The Cultural Roots of Aboriginal Violence

James Franklin

The address to send the application is not included. Perhaps they are not expecting many enquiries.

The reason why not is apparent from the story of May 22, 2008, by Tony Koch, one of the Australian’s reporters who have vigorously pursued stories of indigenous violence that most of the media have not wanted to know about. The report is of a case in the Mount Isa Children’s Court, in which eight Mornington males aged thirteen to twenty were charged with the gang rape of a twenty-two-year-old woman. The alleged attack left her with serious external and internal injuries after being bashed and raped with objects such as sticks. Explaining the background to the case, Koch writes:

“At any one time, more than 40 children [out of a total population of 1100] are in care on the mainland because of the neglect and abuse they receive on the island from parents who are unable or unwilling to look after them as a result of their alcohol addiction ...

“Special legislation was introduced in the Queensland parliament last year banning the sale of home-brew kits after locals, defiant at having access to the liquor canteen curtailed, began making their own alcoholic beverages.”

If the rape case was not exceptional for Mornington, neither is Mornington exceptional among remote indigenous communities. In June a report ranked Queensland’s remote communities according to the level of hospital admissions for assault. Kowanyama had a rate eight times the state average. That is the safest one. The worst, Woorabinda, had a rate forty-five times the state average. Mornington’s figure is twenty-nine times the average (a slight improvement on the figures before the introduction of the “alcohol management plan” in November 2003, but as a total of 284 persons have been convicted of breaches of the plan’s alcohol carriage restrictions, the plan is obviously not too solidly in place). The raw figures possibly need adjusting for the tendency of some indigenous to avoid hospital and the distance of some communities from hospitals, suggesting that indigenous assaults are less likely to result in hospital admissions than non-indigenous. Nor is Queensland exceptional. The stories from Northern Territory court cases and from the West Australian coroner’s reports on the Kimberley are worse.
The facts of violence are clear but the causes and cure are not. Or rather, some of the causes are clear enough but the full story of why things are so bad remains baffling. Obviously alcohol and welfare dependency are important parts of the causes, but those factors are operative in many communities, white and black, and it is far from clear why the effects in remote communities are so far beyond anything found elsewhere, in their extreme levels of violence, ill-health and atrocious education.

What one would wish is that someone intelligent and perceptive would go to a remote community on our behalf, sit and observe it sympathetically but honestly for a few decades, then report back.

It has been done. The Canadian/British anthropologist David McKnight visited Mornington over several decades from 1966, spending a total of six years there. Before his death in 2006 he wrote up the results in four books, notably *From Hunting to Drinking: The Devastating Effects of Alcohol on an Australian Aboriginal Community* (Routledge, 2002) and *Of Marriage, Violence and Sorcery* (Ashgate, 2005). Every page makes it clear that he is exactly the kind of person one would like to observe on one’s behalf—perceptive, patient, able to get along with most people, ready to listen but not easy to fool. What he says is confirmed in its earlier parts by two autobiographies written by native Mornington Islanders, and in its account of later horrors by the work of another anthropologist, Peter Sutton, on Aurukun (especially his 2001 article, “The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia since the 1970s”). What McKnight has to say is in some parts obvious enough, but in other parts has some surprising insights that go well beyond the terms of the current debate on indigenous affairs.

First, the history. Mornington has a short history of white settlement, and McKnight in 1966 was in time to get to know several older people who had clear memories of traditional life before the establishment of the Presbyterian mission in 1914. There was no “invasion” or dispossession, nor any motivation why one should have been attempted. The inhabitants seem to have regarded the mission as a source of both inconveniences, such as control over various aspects of life, and opportunities, such as health care and European goods like outboard motors that made hunting easier. From the 1920s to the early 1950s, the entire younger generation was raised in the mission’s dormitories. How the missionaries were able to exert that level of control does not become clear. All McKnight says explicitly about it is “for most young girls the threat of being expelled was enough to keep them under control”. The period of the mission was something of a golden age, especially during the tenure of the Rev. Belcher (1953 to 1972). McKnight emphasises that he is an atheist and has no interest in Christianity; he just found the missionaries reasonable people with a genuine concern and respect for the Aboriginal people they were dealing with (in marked contrast, he says, to the incompetent and venal careerists who succeeded them when Mornington became a shire). In the mission era, children went to school and learned spoken and written English, even if not to the standard in white schools. A number of men worked as stockmen on the mainland and were proud of their work and ability to earn income, and they had no difficulty with a complex banking system with passbooks set up especially for Aboriginal workers. As Presbyterian ideology favoured self-reliance, in the late 1960s the island store was successfully run by an Aboriginal man. There was virtually no alcohol. In view of the extreme levels of killings on the island in both pre- and post-missionary times, including seven or eight murders in the 1990s, it is astounding to read that between 1917 and 1975 there was only one homicide (and that was believed by many to have been an accident).
Then everything went wrong. One big thing—the opening of the canteen in 1976—and many smaller things: poor leadership in the shire, the decline of the cattle industry (partly but not wholly because of award wages to Aboriginal workers), the replacement of work by welfare payments, a growing contempt by the young for older values whether traditional or Christian, falling education levels and a rising tide of violence. McKnight was so distressed by the violence in the late 1970s that he almost changed his research area, but in the end went back several times and recorded later developments.

