots" to make any change effective. Why do "the powers that be" undervalue education? If the priority is to have a "clever and lucky" country, then a strong commitment needs to be made at state and federal level to

achieve the aim many talk about, lament that it does not happen but resources are not put in place to allow positive outcomes to be worked through with appropriate pedagogy at all levels.

In the questionnaire that I prepared to obtain information from colleagues and those who are currently in the teaching field for my research, the raw data has been mixed with a basic analysis of the methods, frustrations, programs, and needs in the current workplace where Aborigines are taught. The responses were across the board of educational circles and added to after discussions with Aboriginal elders and Aboriginal aides "in the field." In Tasmania, the Aboriginal studies have changed immensely over the last fifty years. When I was in Grade Four, in the Fifties, I was taught about nonexistent people who once roamed parts of Tasmania and they were troublesome to the early settlers, were primitive, uncivilized, and no longer exist. Today we know different, and children are taught about the Tasmanian Aborigines in a totally new light. Sadly much of the rich history and cultural practices have been lost through time, but this is being addressed, albeit slowly, and through painstaking research. More and more awareness is being addressed to provide understanding for the general population. As an advertisement from the past stated: "It won't happen overnight but it will happen." It is hoped that the new approaches become positive and all can learn from one another for a most productive future,

There is so much that has to be readdressed and we need to "chunk" it into manageable portions for effective learning. Since 1967 till today (over 40 years), much work has been done to assimilate, develop learning methods, practices, and structures to be put in place to facilitate the osmosing of a 40,000 year culture into our normal knowledge psyche. Many mistakes and inappropriate strategies have used and inadequately trained personnel put in place to develop learning programs. This is the time to revisit these areas and tick the good practices and remedy the inadequate processes. As we approach fifty years of change, the relevant need to make a more positive approach to education in Australia.

Over 40,000 years of a culture, rich in story, values, tradition, and beliefs has much to offer and attitudes need to be led to broaden Australia's knowledge but resources *must* be put in place for this knowledge to be more fully explored and inculcated into the norm of the Australian education system and help Aboriginal children have the capacity to learn along with non-Aboriginal to achieve success and experience the achievement to pursue any opportunity presented.

It is my hope that this work may be of use not so much as an intellectual treatise, but as a stimulus for acting to attain the kinds of goals mentioned in the article.

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Believing to Recover

The Role of Religion in the Recovery Phase of Natural Disasters

Ranty R. Islam

1 Introduction

In individual human perception natural disasters register among the most extremely singular events. When volcanic eruptions or floods wipe away villages and hamlets, or earthquakes destroy whole cityscapes, survivors find themselves in a situation where the very fabric of their existential context has been disrupted in almost every respect: Homes are destroyed and the immediate physical environment disfigured beyond recognition; relatives and friends are lost or have perished; animals, harvests, and other means of subsistence are gone. All existential ties mooring a person to their life context have been broken.

Because of their existential nature catastrophes have naturally attracted sustained attention from across academic disciplinary divides ranging from the natural sciences and engineering to the social sciences and philosophy. While the latter have been concerned with what can broadly be called the human condition and how it is affected by disaster, political science, philosophy, and, less so, sociology have often proceeded on the assumption that the existential nature of disaster is universal. The catastrophic breaking of all existential ties, as it were, makes everybody the same. Money does not buy anything and friends in high places cannot help when local economic and social systems have collapsed.

As far as the immediate aftermath of a catastro-

phe is concerned, basic human needs like food, shelter, health, and security issues pose a challenge that is universal – a proposition that may sound obvious. Anthropologists, on the other hand, have long been aware of the culturally distinct long-term social change that can be triggered or induced by natural disasters – precisely because they reshuffle local and regional sociocultural set-ups. There is a relatively recent but growing body of anthropological literature on the social impact and perception of natural disasters (Oliver-Smith 1996). Specific examples include Urte Frömming's comparative exploration of the cultural interpretation of volcanic eruptions and earthquakes in Indonesia and Iceland (Frömming 2006).

