THE POLITICS OF SUFFERING

Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus

PETER SUTTON

'Incandescent, emotional, tragic and challenging'
MARCIA LANGTON

MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS
An imprint of Melbourne University Publishing Limited
187 Grattan Street, Carlton, Victoria 3053, Australia
mup-info@unimelb.edu.au
www.mup.com.au

First published 2009

Text design by Peter Long
Cover design by Design by Committee
Typeset by Megan Ellis
Printed by Griffin Press, South Australia

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry
Sutton, Peter, 1946–
The politics of suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus / Peter Sutton.

9780522856361 (pbk.)

Includes index.
Bibliography.

Aboriginal Australians—Social conditions.
Aboriginal Australians, Treatment of.
Aboriginal Australians—Government relations.
Aboriginal Australians—Government policy.

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partially cultural and 'traditional' underpinnings of disadvantage, and from looking clear-eyed at successful interventions that actually diminish disadvantage. Was, for example, a high level of personal violence the norm in pre-colonial Australia? Many have said 'No'. But what is the evidence?

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Violence, Ancient and Modern

In November 1989 I was staying in the Aurukun village. One night we heard sounds of wailing nearby. I had been talking with Cape Keerweer cousin-brothers, Peter and Nelson, helping them sober up with coffee after their evening at the wet canteen. This period was what is now known in retrospect at Aurukun as 'Takeaway Time'. The 'Takeaway' was grog from the canteen. Previous Aurukun eras had been named after mission superintendents: Mr Richter Time, Bill MacKenzie Time, John Gillanders Time, Robert Bos Time.

As the wailing reached us my nephew Roy, Victor's grandson, suddenly came into the room from outside and took me to a house close by. In front of this house the Gothachalkenin, Eundatumweakin and Landis families, the clan of Victor Wolmby's wife Isobel, were in heavy and anguished mourning. They had just lost one of their own. Closer to the house and facing them were members of the Wolmby family, plus Aelan Woolla. I was told that Ken Wolmby had just killed his partner Jinny by cutting her throat. Ken had been quickly removed to the lockup.

Aelan and Roy told me to stand by Ken's father Silas. They told me the killing had been caused by 'black magic' (*ma'-nhay*, hand-string). The sorcery had come from Pormpuraaw, the settlement

to the south where the couple had recently been living. The police arrived to take photographs and retrieve the body. Aelan tried to assist them but couldn't bear the sight. Roy helped them instead. They could do this because Aelan and Roy were more or less neutral with respect to the two families involved. They had rapidly taken up traditional roles in the handling of this tragic and potentially more widely dangerous event. Wik people move with practised smoothness into crisis events. Everyone seems to know what to do.

The police left and the two groups formed up, face to face. As an adoptive Wolmby I was closely related to Ken, who called me father. But Isobel, whose husband Victor had taken me as a son, was also a Gothachalkenin and the murdered woman's full aunt. So I was in the middle between the two families, but as a Whitefella I was also still outside both. I believe this was why I was physically placed in the midst of the event by Roy and Aelan. Just being there was my assignment as mediator. The howling and violent threatening from the dead woman's family continued, but not for long. Word about the sorcery analysis had gone around. It seemed to be accepted. Silas turned and left. I stayed while the crowds dispersed rapidly. Jinny's name was now taboo. For the time being she was referred to as 'Dead Body'.

Ken and Dead Body had been drinking cask wine since early in the day. Anything other than canteen beer was sly grog. They had tried to buy some wine from Fred but he had none for sale. Fred had been long-time chairman of Aurukun Council, a strong man. Instead, I was told, they got it from Jackie and Norma. Jackie, a Frenchman, was colourful and feared, said to have been a mercenary somewhere in Africa, and self-described to me as a former armed bank robber for a Far Left cause in France who had been forgiven in the 1968 amnesty. On his fridge door he once wrote: 'If you steal from me I will kill you'. His food was safe.

I wondered if Jackie and Norma might get blamed for the murder. Apparently not. All the blaming centred on the unnamed Pormpuraaw sorcerer. Roy had shared some of the cask with Ken and Dead Body during the day and said it tasted strange. He said to his

wife Sandra: 'Something going to happen today'. If he was blaming the alcohol it was alcohol as poisoned by the Hand-String Man from Pormpuraaw. I guessed it had been Coolibah Moselle, the one in the green box with a handle. It was such a preferred drink in the outback at the time that it earned the name 'The Green Handbag'.

Roy came back to my place later to pick up the takeaway six-pack he'd left behind. Before leaving he went through other recent Aurukun murders and gave me similar sorcery explanations for the events. The assailants were not blamed, nor the government, nor racism, nor Captain Cook. The key cause was Other Blackfellas. This is how sorcery functions in a small community where everyone is kin. Always externalise blame to a member of another local family, or one away in the distance. The other factor mentioned to me, by Aelan, was sexual jealousy. This was probably the most common and ancient flashpoint for extreme violence in Wik life.

The ancient institution of sorcery continues to maintain a function for many groups, as Deborah Bird Rose has argued in the case of the Victoria River District.[1] There are still many Aboriginal communities in which virtually all deaths, other than those of infants and, in some cases, the elderly, are either attributed to sorcery committed by members of near or distant groups, or result from personal violence. Sometimes it is both. Many homicides or accidental killings are attributed to a sorcerer using the assailant as an instrument, or using the unwitting driver in the case of a car crash. The one whose act overtly caused death may thus be regarded as personally blameless. In 2007 at Aurukun I asked my brother Ron Yunkaporta, Victor's son, how he dealt with running into the woman who had knifed to death our clan son Rexie when she returned after a long jail sentence. He could not avoid seeing her at the Three Rivers Tavern from time to time. He replied that he had said to her: 'I know it was your hand Girl, but the real killer was *pam moenp* [a sorcerer]'. When Ron's own daughter was murdered in 2008 he made the same explanation to me as he had to the police: both she and her killer had been 'caught' by the *pam moenp*.

