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Anggaba jina nimoonggoon:[1] Whose knowledge is that? Aboriginal perspectives of community development

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> Past times are constructed times and thus contestable. Our view of the past is strongly rooted in the present. The questions we ask and the histories we write are shaped by who we are, what we know and what issues we face in the present, as well as by the events of the past and what we can know of them from fragmentary records. These very records are the products of other minds in the past written for particular purposes and from particular viewpoints, so we have layer upon layer of constructed knowledge to peel back in our pursuit of the past (Broome 1994b, p. 70).

Introduction

TO DISCUSS COMMUNITY development is to engage with a term that has its foundations in Western ideology and epistemology. Within an Indigenous Australian context, before colonisation, this raises the question: Did community development as a process take place pre-colonisation and, if so, what did it look like? Was it similar or different to current Western understandings and processes? Living in today's society and modern world, we may never know the answer to these questions but what we can do is examine community development principles through an Aboriginal lens and provide some insight into what community development might have looked like in pre-colonial times and compare it with the present-day situation.

'Community development' is a concept that is widely used and applied across the world, resulting in many definitions and different ways of doing and practising community development. According to Ife (2009), even the term 'community' is problematic. He argues that before discussing community development it is essential

[1] *Anggaba jina nimoonggoon* translates to 'Whose knowledge is that?' in the Bardi language (spoken in the West Kimberley region of Western Australia).

to discuss what we mean by the term community and to identify 'what it is that we are aiming to "develop"' (Ife 2009, p. 9). 'Community' encompasses a wide range of uses as a term – it describes groups that are perceived as forming a community but can be diverse in their make-up, purpose, geographical location, language, interests and/or gender.

'Development' can also mean different things to different people. In discussing development, Ife (2009) points out that the term can have positive as well as not-so-positive associations. It has been used in a variety of ways, some of which have not always been approved or accepted by the people who have been the subjects of the development process. Some of the different types of developmental approaches named by Ife are 'sustainable development', 'appropriate development', 'people centered development', 'bottom-up development', 'human scale development' and 'holistic development' (Ife 2009, p. 17).

Colonisation was all about top-down development (Ife 2013), in that the colonisers decided that not only was it was necessary for Aboriginal people to develop but also how to develop, essentially moving them forward into Western civilisation and markedly different ways of being and doing in the world.

Campbell, Pyett, McCarthy, Whiteside and Tsey (2007) describe community development and empowerment in the context of Aboriginal health interventions and point out that the term 'community' has been used to denote categories of people based on identity, geography or issues. They say that community development in Aboriginal communities has focused mainly on geographical communities, which 'are rarely characterised by harmony and shared values on all issues' (Campbell, Pyett, McCarthy, Whiteside & Tsey 2007, p. 167). Indigenous Australian communities are diverse and located in different geographical areas constituting regional, remote and/or urban communities. Similarly, the non-Indigenous community in Australia is also extremely diverse and comprises Anglo, Muslim and Chinese communities, for example. Across the world, the notion that community implies homogeneity and cohesiveness, a context in which all members are working towards a common or similar purpose, caring and sharing and supportive of all in the community, is attractive but not always the reality. While some communities may demonstrate these characteristics, there are also many that do not and instead exhibit characteristics such as conflict, diversity, insecurity, lack of safety and the constant threat of war or dispersion. Community, therefore, according to Ife, 'is subjective' and is dependent on what each person or individual 'decides it will mean' (Ife 2009, p. 10).

In 1956 the United Nations Organization for Education, Science and Culture (UNESCO) produced a working paper that defined community development as:

> the processes by which local communities can raise their own standards of living. These processes include the organization or establishment of services, e.g. for social welfare, health protection, education, improvement of agriculture, development of small-scale industries (UNESCO 1956, p. 1).