The ground that could potentially be covered here is vast. For the purpose of this essay I have, therefore, tried to focus on the immediate recovery phase following disaster strike from an anthropological vantage, as it appears from the literature that this short-term perspective may have received somewhat less attention by anthropologists. This is not surprising – in the immediate aftermath of disaster striking the long-term sociocultural implications are not clear and the very idea of fieldwork under literally catastrophic conditions may seem odd. Yet, it is precisely in these moments that some of the anthropologically most salient aspects come to the fore, as Oliver-Smith (1996: 308) notes:

The responses of disaster-stricken peoples invariably involve the moral and ethical core of the belief system and include a deep delving into concepts of both social and cosmic justice, sin and retribution, causality, the relationship of the secular to the sacred, and the existence and nature of the divine.

When the dust settles over a ruined landscape, for survivors it is religion and the sacred that become exceptionally important as a first resort.

Taking this as a point of departure, I want to turn the question outwards from the individual survivor again to ask what role religion has during the immediate recovery phase of a world in ruins and for the people inhabiting it (chap. 3). To set the scene I look at what role religion plays in the sociocultural backdrop against which risks and hazards are seen (chap. 2). In my conclusion I consider the more practical implications of survivors' religious sensitivities for emergency response and planning.

2 Religion in the Perception of Risks and Hazards

Modern disaster planning and research in the industrialized world has interpreted resilience largely in

terms of physical defense, i.e., the prevention and control through modifications to the human habitat and the immediate or regional environment: Levees, concrete houses, bridges and roads, sewage systems, drainage of wetlands – in short, fortified physical infrastructure has helped reduce the risk or immediate physical impact of floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes.¹ In addition well-developed emergency response systems (communications, transport, medical etc.) have helped reduce the human and economic cost of natural disasters.

Here, resilience is largely accomplished through fortifying the interface – or rather barrier – between human lifeworlds and the natural environment.² In contrast, actual human *adaptation*³ to nature has taken a backseat.

From this vantage, any society which does not display similar capacities for resilience is seen as “vulnerable and unable to cope, more or less fatalistically living under a continual reign of terror from the environment” (Oliver-Smith 1996: 312). This is seen to apply particularly to “traditional” societies and their turn to religion is viewed as an indication of this lack of resilience rather than an expression of a constructive engagement with (the forces of) nature. This has as much to do with the marginal place of religion in secular Western mainstream discourses of progress, as it has to do with a profound ignorance of the sociocultural context in which traditional societies view and enact religion.

2.1 Religion in the Perception of Volcanic Risk in Indonesia

The view that people are defenselessly exposed to nature also implies something else. It is the assumption that there is a separation in principle, between human (society, culture) and nature: If “they” only had the (technical) means, they would try and fend off the negative impact of catastrophe, i.e., try and

fend off nature. This is a type of epistemological domaining that either does not exist for people in other parts of the globe, or that has only been adopted there recently or partially. Examples of the former include the Achuar Jivaro of the Upper Amazon, who

... consider most plants and animals as persons, living in societies of their own, entering into relations with humans according to strict rules of social behaviour: game animals are treated as affines by men, while cultivated plants are treated as kin by women. (Descola and Pálsson 1996: 7).⁴

For them “the nature-society dichotomy [is] utterly meaningless”, conclude the authors (7).

More instructive for our consideration here is Urte U. Frömring’s exploration of people in four regions of the Indonesian island of Flores. Focused on the role and perception of natural disasters, she finds that for the people in Flores both myth/religion as well as natural science provide two complementary ways of making sense of catastrophe.

In Flores, she notes, nature constitutes a complex network of spaces inhabited by gods and spirits,⁵ especially mountains, rivers, and the ocean (Frömring 2006: 27). Nature assumes no cognitive primacy – the Florenese do not conceive of nature as an entity, let alone one that is seen as separate from their lifeworld. Rather, nature is constituted of events and processes, the action of gods and spirits: “Natur wird vielmehr als die Wirkmächte gedacht, die von ihr ausgehen und mit denen die Menschen in responsiver Beziehung stehen”. The consequence is clear: “Naturkatastrophen wurden daher ... als Warnung oder Strafe der Götter für gesellschaftliches Fehlverhalten betrachtet” (Frömring 2006: 33)⁶. The special mythical status of physical locations in Flores coincides with what a natural scientific vantage would identify as the origin of natural forces (and disasters) prevalent in that part of the world – volcanic eruptions, swelling rivers, and tsunamis.