A community with a high homicide rate in its recent past is, in this kind of way, able to defuse vengeful feelings. This has perhaps always been the case. With limited exceptions, in such communities there are no deaths attributed merely to 'natural causes'. The sorcery analysis not only provides a cause for the death, it deflects blame and rage away from the participants and to the social outside, emphasises insider solidarity, and plays a critical function in maintaining external inter-group hostilities or suspicions.[2] At times some have also said this was a typical hunter-gatherer territorial spacing mechanism. It turns death into politics.

There was nothing in the Aurukun people's own immediate explanations of Dead Body's killing, soon after the event, to suggest that there was much here that was culturally new. Yet some new factors were hard to ignore, especially the alcohol, and the closed doors of the bedroom where the killing had occurred. But causes have their moments—what may be appealed to when there is a fear that conflict will spread like a bushfire can be different from what is said when things are calmer. The next day, while the bereaved family closed the canteen for an unstated time, there was much talk of closing it for good, even though it sold only beer. Drinking unpoisoned and officially acceptable grog was clearly seen as playing a causal role, but there was no consensus on whether it should be banned. This was an arena of the personal as much as of group politics. Even siblings had opposite views on the banning idea that day.

Defenders of the Indigenous reputation will sometimes say in response to media flare-ups that all communities, Indigenous or otherwise, have violence and abuse, as Larissa Behrendt and Nicole Watson did when shooting the messenger in their attacks on writer Louis Nowra and Northern Territory prosecutor Nanette Rogers.[3] But this is to snow the point. The key issue is not the presence of the behaviour, but its frequency. Violence is vastly over-represented statistically in places like Aurukun. How much is this frequency a post-colonial creation? If the frequencies haven't changed much,

what about the immediate contexts, causes and weapons used? What was internal Indigenous conflict like at the time of colonisation?

Collective Violence

To have overturned simplistic and racist colonial stereotypes of Aboriginal people as savages living in a constant state of the war of all against all, whose lives were fantasised by others to be nasty, brutish and short, has been a major educational achievement. But to idealise and romanticise the classical Aboriginal past as nothing but a time of peace and harmony also does no justice to the evidence and no service of historical truthfulness towards the very people one may admire and respect.

While there is no evidence of large-scale organised Aboriginal warfare of the kind found in other parts of the world, and there was no warrior class or military profession as such, there is abundant evidence from all major regions of colonial-era Australia that limited forms of warfare, blood feuding, aggressive wife-raiding expeditions, and incidental homicides arising out of individual confrontations certainly occurred often enough to have played a significant role in classical Aboriginal life.

Frontier accounts of formal battle between armed men and sometimes women are numerous. Lloyd Warner recorded that twenty-nine men had died in pitched battles over a twenty-year period in the area of his fieldwork in north-east Arnhem Land.[4] This was a significant figure but there were also many other smaller kinds of skirmishes or sneak attacks by night resulting in a substantial number of fatalities in the same region and period. Geoffrey Blainey analysed the figures from Warner's account, together with a Victorian account by William Buckley (see below), and concluded that the annual death rates from fighting in the two regions were comparable with, and in most cases exceeded, those of countries engaged in the two world wars of the twentieth century.[5] One problem with this statistical approach, however, was that it omitted from the non-Aboriginal

figures the non-warfare homicides, whereas Blainey appeared to include a wide range of homicide types in the Aboriginal figures. Still, the comparison was close.

That verbal conflict was and is a domain of great skill and finesse in Aboriginal cultures, often involving highly elaborate uses of language, is partly visible in the record of events but may also be amply demonstrated in the rich and often deeply idiomatic swearing, cursing, insulting and provoking resources of Aboriginal languages. Not all use of obscenities and insults was in anger. In many parts of Australia there are certain kin relationships whose members were or are under a traditional obligation to formally joke with each other, 'tormenting' one another with what Donald Thomson called 'organised obscenity'.[6] The physical and verbal skills needed for physical conflict were and in many places still are instilled into children from an early age, frequently as a form of play, making this a vital part of each person's education. Childhood socialisation is the primary site where such behaviours are reproduced in any society.

A basic principle of classical inter-group relations in traditional Australia was that members of out-groups were treated with a range of cool-to-negative attitudes, usually at least with reserve and often, but not necessarily, with suspicion and even hostility. Formal warfare as such has largely disappeared from Aboriginal Australia, but large-scale so-called 'riots' where large groups of kin come into armed collision with each other still occur in remote communities such as Wadeye, Aurukun and Willowra.

While armed combat in Aboriginal classical practice was unlike that of agrarian and industrial societies, it could be and often was very much an organised affair. Warner's account of warfare in north-east Arnhem Land, including a description of seven types of armed conflict, perhaps provides the most detailed account, but it should be read in conjunction with the critical re-analysis of Nancy Williams.[7] The name of one type of armed conflict described by Warner, called *makarraṭa*, has since 1979 passed into Australian English as an alternative name for a proposed treaty between Aboriginal

Australians and the state.[8] The *makarraṭa* is often described popularly as a 'peacemaking ceremony', not quite following the original words of Warner who described it as 'a ceremonial peacemaking *fight*'[9], Williams believes in its original sense it is more correctly seen as 'ritualised revenge'.[10] In Warner's account, the group with a grievance, such as having had one of its number killed, would agree to settle the matter by spearing in the thigh some member(s) of the offending group who offered themselves for this process[11] (*makarr* means 'thigh' in Yolngu-Matha[12]). If the aggrieved party did not accept the offer this would signal a continuation of hostilities. There were, however, many factors that could defeat a peaceful settlement and a *makarraṭa* could turn from an organised settlement by ordeal into a 'real fight' with weapons.[13]

The literature on traditional Aboriginal conflict abounds with accounts of formal engagements at an agreed open location, where opponents arrived painted up in their traditional designs, where singing, dancing, swearing, verbal threats and other 'warm-up' procedures were often among the preliminaries, and where a code of combat required that hostilities cease after a certain degree of satisfaction was obtained. Typically, an open flat was chosen for the event. Stanner's experience, particularly of the Daly River area in the 1930s, has often been quoted:

