

# Loss of Aboriginal Cultural Identities

## *A Study of the Fringe Dwellers and Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

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### Abstract

It is recorded that the first group of Aboriginals arrived in Australia between 40,000 and 80,000 years ago. From then on, they have been forming their own identities. European settlers first came here in 1788 from England, but they changed the Aboriginal society quickly and greatly. Together with the changes were the Aboriginal identities they owned. In order to find out “who I am”, the Aboriginals really exert a lot of efforts.

In this thesis, we are to discuss the loss of Aboriginal cultural identities in colonized times and new age based on two writers' works. One is Nene Gare's *The Fringe Dwellers*, and the other is Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence*. The former is written by a white woman who shows sympathy for the black Aboriginals, while the latter was recorded by an indigenous woman.

**Keywords:** cultural identity, loss, aboriginal, Australia

### 1. Introduction

Cultural identity is the identity of a group or culture, or of an individual as far as one is influenced by one's belonging to a group or culture.(Wikipedia) And it has been arousing increasing attention in literature, especially in countries that used to be colonized by imperialist countries. Fortunately, more and more writers, among whom are Nene Gare and Doris Pilkington, have been taking part in the process of criticizing the false identities imposed on the colonized people.

Nowadays, we usually believe that there are two kinds of cultural identities: one is originated from certain traditions or geographical environment and unchangeable in spite of the times; the other is always in a process of being shaped and reshaped due to the outside world's influence that is always the stronger culture on the weaker one. Therefore, when we study the cultural identity, we should focus on the relation between cultures as well as the unfixed characteristics.

### 2. Brief Summary of *The Fringe Dwellers* and *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

#### 2.1 *The Fringe Dwellers*

The year 1961 witnessed the birth of this great book, *the Fringe Dwellers*. It shows us a story of two part-Aboriginal sisters, teenagers Trilby and Noonah Comeaway. They had been in an Aboriginal Mission for quite a long time to receive the so called proper education out of their parents' will, but our story starts as they are about to finish the mission life and prepare to leave their younger brother and sister there to go back to their parents' shabby house in an Aboriginal settlement on the outskirts of Geraldton, West Australia. The novel mainly focuses on their different views on their identities as part-Aboriginals in the no-man's-land between black and white worlds. Noonah intends to become a nurse and to be assimilated into white society. Trilby is a rebellious figure who wants to be accepted on her own terms. The family moves into a new house but they can't manage to adapt to the expectations of the other world—white society. In the end, the family are driven out of their house and return to an one-roomed shack on a

“native” reservation. Trilby, once a rebel against the old style of life, eventually gives herself up to the squalid card-playing and wine-drinking emptiness, the existing characteristics of the fringe-dwellers according to the novel.

### *2.2 Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*

In 1931, our heroine Molly, her sister Daisy together with her Cousin Gracie lived in a place called Jigalong. Located at the fringe of the great desert, Jigalong was near to the rabbit-proof fence, which was an obvious dividing line in West Australia. A.O.Neville, a white government officer in Perth, worked as the Aboriginals’ local “protector” according to assimilation policy. He spared no effort to apply this policy and insisted that the mixed-blood and the aboriginals be trained to become servants or slaves to serve the white society. For this reason, he gave an order to Jigalong’s police officer Riggs to take Molly, Daisy and Gracie away from their parents. They were brought to the Moore River mission which was under the control of nuns. The three girls felt it was no home for them. As a result, Molly made her decision to take her two younger sisters back home.

The three girls experienced a nearly endless and exhausting journey. They were confronted with frightening figures: the real marbus; the white lady, Mrs. Flanagan who cheated them and offered report to the police; and an Aboriginal male, Don Willocks, who followed the three girls and reported them to his boss. Despite all these confrontations, Molly still held on to her belief of going back home. It was this indomitable belief as well as the girls’ close relationship with other girls and the nature that enabled them to succeed in returning to their own families and culture.

## **3. Aboriginal Cultural Identity**

In order to have a good comprehension of the Aboriginal cultural identity, their cultural ways of life should be fully understood. Aboriginal culture is actually deeply rooted in the past. There are many traditions with a long history as well as a unique continuity.

