Aboriginal Australians

The end of isolation

On 28th April 1770, in the bay of a desolate, uncharted coastline, a historic meeting took place. A group of British sailors armed with muskets came ashore in a longboat and were met by a group of black, naked men armed with spears. Polite conversation was difficult because it was the first time either side had heard each other’s language. One of the sailors later wrote down what he thought the black men had shouted.

“Warra warra!” – “Go away!”

Not a very promising opening for the meeting of two cultures, but unfortunately rather a telling one. The bay where it took place was christened Botany Bay, after the rich fauna. It lies close to present-day Sydney, Australia. The British sailors had just arrived aboard the “Endeavour” under the command of the famous explorer James Cook. The continent that they had been standing on for all of 30 seconds was claimed for their monarch, George III.

The black men were members of the Eora tribe. They and their ancestors had been fishing and hunting on this shore for 30,000 years. They had seen the intruders from the shore some hours before, but had decided to ignore them by turning their backs on them. With their white skins and strange dress they were quite obviously not of this world, and ignoring them seemed to be the best way of getting rid of them. The plan had not worked. Plan B was to shake spears and shout “Warra warra!”.

However, these intruders were not going to go away – at least, not for long. Australia was now on the map and 18 years later more ships would arrive, this time carrying convicts from the teeming backstreets of London, Glasgow and Dublin. Botany Bay was to become a penal colony. The process of colonization had begun and for the Eora tribe, and all the other tribes of this far-flung continent, their age of isolation was over.

The Dreamtime

It is estimated that there were some 300,000 Aboriginal Australians at this time. Not many for such a vast area – about one for every 16 square kilometres, in fact. But as nomadic hunters and gatherers they covered huge areas of the continent, also those seen by the European settlers as uninhabitable. Technologically they were still in the Stone Age. Even the bow-and-arrow was unknown to them. So was agriculture.

However, they had developed skills in tracking and stalking that put even American Indians in the shade. With their spears, their woomeras (a sort of sling for throwing spears) and their boomerangs they could fell anything from a lizard to a kangaroo with extraordinary precision. They also developed hunting techniques based on enormous self-control. They could, for example, stand perfectly still for several hours, spear raised, waiting for an animal to emerge from a hole.

Today we tend to associate Aborigines with the “Outback”, the desert area that covers most of central Australia. But at the time of Cook’s visit most Aborigines lived on the temperate coastline where present-day Australia’s population is centred. The first Europeans regarded them as one people, but they were actually hundreds of tribes and spoke around 300 different languages. Lifestyles varied according to the landscape they inhabited. However there were certain things they had in common. One was a special relationship to the land itself. For the European settlers it was a mystery that the Aborigines had no concept of land ownership and yet were very territorial, suffering great distress when they were forced to move away from an area. They were also mys...
tified by their apparent lack of religion – no temples, no priests, no worship of the sun and moon.

The answer to both these mysteries was that for the Aborigines the land itself was a spiritual world, linking them to their forefathers and the forces of creation. According to Aboriginal beliefs, the world started with the Dreamtime, when there were only spirits. This Dreamtime is not over, but still here, alive and accessible in the landscape. Each hill and rock, every tree and animal, has its own power – its dreaming, as they call it – that makes it part of a spiritual as well as a physical world. To be deprived of land was much worse than being deprived of property – it meant loss of identity and spiritual death.

The trauma of colonization
With convict ships providing the British with an endless source of slave labour, there was no use for the Aborigines. They were seen as being little more than a native pest, like the dingoes and kangaroos. As for their claim to the land, it was seen as laughable. After all, where were the villages, the fields, the domesticated animals that proved their claim? The Dreamtime had no more meaning for the British than land ownership had for the Aborigines. In the colonists eyes these naked, nomadic blacks were a miserable race whose days were numbered. As one colonist wrote in 1849: “Nothing can stay the dying away of the Aboriginal race, which Providence has allowed to hold the land until replaced by a finer race”.

Official policy was that the natives should not be mistreated, but in practice they were often killed without risk of punishment. As European settlement spread they found themselves increasingly in conflict with settlers. In these conflicts the Aborigines often put up stiff resistance, using guerrilla warfare and ambushes to terrorize settlers. But there was no coordination between tribes and their weapons were no match for guns.

Historians disagree about how many Aborigines were shot and killed by whites during the period of colonization. The figure of 10,000 has been suggested as an approximate figure. But this is only a small part of the story of Aboriginal decline. Disease accounted for around 90% of the decline in the Aboriginal population. Like the Native Americans, Aborigines had little resistance to European diseases like measles, chickenpox and smallpox, and such diseases spread like wildfire. Often they would spread in advance of direct contact with Europeans, so that by the time settlers arrived the Aboriginal communities had already been destroyed.