> The impression I received in watching their large-scale fights was that an invisible flag of prudence waved over the battlefield. There was a tacit agreement to call a truce or an end when a few men on each side had been grievously wounded or at the worst killed ... there was a distinct canon of equality at arms, a norm of sufficient—but just sufficient—retaliation, and a scale of equivalent injury.[14]

What is seldom quoted is Stanner's qualification that followed:

> I must not overdraw the picture. A lot of this restraint and limitation went by the board when passions got out of hand,

> as they often did, especially when old or sudden new quarrels flared up, as they might, over the most trivial things. One could then be in a donnybrook in no time. And I could not find rules that applied in the raids, ambushes and cutting-out expeditions for which the young bloods had a liking.[15]

'Cutting-out', a term from the pastoral industry that refers to the removal of beasts from a herd, and here probably alludes to wife-stealing raids, was a widespread if intermittent phenomenon in the old days in different regions of Australia. Wife-raiding was a particularly serious cause of conflict between men.[16]

Massacres between Aboriginal people certainly took place, although there are few eyewitness massacre accounts such as William Buckley's telling of a night attack between Aireys Inlet and Lake Modewarre in Victoria during his long sojourn with the people there, prior to colonisation, from 1803 to 1835.[17] As in Buckley's Victoria, so within living memory of the Pintupi region in the 1970s, Myers found that 'Revenge killings and violence were commonplace' in the past but they tended mainly to involve small groups or individuals.[18] There are a few reports of entire camp massacres from usually reliable authorities, including Bill Stanner who wrote of 'occasions on which whole groups were put to the spear'.[19] There is an unpublished account in the records of the Aurukun Mission of a local massacre on the upper Love River in the early twentieth century.[20] For Central Australia, TGH Strehlow described in some reconstructed detail the massacre of 80 to 100 men, women and children at Irbmangkara (Running Waters) by three parties of warriors in 1875.[21] He also refers to the wiping out of the Plenty River local group of Udebatara in Central Australia, and to the killing of a large camp of men, women and children near Mount Eba in desert South Australia.[22]

Political relationships between groups often were, and often remain, asymmetrical. A particular group would not have relations of equivalent intimacy or hostility with all and any neighbours of equal distance from the country of the group concerned.

For example, Meggitt reported of Warlpiri people as they were in the 1950s, that relationships with groups to their north (Guurindji, Mudbura, Malngin), with the exception of the Warlmanpa, whose language is very similar to Warlpiri, were not close and could be hostile.[23] On the north-east, relationships with Warumungu had been quite distant and hostile but were easing. On the east, relationships with Kaytetye, whose language is quite different from Warlpiri, had in the past been quite negative and communications limited. On the south-east they were politically close to the Anmatyerr, and in spite of the great difference between their languages regarded them as 'half-Warlpiri', as they did the Warlmanpa. On the south and south-west they were in mostly friendly relationships with speakers of Western Desert dialects but the relationships were not as close as in the case of the Warlmanpa and Anmatyerr. On the west, they had a longstanding relationship of intermittent violent conflict with the Ngardi.[24]

But as Nicolas Peterson has pointed out, characterising these relationships as those of entire language groups can be misleading.[25] It would be more accurate to say that those Warlpiri people who lived closest to certain Guurindji people had particular relationships with those particular neighbours for the particular period about which Meggitt was writing. Generalising from the state of play among particular networks of neighbours to political relationships between whole 'tribes' is fraught with dangers. On the other hand, there are clearcut cases where the asymmetry of geopolitics in a region does indeed have a wider dimension that matches well with large-scale group distinctions. These include the relatively strong social closure, at colonisation, between southern Wik and their immediate Thaayorre neighbours in Cape York Peninsula, and that between Western Desert people and their Nyungar neighbours in Western Australia, and between Western Desert people and the Arrernte in Central Australia. In some cases these forms of closure are also cases of historically recent pre-colonial contact and unresolved proximities as a result of movement.

This kind of asymmetry applies not only to degrees of conflict but also to frequency of interaction, the amount of intermarriage, and the sharing of cultural practices such as languages, marriage rules, or forms of ceremony. At certain places in the landscape there have long been key break-points in the social fabric, some of them marked by ecological framing devices such as dividing ranges, or the ubiquitous coast–hinterland (or saltwater–freshwater) distinction, the divide between people of the river frontages and those of the back country, or that between people of the spinifex sandhills and people of the desert ranges.

Even where there were serious tensions between those in regular daily contact, there is no evidence that open conflict was the norm—quite the opposite in fact, although continuous tensions could easily underlie the maintenance of a highly diplomatic approach to interpersonal relationships for much of the time. Stanner referred to the 'circumspect formality which marks all the face-to-face approaches of natives in commonplace social relations'.[26] This restraint is one of the sources of the rather condescending stereotype of Aboriginal people as 'this gentle people'. It is also contrary to one of the urban myths of non-Aboriginal Australia, namely that Aboriginal people always prefer informality. Especially when interests are in conflict, but quite commonly at other times as well, the very opposite is true of traditional Aboriginal manners. Mediation and negotiation situations, based as they are on difference, should be approached by go-betweens, at least, with great care and with an appropriate degree of formality and distance.[27]

There was, and in some areas still is, a wide range of formal ceremonial means for settling grievances in classical Aboriginal Australia. From many regions it is reported that a settlement procedure would routinely precede conjoint ceremonies of other kinds, such as initiations, which emphasised connection rather than division. The forms taken by grievance-settling ceremonies differ greatly, from the *Buluwandi* fire ceremony of the Tanami Desert region, described in print by Nicolas Peterson and dramatically recorded on film[28], to,

for example, the *Thaatherem* and *Piithel* ritual genres of the Wik region of Cape York Peninsula. 'Thaatherem' and 'Piithel' were songs of ritualised aggression formerly sung face to face between antagonists, who were nonetheless required by custom to restrain themselves and avoid fighting. On occasion, however, fighting would break out when temperatures rose too high.[29]

Even after serious overt conflict has broken out, a certain conventional formality will still normally attach to the ways and means of armed and unarmed fighting and verbal abuse in an Aboriginal community, especially in the absence of alcohol. For a visiting observer there is a look of something highly practised and even seemingly theatrical about many of these behaviours, serious though they are. Fred Myers's story of a man who sat observing a brawl impassively from his camp until 'the punishment to his son became too much for him to bear' probably will ring true for anyone who has observed fighting under similar conditions.