Why have the Florenese gotten into so close a relationship with volcanoes and rivers? Their notion of what adherents of monotheistic religions would refer to as the hereafter is a central plank in the Florenese cosmology bridging the gap between human life worlds and the realm of nature. The “hereafter” is not beyond both but connects the two: The ancestors continue living as ancestral spirits inhabit-

1 This does not contradict the by now well-known negative (and catastrophic), albeit unintended consequences of other physical modifications of the environment, e.g., the increased risk of flooding or droughts from regulating rivers and, of course, global warming.

2 This is also reflected in a topography where ever more people collectively live in cities and urban agglomerations – that is, in places made physically distinct from the surrounding natural environment (see *United Nations Report 2007*). However, the protective embrace of the metropolis may still fail – see e.g., the flooding of New Orleans, mudslides in urban slum areas, etc.

3 In the sense of establishing structures and modes of behavior that allow responding flexibly to nature rather than erecting fixed iron clad fortress walls keeping nature out.

4 Descola and Pálsson’s volume contains contributions with many more such examples.

5 Frömring differentiates between three major kinds: earth, evil, and ancestral spirits.

6 “Natural disasters are thus ... regarded as God’s warning or punishment for societal misdeeds.”

ing volcanoes or mountains. For the Florenese this dissolves a dichotomy that remains central in industrialized societies: the finality of human life and the question of death. Frömming writes (2006: 37):

Durch die Vorstellung vom Weiterleben des Menschen nach dem Tod in verschiedenen Naturräumen ... und durch die Ahnenverehrung, wird die, für ein menschliches Bewusstsein überwältigende Vorstellung der Endlichkeit, also des Todes bewältigt. Gleichzeitig wird durch diese Imagination die Dichotomie zwischen Natur und Mensch aufgehoben. Die Ahnenvorstellungen sind das kognitive Bindeglied zwischen Mensch und Natur.⁷

The full integration of human and natural life into one cosmology has several implications. Natural catastrophes as a discontinuity of the physical natural environment cannot be conceived of as separate from fractures in collective human life. Or put differently: Natural disasters merely echo the internal tensions and faultlines of human society. At this point already it becomes clear, that a person subscribing to this kind of cosmology would regard technical means to defend against natural catastrophes not as wrong but as wholly inadequate.

Another implication are the modes of behavior in response to disaster striking. On the one hand, this comprises rules regarding the conduct in the face of impending natural disaster or in its immediate aftermath – something to which I will return in the next section. The Florenese cosmology also gives rise to general practical guidelines on how to behave with respect to nature. Among these are the prohibitions of logging or even entering in mountainous regions which are considered sacred. Hunting is only allowed under specific conditions and not unless a sequence of particular rituals is followed. In the context of Flores, we find that this spiritual sense very much encapsulates the essence of long-term practical wisdom: Trees in mountain regions are an effective protection against mudslides and the observable movement of animals in an intact fauna can be an indicator of precursors to flooding or earth tremors imperceptible to humans.

There are other rituals and guidelines which do not carry immediately obvious practical implications such as saving humans from, or lessening the physical impact of disasters. Among these are rituals at or near volcanoes carried out to appease ancestral spirits and thus dissuade them from unleashing

7 “The representations of afterlife in various areas of nature as well as the ancestors’ cult are means to overcome the overwhelming feelings of finiteness and the fear of death. At the same time – as the ancestors’ cult serves as the link between people and the nature – these conceptions nullify the dichotomy between human beings and the surrounding world.”

disaster (i.e., an eruption) on the living (Frömming 2006: 67). Here we find another type of ulterior significance. Pointing to the ritual at the *Lewotobi laki-laki* volcano, Frömming notes that there is a taboo on using knives to slaughter the sacrificial animal (it is instead torn apart) and participants are enjoined not to carry weapons, as these are considered “impure” by the gods (2006: 73). These provisions are symbolic of the clear social dimension that these rituals carry. They are designed to help mitigate tensions between groups of people. This is acknowledged by the participants as well: “[A]uch wenn es Konflikte und Streitigkeiten zwischen den verschiedenen *suku* [groups] gibt bzw. früher Krieg geführt wurde, muss die Zeremonie von den ... Gruppen gemeinsam durchgeführt werden” (2006: 68).⁸ The correspondence between human and spiritual (natural) world then can be seen to communicate in both directions. The rituals try to heal rifts in human society thereby depriving the gods/spirits of a reason to exact punishment in the form of natural disasters. On the other hand, in the wake of flooding or a volcanic eruption, the rituals act as a rallying point to reestablish order in the human lifeworld by enjoining everybody affected to unite in a common cause.