This definition of community development refers to a process that is owned by the people – they decide how they can create and foster progress in their local community, focusing on both economic and social factors and drawing on community participation and initiatives to drive the process. Ife says community development is about:

> processes, rather than outcomes … the journey of discovery, rather than the planned arrival. It is about a community being helped to be self-determining, which contradicts the idea of clearly defined objectives.
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> It is about processes that cannot be time-limited, because we cannot know in advance how long a process might take, or where it might end up. In this sense, community development is a more chaotic, unpredictable and postmodern activity than most planners or managers would like, and does not fit neatly, if at all, into conventional bureaucratic accountability guidelines (Ife 2003, p. 2).

In the above definition, the emphasis on the 'doing' of community development implies that it can take time, it can be messy rather than neat and tidy, and it is important to get the process right. More importantly, community development can often be at odds with government expectations and the bureaucratic need to clearly define objectives and outcomes.

Sherwood (1999), who describes community development within an Aboriginal paradigm, says it is about 'working with communities to assist their members to find plausible solutions to the problems they have identified' (p. 2).

This chapter discusses community development from an Aboriginal standpoint (Nakata 2007) and unpacks what it might have looked like prior to colonisation and what it looks like today, drawing on the theoretical framework of the third space (Bhabha 1990).

Before colonisation

The antiquity and continuity of the Aboriginal populations is well established. Aboriginal cultures within the Australian landscape have evolved for at least 50 000 years (Broome 1994a, p. 9). Before colonisation Aboriginal people lived in geographical, tribal and/or language-based communities across Australia (Broome 1994a). When the British first arrived in 1788 there were 'approximately 300 000 Aborigines [sic] … divided into over 500 tribes, each with their own distinct territory, history, dialect and culture' (Broome 1994a).

To have an appreciation of what community development means in an Aboriginal Australian context it is necessary to have a sound understanding of the

underpinnings and principles of Aboriginal Australian societies and cultures in a contemporary context. Traditional Aboriginal society evolved over a 50 000-year time frame, developing a way of life in harmony with the environment. Across Aboriginal culture people's belief systems and world views defined their relationships to one another and the land, established rules about what they could and could not do, and guided their behaviours towards each other and understandings of the spiritual and physical world (Sherwood 1999). Hill (2007), expressing a definition of 'worldview', states that it is:

> the basic way of interpreting things and events that pervades a culture so thoroughly that it becomes a culture's concept of reality – what is good, what is important, what is sacred, what is real. Worldview is more than culture, even though the distinction between the two can sometimes be subtle. It extends to perceptions of time and space, of happiness and well-being. The beliefs, values, and behaviours of a culture stem directly from its worldview (p. 129).

Collectively, while Aboriginal people lived off the land through hunting and harvesting native fruits, food plants and medicines, how they carried out this role was different according to where they lived. Broome (1994a) states that 'by looking at one aspect of Aboriginal culture – for example, technology – we can see the sameness and diversity of the various groups' (p. 1). Furthermore, the diverse ecologies in which Aboriginal peopled lived shaped the ways in which they interacted with the landscape, made sense of their world, and enacted and carried out their rituals and spiritual obligations in caring for country. The connection to land and territorial boundaries was so strong that it was not common for people to travel outside these boundaries unless they were visiting or travelling to engage in trading or corroborees (Broome 1994a).

Looking through the lens of community development

If we unpack this glimpse of early Aboriginal society through the lens of community development, what we begin to understand is that Aboriginal Australia was comprised of small, geographically specific communities based on different languages and dialects living in 'diverse ecologies, ranging from the seashore to woodland, river banks and desert' (Broome 1994a, p. 2) and the rainforests and tablelands.

In these small, geographically focused communities, the location and group beliefs, cultural expectations, interests and obligations of the group created a common purpose that all members of the community – women, men and children – worked towards. This common purpose ensured not only the wellbeing and survival of the group but also the enactment of spiritual and ceremonial responsibilities in caring for the land, honouring and celebrating the Dreaming ancestors who gave them life

(Broome 1994a). The 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' is a concept denoting Aboriginal ontology, which describes and explains how the world came into being.