> The transformation was instantaneous and remarkable. His demeanor took on the convention of violent engagement. His carriage shifted to the fluid bearing appropriate for dodging spears ... I remember thinking that he had slipped into this mode as comfortably as one puts on a well-worn glove.[30]

Drunken conflict, which so often ranges beyond the conventional bounds of acceptable terms of engagement, and even 'berserks' or apparently uncontrolled displays of rage, are nevertheless carried out in highly patterned, distinctive ways.[31]

In 'Medicine Square', Marcia Langton wrote:

> My aim is to demonstrate that swearing and fighting in contemporary Aboriginal society constitute dispute processing and social ordering devices derived from traditional Aboriginal cultural patterns ...[32]

Using evidence from a range of sources, Langton argued that such swearing and fighting in 'settled' Australia should not be seen as 'drunken anarchy and anti-social misbehaviour' but as 'two aspects of evolving Indigenous law'.[33]

This is not, however, to argue that conflict is not seen by Aboriginal people as problematic, even though there are times when it provides welcome relief from humdrum nights or results from positive motivations to do with asserting autonomy and pride, or dealing with suppressed grievances. On the contrary, conflict is fundamentally a rupturing of that most highly valued state, relatedness:

> What is clear is that sustaining the impression of relatedness to coresidents constitutes a real and basic quality of Pintupi social life ... However, 'differentiation'—its opposite—is also a fact of life, in the form of conflict and violence ... as well as the willingness to stand up against threat. Pintupi descriptions of the past as 'like army all the time' and their fear of attack by revenge parties under cover of night are indications of this potential. Conflict and intimidation are regular occurrences in Pintupi communities as individuals try to influence each other ... The Pintupi meeting is one transformation of this dialectic between relatedness and differentiation. It is necessary to understand, however, that in Pintupi social life relatedness is the ontologically primary value, and that differentiation is experienced as a breach.[34]

The fact that conflict is perceived as a breach does not mean that people are necessarily unwilling to start an argument that may or may not lead to violence. Starting conflicts is often a means of getting subterranean differences out in the open where they may be either resolved or, if not, then pushed down so far that they are unlikely to surface again soon. In some cases, anger may also be the only effective available pathway to a relationship, especially one of emotional intimacy, not something that blocks it.

Personal Violence

The early record often refers to the affection and solicitude shown between Aboriginal husbands and wives. But there are also plentiful early contact reports by colonial observers, including some sympathetic characters like Edward John Eyre[35], and accounts by later field anthropologists[36], that make it clear that earlier and similar versions of what is now called 'domestic violence', 'family violence' or 'community violence' were also widespread and frequent in Australia under 'traditional' conditions. The evidence is also clear that formal rules governed physical conflict to a greater extent than now, and the dramatic factor of alcohol was almost entirely absent.[37] Nevertheless, rates of interpersonal violence were extremely high then also, and marital and sexual relationships and various kinds of jealousies were chief among the prime causes of conflict then as now.

The world-famous anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski surveyed much of the available literature on Aboriginal marital relations in his 1913 book on the family in Aboriginal society. He examined thirty different descriptions of husband–wife relationships.[38] Although he found a 'large diversity of statements and much contradiction', he also felt able to summarise the more consistent statements in terms of a 'standard' picture. The husband 'had a nearly unlimited authority, and in some cases, when he had special reasons (and undoubtedly deemed himself to be within his rights), he might use his authority for a very brutal and severe chastisement'. Yet 'there was usually a mutual fondness and kindness'.[39] From the fact that Aboriginal wives were as a rule happy, Malinowski concluded that 'this ill-treatment did not appear to them cruel'.[40] I'm not sure about this conclusion. Many relatively powerless people are resigned to their condition, and take the highs with the lows. In north-east Arnhem Land in the 1980s, Grayson Gerrard found that women almost never complained about wife-bashing, and rarely discussed it, at least not within her hearing, even though it happened often.[41] Across the Gulf of Carpentaria,

Isobel Wolmby of Aurukun, born in the bush in 1917, once told me that local women should marry white men. Why? 'Because white man don't give hiding' was her rather sweeping answer. Isobel was clearly not resigned to wife-bashing. She was proud to tell me that in all her long years of marriage to Victor, he had never been violent towards her. There were many others less fortunate.

High levels of male–female violence were recorded not only after the impact of colonisation had developed in Australia but also at the earliest moments of external contact. This is one major piece of evidence that the behaviour was not, of itself, only post-colonial. Bennelong's violent and armed public attack on a young woman at Port Jackson in 1790, as recounted by Watkin Tench, is among the earliest of what were to be many reports of male-on-female assaults observed on the frontier. The woman was another man's wife; her father was Bennelong's enemy. Both had attacked him on a previous occasion. He had taken her from Botany Bay to Port Jackson and was intending to kill her. After having given her two severe wounds on the head and one on the shoulder in the presence of the English officers and men, he is said to have added, presumably not in these florid words: 'She is now my property: I have ravished her by force from her tribe: and I will part with her to no person whatever, until my vengeance shall be glutted'.[42] Tench commented, 'It is certain that no second instance of this sort was ever witnessed by us', but he was writing of 'sacrifices' of 'prisoners', not violence in general.[43]

That physical assaults on women by men were common in the same area at the time of the First Fleet was described in some detail by William Collins, who wrote: 'The females too are accustomed to bear on their heads the traces of the superiority of the males, with which they dignify them almost as soon as they find strength in the arm to imprint the mark. We have seen some of these unfortunate beings with more scars upon their shorn heads, cut in every direction, than could be well distinguished or counted'.[44] Fellow officer John Hunter noted in his journal for 1790 that 'the women are certainly treated with great cruelty [in the Port Jackson area]'.[45]

Today this kind of assault is found at its most extreme in communities that have remained closest to their cultural traditions, and where alcohol is available in quantity. Another way of saying this is that those with the most recent experience of being drawn into contact with the wider world and with alcohol seem to be facing the greatest problems of interpersonal violence, much of it directed at women by men. Hospitalisation figures for head injuries in Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory for the period 1999–2005 showed that the Indigenous rate was twenty-one times that of the non-Indigenous population. This broad figure also hid a more startling fact. Indigenous females were hospitalised for assault-caused head injuries at a rate sixty-nine times that of non-Indigenous Australian females.[46] Was a high rate of such injuries, and an excess of female victims over males, new to Aboriginal society, and attributable only to historically recent factors of disadvantage and psychosocial trauma, as the authors of this study implied?

