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**ADELAIDE'S RECIPE FOR LIFE:
WISDOM OF THE KAURNA**

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ADELAIDE'S RECIPE FOR LIFE: WISDOM OF THE KAURNA

Gerald McBride *

The powerful and profound significance of their ceremonial life caused Aboriginal Australians to see it as the real content and purpose of life and to believe all other things exist only to make it possible and to add to its quality.

In our society we seem to be increasingly dominated by the economic system and to accept as paramount the behaviour required by it and the values which it inspires. (Coombs 1970: 13)

'Nugget' Coombs was an eminent Australian public servant and economist who played a key role in the dramatic transformation of the size and composition of the Australian population during the two decades following the end of World War II. His comments above were made at a time when the generally accepted Keynesian economic view argued strongly for government intervention in order to maintain and enhance community prosperity. The contrast between Indigenous values and those of the mainstream economic system described by Coombs continues to resonate thirty years on in an era when the Keynesian paradigm that dominated post-war economic thought has been overwhelmed by the simplistic slogans of economic rationalism. Doubtless, if Coombs were alive today, he would be appalled by the social, ecological and spiritual debris resulting from the behaviour and values associated with the economic rationalist paradigm that currently holds sway over mainstream global, national and local economic thinking.

The past century has seen an exponential increase in the human impact on the natural environment that many people believe to be close to catastrophic. Despite the supposed power of marshalled reasoned argument, impassioned eloquence and often pitifully futile direct action by many of the humans on this planet, the condition of our fragile natural environment continues to deteriorate in terms of its capacity to sustain human life at an alarming rate. With occasional notable exceptions, our sense of shared community continues to erode under the onslaught of ever-evolving new technologies, the emergence of a new social code emphasising individualism and the comprehensive application of market-based economic fundamentalist principles and policies.

The dramatic deterioration in the condition of the ecological and social life support system for humans in the three decades following Dr Coombs's Boyer Lectures gives added urgency to his exhortation in the same lecture series that the broader

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community learn from the wisdom of our indigenous people. Pointing out that the future of the Aboriginal people lies inevitably in association with other Australians, he believed that 'it should be, and with patience and imagination it can be, an association between equals to which they will contribute much that is distinctively Aboriginal and Australian'. (Coombs 1970: 23)

The Kurna people, the original inhabitants of what is now known as the Adelaide Plains, are believed to have one of the oldest living cultures in existence. Scientific estimates of their occupation of these lands range from 50 000 to 120 000 years, spanning a time of dramatic change in climate and landscape, including the glacial peak of two ice ages. Such a vast history of human existence could be contrasted to the mythologies of Christianity, whose Old Testament describes events over the past 6000 years.

Up until 200 years ago, Kurna values, beliefs, behaviour and relationships both with each other and with every feature of the land enabled them to prosper in their material, social and spiritual lives whilst preserving the essential life forms of the natural environment.

In this paper, an attempt is made to respectfully present the Kurna perspective, highlighting the sustainable nature of their lifestyles and the underlying wisdom of their values and beliefs. It will be argued that the ecological, economic and cultural sustainability of the Kurna people has been due to the individual and communal understanding of and commitment to the underlying philosophy of reciprocity with others, the natural environment and the Dreaming. The wisdom of the Kurna will be contrasted to the values and assumptions of modern mainstream economics, which is unable to provide equity, sustainability or enlightenment.

THE IMPORTANCE OF LEARNING FROM THE KAURNA

The Kurna have an ancient, increasingly fragile, culture formed through an essentially oral transmission of knowledge based on living experience that has been seriously disrupted by forced dispossession of the land that is crucial to their spirit.

It is only recently that the indigenous people of Australia have begun to erode the endemic negative stereotype associated with white perceptions of them. The legal fiction of terra nullius provided the broader background to the widespread attempt for more than 200 years to systematically dismantle their languages, cultures and beliefs. The nineteenth-century Social Darwinist theory of 'survival of the fittest' formed the basis of the dispossession as well as the residual resentment towards Aboriginal people held by many non-Aboriginals that persists into modern times.