In the light of what McKnight says, let’s answer a few questions that everyone has about why things are so bad.

Do traditional ways and beliefs survive?

Yes. It is an illusion of perspective to think people in Aboriginal communities spend their days worrying about white society, whether to be enraged, resentful, grasping or co-operative. They have other things to do, like the rest of us, dealing with their families and associates, who, in remote communities, are overwhelmingly black. In those circumstances, a core of traditional ways of doing things really does survive from pre-white times, and modes of dealing with white society are an add-on (though by this time a well-ingrained one). Thus references in court cases or land rights inquiries to “traditional law” or “attachment to land” may be genuine though in individual cases may not be, while discussions of violence, education and economic incentives need to take account of the context of traditional practices of control and sharing. (Those comments do not necessarily generalise to communities with much longer histories of interaction with whites.)

The survival of more positive aspects of traditional culture—for example, there are two books on Mornington art and the island’s dance troupe’s travels to festivals on the mainland—is an index of the survival of culture more generally.

Was traditional Aboriginal society violent?

Yes. On his earliest visits, McKnight recorded older people’s stories of violence many years earlier, and others are available in the 1971 memoir by a local, Dick Roughsey’s Moon and Rainbow. They are confirmed by the work of T.G.H. Strehlow, Joan Kimm and others on other parts of Australia. There was sometimes large-scale (but short-term) war between different groups, for example when one group was blamed by others for causing a cyclone. Small-scale violence occurred regularly over the breaking of taboos, elopements and punishments for infidelity and disputes about the distribution of meat.

McKnight is scathing about the avoidance of the topic of violence by some anthropologists and other writers. “It seems to be quite acceptable to write about violence,” he says, “providing that one takes the line that the people are basically peace loving and shy but they have become violent because of exploitation by Europeans.” Peter Sutton finds it necessary to begin his account of violence in Aurukun by quoting another anthropologist:

“To suggest that precontact indigenous life was anything but Edenic and that traditional modes of socialization and social control may contribute to the contemporary problem of violence is to risk being accused of blaming the victims and excusing their oppressors.”

Hopefully the racism involved in averting one’s eyes from the violence in any particular culture is now obvious enough that such things no longer need to be said.
Is contemporary violence descended from pre-contact violence?
Yes. Although there weren’t homicides on Mornington in the mission era, there was incessant violence. McKnight gives a detailed account of an evening of violence in 1977 and writes:

“During a period of seven days I recorded 23 fights. To give some idea of the incidence of violence it should be borne in mind that in most fights several persons traded blows. It would not be an exaggeration to say that there were many more fights that I failed to record or that occurred but I did not know about first hand. All the fights that I did record were in only a small part of the community.”

The style of violence was similar to earlier times: fights began with the sort of dispute that happens in any community, about jealousy, competition, insults or payback for previous violence. But the escalation to violence was fast, then kinship obligations and the close proximity in which people were living soon had many combatants hitting one another. Violence was largely male but women joined in.

Is alcohol a basic cause of violence?
Yes, but … The scale of violence on Mornington escalated drastically when alcohol became freely available. Where previously it was usually clear what a fight was about, people now said resignedly, “Just drunken fight.” Most of the worst cases of violence reported in court cases in the last few years have been perpetrated by people while drunk.