Frömming points out, though, that while these traditional notions are strong, a large part of the population on Flores is well versed in natural scientific ways of looking at disaster. There need not be mutually exclusive competition between the mythical and scientific views – the people on Flores are aware of both.

2.2 Religion in the Perception of Volcanic Risk in the Industrial World

The association of mythical qualities or religious sentiment with natural disaster sites is by no means confined to preindustrial societies. Frömming herself points to the widespread belief among Icelanders in mythical beings, such as elves and trolls, in connection with nature.

Another example is the strong presence of Christian religious attitudes aimed at (or rituals charged with) literally protecting against volcanic eruptions in Italy – particularly at or near the sites of the Vesuvius and Etna volcanoes. Chester et al. (2008: 223) found that “what is remarkable about disasters in southern Italy is that a wide range of religiously-based responses has persisted and continues to in-

8 “The ceremony is carried on by all groups involved when there are ongoing conflicts between various *suku*, or after an all-out war has been brought to an end.”

volve a large number of people.” Among these responses they count phenomena as general as the kissing of patron saints’ relics, or as specific as the administration of mass by the Archbishop of Catania in 2001 “to facilitate an end to the eruption and for the villages to be spared.”

According to the authors, belief in miracles or literal divine⁹ intervention remains strong in Sicily. As part of a large survey of risk perception they carried out interviews. The following is quoted as a typical response (Chester et al. 2008: 224):

We thought the patron saint of our town, S. Leonardo, could have stopped the lava, so some people decided to put the statue of the saint in front of the oncoming lava. They positioned it only 50 metres away, hoping it would perform a miracle but it was no good.¹⁰

Similar to Frömming, Chester et al. (2008: 225) suggest that religious practice and “more rationally” grounded action are no contradiction for those (potentially) affected by disaster: “religious practice ... [is] simply one of the protective behaviors used by people before, during and after volcanic emergencies.”

One could argue that even if these notions appear contradictory, it may be less so for the Florenese – for conceptual reasons. For them, volcanoes and rivers are not only the stage for the action of gods and spirits, these beings also reside there – almost “next door.” The conceptual leap across the gap between divine residence and stage of action is more easily accomplished compared to Italian Catholics who have to make sense of God intervening on Earth from somewhere *beyond* nature.

3 Impact of Religion on Recovery Phase

In many ways the impact of religion on risk perception blends in with the general socio-cultural context of a society. As such it is primarily connected with attitudes towards or general conceptions of life, including the existential threats it harbors. In contrast, in an acute crisis situation and its immediate aftermath it is practical action that is a rather more important determinant of how people end up being affected by disaster in the short term. The question here is, to what extent religion provides or inspires concrete and immediate action that helps guard against the impact of natural disasters, and how re-

ligion affects or can change the short-term perception of catastrophe.

3.1 Myth as a Source of Rules for Action and Instant Justification

In the context of Flores, Frömming points to the religious taboo on panic reactions, when disaster strikes. This includes the prohibition to turn around while running away from a disaster site (Frömming 2006: 52). She notes that this rule also exists elsewhere, such as in Tanzania, and that it is mentioned even in the biblical context as a command by angels during the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah. This is also well in tune with modern emergency response guidelines, e.g., for the channeling of refugee streams away from disaster sites: stampedes triggered by the chaotic movement of people on the run end up killing more.

Another example of this kind was illustrated during the massive Asian tsunami in December 2004. While thousands perished along South and Southeast Asian coasts, there were virtually no victims in some villages on the West coast of Malaysia. Some village elders remembered earlier tsunamis and told the villagers to immediately move inland to locations at higher altitude. When the elders saw the waters recede far away from the beach, they recognized the phenomenon from experience as a precursor to the massive tsunami wave hitting the coast shortly afterward. Interestingly, as Frömming (2006: 23) notes, some younger villagers also knew what was about to happen, because they remembered myths giving the very same advice.

These two examples give rise to an interesting thought. It appears that practical wisdom with existential significance (such as where to go, when the tsunami approaches or the volcano erupts) over time passes from the remit of individual experience (handed down between generations) into the realm of myths and is endowed with religious and spiritual significance. This epistemological passage strips vital experience off its individual human authorship and reformulates it as an eternal truth or as borne by eternal truth.