Modern white education emphasises and values recorded information and the scientific method of knowledge construction. In particular, mainstream economics prides itself on strictly adhering to positivist analysis using hypotheses and

empirical data. Non-random behaviour and relationships are mathematically quantified so that they can be represented and manipulated within theoretical models. Similarly, mathematical probability analysis is applied to the risk of the occurrence of random behaviour and relationships.

Thus, the language, analytical forms and conceptual framework of mainstream economics knowledge differ from the Kurna formation and transmission of knowledge almost to the point of alienation. Nevertheless, there are increasingly popular schools of thought within the broad field of economics, particularly feminist economics and ecological economics, that value and encourage action based upon knowledge beyond reason such as intuition, imagination and emotions.

It is important to be deliberately conscious of the dangers inherent in any form of inter-cultural interpretation as well as to respect the complex cultural patterns associated with the provision of shared knowledge. Nevertheless, the Kurna people living in our community provide us with an invaluable opportunity to learn the background and detail of a culture and lifestyle that managed the natural, social and spiritual environment remarkably well for such a long period of time. It is important that we design and participate in effective forums to facilitate the sharing of this knowledge and wisdom, so that we can devise more effective strategies for dealing with the inevitable ecological, social and spiritual transformation resulting from the excesses of the twentieth century.

THE KAURNA

In 1836, when official permission was given by the British Government to invade the area now known as South Australia, the large tract of the south central section of the recently 'discovered' continent was the home of 54 different language groups of Aboriginal peoples. Each of these groups had their own distinctive language, technology, lifestyle and Dreaming stories.

Kurna territory stretches between what the invaders named as the Mt Lofty Ranges and the St Vincent's Gulf from what is now known as Cape Jervis north to what is now known as Crystal Brook. The environment in which the Kurna people lived before the invasion was rich in natural resources, with an abundance of plant, animal and bird life. There was a strong code of law that governed virtually every aspect of life and they lived an affluent lifestyle, which usually allowed more time to be devoted to religious, ceremonial and cultural activities than was required for food gathering.

At a time when humanitarian principles were being widely advocated in England, it was anticipated that the Aboriginal people of the newly formed colony of South Australia would be treated more humanely than in other parts of Australia. The first annual report of the Colonisation Commissioners to the United Kingdom Parliament in 1836 stated that the Aborigines would be protected 'in the

undisturbed enjoyment of their proprietary right to the soil' (UK Parliament 1836: 8). As well as this, it was proposed that one fifth of every eighty-acre section ceded should 'be resumed as a reserve for the Aborigines, and the remaining four parts, or 64 acres, to remain with the proprietor as his freehold'.

Nevertheless, the preamble to the *South Australian Colonisation Act* of 1834, which regulated the sale of land in the new colony, had declared that South Australia was a waste and unoccupied land so that the Kaurna did not legally exist. Thus the measures proposed by the Colonisation Commissioners to ensure the protection of Aborigines were ignored.

It has been estimated that in 1836 the Kaurna people numbered between three and five hundred. At first, they were courteous and hospitable to their visitors, not realising they had come to stay. Without legal identity because of the doctrine of terra nullius, the Kaurna people were forcibly removed from their land and attempts were made to systematically extinguish their culture. After a number of years they were progressively 'resettled' in 'missions' at Pernindie on the Eyre Peninsula (1850–1894), Point McLeay (1858) and Point Pearce (1868) in other traditional peoples' land, each with different languages, stories and sacred places from that of their natural home.

Their descendants were not permitted to return to Kaurna land until the 1960s, when the civil rights of Aborigines were formally endorsed in a national referendum. Since then, often in the face of local government resistance, they have continued to contribute to our understanding of how best to treat our land and each other.

THE DREAMING

Aboriginal groups throughout Australia have Dreaming stories that describe their origins and explain the formation of the landscape. The Dreaming is central to the existence of traditional people for it determines their values and beliefs and their relationship with every living creature and every feature of the landscape.

Deborah Bird Rose, an American ethnographer who lived with the Yarralin people, suggests that the inherent ethos of the Dreaming regarding human behaviour can be summarised as four basic laws. These laws emphasise balance, response, symmetry and autonomy.

She offers this interpretation of these transcendent rules:

- Balance: A system cannot be life enhancing if it is out of kilter, and each part shares in the responsibility of sustaining itself and balancing others.