Nowhere was the tragedy of colonization more shocking than on the island of...
By the beginning of the 20th century the Aboriginal population of Australia had fallen to around 30,000. When Australia was declared a self-governing “commonwealth” in 1901, the “first Australians” had little to celebrate. As a group they were largely ignored, having no right to vote and no status as Australian citizens.

**Protest and reawakening**

However, the 20th century was not only a tale of defeat for Australia’s native population. In the 1960s, partly inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in the US, there was an awakening of Aboriginal activism. Students, both white and black, held so-called “freedom rides” in New South Wales to show that segregation was not just an American phenomenon. Although not official policy, it was practised locally on a big scale, with blacks excluded from white cinemas, swimming pools, pubs etc. Aboriginal organisations grew in strength and began to demand more than just civil rights. They also wanted equality in other areas – housing, health, education – where they have lagged behind white Australians.

In recent years the issue of land rights has been high on the Aboriginal agenda. The rights of an individual are one thing, and most Australians now admit that Aboriginal people have suffered discrimination. But do they have rights as a people, so-called “native title”? Other settler states, such as the USA, Canada and New Zealand, accept the idea of a native title to land. But according to British law at the time of settlement, Australia was a terra nullius – land belonging to no one. In high-profile court cases Aboriginal groups have contested this view – and won.

These cases have been greeted with joy by Aboriginal organisations – and with shock by Australian industrialists, especially those involved in mining and farming. Granting native rights to huge areas of land would mean “locking up the economic future of Australia”, they claimed. “Is this really one Australia for all Australians?” they asked in a newspaper advertisement. The last word on the issue of native title has not yet been said and it promises to remain a hotly debated issue.

The “warra warra” greeting of 1770 may not have been successful. On the other hand, the white settlers’ dismal prophecy of a native people “dying out” has not turned out to be correct either. Today’s “first Australians” take pride in their roots, and Aboriginal art and languages are making a comeback. Politically they are more active than ever, with some activists saying that native title is not enough – they want sovereignty.

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ACTIVITIES

1 Understanding the text
Which of these statements are true and which are false? Correct the false ones.

a. The tribesmen ignored Captain Cook’s boat because they were so used to intruders.
b. The early settlers used the aboriginal people as slave labour.
c. The Aborigines did not use the bow-and-arrow.
d. At the time of European colonization, the aboriginal people consisted of many different tribes and languages.
e. As nomads, the land had no value for them.
f. Disease was the biggest cause of aboriginal deaths.
g. Today there are no Tasmanian Aborigines left.
h. Aboriginal people were given the vote in 1901.
i. Segregation was unknown in Australia.
j. Industrialists see aboriginal land claims as a threat.

2 Improve your language
Complete the sentences using verbs (in the right form) from the list below.

account, ignore, grant, mistreat, christen, practice, emerge, contest, deprive

a. Aborigines have been ... native rights huge areas of land.
b. These rights have been ... by farmers and industrialists.
c. Hunters can stand and wait for many hours for an animal to ... from a hole.
d. Diseases ... for 90% of the decline in the aboriginal population.
e. The newcomers ... the bay Botany Bay, because of the many plants they found there.
f. For many years the native population was ... of all civil rights.
g. The natives tried to ... the intruders by turning their backs on them.
h. Although it was illegal to ... the natives, many were killed without risk of punishment.
i. An unofficial policy of segregation was ... in many Australian towns.

3 Role play
An aboriginal community in a country area of Australia applies for “native title” to Ananga territory, an area of about 50 square miles. There are storms of protest from farmers and industrialists. The two sides in the dispute are invited to discuss the issue in a radio programme called “Confrontation”. Sit in groups of three, give each person one of the roles below – and perform the programme.

Role 1: A spokesperson for farmers and industrialists
Tests have shown that Ananga territory is rich in minerals like uranium, bauxite and zinc. What is more, some geologists believe there may be oil reserves there as well. You believe these resources belong to all Australians, not just one small group. It is vital that the land is used for the benefit of everybody.

Role 2: A spokesperson for the aboriginal community of Ananga
Ananga territory has been inhabited by your forefathers for 40,000 years and is of great religious importance to you. Mining and drilling here would be like bulldozing a cathedral.

Role 3: The interviewer
Your role is to introduce and round off the programme. You should also try to keep the discussion going. You should, of course, be neutral, but that doesn’t mean that you can’t ask pointed questions!

4 Write about it
Imagine that you are an Aborigine who was present at that first historic meeting with Captain Cook’s men. Write an account of how you experienced that day.

5 Research
Go to passage.cappelen.no and find information about one of the following subjects:

- The Dreamtime
- Aboriginal art
- Didgeridoo (musical instrument)
- Uluru (Ayers Rock)

WE WERE HERE FIRST