

Knowledge and Wiradjuri: Who is telling the truth? A Wiradjuri Perspective

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One must question if it is possible to portray Indigenous peoples in a correct light if one should follow the writings of some sociologists, anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians. Much of their respective findings have provided false depictions of peoples, places, languages, cultures, origins and meanings. Wiradjuri peoples for instance have been informed by some historians and others of dubious intent that they never existed as Wiradjuri until someone came along and named them that! The danger here lies in how many contemporary researchers take the writings of those gone before as gospel, and in doing so contribute to the false depiction of Indigenous peoples. This false depiction adds to the knowledge base inherent in studies and research on Indigenous peoples. An unethical and inappropriate knowledge base is a major concern for my peoples, Wiradjuri peoples. There is much confusion in the broader community in regards to whose knowledge is correct and who should be believed. Readers of this paper will have the opportunity in many instances, to decide for themselves what to make of it all. This has been done in a deliberate way. Firstly it provides an opportunity to get an idea of what has been written about Wiradjuri and by whom, albeit briefly. Secondly, readers are given every opportunity to glimpse other perspectives of events and to also understand the thoughts, ideas, and concerns of a Wiradjuri man and whilst I am not a 'Black Dictionary', surely this is an entirely ethical and appropriate approach to take.

Introduction

"Knowledge is everything. It tells us where we came from, who we are, why we are here, what to eat, what to use for medicines, what is woman's business and what is men's business, where we can go and where we are not allowed to venture. Knowledge is about land, law and ceremony, and was given to us by our creator" (Wiradjuri Elder, 2004).

The knowledge that the above Elder speaks of relates to all things. This knowledge was passed down from Elder to young, through countless generations (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002), knowledge that came with creation and the creator himself; Baiame (Grant & Rudder, 2005). This was our education, the environments our classrooms (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002). According to knowledge passed down, Wiradjuri peoples have always been, always existed, and our country and our languages have always belonged to us (Clarke, 2003). We never questioned this knowledge (Broome, 2001) and respected those who gave it to us (Tonkinson 1991). Our knowledge was passed down ethically and appropriately where ethically means 'honestly / truthfully' and appropriately meaning 'the right way'.

As a current PhD student, I am undertaking a number of face-to-face interviews with Wiradjuri peoples in order to ascertain their perspectives on their peoples and cultures. During the interview process, the participants stress time and again that Wiradjuri knowledge has been misinterpreted in so many ways that they themselves live in 'confusion country'. The participants have also stated that in contemporary times one of the major concerns is that non-Wiradjuri people depict Wiradjuri.

It has been my experience as a Wiradjuri Elder, that I am expected by most non-Indigenous people to have an enormous amount of knowledge pertaining to Wiradjuri peoples and or issues, as well as having knowledge about other Indigenous peoples and cultures; I am not a 'black dictionary'; referring to a 'knowledgeable one' according to Tonkinson (1991). I have never been initiated and given secret and sacred knowledge by Elders as defined by Myers (1991) and so in reality I do not have all the knowledge that I should have had by rights of birth; I am culturally poor (Keen, 1994). But knowledge grows when partnerships are formed, and this collective knowledge can be and often is, a very powerful tool (Walsh & Mitchell, 2002).

This paper also highlights how non-Indigenous people have depicted Wiradjuri; how our cultures and ownership of our own history, has been 'taken away' from us through writings that could be considered ambiguous and contradictory. This line of thought includes in part, an examination of what has been written about Wiradjuri peoples and how those writings have contributed to knowledge that has led, and still does, to the misconceptions and stereotyping that has become a part of our (Wiradjuri) daily lives.

It is only in the last few decades that the true pictures of Wiradjuri have come to light and in many instances only because we have put pen to paper (Macdonald, 1994; Keen, 1994). Perhaps it is time for others to let Wiradjuri speak for Wiradjuri. Surely our version of history should be accepted, or at the very least considered... "We want to represent ourselves, and we want to be heard" (Kinoshi, 1998:5).

Discussion

It is a given that major research has been undertaken on Wiradjuri; the literature testifies to this. Some of this research has looked at Wiradjuri from every aspect of their lives (see Read, 1983; White, 1986) others have looked at specific customs or languages only (see Hale, 1846; Mathews, 1897: 1900; Holmer, n.d.) whilst others still, have only paid Wiradjuri a cursory glance (see Gribble, 1884; Heaton, 1879). But there are anomalies in the combined works of people such as these.