Aboriginal people have been in Australia for between 50,000 and 120,000 years. And there were approximately 300,000 Aboriginal people living in Australia when the British arrived in 1788. About 260 different language groups and 500 dialects were found at the colonized times, when the Aboriginals lived a semi-nomadic life with small family groups. Each family group lived in a fixed territory and moved across it according to seasons. Among these groups, each had their own distinct history and culture. The family groups would only get together when there were social, ceremonial, religious and trading activities, on which greater emphasis was laid. The environment was controlled by spiritual rather than physical means and religion was deeply tied to country (Berndt R.M. & Berndt, 1992; Broome, 1994).

Land is a fundamentally important part for the individual as well as the groups. The concept of this land ownership differs greatly from that of the European’s. According to the Aboriginal concept, each individual belongs to certain land within a family group rather than own it. Therefore, the land plays a role more than a physical environment. It is something of symbolism and spirituality. It is the spiritual life in which man and woman are all involved. But ladies’ roles are usually neglected and misinterpreted by the past scholars.

Relationship with the members of family and group is as important as the land. The Aboriginal people interact with each other under the control of complicated kinship systems, which also determines a person’s behavior to others. That is to say, an individual’s responsibilities and obligations are all under its control. For example, a man has the responsibilities to teach his sons and nephews how to hunt for food, while a woman teaches daughters how to cook. Of course, it is this kinship that determines how the eating things divided among them. In a sense, an individual is not alone; kinship systems place each person securely in the group (Berndt & Berndt, 1992).

In the group, their roles are defined according to age together with gender. Take the role of a man for example, he is to hunt with skills and holds the obligation of passing them to the next generations to keep a cohesive development in the group. While a woman also has a significant role in providing most of the food for the group and she also shoulders the cultural obligations. Therefore, we can conclude “Sharing along the lines of kinship and family remains an important cultural value” (Berndt & Berndt, 1992).

From what is discussed above, we find that in order to eliminate the identities of the Aboriginals, the above mentioned elements have to be dealt with. And that is what the white invaders did from the very beginning of their landing on the continent of Australia.

#### 4. Identity Loss in the Colonized Times

On 26 January 1788, British ships sailed into Port Jackson, and on board were seamen, soldiers, officials and convicts confronted with Gamaraigal people in Sydney. The following year witnessed a mass invasion into a larger place across the country. According to *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the first group of invaders were sailors and whalers, and later came Major Edmund Lockyer with a detachment of eighteen soldiers

On a hot summer day of 1826, Major Lockyer and two of his officers went ashore and climbed the cliffs and explored the harbor (Pilkington 2002).

The coming of the white changed the traditional society of the Aborigines and this process was defined as dispossession and de-population of the Aborigines. By the early years of 1930s', the population of the Aborigines had decreased to less than 30 000, which was mainly due to the introduction of various diseases by the white and the alarming amount of violence toward the Aborigines with a view to get them under control and conquered. Accompanied the population decline was the loss of discourse power and the change of the Aboriginal identities, means of living, perceptions and expectations. At the same time, Aboriginal elders' authority was confronted by superior "White" technology and inevitably crumbled.

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Captain Fremantle told the Aborigines that they were going to give the land an English name, which should be considered as the first step to eliminate the Aboriginal identities, which was also a good way to keep their own identities. Because they were advised to "keep up their Englishness" at all costs (Pilkington 2002). But the name changing of a piece of land was just a beginning, followed by the ownership changing. This was soon realized by the Aborigines and they figured out what the Whites' arrival meant to them: it was the destruction of the traditional society and the dispossession of their land.

Land dispossession was not enough for establishing a world for the whites; therefore, they brought English law into the continent. Two brothers were caught because of trying to get a sheep from the whites. They were sentenced according to the English Law. And in light of the sentence, they were sailed away together with hundreds of others to the prison, among whom some were scattered to strange towns and some never came back. This can be regarded as an effective measure to cut off the kinship between Aboriginal members of a family, which could also be called a type of identity elimination.

Land dispossession or kinship elimination, they also reflects a fact that white people are superior in discourse, while the Aborigines inferior. And in this process the white people took it for granted that the Aboriginal understood their words as well as their sign language and then gave the name West Australia to the land. The Aborigines had no right to have a word. The same was in the case of those who were sentenced according to the English Law. This was the first time they felt helpless and doubt their own identities:

The Nyungar people were hurt and confused when they were punished for carrying out their own traditional laws, handed down to them by the Dreamtime spirit beings (Pilkington 2002).