One could argue that religious practice provides the most efficient long-term repository for practical action against disaster. Or, put differently, practical wisdom once garnered obtains a longer half-life, when embedded in a mythical/religious context. But why is this so? After all cultural memory is not exclusively tied to religious experience. And what is more, while myth furnishes the bedrock of human existence (as in Flores), rare high impact events such

⁹ In further course I shall also use the term “divine” to refer to spirits.

¹⁰ This is, of course, also an example of religious sentiment affecting behavior and short term defensive action against disaster unfolding. This is the focus of the next section.

as natural disasters directly challenge it. I would argue that it is the *existential nature* of both – myth and disaster, its greatest challenge – that unites them despite the otherwise glaring contradiction. When it appears at first sight that the massive loss of life caused by a volcanic eruption calls into question the wisdom or justice of the gods, it is only because humans have not heeded or not known part of the divine message.

Practical rules and guidelines for action are part of this and by their concrete nature also provide the clearest marker for human transgression against divine will. If an individual fleeing a volcano got killed because he looked back, it was not because he was slowed down by his action allowing the lava to reach him, but rather because he clearly contravened a divine provision.

Integrating short-term practical action with belief systems also addresses a less tangible but equally fundamental problem. Natural catastrophes not only mark a singular break, a discontinuity in human life. More specifically, they upset temporal structure which arguably is the cognitive substrate allowing humans to integrate action and beliefs over different time scales, as the sociologist Victoria Koehler-Jones (1996: 82) has observed:

Cognitions, knowledge, beliefs and attitudes – as well as capabilities and motivations – all come together to structure a model about how time operates and functions. Two important elements of the temporal structure are pattern and flow. These have to do with the way time moves from the past, through the present and into the future. Patterns of time may be circular, elliptical, linear or otherwise. Flow is a term that includes ideas about rates of change as well as consistency or uniformity of change. It embodies ideas about how the environment changes – gradually or sharply – and what expectations are for the speed of onset of particular events.

The problem is not that human beings in one place or another subscribe to anyone type of flow or pattern. Rather, natural disasters are unique in mixing up different flows and patterns for a large number of people. Relatively slow changing, possibly circular flows of time, marking individual and collective life, are facing off against natural disasters, i.e., relatively rare, seemingly irreversible, and massive changes to personal and communal lifeworlds. When myth and religion are called upon to make sense of this, part of their ability to do so lies in the fact that they individually address different time scales and patterns. Hence, we find the cosmology of the Florenese, say, integrates both, long-standing belief systems and instructions for short-term action, into one cosmology.

Compare this, e.g., with mainstream Abrahamic monotheistic and particularly European Christian cosmologies. The often perceived silence of God in the wake of disaster – personal or collective, natural or otherwise – has given rise to the theodicy: the discourse on the justification of God’s seemingly incomprehensible or “evil” actions, when God remains silent. In the light of the argument on the disruption of temporal structure it might be argued that something akin to theodicy has not cropped up in the Florenese context because myth there does *not* remain silent, when disaster strikes: It provides both instant justification (even if retrospectively) and rules regarding immediate action.¹¹ When, in the wake of disaster, all authorities in the world of the living fail to provide guidance on what to do, it becomes even more important that answers – practical, immediate, and concrete – are readily found in myth, as in Flores. As Frömming (2006: 54) notes, “die vormodernen Strategien der Affektkontrolle und der Verhaltensweisen bei Naturkatastrophen [spiegeln] die Fähigkeit der ‘imaginativen Deutung des Seins in der Welt’ [wider]”.¹² In other words, the provisions for short-term action are part of the mythical answer that helps the Florenese to make sense of catastrophe – even as and when it strikes.

Put simply, the mythical cosmology provides a guide to action aimed at re-establishing continuity after the disaster, or conversely, to bridge and lessen the discontinuity caused by natural catastrophe. Instructions for where/how to move (e.g., to run away from the volcano) are just the first in the chain of prescribed actions. Others follow. The longer they take place after the disaster event the lesser their immediate practical content. Examples are some of the volcanic rituals already mentioned, which are designed to appease the ancestral spirits and thereby reestablish harmony – i.e., continuity.¹³

11 See, for instance, Frömming’s description of guilt confessions following volcanic eruptions (2006: 50) – the Florenese know why disaster has struck, the only thing remaining is to nail the culprit.