Written records are not our only source of knowledge of the experience of physical trauma in Australia in earlier times. If people are in any doubt as to whether or not serious armed assaults on women and men took place in Australia over the thousands of years prior to conquest, or whether women suffered an excess of head injuries over men before 1788, as well as now, the archaeological record of prehistoric human remains settles the question decisively.[47] Stephen Webb, an expert in the study of prehistoric disease and injury, studied the evidence of injury from force, using 6241 adult post-cranial bone samples and 1409 adult cranial samples. (Post-cranial bones are those from below the skull.) He used prehistoric remains from all major regions of Australia except Tasmania. He also studied juvenile remains but found no overt signs of healed traumatic injury among them.[48] This was consistent with numerous reports that the very young were rarely chastised physically in traditional Aboriginal child-rearing.

Webb found that upper limb trauma consisted mainly of parrying fractures on the lower left arm. This typically indicated defence against attack from the front by people who were right-handed.

Webb considered the incidence of this type of injury overall 'not large' except in the case of Desert men, where it was 10.5 per cent, and East Coast women from Brisbane south to the New South Wales/Victorian border. Among these prehistoric East Coast women, the incidence of parrying fractures was at its highest, being found in almost a fifth of all individuals.[49]

By far the commonest injury to the skull in Webb's survey was a depressed fracture of a kind that can 'usually be regarded as the result of deliberate aggression'.[50] One reaction to talk of these injuries is to attribute them to 'sorry cuts', bashing of one's own skull during mourning, often with rocks. Webb considered this thought in some detail. He found that self-inflicted wounding could indeed cause depressed fracturing, particularly to the front of the skull, but frontal skull fractures in his large sample were on average a minority of all such injuries, a finding he had not expected. Most of the injuries were on the sides or rear.

Sorry cuts are just one of a range of ways bodily injury was used in traditional Aboriginal societies for the restoration or claiming of equilibrium or satisfaction in relationships, or for the transformation of the individual. Injury was also commonly used for display, in the case of body scarring, which could be, as in the Kimberley, extremely extensive, even spectacular. This was usually done by cutting the skin open, although in the Western Desert it was also done with burning embers.[51] Chest scars were known in frontier pidgin as 'country marks'. Their styles were regionalised. Some played a role in displaying seniority or marital status. The removal of a finger in females in the Port Jackson district was probably related to marking place of origin. Nasal septum piercing for nosepegs was very widespread. Large cylinders were inserted into men's earlobes in Cape York Peninsula. These insertions were usually done to make one look extra attractive. Initiation by circumcision and subincision, or by the pulling out of all bodily hair, were among the religious uses of injury to mark advancement from boyhood to full manhood. Bloodletting from the crook of the arm and the urethra was and remains a common feature

of certain kinds of ceremonies in remote Australia. Spearing in the thigh was, and sometimes still is, a common form of restitution, usually undergone voluntarily. In north Central Australia there are regions where women traditionally burned off their pubic hair as a sign of mourning. In sum, there was no general attitude of revulsion towards physical injury per se. This is a foreign idea.

Deliberate injury in such cases is typically infused with a positive value that pulls into the act many strands of wider relationships and their emotions. Often the implication is that without the injury the person will be incomplete among their peers, or the bereaved will show insufficient mourning, or the relationships of disputants will remain out of kilter, lopsided, anxiety-producing, pent-up.

Wounds can create indebtedness and they can resolve indebtedness. A circumcisor owes the circumcised boy his daughter in marriage. He is made at least theoretically the boy's future father-in-law by this action. The wound between men is compensated for by the woman. I have heard of people saying that the surgeon who operates on them should pay them, not the other way round. After all, it is the surgeon's cutting that creates the blood debt. An example of the traditional use of violence in the economy of relationships after a death will perhaps make this principle clearer.

We have at least one record—an extremely reliable one—of head injuries being inflicted on recently widowed women, by men, as a form of settlement of grievances between widows and their deceased husbands, or rather their networks of kin. In 1902 Mulin, a Guugu-Yimithirr woman at Hope Valley Mission (later Hope Vale) in Cape York Peninsula, wrote an extensive account of her people's traditional disposal of the dead. She wrote it in her own language and it was translated by Lutheran missionaries Schwarz and Poland for anthropologist WE Roth. In part of it she wrote this:

> Next day, the dead man's wife comes along crying, offering her head to all the men to be struck; and they strike her too with a wommera [throwing stick] until she is covered with blood ...

> When the striking ceremony with the wife is over, they are no longer angry with her. But why do they hit the woman at all? What a question! Because when her husband was alive, they both had been jealous of each other, and had quarrelled and fought: this they could not approve of, and they therefore strike the woman just in the same way as the old men spear the husband in the leg after his wife's death [Roth's footnote: '*i.e.* to cry quits'...].[52]

Yet while there were many uses of violence in situations quite distinct from fighting, it has to be said that ceremonial cases like this would have been far less frequent and probably far more measured than violence arising from emotionally heated disputes.

