



This is the word of the present

Looking at the Aboriginal community today, it's impossible to define it. There is no consistency, no common beliefs; everything seems to be arbitrary, varying from one region to another, from tribe to tribe, from one person to another. Even members of the same clan can hardly agree on anything. When you put the same question to ten different Aborigines even in the same township, you get ten different answers, each claiming their answer is the truth and it's their Law, as they got it directly from their father, or uncle, or the clan's wise man.

In even a brief interaction with local Aborigines and Aboriginal groups, one cannot fail to notice the bitterness, discord, or downright hostility among them, and all those annoying, tiresome contradictions.

"Has anything changed since then, since the '70s, in the last 30 or 40 years, has anything improved?" I asked Goomblar.

"Nah."

"At least in the last year, since Sorry Day?"

“No. That meant nothing, doesn’t mean anything.”

When he talks about the Aboriginal community in the Blue Mountains, Goomblar turns into an unhappy man. “They hate me,” he says. “I’ve been here for 17 years and my people have given me nothing but grief.”

“Why is that?” I prompt him gently, knowing it must be difficult to criticise your own people, to an outsider, and to a woman.

“I’m not sure,” he says. “I’ve been playing the didge at Echo Point for the last 15 years, day in day out, making a living, feeding the family. And my people don’t seem to like that, me working, ha, ha, that must be ‘against the Law’. It seems that the new Aboriginal tradition is to sit around getting money for doing nothing, living on welfare. The Government is stupid, they think handouts will motivate people to get off their bums and get some education, some skills, get working. Fat chance, why would they, they’ve never had it so good... Like in those remote areas, they’ve never seen any money, and suddenly they are getting a few hundred a week, without lifting a finger, how can that motivate them to better themselves? Why would they go and work? They’ll try to sell you some story of working being a whitefellas’ trap to enslave us again, and some silly theory that we want to be free, roaming through the woods or something, in direct contact with our creator. Like having a job and taking responsibility is ‘unnatural’. I am proud I don’t depend on Government handouts.

“But that’s caused me a lot of trouble. I’m sure you’ve heard the nasty comments; they’ve said it to my face, like I’m some blow-in playing the didge at the Three Sisters, that’s a sacred place and I’m breaking ‘the Law’. I’m from Queensland, and a Wakka Wakka man, I’m not a local, and they begrudge me my living here, and working here, like I’m a wog, ain’t that a laugh. Just show me someone who is not a blow-in. Most of these Aborigines you meet in the Mountains

have moved here from somewhere else, the Central Desert or Northern New South Wales, or Sydney.

“They tried to stop me, but I got permission from the Council, to play at Echo Point. Go and jump for all I care, I said, perhaps from those white cliffs, yeah, that was nasty... Since they couldn’t stop me, they accused me of not ‘following protocol’, like I’m shaming the sacred tradition of playing the didge, it should be only used within our Aboriginal community, for ceremonial purposes, not to entertain tourists. I let the tourists take pictures with me, they like having a photo with a ‘wild-looking Aborigine’, they hug me and I hug them back and some people use that against me, like shock horror, he is entertaining those who oppressed us for centuries.

“Another thing that bothers me is all those lies. My people—or I shouldn’t say ‘my people’, that would upset them too—you see, they get upset over anything, but they have lost connection with their own tribe’s tradition. Every tribe had its own customs, its own protocol, but most of that has been forgotten, the magic is lost. But if you ask them about it, they’d rather pretend it’s some deep secret, which they cannot tell you; you are not ‘initiated’, as if there is some deep wisdom they cannot share with an outsider. Like every person has their own ‘dream’ which must not be shared. That’s like if you said that the signs of the Zodiac are something deeply spiritual not to be shared with anyone, like if you are a Taurus, or a Leo, or a Sag, and say ohhuuuuuuuu, that’s my dreaming, cannot tell you. Or in the Christian tradition, I know because I am a Christian myself, my Christian name is Paul James, and as Christian children are often given the name of a patron saint, to think of or pray to as their protector or a guide, that’s similar, an Aboriginal kid is given a totem, a turtle or a lizard or a kangaroo to think of to develop their imagination and intuitive side.

“I often argue with my mob. To my kids I say if you want

to be a good person, be responsible, get education, stop waiting for someone to organise your life for you, sit up and pay attention, take initiative, work, *then* you'll get respect."

"Like you?" I asked, cheekily.

"Ha, ha, you got me. Like me. Yeah, I'm a poor example of hard work being rewarded. It has been rewarding, though, in terms of me being able to look after my family, having financial independence; but in terms of acknowledgment and respect, you are right, there is not much to show."

"The general impression is that the Aborigines are pretty sad folk, sort of depressed; their general disposition doesn't seem to be what one would call upbeat and happy and light-hearted, more heavy and depressed."