- Response: Communication is reciprocal. There is here a moral obligation: to learn, to understand, to pay attention, and to respond.
- Symmetry: In opposing and balancing each other, parts must be equivalent because the purpose is not to 'win' or to dominate, but to block, thereby producing further balance.
- Autonomy: No species, no group, or country is 'boss' for another: each adheres to its own Law. Authority and dependence are necessary within parts, but not between parts. (Rose 1993: 4–5)

The Dreaming stories are a major way of teaching Aboriginal children about the natural world, the spirit world, right and wrong behaviour, and the laws of society. The stories provide examples of sharing, being honest, showing respect for elders, good manners and so on.

Kaurna Dreaming tells the story of an ancient battle in which a great giant, Yurebilla, was slain. His two ears form what is now known as Mt Lofty and Mt Bonython. The giant's fallen body forms the hills running north to Nuriootpa with his outstretched arms reaching the sea at Marino and his head pointing south to Cape Jervis. Looking down from the protective hills, the spirit of Yurebilla is the protector of all life along the plains. Its shape is the physical embodiment of the 'twoness' that is central to Kaurna culture and philosophy. This emphasis on reciprocity and multiplicity covers their relationship to their land, to each other and to their understanding of the mysteries of life. The resulting sense of interconnectedness guides their personal and social behaviour.

RECIPROCITY

The unifying ethos of Kaurna wisdom centred on an understanding of the interlocking web of finely integrated responsibilities of reciprocity as symbolised by the 'twoness' manifested by Yurebilla.

Aboriginal systems of reciprocity embraced not only goods but also people, rituals, and social, political and legal obligations. The associated rights, obligations and responsibilities provided individuals with a guide to their own behaviour as well as predicting likely behaviours when meeting other people.

Kaurna elder, Lewis O'Brien points out:

You've gotta get back to this philosophy. This is what it is all about. The group is far more important than the individual. People have been sold a terrible statement that any individual can do as they like. That's the worst thing that people can do in their lives. It's a very bad philosophy. What are you on about? If you are just on about the survival

of yourself, you're gonna do that and you're gonna die tomorrow, if you think about it. (1995)

ECOLOGICAL CO-OPERATION

This landscape [found by the first Europeans] provided a habitat for animals and plants of great diversity giving a rich repertoire of food and materials for the indigenous inhabitants. Although we have only now begun to realise it, this landscape was not 'natural'. It was, rather, the artefact of Aboriginal land management over tens of thousands of years. (Coombs 1990: 97)

Many people believe that when Europeans first came to Australia, the Aborigines had evolved a society and way of life that was in many ways the most idyllic ever evolved. Historian Geoffrey Blainey makes the claim in *Triumph of the nomads* (1975) that the standard of living of Aboriginal people when Cook landed in 1788 was better than that experienced by many sections of the population of Europe at the time.

Uncle Lewis O'Brien (1999) explains that Aboriginal land management was based on 'assisting nature and not managing it'. He gives the example of wild bush fires, which, then as now, were very destructive. The Aboriginal response was to periodically burn off strategic patches so that, in the event of wild fires, there would always be safe zones for humans and animals.

Coombs (1990) points out three distinguishing aspects of the pattern of Aboriginal land use. Firstly, it was adaptable to the varied physical and climatic character of the Australian continent. Secondly, Aborigines' demands upon the land's resources were modest. They adapted to the seasonal availability of plants and wildlife and there were ritual constraints on the timing and pattern of the use of natural resources. Thirdly, it was effectively sustainable because it was based upon the individual and group acceptance of responsibility—the responsibility to know, to care for and to protect the land with which the Aboriginal group identified.

Aborigines' relationship with the environment and its resources was designed to ensure survival. It was sustainable because, individually and collectively, Aborigines had come to accept a responsibility for the conservation of natural resources and to accept the discipline associated with that responsibility. The acceptance of this responsibility flowed from an understanding of the Dreaming stories and the rituals of reciprocity.

KAURNA WISDOM

Arguably, there are at least six distinctive differences between the Kaurna way of thinking and that of the broader white community. Each of these differences is based on a profound understanding of the 'twoness' symbolised by Yurebilla.