According to Dean (1996), these are English terms coined around 1896 by the anthropologist Francis James Gillen, and used by Gillen and his colleague Walter Baldwin Spencer in their work after 1899 to refer to the primordial period in religious mythologies of the Northern Arunta. Both 'Dreaming' and 'Dreamtime' are engrained in the Australian vocabulary, referring to the spiritual or religious aspects of Aboriginal culture. Anthropologists in contemporary Australia use the two terms interchangeably, and while, as Dean acknowledges, there are differences in their meaning, they are used interchangeably throughout the broader community. (In this chapter the term 'Dreaming' will be used.)

Dreaming stories are often referred to as Creation Stories that differ across the diverse Aboriginal language groups in Australia today. The term Dreaming is also known by different names; for instance, in Noongar country (in the south-west of Western Australia) the word is *Nyitting*. In Yamaji country (in the mid-west of Western Australia) the word is *Guduroo* and in Wongutha country (in the Goldfields region of Western Australia) the word is *Tjukurrpa* (Dean 1996).

When talking about community development we can only speculate as to whether the notion of community as we know it today was the same as in pre-colonial Aboriginal societies or whether it was different. How did Aboriginal world views and/or ontology shape people's understanding of community and influence what and how they carried out their day-to-day living arrangements?

Commonalities such as groups of people linked through their identity of sharing a common language, small societies living in specific geographical locations, and strong spiritual and ceremonial activities linking people to the land feature in current understandings of community. Analogous to Western religions, Aboriginal ontology provided people with a purpose and direction for their day-to-day lives, indicating that the notion of community was similar to what we know today. That notion is congruent with Western ideas of community; according to the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition (n.d.), 'community' is most often associated with one or more of the following characteristics:

- common people, as distinguished from those of rank or authority
- a relatively small society
- the people of a district
- the quality of holding something in common
- a sense of common identity and characteristics.

When talking about communities built around commonalities, Ife (2009) raises the question of what happens when an individual or family is different and does not

fit in. If people do not align with the identity inherent in the community then they are more likely to be excluded and/or rejected. In Aboriginal society pre-colonisation (and current) the operation of the kinship and skin system provided a structure for managing relationships and dealing with difference (Berndt & Berndt 1964). Everyone in the community knew where they belonged and understood their differences based on skin and kinship groupings. When a new member arrived in the community, they were very quickly asked who they were, what family they were from and their totem and or skin grouping. This then enabled the host community to quickly place them within their skin and kinship system, providing a place for the newcomer and accepting them into the community.

Hence Aboriginal society prior to colonisation had (and still has) a very effective system of ensuring that people had a place and belonged. If members acted contrary to the system, then they were subject to punishment or expelled from the group – this occurred when members engaged in a 'wrong-way' relationship, that is, marrying or going with someone who was outside their skin grouping (Australian Government, Australian Law Reform Commission 2010). The law inherent in pre-colonial Aboriginal society ensured that members adhered to proper and correct behaviours and protocols. With the onset of colonisation and the consequent disruption and breakdown of the skin and kinship system, Aboriginal people were dislocated, displaced and thrust into a Western system where they were noticeably different. In contrast to Aboriginal society, in Western society there were no protocols that established a process whereby people were able to communicate, identify with others and know where they fitted and belonged in the system. This lack of protocols left Aboriginal people stranded and with no means of identifying with the new colonising group whose dominant paradigm dictated how people should live.

Development as a concept

As a Western concept the term 'development' originated in the early 19th century and was linked to industrial societies. It is highly probable that before colonisation, development did not exist as a concept in traditional Aboriginal societies in the same way as understood by Western society. If the concept and term did exist, 'development' would have been known as something else and been completely dissimilar to how we understand the word today. The concept from a Western perspective would more than likely have been incommensurable with Aboriginal understandings. Aboriginal practices and world views have evolved around the philosophy of the Dreaming and were interpreted through the Creation Stories that described how the world came into being and was constructed through the actions of Dreaming ancestors and creator beings (Grieves 2014). Aboriginal identities and world views stemmed

from these stories – they provided Aboriginal people with a deeper understanding of who they were and how they were related not only to each other but to the natural environment in which they lived. People understood what was expected of them in their day-to-day lives and what needed to be done to ensure the ongoing prosperity and wellbeing of the group. Traditional lore defined how people would engage and communicate with each other and neighbouring groups and what their responsibilities and authority were in both the spiritual and physical realm (Grieves 2014).