Where do the Australian figures on pre-colonial injury due to violence sit within the wider world? There is a huge range in the figures for injury in archaeological human remains. At Tipu in Central America skeletal injury of any kind was found to be rare, less than 2 per cent of individuals. Scholars concluded that in that community the overall pattern was one only of 'occasional violence, not continuing political strife'.[53] Evidence from 350 British skulls from the Neolithic (New Stone Age) era concluded that about 2 per cent showed signs of lethal injuries and 4–5 per cent healed injuries, a maximum of 7 per cent. The sexes were about equally represented in the British case.[54] In the Alfedena necropolis of Iron Age central Italy (sixth–fifth centuries BCE), 12.9 per cent of the 209 adult skulls exhibited trauma. Those who made the study considered this was high and reflected an unusual level of violence for the period.[55]

In Webb's study, 21 per cent of the 1420 Aboriginal crania showed trauma, but the figures varied according to which part of Australia they came from.[56] This average figure of a fifth is at the global high end. Females with skull fractures were nearly 40 per cent and 44 per cent respectively of the total number of individuals in Webb's Swanport (Lower Murray) and Adelaide samples. Just over 19 per cent and 9 per cent of men in the same respective locations of South

Australia had skull fractures. The female figures were double those of men at Swanport and almost five times those of men at Adelaide. In the case of the Central Murray and East Coast regions, women's skull injury frequencies exceeded but were less than double those of men. On the South Coast and in the Desert they were roughly double those of men. Along the tropical North Coast women's skull injuries were just under four times as frequent as those of men. These are wide variations but the pattern of higher figures for women compared to men is clear. Only at the Rufus River (Murray River region) were men's and women's skull injuries of comparable frequency, but it was a frequency nevertheless of over 25 per cent in each case.[57]

The percentages of women with skull injury outstripped those of men not only for all regions but also for all numerical categories—single, double or triple lesions. Females were more than twice as likely to have two depressed fractures or other cranial lesions than men. The average female incidence of triple skull fractures caused by force in Australia was prehistorically more than five times that of men.[58]

The general pre-colonial picture for Australia was thus one of a high incidence of interpersonal violence affecting the skeletal parts, with women receiving more of this kind of injury than men.[59]

There may be no strict way to prove the gender of the attackers in the case of archaeological remains, although men's and women's weapons used in assaults were typically differently shaped in historic times. But it would be unwise to exclude the probability that a good many of the women's injuries were inflicted by men as well as by other women, given the ethnographic evidence from early contact. Webb's work certainly dispels any attempts to claim that the majority of such injuries were caused by accidents, or by 'sorry cuts'. While people were injured and killed in set-piece battles and organised raids, serious violence was probably more likely to happen during unplanned emotional flare-ups between kin who lived together. At least for one region, this can be seen in the detailed case material quite clearly.

My own study of 100 homicides in the Wik region of Cape York Peninsula between about 1890 and 2006 shows that a high proportion of killings that happened prior to 1960, mostly among people who had been raised traditionally, occurred during flare-ups of personal disputes. Most of the events happened in the bush or near but outside missions and pastoral stations, and were recorded in the Aurukun Mission Diaries[60], or I have recorded them from old people's memories in fieldwork in the region since the 1970s. The dominant theme of these earlier conflicts, although not the only one, was jealousy and disputation over sexual relationships, including marriages and elopements. Few were attributed to payback. Few showed evidence of long-term planning. Few were attributed to inter-group tensions of a 'tribal' or political kind. Almost half the homicide victims were female. It is simply not true to say that Wik homicide in the early contact phase was largely concerned with warfare, or with pre-arranged formal dispute settlement, or was something that happened largely to men.

Up to 1959, to be specific, there were twenty-two recorded male Wik deaths from homicide, all of them male-on-male killings. They were predominantly reported as being by spear; one was by tomahawk. The number of women killed in this early period was not far behind the men at seventeen. Male deaths by homicide were 56.4 per cent of the total, females 43.6 per cent. Over half of the female victims, 52.9 per cent, were women killed by their husbands. Others included an actual sister, a mother and an aunt of the male assailant, as well as more distant female relatives. No men were killed by their wives in the available records for this era. No homicides in this early period were reported as involving alcohol. There was only one case of a woman killing a woman.

Then there was a gap from 1960 to 1985 when there were no Wik homicides at Aurukun. This reflected a dramatic change in behaviour, although we should not assume it also reflected a dramatic change in the emotional life. Basically this is the period after centralisation, the time by which mission influence and the rule of Australian law had

become entrenched, and before grog. The mission era came to an end for the Aurukun Wik in 1978, and after this alcohol became more accessible even if still banned there for a time.

Terry Pamtoonda committed suicide and his brother Brian Pamtoonda was murdered in separate incidents at Aurukun in April and September 1985. Their half-brother Russell had killed his girl-friend at Mornington Island in 1981. Russell's brother Abel killed his partner Alfreda in 1997. Brian and Terry's niece Gertie was murdered by her boyfriend Chris Woolla in 1989. Before Grog Time, Chris's father Raoul had killed Alec Peemuggina, with Frank Ngallapoorgum, in 1959. Raoul's father Jack had killed his wife, Raoul's mother, in 1957. I'd met Jack in 1970 at Palm Island, and was there when he died at Aurukun in 1976. Jack's half-brother Billy Wildfellow was a multiple killer whose spearing victims included two of his eight wives. I learned a lot about Wildfellow while living for months in the same outstation as his remaining widow Yukwainten and her daughter Isobel, Victor Wolmby's widow (figure 10). Isobel died in a fight with Gladys Tybingoompa at Aurukun in 1989. However, in a number of families there were no recorded homicides at all. Some groups of relations seemed much more troubled than others.