12 “... pre-modern strategies of affect control and behavior in natural disasters reflect the ability of interpreting one’s own ‘sense of being in the world’ in an imaginative [and practical] way.”

13 Interestingly, this appears to be almost the opposite of the situation reported by Agnieszka Halemba about the religious life of the Altai people in Siberia. The Altai also have a strong mythical connection to the land they live on. It is inextricably linked to their identity. Unlike the Florenese, however, the Altai see natural disaster – particularly earthquakes – not only as mirroring rifts in human society that need to be healed, but rather as spiritual events intimately heralding or accompanying changes within their society. To explain this connection Halemba employs the metaphor “religion moving under one’s feet”: “... the metaphor refers directly to the

3.2 Making Sense of Disaster. Social Differences and Religious Justification

As already mentioned, when disaster strikes and no immediate answers are provided by myth or religion, the destruction apparently without sense traumatizes those directly affected and also leaves those further removed searching for answers. John Campbell-Nelson refers to this as the “Hermeneutics of Disaster” (2008). In Indonesia we find yet another example of how religion does not so much provide direct answers but acts instead as a catalyst for deriving them from elsewhere. Campbell-Nelson refers to the earthquake that shook the ground in the Indonesian island of Alor in November 2004 – barely one and a half months before the massive Asian tsunami. The quake destroyed some 6,000 houses, 200 people were wounded, 35 died. In the weeks following the disaster, describes Campbell-Nelson, various types of explanations were put forward – some motivated by social tensions, others by religious sentiment or a mixture of both. Interestingly, in the immediate aftermath it was the differential impact of the quake on various sections of the populace that turned out to be a source of explanations, which were subsequently justified by reference to religion:

... the relatively affluent suffered the greatest losses when their brick houses collapsed, whereas the bamboo homes of the poor rarely fell down. In extreme cases, an oppressed group may see disaster for their oppressors as divine deliverance for themselves ... More than a few Christians in Eastern Indonesia react to news of a disaster that affects Indonesian Muslims with a thoughtlessly fiendish piece of folk theology: “See, they burn our churches and murder our pastors, but we don’t need to fight back. God is punishing them for us” (Campbell-Nelson 2008: 13).

It is clear that this type of explanation offers no permanent answer, but it may help survivors to help bridge those critical hours and days after the disaster event by providing some sort of anchor for people who have to begin sorting out their minds and their lives while facing an uncertain future. This contrasts starkly with the post-disaster rituals of the Florenese aimed at reestablishing harmony between opposing groups of people. The extreme forms of “religious” explanation in Alor are an illusory peace of mind bought at the price of reinforcing animos-

ity and mutual suspicion between different societal groups in the long run.

3.3 Impact of Religious Institutional Affiliation

Religion can play yet another different but existential role in the immediate post-disaster recovery phase. When the world collapses, those affected turn to religion for both answers and help as noted above. But this also implies that institutions serving religious or sacred functions may be the first port of call in practical terms (see also Shaw et al. 2010 below). Depending on how well these institutions are set up to respond, survivors may experience disaster stress in very different degrees. Gillard and Paton (1999) have investigated how this plays out for adherents of different faiths in the Fijian islands. Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism all have a major following on the islands. These religions are actively practiced by 95 percent of the population. The high rate of practical identification with their faith goes hand in hand with a strong bond between members of religious groups and their respective religious institutions. A relationship that is by and large reciprocal in the normal course of life: Churches, mosques, and temples provide a source of identification for believers who in turn serve and sustain their group and institution economically. When the devastating hurricane Nigel struck in 1997, this equilibrium was upset. Fijians were no longer able to materially support their institutions and other members of the religious groups, and for the same reason would not be able to expect help from there either, unless the respective group could make use of institutional arrangements for overseas support. As it turns out, this is primarily the case for the Christian Churches in Fiji, which can draw extensively on overseas help. Many Fijian Christians may not even be fully aware of this link, but it has apparently often worked well enough. As a result, this has fostered their confidence in receiving adequate help from their church and – more importantly – has lowered their subjective perception of disaster stress, the authors find.¹⁴ For Muslims and Hindus the situation is the opposite. In summary,

