

# Aboriginal Influence on Australian Culture.

By Dr Graham McLennan

The [40 Indigenous Stories](#) have helped us understand Aboriginals who have contributed to our unique Australian culture.

Growing up between Dubbo & Gilgandra I often reflect on the contact we had with the Aboriginal families in the district. As kids we walked barefoot to school amongst the "cat head" burrs (and snakes - my father killed 28 in one day. It made the SMH front page. As a teenager I worked as a board boy with Aboriginal shearers on the family farm "Maiala" on the headwaters of the Marthaguy where downstream is the site of the oldest evidence of bread making in the world.

Interestingly the McLennan family always said grace before meals, even by an uncle, a person who rejected the Christian faith, the influence of the aboriginal Balladoran Mission and the [Nadine family](#) some of whom worked on the property having meals with us. There are more Christians per capita amongst Aborigines than amongst other Australians.

Here are some areas to think about:

## Sense of Humour

In Romans 5:3 we are told to rejoice in our sufferings, aboriginals do more than that, they [laugh and at themselves](#).

In this twenty minute interview atheist commentator Phillip Adams (and son of a Congregational minister!) [interviewed Prof Lillian Holt about Aboriginal humour](#) It is a fascinating analysis with some "colourful" language.

[Dr Jessica Milner Davis](#), of the University of NSW, a world authority on humour, explores the Australian tradition of "taking the micky" in a chapter in the book *A Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour*.

Milner Davis says humour has played a vital role in civilisation and shaping cultural identities the world over. She has news for the Aussie larrikin: "My theory is we may have learnt our Australian tradition of taking the micky from our indigenous ancestors, not from our introduced ancestors."

The white settlers were easy targets for the Aborigines. Milner Davis cites an account by the First Fleet diarist, Captain Watkin Tench, of an arduous day exploring the new colony.

"The whites had not done too well trekking through the bush that day," she says. "There'd been some falls and as they sat that night around the campfire with their two trusty indigenous guides, a corroboree dance was staged for them, and all the pratfalls and disasters of the day were immediately recognisable."

[Professor W. E H Stammers said this in 1956](#) about Aboriginal humour:

"There is another and very distinct kind of Aboriginal humour which, I think, to some extent does: it can be spoken of as 'formal' humour. That is to say, there are certain well-known situations in Aboriginal life which, in their understanding, have to be signaled and resolved by a kind of banter, half-serious, half-humorous."

### Love of Sport

Marngrook a game was means "Game Ball".



Traditional Aboriginal ball made from possum or kangaroo skin. The ball was made in various sizes to fit the game it was used in.

A traditional game from the Gunditjmara people in Victoria. The name comes from a corroboree by the Djabwurrung and Jardwadjali clans in Victoria's Western District (6).

Marngrook is said to be the Aboriginal game that provided the first lawmakers of football with some of the fundamentals of the game millions know and love as Australian Rules (Aussie Rules) Football, a view which is not totally undisputed.

There are many Aboriginal games and it is possible to see elements of our modern games in traditional Aboriginal games. Keentan is like basketball, and Wana is much like French cricket, Kokan is a hockey game and Koolchee is like 10-pin bowling.

Please [click here](#) to learn about over thirty Aboriginal games. [The Australian Institute of Sport lists over one hundred](#)

Traditional Aboriginal games were almost lost after colonisation. Today extensive consultation with Aboriginal elders is necessary to re-establish the traditional Aboriginal games and their rules. They are now creatively adapted—for safety reasons—by using tennis balls instead of spears and soft pool noodles instead of waddies (Aboriginal heavy-wood war club).

[Traditional Aboriginal games](#) are inclusive games and not competitive. For example, if a player gets 'out' in some games they can immediately rejoin the game once leaving the field.

### **Laid Back Attitude. "She'll be Right Mate!"**

We have been influenced by the Pacific "Islander" time, I'm sure brought about by the humidity and heat. Anybody who has worked in these climates knows as I do, working in Vanuatu on many medical/dental outreaches with impervious gowns, gloves and masks, is both mentally and physically draining.

Some questions:

Why is it that we to take off and be nomadic as "geriatric gypsies"? [We own about half a million caravans!](#)

How did mate ship develop? Was it because of the deeper relationships tribal aborigines have with one another?

How much does heat affect our brains in concentrating? Has it affected our language?

"The vocabulary of Australia is drawn from many sources, including various dialects of British English as well as [Gaelic languages](#), some [Indigenous Australian languages](#), and [Polynesian languages](#).<sup>[2]</sup>" [Wikipedia](#)

Why do we have a lazy drawl droppin our "gs" in runnin, fishin and yakkin etc? In the mid 1960's there was considerable interest in ["Strine"](#) (Australian) after the "author" Afferbeck Lauder (Alphabetical Order) published several books .

Some Aboriginal words are recognised throughout the world such as the words boomerang and kangaroo.

And the the first European settlers used the original walking paths, which became roads and then highways. For Instance ninety percent of the Castlereagh Highway coincides with the aboriginals' walking track from Lightning Ridge to the Bunya Mountains in Southern Queensland. In late winter evenings, when the stars were very bright aboriginals they used them for guidance. The stars were used as a memory aid, very much like our GPS systems and the routes were then memorised and passed on by song (songlines).