Alcohol served through a canteen became legal at Aurukun in December 1985. From 1989 onwards murders at Aurukun became more common. The most per year were four in 2002. Under the new conditions there was a new–old pattern of homicide, one that strongly resembled that of the bush past but that also was different in several ways.[61]

In this new era there were seventeen Wik homicides between 1985 and 2006. Female victims as a percentage of the total went up from what had been 43.6 per cent in bush and early contact times to 64.7 per cent. The proportion of female victims killed by a sexual partner also went up from 52.9 per cent in the pre-1960 phase to 72.7 per cent post-mission. Sexual relationships and jealousies had become perhaps more than ever a source of the relevant conflicts. Statistically it had become more dangerous to be a wife not only than

in mission times but it was also more dangerous than in pre-mission times as well. A man was killed by his wife in this period, something not previously reported, and two women were killed by women, twice the figure for the pre-1960 period. A large number of these post-mission homicides involved alcohol. Overall the figures indicate a shift whereby an increased proportion of homicides had become concentrated within spousal or sexual partner relationships than was the case previously. These were people who had never, for the most part, been physically dispossessed of their lands, whose pre-1978 mission regime had been one of the most liberal in Australia, who still spoke a Wik language as first language, and who had never been swamped by deportees from elsewhere. The overall pattern relating homicides of bush times to those of post-mission times indicated transformation, not revolution.[62]

As early as 1913 Malinowski had warned against judging Aboriginal men's reported violent treatment of their wives ethnocentrically; that is, by applying the standards of modern Europeans to the behaviour of people from a radically different culture.[63] Today many would reply to this that while cultural differences may explain why certain behaviours differ between peoples, the virtue of tolerance should not be used to condone just anything that is customary. Capital punishment for minor thefts, once normal in European society, is not suddenly acceptable now simply because it was once an old tradition of Europeans in another era. That Captain Cook flogged 20 per cent, 26 per cent and 37 per cent of the sailors on his three voyages to the Pacific, respectively, was very traditional and has in no way cost him his reputation.[64] But that was then.

If we are to understand what has been different about the post-1970 period of Aboriginal community life as against the preceding decades of the control era, perhaps we should look to see in what ways it both resembles and differs from the first decades of post-conquest Australian society, especially in the town areas. Parallels with William Hogarth's eighteenth-century London, as depicted in his famous image of social devastation in *Gin Lane*, are unnerving.

Gin Lane had its echoes in early Sydney street scenes by Augustus Earle and others showing the effects of Aboriginal contact with alcohol and 'civilisation'.[65] In the first invasion period, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while the discipline and social controls of the classical Aboriginal order were being deprived of much of their force or removed comprehensively, the era of legally and institutionally imposed order and control was for most people yet to come. Especially in the south, for the first decades *laissez-faire* was more the order of the day than institutionalisation, although there were both.

Laissez-faire returned in a new form in the 1970s, in the shape of the freedoms of self-determination or, as some once preferred it put, self-management.[66] The ancient social order, while resting on a mixture of internal and external constraints like any other, depended very highly on external mechanisms of control. This meant fear of consequences more than anything else, including fear of ostracism, exclusion, and humanly imposed physical or supernatural harm or death. In this sense the authoritarian and patriarchal regimes of most of the early Christian missions were, bizarre as this might sound, 'culturally appropriate' in a way that the liberalised and more chaotic regimes of recent times have not been. This is not, of course, to suggest that this particular clock can or should be turned back.

In his study of suicides in Indigenous New South Wales and New Zealand, Colin Tatz made the important point about recent violence in Aboriginal communities that it was '*de*colonisation, rather than colonisation', that was a root cause.[67] The dismantling of the external control system left the inmates of the segregated institutions open to the disastrous impact of the new power vacuums, especially where residents had little of the bonding of a real community and there was a failure to provide training in the new autonomy.[68]

Robert Tonkinson described the problems encountered at Jigalong, Western Australia, when the missionaries departed and a new policy of self-management began in the mid 1970s. Children ran out of control in unprecedented numbers. Tonkinson saw 'white staff

members refusing to intervene because to do so would contravene self-management policy'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Jigalong adults, at least, experienced a certain nostalgia for the departed authoritarian Christians.[69] Casual administration might work to an extent where restraint is thoroughly internalised, as in those historically rare societies characterised by an unusually powerful development of what is commonly called conscience. But WEH Stanner said of a classically oriented Aboriginal society in the north-west of the Northern Territory, 'As far as one can tell from outward show the formations of conscience are not strong'.[70] This can be extended to other traditional societies in Australia and probably many other parts of the world.

The authority vacuums that have led to chaotic developments in many settlements seem strongly resistant to the reinstatement of older forms of power that may be remembered fondly by some of the elderly but which are feared and resisted by the young. I haven't met too many women who have a nostalgia for the old patriarchy. The older forms were based significantly on senior people's domination of religious nurturance, their powers of mystification, their control of people's marriage prospects, and their possession of the sanctions of sorcery, physical injury and, ultimately and in few domains, execution. Channelled retribution and 'getting satisfaction', not the foreign judicial independence implied in English terms like 'punishment', were mostly central to dispute resolution. The violent aspects of this apparatus have become illegal. The old social order also depended critically on the use of dispersal as a means of keeping levels of conflict at manageable levels.

There is little evidence that such a system, once thoroughly broken, can be reinstated. In any case, one could expect most citizens now, including most Aboriginal people, to take the view that its totalitarian and violent characteristics, perhaps once necessities of life in a stateless society, should no longer be promoted or supported. And dispersal as a means of keeping relative peace was dealt a deadly blow by centralisation on settlements in the post-colonial era, even though mobility between settlements is still used to avoid conflict.

The Growing Child

If we are to try to understand phenomena like the reproduction of violence over time, in our time, we cannot start just with yesterday, and we cannot begin by excluding violence from 'culture' and confining it to pigeonholes like 'criminality' or the emotional 'pathology' of individuals. Better understanding is needed of how violence is learned by the growing child, as much as how and why it is practised by adults.

To take a small but significant instance, a response of extreme anger and physical attack in retribution for pain or food deprivation inflicted by another person is regularly elicited from infants in communities distributed across north and Central Australia, beginning in the child's first months. This seems to be done ostensibly for the purpose of encouraging self-assertion, although deeper and less functional explanations to do with repressed anger and jealousy on the part of the instigator are probably relevant. In the Kuranda area of North Queensland, as recorded by Julie Finlayson, this is locally known as 'cruelling'.[71] Cruelling is most commonly done by relatives who pinch the infant's cheek hard enough to bring tears, kiss the child in a biting manner or slap it, and who may then offer part of their own body for a good hard striking by the child, or a mother may offer the infant the breast by way of comfort. My own son Tom's cheek was pierced when pinched by his grandmother Isobel one day at Watha-nhiin, an outstation south of Aurukun, in 1976. As I intervened and grabbed her arm, she laughed. He screamed. The wound later became infected. He was about six months old (figure 10).