In fact, the whites just took the advantage of their belief for gaining a lot. But what's worse was that in applying their law, the whites were differentiated from the local Aborigines. When a man reported a white man just stole his wife, he was sent back away by receiving a bag of flour, which could also be considered as oppression on the female from the white male. In this case, the Aboriginal female just became a product trading between males.

The above mentioned measures were also accompanied by cultural weapons. The Aborigines were forbidden to sing songs or dance, which were great traditions passed down by the ancestors. Without celebration meant some important days or Aboriginal festivals were forgotten. Instead, the white invaders distributed blankets annually to the local people, which occurred on Queen Victoria's birthday. Meanwhile they were trained to work as servants for the white invaders. What's worse was that they did not see this work as exploitation but as a form of kindness shown to them (Pilkington 2002). Actually, in order to meet their boss's demand, these Aborigines also changed to wear the white clothes, which was also different from their laws. For the sake of changing the Aboriginal identities, the whites just gave the animals their English names, which could also be seen as a great move in identity alteration.

Being hurt from various aspects, the Aborigines learned to accept the white system of justice and punishment. They also realized that they had to conform to the changes in their lifestyle. According to the book, the Aborigines were introduced into "civilization" (Pilkington 2002). But this doesn't mean they gave up their resistance against the whites dominated society.

## 5. Identity Loss in the New Age

In the 20th century, the Australian Whites just took more legal measures to bring the Aborigines under control. But their origin could be traced back to the middle of the 19th century. At the very beginning, the colonists regarded themselves as the superior to the Aborigines and the latter group was heading for extinction. Therefore, the colonists considered that it was their responsibility to protect the inferior group. And various controlling measures as well as policies were put forward and put into practice. Among them, legislation was the most effective means. In this part we are going to discuss their effects on the Aborigines' life style and identity.

The *WA Aborigines Act 1905* admitted the role of the Chief Protector of Aborigines played in the safeguarding aspect. And the Protector had the right to protect the so called "half caste" children as well as all the Aborigines. In order to provide the Aborigines with a "better life" and cut off their connection with the traditional Aboriginal culture, they set up reserves and missions.

In the reserves, take the depot in *Following the Rabbit-proof Fence* for example, Food, clothing, tobacco and blankets were all distributed among the Aborigines. And gradually all these benefits tempted an increasing number of people who lead a nomadic life to join them. Some kinship groups also chose to stay here since they were tired of confronting the difficulties. Even though, some of the young men nurtured doubt about the elder man's choice of staying in the reserve, they were obedient to their elder people and had to stay with them there. This shows us that even though they wanted to retain some traditional identities, they still had to give up their own and construct a new self according to the changing of the external environment. Holding meetings on Christmas to discuss their own problem was a proof for identity changing.

Next, we shall focus on the *Half-caste Act* and the influence it brought about. At the turn of 20th century, the communities of the Aborigines were heavily devastated. Most of them lived in reserves or stations with the whole family. In this process, Aboriginal women were exploited sexually. Therefore, there was a mixed-blood baby boom. Because of the white's misinterpretation of the characteristics of the Aborigines, the belief that indigenous families were not capable of raising their children became widespread. So children should be taken away from their Aboriginal families to be trained civilized.

They also thought that the mixed-blood Aboriginal children who are believed to be smart should be isolated from their traditional society that was thought poor and backward. By doing this they could become servants as helpful as possible in the white dominated society. Another reason also propelled the implementation of this policy. In the 1920's and 1930's, the population of the half-caste developed with a shocking speed. The government then became worried about the situation and scared of the impurity of their race. The controlling policy was born and implemented under this background. By doing this they expected to ensure their whiteness and removed the black—colored.