On the issue of origin for example, our knowledge is in direct contrast to many non-Indigenous people who saw us as immigrants as suggested by Laidlaw (1990); Rickard (1992); Berndt & Berndt (1999) and Clarke (2003). In David Loewenthal's 'The past is a foreign country', is written that "every feature of the landscape is filled with creatures of their own imagination... The present-day natives are on the whole uninspired preservers of a great and interesting tradition" (Strehlow cited in Loewenthal, 1985:379). One wonders if Strehlow has ever seen a kanga-

roo, emu or goanna; they are not from our imaginations! One must also ask whether Strehlow has seen our sites, our art, our fish traps and been witness to ceremonies; we were always 'inspired' to preserve our cultures and spiritual beliefs.

Bates (cited in McGregor, 1997:128) suggested that we were all cannibals... [That] "human meat was our favourite food" and in so saying was commended for her examination of 'life in the primitive state'.

How does one go about discerning what is right or wrong in relation to writings of this sort? What constitutes knowledge in this area? Who is telling the truth? According to Wikipedia (2005), a rather dubious and dynamic website, Indigenous peoples had no name for themselves pre-invasion. This is a fairly ambiguous suggestion as it can be taken from two different perspectives; that no single clan group had a name for themselves; or that Indigenous peoples had no collective name for themselves. Then there is the statement by Windschuttle (2003) that Wiradjuri did not exist in the 1820's as the term "Wiradjuri" was invented. Windschuttle quotes Tindale (1974:156) in stating that Wiradjuri were one of those tribes whose name was given by white people in the 1890's. If Wiradjuri were not Wiradjuri until the 1890's then who were we?

Certainly Wiradjuri do not follow the same line of thinking as those of Wikipedia, Windschuttle and Tindale. Wesson (2000) in discussing traditional boundaries cites numerous sources in her historical atlas of Indigenous peoples and names (Robinson (1840); Barber (1841); Lane (1859); and Smyth (1878) as examples of authors who have mentioned 'Wiradjuri' prior to the 1890's.

Knowledge that is 'tainted' has impacted upon Wiradjuri in many ways. Firstly it takes away our identity. Secondly, knowledge is directly attributed to 'wealth' (Myers, 1991); we were rich in culture because of that knowledge, but we are now the poorer, and thirdly, 'ownership' as defined by Keen (1994) has been taken from us to such an extent that we are no longer owners of our own histories.

The problem however is not how, but what non-Wiradjuri write about us. An ethnocentric approach such as this according to Ferraro *et al.*, (1994) emanated from the innate belief that their (European) cultures were far better, far superior, and were cultures that were most wanted above those of Indigenous peoples; they were the experts. Ethnocentrism meant that non-Indigenous people looked at Wiradjuri through non-Indigenous eyes, from their own cultural perspectives and did so "with a false sense of superiority" stated Broome (2001:8). However Lampert (2005) suggests that whilst non-Indigenous Australians could be classed as experts in relation to a number of things, they cannot be so when it comes to Indigenous peoples.

Learning white language has provided us with a tool in order to deliver our own histories but if Wiradjuri history was an oral one, and it was and still is to a certain extent, then our history has been written by mostly anthropologists; a "false history" (Walley, 1990:69).

Therein is the heart of the problem. The majority of research undertaken by non-Indigenous people on Indigenous peoples has been tainted simply because it has not been sanctioned by the very peoples themselves. Wiradjuri and by association, other Indigenous peoples, have been presented from the invaders perspectives; "who we were, who we are, and who we could be" (Phillips, 2005:25). They

have not consulted Indigenous peoples before respective findings are presented to the world, with the end result being that Wiradjuri have become stereotyped; that we are a homogenous peoples; all do the same thing, carry out ceremony the same way, eat the same foods, have the same spiritual beliefs as other Indigenous peoples as suggested by the Australian Information Service (1979).

The thoughts of an anthropologist add to the confusion that exists in relation to the issue of 'knowledge'. Maddock (1983: ix) inform readers that "Anthropology is important because it is the *main* (emphasis added) source of knowledge about traditional Aboriginal society, *including* (emphasis added) the nature of relations to land". There are a number of things wrong with this statement. Maddock does not give credence to Indigenous peoples; their respective levels of knowledge are not considered. In using the words "traditional Aboriginal society", Maddock does not take into account the diversity of Indigenous peoples and infers that we are homogenous, but then states that there are "cultures" (:3).

Maddock goes further and confuses even more. He states that he began research in the Northern Territory in 1964 among "traditionally oriented Aborigines"... [That] "they knew a great deal about their ancestral culture". Readers could take this statement as suggesting that Indigenous peoples that lived elsewhere were not "traditionally oriented" or that they had no knowledge of culture.

'Many past writers or observers of Wiradjuri history fail to advise that knowledge is not distributed equally among clans or communities, that appropriate ceremony had to be undertaken in order to acquire knowledge, as highlighted earlier (ATSIC, 1999); and that, if an informant has not undertaken such, then information passed on may well be corrupted'. Talking to *any* Indigenous person about Indigenous issues may well provide an answer to a question, but the information may be incorrect and if used, can be the catalyst for additional stereotyping or misconceptions.