Similar patterns of cruelling of infants are reported for the Tiwi Islands by Gary Robinson, the Mount Isa area by Robyn Mobbs, Doomadgee (Queensland Gulf country) by David Trigger, the Wik region (Cape York Peninsula) by David Martin (and frequently observed by myself at Aurukun also), both the Pilbara and north-western Western Desert areas by Jan Turner, and at Hermannsburg in Central Australia by Diane Austin-Broos.[72] A woman from the desert

south-west of Western Australia told me it was also the practice there. When two visiting aunties approached her sister's baby to carry out the same customary practice, her sister intervened physically, telling them it was no longer acceptable. Reportedly they were not happy. Similar cases of deliberate infliction of pain on babies followed not by encouragement of revenge but by suckling are reported for the Maningrida area of Arnhem Land by Annette Hamilton.[73] Infants who fall over inanimate things like chairs may also be encouraged to attack the offending object in a valued and approved display of physical revenge.

There is no doubt in my mind that this was once an ancient and, under pre-colonial conditions, extremely useful training in one of the requirements of adult life in a stateless, foraging society such as prevailed in what is now Australia. Physical self-redress and the principle of payback had to be instilled in children from an early stage. You had to look after yourself, if necessary in deadly combat, even if you could also call on kin for support. But this is not the pre-colonial era, and the state, for all its faults, now provides people with the protection of Australian law instead of leaving them to rely on direct retribution. Unfortunately the state has applied its theoretical monopoly on violence in a rather patchy way, especially in remote Australia. Involuntary circumcision has long been widely accepted as being de facto outside the scope of Australian law. A blind eye was often turned to local fighting, especially after the end of the mission-control period. Governments have at times been reluctant to meet Aboriginal demands for locally stationed police in remote settlements, and police have at times been reluctant to apply the law rigorously in the same places. Wilf Douglas listed 'The Poor Manifestation of White Law Enforcement' as one of several causal factors in the evolution of a 'rampage of destruction' in Warburton, a desert community, in 1975, noting that in the minds of both the Aboriginal elders and offenders, the general picture was that 'White law does not operate efficiently' and 'White Australians do not take their law seriously'.[74] By the 2000s this less than interventionist

mood was changing. States increased policing in remote areas and the 2007–08 Northern Territory Intervention, which sharply increased police presence in Aboriginal settlements, in that region, was an example of a new official intolerance of a racially selective tolerance of violence.

Cruelling is only one traditional child-rearing practice that is relevant to adult patterns of violence. More significant is a reluctance to attempt to control the anger of children, especially boys against women, and a reluctance to curb physical fighting among children. This is from Annette Hamilton's study of child-rearing in north-central Arnhem Land in 1968–69:

> [Girls] witness the verbal and sometimes physical assaults on older women meted out by certain quick-tempered men, and are told that adult women as a matter of course comply with men's wishes for their own good ... When a man makes an unreasonable request a woman's usual response is compliance, and children of both sexes are constantly exposed to this pattern.[75]

> On occasions like this [when a four-year-old boy attacked his mother and threw a screaming tantrum over being told to share a container of ice-cream], no one makes any effort to restrain the child's anger, to reason with him, or to explain why he should act otherwise. Neither do they shout at him or punish him, or demonstrate in any way that they find his behaviour unacceptable. They simply accept it with a shrug.[76]

> The deprecation of aggressive behaviour in children, and the tendency to ridicule it, are no doubt important in conditioning the child's view of aggression in adult society. However, other early experiences indicate that wants sufficiently deeply felt will be satisfied by others. The temper tantrums of the young child over food (noticed especially though not exclusively among boys) have a close parallel in the apparently irrational demanding

> behaviour of adult men over women, the usual cause of overt aggression in this society.[77]

The demands referred to here were for women as wives. In the case of north-east Arnhem Land, Grayson Gerrard proposed a strong link between the way children were allowed to treat their mothers as property and as sources who could not refuse their demands, and adult men's attitudes towards women. This was in a region where assaults by men on women, including rape, were found by her to be far more frequent than in, say, Sydney.[78]

Violence occupies a very different place from that of illness in traditional Aboriginal systems of value concerned with the bodily person. Violence was not seen as having any inherent negativity; it depended on the circumstances. This was rarely so for illnesses, and it is well known that everywhere in Australia Aboriginal people had a bush pharmacopoeia, healing practices and doctors. Strangely in parallel with this, in the post-1970 policy era until the 2000s, the problems of community and family violence were seriously neglected by the Aboriginal affairs industry. In the meantime, enormous efforts and increasingly heroic amounts of funding were being concentrated on Aboriginal health in all of its aspects, apart from genetic research. Far too often, violence was abandoned to the administration of the criminal law and, in the aftermath of violence, the nursing and doctoring in the wards, or the cemeteries.

5

Bodies Politic

In July 2008 Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard was reported as saying that improving the health of Indigenous Australians was a higher priority for the government than having Indigenous rights recognised in the Constitution. She said the government's main focus was closing the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, something Prime Minister Rudd had identified as a key aim in his national apology to the Stolen Generation in February 2008. This was Aboriginal health politics with an earthly focus. It has not always been so.[1]

Health is one of the most highly politicised domains of Indigenous affairs in Australia.[2] Acting out of altruism, ardent goodwill, or political ambition, sometimes perhaps all three, activists and progressives have made improvements in this field. Some have also created a web of self-censorship and other-censorship that has become counterproductive.

The standard progressive line on the causes of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health is that these are pretty much entirely the historical outcomes of past dispossession, ill treatment and racial discrimination. But there is a deep-seated problem with this partial picture. These same catastrophic events have been endured