Hindu and Muslim Indian groups are less likely to receive assistance from their Temples and Mosques, more likely to perceive assistance as being inadequate for their needs, and more likely to find their religious organisation making demands upon them after a disaster. Mosques and Temples, being of limited financial means, were unable to

¹⁴ Gillard and Paton provide several stress measures derived from the evaluation of their surveys.

earthquakes, when the land – the foundation for Altaian religious life – shakes under peoples’ feet.” At the same time, “the metaphor ... refers to *change* ... [which is] that at present the Altaian religious life is reformulated in the context of national ideology building” (Halemba 2008: 287).

provide their members with financial support after a hurricane; instead requesting financial and material assistance from their members, increasing their vulnerability to experiencing disaster stress reactions.

Conversely, because Fijian Christians can anticipate high levels of assistance from their church, with no, or only minimal, demands being placed upon them after a hurricane, they can be placed in a lower risk category (Gillard and Paton 1999: Discussion).

4 Conclusion

When catastrophe has severed all connections between people and the world they used to inhabit, they rely even more on the connection tying them to a world beyond, where they seek and obtain meaning for their existence. This connection is what religion or myth provides. It is the last string of a shaky rope bridge reaching across the abyss that has suddenly opened up. Disaster marks a singular break, a discontinuity between a past lost and a future uncertain, a fundamental change to a person's habitat and physical circumstances. It is so incredibly fearsome also because it constitutes a break in a person's narrative – the engine continuously generating their identity. When that engine founders, identity is called into question.

In the case of the Florenese, it seems that this abyss is ultimately limited, because their world and their world *beyond* are not really separate. If the world of the living is turned upside down, it is because the ancestors have spoken. And they can be spoken to, in turn – right there and right then. But where answers are not readily available because “God remains silent,” explanations are designed ad hoc (cf. Alor) or are developed over a long time (the theodicy).

It has been argued, that in all these cases (cf. Frömming 2006) it is a human quest for reestablishing continuity after a singular event that has introduced a discontinuity. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster event, this quest is most acute and sufferers are most disconnected, stranded, and vulnerable at the same time. It may be instructive to complement this with another idea formulated in a different context. Zygmunt Bauman argues that neoliberal globalization has produced ever greater existential fear and insecurity among people, particularly in urban areas, where it has triggered the breakdown of social bonds that had previously acted as a kind of insurance against the risks of life. This breakdown has proceeded in various stages: Competition has now replaced solidarity, but solidarity itself had previously replaced something more

fundamental – the sense of *belonging*¹⁵ (Bauman 2007: 66). I would argue that (apart from the difference that Bauman addresses a situation of chronic insecurity, whereas disasters induce a state of acute insecurity) the sense of belonging (or lack of it) has a similar role in the context of natural catastrophe. More specifically, then, discontinuity means the sudden loss of the sense of belonging, brought about by the disappearance of the community (physical, spiritual, mental) and familiar physical environment. All types of behavior of survivors addressed in the previous sections can be seen as an effort to reestablish belonging and the community that is a prerequisite for it – the physical reconstruction of the place comes after that. Religion acts as a natural nucleation point around which the community is being built. This does not contradict the primacy of religion or myth in people's quest for meaning after the disaster. Myth remains the wellspring of meaning, but it needs to be mediated by the community and its rituals: Private religion alone is powerless to make sense of catastrophe.

4.1 Cultural Awareness in Emergency Response

In a time, when emergency response operations draw on resources that can be mobilized across the world, new problems arise especially with respect to the recovery phase immediately following massive disaster events. When the great tsunami hit the Asian coastlines on December 26, 2004, it soon dawned on a stunned world public that they were confronted with one of the biggest natural disasters in modern times. The aid machinery around the globe sprung into action, thousands of emergency responders were sent from all continents to support local rescue operations or work on their own. In capitals of the industrial world millions of Euros in aid were cleared almost overnight. But weeks later, Europeans and North Americans were confused to learn that rescue and reconstruction were not really lacking money. Logistics was still a problem, especially in remote coastal regions. However, another problem hardly made the headlines – the cultural inadequacy of foreign aid efforts that were also insensitive to local religious sentiments. Anthropologists have been aware of this for some time. Oliver-Smith