How can they achieve this? The answer is racial assimilation. The day of 15 December 1886 witnessed a great event—the birth of the *Half Caste Act*. Its fundamental intention was to control over their conditions of employment, residence, care and custody of mixed-blood children (Attwood, 1989). The main function of this act was to realize the merging of half-caste into the white's population so as to bring the Aboriginal identities into extinction. By doing this, Australia intended to achieve the goal of all whites with unitary identity. In reality, this act did affect every Aboriginal family. Not a single family escaped the cruelty of this policy. All of them experienced the loss and the pain. Specifically, it was the loss of identities and the pain of losing it as well as how to reconstruct a new one. Attwood regarded it as "the beginning of the end" (Attwood, 1989). In fact, the act of removing part—Aboriginal children was not a new thing, which originated prior to the 19th century. The legislation was just a frame work in which the white protectors gained greater authority and justification in the implementation of the *Act*. In light of the *Act*, officials or the so-called protectors of Aborigines could wander around tracking down and took away little children without informing of their families, or even their white fathers. And, these children taken away to the mission belonged to the stolen generation.

But what is mission? After the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829, conflicts dominated between the white settlers and local Aborigines in West Australia. The report of the British Select Committee about the condition of "natives" in all British colonies in 1837 was followed by the fact that protectors were appointed in Perth and York. Because of their successful work, protector was abolished and not revived until 1886. During this period, police and magistrates played the protective role instead. In fact, settlers were the main people applying the laws. While the Aboriginal communities developed in camps on the outskirts of towns and lived a life by hunting and working from time to time for local farmers and businesses.

With the financial help of the government, church-run schools were opened for the Aboriginal children in the 1840s. By 1847, only one of the schools had been left because of the lack of financial support as well as the reclaiming of the children by the parents due to the deaths of some students from disease. In the late 19th century, two schools were opened in the south for the Aboriginal children. Even though these two schools were opened as orphanages, most of the children there had parents alive. In the mission, the children were trained to do domestic and farm work. According to the Industrial Schools Act 1874, children voluntarily surrendering to a school or orphanage would still be under control of the authority by the age of 21 without taking the parents' wish into consideration. It was in 1890 that a Catholic mission was founded at Beagle Bay in the north of West Australia. In the following 20 years, another 4 were opened with the financial help from the government. These missions shared an objective that was to remove the children from their families. They were removed from their parents and the life style of a nomadic way and housed on the mission to be trained at school and in various trades working as servants. At what age could they be taken away from their Aboriginal families? In the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report—*Bringing Them Home*, we find:

In the south of the State little use of the removal power was made before 1909. In that year a regulation dispensed with the need for the Chief Protector's permission to remove any mixed descent child under the age of eight. (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997).

In West Australia, the Chief Protector used his power of removing and guarding to drive all the Aboriginals to settlements and missions, to take the children from their parents at about the age of 4 years old and confined them to the dorms which were far away from their families. At the age of fourteen they were sent to work. In addition, the Aboriginal girls becoming pregnant would be sent back to their original mission to give birth to the child and then the child would undergo the same experience his or her mother had suffered.

In *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*, Molly, her sister Daisy and her Cousin Gracie were taken away from their mothers forcibly. Even the white fathers had no say in this process, and the only thing they could do is to see the girls taken away from their family. But in *The Fringe Dwellers*, things are a little bit different. Noonah and Trilby together with their siblings were not forced by the white to come to the mission. They came because of their family's poverty. To some extent, poverty could also be regarded as a forcible force.

"Half-caste" children were forced to leave their family to a mission, which was a means to isolate the younger generation from their own culture. By doing this they hope the "half-caste" formed a new identity and a new value system. Therefore, in the mission, they were trained to be nurses, milkmaid or servant. They learned the English language, which was a key element in forming a certain identity. Until now, we seem to have neglected something important. That is who was in the charge of the mission? They were mainly the white nuns. So we can safely come to a conclusion that the whites not only intended to isolate the "half-cast" children physically, but also spiritually. They expected to convert the children's belief fundamentally

## 6. Conclusion

By studying Aboriginals in Australia, we can see that the efforts for the searching of the Aboriginal identities have a long history. From the beginning of the land dispossession, the Aboriginals started to lose their foundation of identity. Over the next two hundred years, the Aboriginal society underwent great changes. In the colonial times, their loss of identities was in a cruel and painful way like being slaughtered and abused; while in the new age they are assimilated but still marginalized. History has proved that it is useless to eliminate Aboriginal identities as well as to maintain the original one. The correct solution is to construct a brand-new identity combined with the characteristics of the whites' as well as the Aboriginals'.

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