But alcohol entered a situation where violence was already endemic. McKnight sadly records the effect of the interaction of alcohol, the existing culture of violence and the breakdown of traditional authority:

“After 1978 Mornington underwent a fundamental change with suicide and homicide becoming more common. By 1999 the suicide rate was some 34 times that of Queensland and a person was some 25 times more likely to be killed on Mornington than in any other place in Queensland.”

Alcohol is also a direct cause of violence in a longer-term sense, in that sufferers from fetal alcohol syndrome lack self-control.

Are there cultural factors that inhibit improvements to violence, health and education?
Here McKnight is at his most valuable. Indigenous society, as he explains in detail, is fundamentally more communal than modern white society. “Western individualism” implies some basic attitudes and practices that we need to be consciously aware of, so as not to assume they apply in another society. A typical Australian wage earner or welfare recipient collects his/her payment, enters a home into which others do not come without invitation, spends the money on what he/she determines, and directs the use of the items the money buys. None of that can be assumed true in a highly communal society. Private property is a meaningless concept if one is enmeshed in a network of obligations to give away everything if kin demand it. There is shame in refusing a request from someone appropriately kin, and refusals can engender grudges that are held for a long time. For the division of irregular hunting kills, there was a good reason for a system of rights to portions of it. The same practices are dysfunctional in a modern setting. No one except “bigmen” has the unimpeded power to spend their own wages, pension or baby bonus, retain their own medicines, repair anything, or find a place to study in a house full of twenty relatives.
It does not make sense to talk of “economic incentives” in the usual sense or the provision of jobs or training in situations where people do not retain the fruit of their labours.

Communal obligation also means that social pressure to drink is similar to but much stronger than “peer pressure” in a white social setting. It also results in the small number of teetotallers being run ragged by their obligations to look after drunks and their children—and with the last generation of mission-educated grandmothers dying off, the families they have held together are likely to fall apart even further. Finally, obligations include support in disputes, so individual fights quickly turn into all-in melees.

McKnight suggests also that one reason for increased violence was what he calls “relational density”. In pre-contact times, Mornington Islanders lived in groups of about twenty or thirty, in which, naturally, everyone had some sort of personal relationship or “kinship” with everyone else, with corresponding degrees of rights and obligations. When hundreds of people collected in a village near the mission, everyone including long-term white settlers was incorporated into kinship systems. The cognitive load of understanding every individual’s relations with everyone else became enormous, with high potential for proliferating disputes about legitimacy of marriages, obligations to help, food, old and complex feuds and so on. There were also some problems with traditional rival groups living side by side, but McKnight believes these were minor compared to the chaos of the vast network of individual kinship relations.

That still leaves it unclear why violence and alcohol are so much more out of control in remote communities than in our society. As with our ability to close the front door and assume no one will come in uninvited, perhaps we need first a better awareness of what our abilities to drink moderately and restrain anger rest on.

A normal Western child grows up with a non-stop training in self-restraint, from toilet training through fixed meal- and bed-times to regimented and compulsory schooling and sport. Traditional indigenous child-rearing practices, still largely intact, are very different. McKnight states baldly, “Children are indulged and rarely disciplined” (and if one relative attempts discipline, others will step in to prevent it). Black parents were often shocked by how white parents disciplined their children. The indulgent period lasted until the early teenage years, when an extreme level of discipline was suddenly imposed through a violent initiation (for boys) or marriage to an elder (for girls). Plainly, low levels of discipline in childhood are no way to develop the normal levels of self-restraint that keep drinking and violence in check.

These truths do not give rise to a recipe for fixing the problems. But there are a few conclusions that are obvious, as far as they go.

First, as the Bennelong Society and other commentators of the right have been saying all along, the “Nugget” Coombs plan of separate development and welfare has been an unmitigated disaster.

Second, the provision of more programs and services in health and education cannot make much progress until violence is controlled.

Third, analyses of the problems in purely economic terms such as “welfare dependency”, job availability and economic incentives are insufficient because they neglect the underlying cultural aspects and so will not by themselves lead to solutions.

Fourth, land rights, reconciliation and apologies are of marginal significance (in such communities as Mornington: again, that may not generalise to others).
Fifth, the Intervention is a good plan, but is underpowered.  
Sixth, prohibition of at least full-strength alcohol is essential.  
Hobbes, still the best theorist of violence, wrote in the seventeenth century:

“In such condition [of no authority offering protection against violence] there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

He was talking about an imagined state of primitive man. Strange that he should have been able to describe so exactly the direction remote Australia is heading in 2008.


Franklin 2008  