Because the term development has its beginnings in industrialisation, the use of the term is not compatible with pre-colonial Aboriginal understandings, which have their foundations within an ecological framework that has been informed and shaped by Aboriginal ontology, land, plants and animals who shared the environment with Aboriginal peoples. Dreaming stories from the ancestors directed what people could and could not do to ensure productivity and wellbeing. Hence, people's day-to-day activities would have been influenced by the Dreaming, and by the natural environment in which they lived, such as the seasonal patterns and cycles that informed the group what foods and animals could be harvested and hunted at specific times (Fryer-Smith 2008). Aligned with the knowledge required for day-to-day survival, which included the maintenance and development of old and new tools for hunting and harvesting, and caring for and teaching children and preparing them for adulthood, were a range of spiritual and cultural responsibilities. These included caring for country, conducting and performing ceremonial business and preparations, engaging in women's or men's business according to the time of the year, creating new songs and dances, and recording through rock art and sand paintings the stories and history of the group.

Inherent in early Aboriginal societies was this great diversity of lifestyles and world views in how people lived their lives, along with many common elements with relatively small variations. Hence, to even consider development in relation to pre-colonial Aboriginal societies requires a huge shift in conceptualising what we actually mean by this. Having looked through the Bardi (Aklif 1999) and Noongar (Whitehurst 1992) language dictionaries, we have found there is no word for development in either of these languages and we suspect the same could be said for the range of other Indigenous languages across Australia. In pre-colonial Aboriginal society, rather than engage in development people would have been occupied with maintaining their livelihoods through hunting and harvesting foods and medicines and with ensuring the ongoing wellbeing of the group. For the authors, 'wellbeing' is quite different to development: it is not about 'developing'. The following case study describes how maintaining and progressing wellbeing might have looked like in pre-colonial times.

CASE STUDY

Story of the Brewarrina fish traps

The Ngemba people from the Brewarrina region in north-west New South Wales are well known for their Dreaming story about the making of the Brewarrina fish traps that are known as the '*Nghunnhu*'. The fish traps are considered to be more than 40 000 years old.

According to the Ngemba, the fish traps were designed and created by the creator being Baiame, who became concerned after noticing that the people were starving following a drought that had dried up the river. 'Baiame produced the design for the *Nghunnhu* by casting his net over the river course, where the net landed his two sons built the fish traps to Baiame's design.'

After building the traps, Baiame taught the 'old men of the Ngemba how to call the rain through dance and song'. After dancing and singing for many days, the rain came and filled up the river and Baiame's net filled the traps with fish. The old men then quickly herded the fish into the pens and blocked the entry to the traps, thus providing food for their people.

After building the traps, the Ngemba people were instructed by Baiame in how to care and maintain them, while ensuring that other tribes could access and use the traps. Baiame directed through the lore how the traps were to be used and maintained. Following Baiame's directions, generations of Ngemba people have continued to use and care for the traps, 'studying fish migration in relation to seasonal river flows to apply innovative and new methods of working the fish traps more efficiently and to ensure the river is not overfished'.

Sources: Australian Government, Department of the Environment (2005); Destination NSW (n.d.).

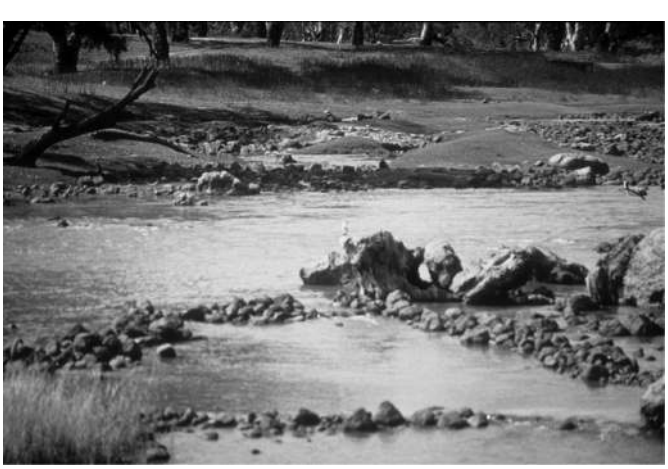

Figure 1.1 Brewarrina fish traps
Source: Australian Government, Department of the Environment.

REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. Identify the number of ways in which traditional knowledge systems informed the building and operation of the fish traps.
2. How are the knowledge systems operating in this case study different to Western understandings?
3. How can this case study inform community development approaches in Indigenous Australian communities today?

In discussing the notion of community development, we know that in Western society community development processes generally involve problem solving with four common steps:

1. Identify the problem.
2. Set goals or develop a plan.
3. Implement the plan.
4. Evaluate the plan/actions.

In Aboriginal society, the Dreaming lore (such as the aforementioned *Nyitting*, *Guduroo*, *Tjukurrpa*) would have set out how to deal with issues and or manage problems. Berndt and Berndt (1992) outline how maintenance of order was (and still is) maintained in Aboriginal societies and the many different approaches that were used depending on the problem or issue. They state that 'outside of religious matters, the headman, elders, ritual leaders, native doctors, sorcerers and so on' dealt with other conflict matters presented to them (p. 359). Their response to these would be guided by *Nyitting, Guduroo, Tjukurrpa* or similar for an outcome. The Brewarrina fish traps case study clearly shows how the Dreaming ancestor Baiame informed the Ngemba people in New South Wales tens of thousands of years ago how to resolve their problem of food shortage during a drought. In pre-colonial Aboriginal society, the presence of cultural paradigms based on the Dreaming provided a different set of processes for people in tackling their day-to-day issues and problems. Does this mean that community development models and processes were present in traditional Aboriginal societies? It probably does, but the what and the how as demonstrated through the above case study reveals a very different conceptual framework to what we know and understand about community development from a Western paradigm.

Scholars identify the professional practice of community development as a post-World War 2 event (Batten 1957; Cary 1973; Cawley 1989; Sanders 1970). The earliest projects evolved from the efforts of industrialised countries to assist emerging

nations in their development. While basic concepts and underlying principles were already known, new in the second half of the 20th century was the articulation of professional practice (University of Wisconsin n.d.).

As a strategic process to build and develop economies after World War 2, community development involved developing and implementing known processes of problem solving. Development in this sense is based on something (in this case countries and/or economies) requiring improvement. After World War 2 countries such as Japan, Germany and other European countries required rebuilding in a physical and economic sense.

In traditional Aboriginal societies and communities that were relatively similar in terms of lifestyles and ecological economies, with no one group/s having power or superiority over another, there was likely no sense of community development as a planned, strategic pathway to develop or improve to the level of another group or community. Rather, the community (or societal) development model would have evolved around a natural progression of what was expected of people through their ontology, belief systems and relationship to the Dreaming and the land rather than an intrusive, planned, strategic goal for development as was expected within an industrial framework.

Present-day Indigenous society

A useful theoretical lens for considering the application of community development to Indigenous Australian societies is the concept of the 'third space' (Bhabha 1990, 1994). The third space, according to Homi Bhabha (1994), is a space in which different cultures intersect or meet; it can be a space of contestation, collision and often misunderstanding due to the different world views, beliefs and understandings that people bring into this space. Bhabha argues that while the propensity for polarisation to occur in this space is ever present due to differing world views, there is also enormous potential for people to engage in conversation that can move them forward into a space of understanding and transformation, by not only identifying and acknowledging these different world views but focusing on the commonalities as a driver for moving forward.

It is important to understand how the third space concept relates when applying community development models to contemporary Indigenous communities. Although colonisation has attempted to transform Aboriginal people through policies of assimilation into carbon copies of Western models, modern-day Aboriginal Australians have resisted these attempts, retaining at different levels and in different ways cultural traditions, world views, values and practices that have endured for more than 50 000 years. This process in turn has developed Aboriginal ways of