Firstly, the Kaurna believe that humans are physically, emotionally and spiritually intertwined with the land. Kingsley explains:

A person is not simply the offspring of his or her physical parents. Each individual is primarily an incarnation of the land, a spirit being who belongs intimately and specifically to the local geography. (1995: 87)

Each member of the community has their unique 'songline' determined by their genealogy and place of conception. It is the duty of each of the Kaurna people to look after these special places and to keep alive the songs and stories that belong to them.

Secondly, traditional Kaurna people believe that they are responsible for and must contribute to the wellbeing of their community and their land.

Thirdly, traditional Kaurna people emphasise the importance of making decisions by thinking 'twice' about future considerations. That is, they actually engage in the process of considering an issue from a range of possible perspectives and will only proceed with an action when they are convinced that all possible outcomes have been sufficiently addressed.

Fourthly, traditional Kaurna people understand apparent mysteries by simultaneously accepting apparent contradictions as part of life's intrinsic 'twoness'. There is a commitment to the importance of consideration of the theoretical and the practical elements of an issue together.

Fifthly, according to Kaurna beliefs, humans are not expected to know everything. They are expected to seek to achieve excellence with humility in areas of knowledge they choose to learn about. The traditional Kaurna way of learning was to sit, watch, listen and imitate—the responsibilities of reciprocity. The importance of observation, sequencing, memory and predicting the consequences of actions were emphasised as the basis for problem solving.

Finally, as we have seen, life for the Kaurna is composed of mutually reciprocal obligations. As you give, so shall you receive. These distinctive ways of thinking are very different to the beliefs of modern mainstream economics.

MODERN MAINSTREAM ECONOMICS

The Kurna values of reciprocity, responsibility and connection with the land described above provide a stark contrast with the values of mainstream economics. Economics is an area of knowledge about the material world that is less than 300 years old as a formal mode of inquiry and study. It emerged predominantly in Europe in tandem with dramatic changes in production and distribution techniques that required new methods of description, analysis and prediction. In an attempt to make sense of the new market system, economics sought to integrate the insights of the physical and human sciences into a coherent intellectual package to explain, and, as critics have argued, invariably justify, the decision-making process.

Unlike the approach to knowledge of the Kurna people, economics is imbued with a Cartesian approach to knowledge. Economics uses a range of modelling processes in order to simplify the complexities of life sufficiently to make them comprehensible and communicable, at least to other economists. The most common form of modelling, of course, is language, but in economics it is also considered important to use diagrams, charts, mathematical calculations, tables of data and computer-based models to ensure scientific credibility. It is expected that all forms of models should be characterised by assumptions, propositions and conclusions.

The classical economics that developed in the century following the publication of Adam Smith's *Wealth of nations* in 1776 was based on a belief in Say's Law, which is that supply creates its own demand. Thus, as long as the government minimised intervention, full employment would result through the 'clearing' of a complex set of integrated input and output markets at the 'market price'. Economists explained away the human miseries of those times as the results of the 'objective' forces of the marketplace. The resultant laissez faire policy that they advocated involved little more than protection of king and country as well as the provision of regulatory, judicial and penal systems necessary to enforce ownership rights and to protect property.

The resuscitation of this classical view 200 years later is widely termed 'neo-classical economics', although in Australia its more fundamentalist, pro-market version is often referred to as 'economic rationalism'. This paradigm emphasises marginal analysis, individualism and maximisation in decision making. It advocates a minimalist role for government and trusts the marketplace to produce the most efficient outcomes.

In this world view, fully informed economic agents make maximising decisions necessitated by scarcity. The behaviour of individuals, groups and communities with respect to a range of key variables is mathematically quantified so that such behaviour can be represented and manipulated in order to derive 'objective'

conclusions. The ever-present notion of change and random risk is either absorbed into such models through probability analysis or, more usually, assumed away.

The concept of reciprocity is central to Kaurna wisdom, as described above. In contrast, the central tenet of modern mainstream economics, as well as contemporary mainstream culture, is the assumption and often glorification of individualism. The 'rational' economic decision maker is presumed to be motivated by self-interest and achieves 'satisfaction' by the accumulation of items of consumption that can be bought and sold. The obsession with material enrichment associated with economic growth has led to a treatment of the natural world as a catalogue of resources that exist to be exploited.