## **The Tall Poppy Syndrome**

As Noel Pearson points out in an article "[Individualism verses Communalism](#)":

"Australia's ubiquitous tall poppy syndrome is actually an enduring contribution of Aboriginal culture to the country's national ethos. The great Australian levelling may have its provenance in the country's ancient culture, tempered by centuries of laconic human existence in a hard land." making it difficult for [leaders within their communities](#) who suffer from the 'tall poppy syndrome' and often seem to have to work twice as hard to gain legitimacy and keep faith with their own mob as explained further in this [Australian Human Rights Commission Social Justice Report](#)

"Charlie Perkins was clear about the importance of individual endeavour and the pursuit of wealth, and that this was not inconsistent with his Aboriginal identity. He came under criticism publicly and from within indigenous circles for this. I look back on my own youthful views – when I did not understand the double standard that made it ok for any white fella to do something that Perkins was not supposed to do- and I feel ashamed to have held those views. I woke up to the defeating view and came to appreciate a great friendship with a man who was trying to negotiate peace in the conflict between Aboriginal individualism and Aboriginal community

This sort of criticism of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who find success in the non-Indigenous world is more than just the characteristically Australian 'tall poppy syndrome'. There may be elements of jealousy at work for those who manage to succeed where others do not, or as Noel Pearson explains again:

Paul Keating once told me, the problem with your mob is you're like crabs in a bucket. If one of you starts climbing out and gets his claws on the rim, about to pull himself over the top to freedom, the other mob will be pulling him back down into the bucket. You all end up cooked."

There are countless examples of this. One illustration was of the highly motivated young aboriginal who was recruited and trained at the Goulburn Police Academy to help his own tribe, only to go back home to be rejected by them because of his education.

There are other negative influences such as rejection and inferiority that are as much spiritual as emotional and combined with our convict past make these significant problems in our national identity.

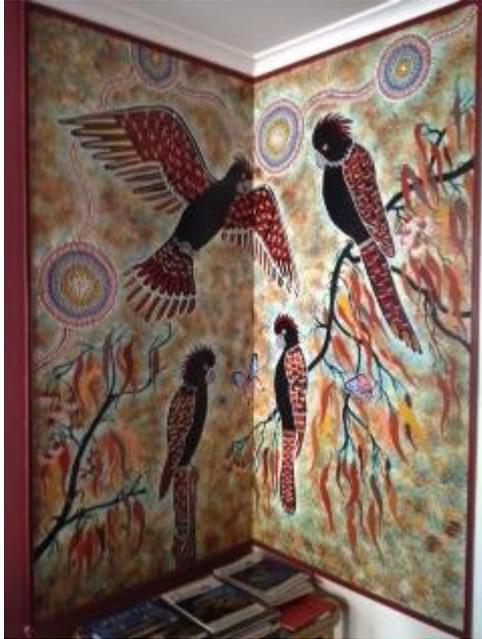
The tall poppy syndrome is a phenomenon not just unique to Australia but also shared amongst some other cultures. Some of it goes back to our "refuse" from England and our convict heritage intensely disliking authoritarianism.

## Art

How much has the traditional [Corroboree](#) influenced performing arts in the love for story telling, dance and live performances?



A [ballet](#) performance based on the Corroboree



A painting in my dental surgery painted by two local Aborigines, Emily Goolagong and Joanne Reid. Other paintings like this hang in Parliament House Canberra.

In conclusion the following are salient remarks by John Blacket ([www.khesed.org.au](http://www.khesed.org.au)) author of *Fire in the Outback* the story of the Aboriginal revival movement that began on Elcho island in 1979.

"Most westerners have a Hellenistic (Greek) worldview that sees everything rationally and tries to deny the existence of the spirit world, where First Nations\* Australians basically see everything through spirit eyes. One example of this is seen when a middle aged person dies. Medical diagnosis says it was caused by a heart attack, but Aborigines see this as the result of a curse from an enemy.

There are many things that cannot be explained scientifically or rationally that require spirit eyes to help us to see the powerful spirits over different places in our land. They have power as a result of thousands of years - or even a short period - of joyful festivities in that place, or maybe judgemental spirits from a place of law, or violent spirits from wars or even areas of violent sports in this place, or a spirit of sickness and death where events in that place have encouraged their presence over the years.

**My indigenous friends have helped me see the reality of these various spirit powers affecting me and other non-indigenous people in different parts of Australia, and I have seen and heard how God's Holy Spirit has either built on the good spirits that indigenous Australians have invited into different places, or brought peace instead of fighting, love instead of hate, life instead of death and suffering."**

\*Footnote.

"First" Peoples

Is it better to refer to Aboriginals as **prior** peoples since anthropologists believe that that there were several waves of migrations to Australia, the Negritos, Murrayians & Carpentarians being three of the major ones. It was some of these "invaders" (if you want to use a derogatory term) who pushed the former migrations down to Tasmania. For instance the DNA of Central Australia aboriginals differ markedly from Queensland Aboriginals.

The reason why there was integration and acceptance was apparently mainly due to intermarriage. Graham McLennan