15 Solidarity is already a community-created substitute for “natural” social bonds that answer and mediate the sense of belonging. Referring to the situation in the industrial metropolis, Bauman defines solidarity as the “artificial equivalent [of natural bonds] in the form of associations, unions and part-time yet quasi-permanent collectivities unified by shared interests and daily routines” (2007: 67).

notes that “[s]erious criticism has been leveled at postdisaster aid that is so culturally inappropriate as to be both useless and insulting” (1996: 318). Recent research on aid efforts in the wake of the Asian tsunami arrives at similar conclusions. Based on extensive surveys conducted between 2006 and 2010 with affected communities in the Indian and Sri Lankan coastal regions researchers at RMIT University’s Globalism Research Center in Australia note the lack of awareness for local religion, human resources, and capacities in international aid efforts (Shaw et al. 2010):

The contribution made by local people and organisations to the relief and rehabilitation operations has not been well documented ... (10). The experience of the tsunami in both Sri Lanka and India suggests that more needs to be done to build local and regional capacity to respond to disasters ... (13).

... religious centres tend to become an important refuge for disaster victims and their role in this regard needs to be acknowledged ... (10). It is critically important to establish spaces for important cultural practices – such as religious rituals – as soon as possible after a disaster (12).

Classic examples are inadequate design of shelters or culturally insensitive donations such as food and clothing that are not used or consumed by local populations because they do not conform with local beliefs and norms. At worst they exacerbate the post-disaster situation by their uselessness. Where aid can be actively harmful, however, is in the area of mental health provisions that have become an integral part of global post-disaster aid operations. The basic problem is that here “aid practices and procedures, ... are often developed in a cultural context that differs substantially from that prevailing within the affected country” (Gillard and Paton 1999). That also and particularly touches on concepts of religion and myth – which in many regions, that happen to be struck by disaster, may have a much larger impact on people’s lives than European aid workers are willing to acknowledge. Even local emergency response organizations in disaster areas go along with this as they are tied in with and dependent on funds from international aid networks. They go along, even though they do have the means to provide culturally more appropriate alternatives (Shah 2006). Referring to the situation in India, Thailand, and Sri Lanka after the 2004 tsunami as an example, Shah points out (2006),

... these other treatments include South Asia’s culturally-embedded healing methods: therapeutic yoga, meditation, pranayama (breathwork), Ayurveda, Siddha Medicine, Unani, Tantric spiritualism, pranic healing, and shaman-

ism. While native psychiatrists/psychologists have gone on record supporting these practices, Western agencies, however, rarely integrate these treatments at the official level ... Community coping methods may include spiritual grounding and religious leaders ... a failure to utilize them may undermine future community resilience by reducing the capacity of indigenous populations to utilize their intrinsic resources to confront and cope with the problems they encounter.

It appears, however, that beyond this general diagnosis and generic suggestions for more ethno-medical competence in “Western aid canons” the multiple dichotomies (or lack thereof in many pre-industrial societies) between human and nature as well as psyche and spiritual world remain largely unaddressed in global aid flows. The excerpt mentioned above is a case in point. Shah, a medical doctor at a US institution set up to improve the work of aid organizations, merely addresses problematic issues but not the idiom of the argument itself. When mentioning that “native psychiatrists have gone on record supporting these [indigenous] practices” he still only considers the utility of these practices (torn from their cosmological context) in relation to the mental well-being of an affected individual. And he is still not prepared to view as an integrated whole the mind and the spiritual, human being and nature – in his argument they remain part of separate domains. In Flores, for instance, this approach may be at best inefficient.

The big challenge for aid operations to become truly culturally and religiously aware thus lies in overcoming these conceptual dichotomies – and on this basis come up with pragmatic, workable emergency response measures.

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On Cultural Evolution

A Review of Current Research toward a Unified Theory of Societal Change

Christoph Antweiler

Darwin's 200th birthday and the 150th anniversary of his "Origins" are gone, but the proliferation of books inspired by Darwin goes on. This cumu-

lative review discusses fourteen monographs and edited volumes published in German and English.¹ This review discusses works published mostly between 2009 and 2011 and can be taken as an update to an earlier review in this journal (Antweiler 2005). My aim is three-fold: (1) to discover cross-cutting issues and results in a fragmented field of research; (2) to present some recent German language scholarship to English-speaking readers; and (3) to

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