Interviews conducted during my PhD research highlight the need for Elders to ensure that knowledge is passed on honestly; ethically (in the right manner); appropriately (with the right peoples); and to ensure that the knowledge is correct. The participants all agree with Chalmers (2005:163) that "only Indigenous peoples know who they are". Chalmers has suggested that Indigenous peoples must be allowed to "represent themselves in such a way that does not restrict or limit how they wish to represent themselves". Wherever and whenever possible the teachers of history must be those who have lived it, or at the very least be "written by and be under the control of Aboriginal people" (Keen, 1994:21). In order to reduce misconceptions and stereotyping, this I believe, must emanate from perspectives that are inclusive of country; Wiradjuri, Walpiri, Gamilaroi, Yorta Yorta etc.

One only has to look at the issue of 'culture' to see how confusing things can be. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (cited in Voget, 1975:383) report that "Between 1903 and 1916, six definitions appeared – two by sociologists, two by a chemist, and two by an anthropologist". Otterbein (1972: 2) suggested that "the use of the term culture to refer to both a group of people and to their way of life entered the vocabulary of anthropologists after 1900". Voget (1975) had written that approximately 157 definitions of culture existed between the years 1940 and 1950. Regardless of who first initiated the term, White (1968) puts it into perspective when

stating that there aren't too many people that would need approximately three hundred definitions of the meaning of culture. Three hundred!!! Readers can be left to wonder at the brilliance of the scientific mind!

Whilst this paper has highlighted, albeit briefly, some areas of research that have impacted upon Wiradjuri, and here I write of the literature, it is important however that we look at what has been written and classed as 'knowledge', as resources that should not be thrown out with the garbage. Each of these 'tells' a different story and whilst each may add to 'confusion country' they can be a very powerful educational tool, now and in the future. The writings of Maddock (1983) for example can be utilised to highlight how 'tainted' thoughts have permeated Indigenous history.

This must be done however with the thoughts of a Wiradjuri Elder in mind:

"We must not burn the books... [We] need to utilise these resources, these 'offerings of knowledge'... [We] need to utilise them in an appropriate manner and in direct consultation with those who may have the true knowledge; Indigenous peoples" (Wiradjuri Elder, 2004).

The formation of partnerships, as alluded to earlier in this paper, infers partnerships between Wiradjuri and non-Indigenous people. Whilst this may be a giant step in the right direction as suggested by Davies (cited in Baker *et al.*, 2001; Liddle (2001) other partnerships must also be forthcoming. Wiradjuri peoples, especially the Elders, need to work in partnership with each other. In this way their collective knowledge can become a 'pool' whereby those who would research and study Wiradjuri, and by association other Indigenous peoples, could cross-reference the written words of the past with the oral history of those living in the present and provide awareness among the broader community (Lands, 1990).

It is not hard to ascertain from the literature that in the majority of times, the opinions of the sociologist, anthropologist, archaeologist and other historians differed; and differed greatly and often. The problem with the historical record is that in the context of this paper, it is corrupted. There are only a few researchers that identify as their primary resource; the peoples themselves, others rely on the written word of their peers and other writers for information as suggested by Shaw (1992), and this is also cause for concern. The writings of others may well be as corrupted as their own!

The impacts to Wiradjuri via corrupted writings are many. There is the obvious of course. Those who are not Wiradjuri take the words of these people as gospel; that their words are correct in every instance, therefore that is what has happened; that is what Wiradjuri peoples are and do. The danger in this can be found in those who utilise the resources in an unethical (in the wrong way) and inappropriate (with the wrong peoples) manner in the education of others. Those who do this are teaching about Wiradjuri or any other Indigenous peoples, in such a way as to often aid and abet the misconceptions and the stereotyping that seems to go hand-in-hand when any issue Indigenous is taught, debated and/or argued.

The way in which history has been written has taken ownership or custodianship away from Wiradjuri, and by association, other Indigenous peoples. Changes are now happening however. Attwood's (1996) comments that we are 'reclaiming

our right to provide our own perspectives of history by claiming the right of ownership and custodianship of those histories' are a timely reminder that our histories belong to no other than us...we are willing to share our knowledge, but we are it's keepers.

Conclusion

It is my belief that the history that belongs to Wiradjuri be returned to Wiradjuri; we are the rightful custodians of knowledge that belongs to us and is ours by right of birth. Those who have written about us have not spoken with us; they have no real understanding of how we feel, what our thoughts, ideas and concerns are. It is my belief that it does not take courage to write, but it does take courage to write the truth. You see, the truth my friends, is where our knowledge and history lies.

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