There is a strong body of opinion that increased consumption does not deliver on its claims. Beyond a certain level, increases in the consumption of goods and services do not seem to lead to increases in personal satisfaction. Galbraith (1984) maintains that there is a 'dependence effect' whereby the desire for goods and services is created by the same process that manufactures the goods, so that net satisfaction has not increased with consumption of those goods. He points to advertising as inducing people to buy goods they never considered they needed or wanted. But the satisfaction of 'unlimited' needs and wants can never be achieved. Continued environmental degradation and worsening global inequality must inevitably result from human behaviour associated with the delusion that the path to contentment lies in the accumulation of more material goods.

Economic rationalism has been a major influence on decision makers in the private and public sectors at all levels. The rhetoric of 'there's no alternative' of British Prime Minister Thatcher and American President Reagan during the 1980s continues to echo through the corridors of power in the western world. As Costanza points out, 'the most insidious form of ignorance is misplaced certainty' (1989: 3). The impact of the dominance of this economic view on policies, decisions and behaviour has led to a dramatic decline in the quality of our natural environment and has seriously eroded the sense of community within much of the western world. It has also led many to question the assumptions, relevance and integrity of an economics that seems unable to foster sustainability, equity or enlightenment.

Paul Hellyer, who was the Deputy Prime Minister of Canada in the Trudeau years of the early 1970s and has maintained a life-long interest in macro-economics, offers this reflection:

True believers in the monetarist, neo-classical brand of fundamentalist economics led us to believe that if we just let the lions out of their cages the world would inevitably become a safer, happier habitat for the rabbits and deer. Two hundred years of economic history demonstrates that it is not so and common sense guarantees it will never be so.

For twenty five years, increasingly, the rewards have gone to the financial economy, the people who play with money, at the expense of the real economy, the people who grow food, sew dresses and build houses. There has been a vast increase in interest income at the expense of earned income. There have been more people out of work and the distribution of income has lost all relevance to real worth. (1999: 211)

The current mainstream view of neo-classical economics fails to explain the existence of or offer solutions to many of the major problems of our times, particularly inequity and unsustainability. The analysis is mechanistic and reductionist in that it reduces comprehensive explanations of complex phenomena to the simplified analysis and description of elements of the phenomena. It assumes that people are motivated by materialism and consumerism. It ignores ecological patterns and constraints and it has meant that the traditional and planned economic mechanisms have been marginalised or ignored. Thus, mainstream economics favours the mathematical certainties associated with mechanistic analysis whereas Kurna people favour a holistic perspective, understanding the importance of individual contributions to community wellbeing and of the Dreaming responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

For a time span that defies our imagination the wisdom of the Kurna people and the other indigenous peoples of Australia have nurtured the spirit of the land in an elaborate, inclusive and complex ritual based on knowledge from the Dreaming and the protocol of reciprocity. As the modern world hurtles blindly into the consumerist void and the inevitable resultant ecological adjustment, the detailed study of the lives and insights of such indigenous cultures as the Kurna must inevitably contribute to the design of an ecologically, socially and culturally sustainable path to our future.

Lewis O'Brien explains:

I think that everyone now are crying out for the spiritual side of life and people are finding it hard to come to terms with the land and yet it's here, it's under your feet, you're on the Red Kangaroo Dreaming here, its Tandanya. White people say it's a nice philosophy, but they don't come to terms with it. You know you've come from the earth, and you know that if you look after it, it will look after you.

I think our people have a wonderful philosophy about that—they took what they needed, they shared with people. That greeting I learnt as a kid says it all; 'Mai yungainjaudjega'—'Come and have something to eat, my friend'. You can say 'Hello' or some little fanciful saying that

doesn't mean anything—it was a proper giving and sharing and I think a far greater philosophy. (1990: 113)

With humility, imagination and respect, the broader community can learn important lessons from our indigenous sisters and brothers on harmonious and culturally satisfying ways of freeing ourselves from the prison of self-indulgent delusion about the nature and impact of our daily lives. This requires, amongst other things, taking seriously the warning of Nugget Coombs of thirty years ago, and re-examining the values that underpin our system. The indigenous people with timeless knowledge and wisdom of the spirit and ecology of the Adelaide Plains of South Australia are the Kaurna. Let us learn to dance with our differences in a reconciled community committed to nurturing the land and its spirit.

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