"Perhaps you are right. Now you've reminded me of the other day, I was playing at Echo Point, and there was a little girl, she said to her mother: Mummy, look at his sad eyes. Sad eyes, that's what she said, I don't know why. But if we seem to be sad people, how wouldn't we be, so many things lost, being robbed of everything, our land, our culture, our basic human rights, ain't that sad. Once, a person said: 'Do you know what it's like to live in your own country and be black?' That's a powerful question, it's hard to be living here in this country and be black. And you know what's even harder than being black in your own country? Having a disability and being black. And what's harder than being disabled and black? Being fair, disabled and black."

"What does that mean?"

"Being fair, fair-skinned, light-skinned. That's the worst. If you are Aboriginal, but don't look it, if you've got fair skin people are gonna knock you down claiming you are not black, you just want to take advantage of those new programs the Government is running these days so as to look like they are doing something for us."

"Well, Goomblar, there is something even worse, you know what?"

“Probably being dead.”

“Being fair, with a disability, black, and a woman.”

Goomblar laughed a mirthless laugh. “Fair enough, that would be the worst. Women too had a long struggle to become recognised as human beings, ha, ha. But, I’ve been all around the world, like in 25 or 27 countries, and still, Australia is the best... I’d stay there in some countries for months, got to know them well. The one I really liked was Hungary, I love Hungary, I’ve got a special spot in my heart for Hungarians, Croatians too, I’d say; probably for those countries where people were oppressed and had the land taken from them, and women in those countries probably have even harder lives than Aboriginal women here. Being in Central Europe, everyone wanted to take a bit of their land. But perhaps I sort of identified or empathised with Hungarians the most. During the ‘60s they had a really hard time, and Aboriginal people here had a really hard time in the ‘60s too. I know that a lot of other countries had it rough too, like yours, Croatia, and Bosnia too, with all that ethnic cleansing. Even if everyone here now seems to focus on Aboriginal people having a hard time, but at the same time everyone forgets how much other countries suffered, how their people suffer. What about the Croats, were they upset about no-one paying any attention to their suffering?”

“Well, everyone handles it differently... If we try to sum up the collective psyche of a nation in one word, for example one might say that Bosnians are sort of blasé, nothing gets to them, even in the midst of tragedy they seem to keep their cool, take it in their stride. Or that the Croats as a nation got bitter, or resentful, of all that’s happened to them over centuries. Cheerless people, who cannot let go of the past.”

“And they have the right to feel that way, seeing what happened. But what I’m trying to say, we, the Aboriginal people, we have suffered, but almost everyone in the world has suffered as well. Now, we know what’s been done, we

know it's happened, but let's get on, let's fix it, making sure it's never ever gonna happen again."

"So even though you acknowledge there is some deep sadness in the psyche of Aboriginal people, due to all the injustice over the last couple of centuries, your attitude is still reconciliatory, when you say let's get on and concentrate on the Now."

"Yes, we should all concentrate on the Now. And look after the kids, educate them, now I'm not talking about Aboriginal kids but kids generally."

"How would you educate white kids?"

"About what happened to Aboriginal people?"

"And about working together today. How would they connect with each other?"

"It used to be only black people and white people, who didn't want to know about each other. But now we have so many different cultures here. The first thing for every culture would be to fix themselves up and *then* connect with others, rather than each one carrying on about their own problems.

"I have to admit, though, we are not so good at setting an example. Aboriginal people are unable to solve their own problems. Here in the Blue Mountains, there are a lot of damaged people. There are a lot of people here who were taken away, from that 'stolen generation' as the Government likes to call us. They come up with cute little slogans like that 'Close the Gap' program, if you've heard of that. Here, we have an organisation in Lawson, called Link-Up. It's funded by the Federal Government, to find Aboriginal people's parents. They search for the family, and once they find them they pay them something like 40 thousand dollars.

"But some things never change. The labels change, things stay the same. In Brisbane, early '80s, I was travelling with my grandmother and we were thrown off a bus, we were told get out and let the white people get on the bus. I didn't argue, but my grandmother did. She said I'm older than

them, the guy said I don't care, you have to get out, *vacate* your seat. Chucked us out. She said no, he said get off my bus. They argued, and in the end we were thrown out. Or, should I say, we were 'forcibly removed'.

"Just to show how things never change... the last time I was flying to Germany, three or four years ago, the plane was fully booked out, but people with seats beside me didn't want to sit next to me, requested the crew to move them, find them another seat."

"Did the crew apologise to you?"

"No. But the good thing about that was that everybody on the plane was travelling like this" —sits up straight with his arms tightly together— "and I was like this" —spreading himself sideways— "with three seats to myself, that was the good thing."

"Ha, always looking on the bright side."

"At the time I was really pissed off, but I thought that's how it is, cannot change it. I can get resentful, for a moment, if I allow myself to, but why would I, it's better to make the most of it and have a comfortable ride, with three seats to myself. I slept all the way to Frankfurt."

"Isn't that strange, you play at Echo Point and everybody loves you, people are all around you, everybody wanting to have a picture with you, but when you are out of that context, when you go to the city, to the country, to another country, people treat you like that."

"They don't treat me like that all the time. But there are cases, like last time in Canada, I went to buy some clothes for my kids, and the guy in a shop in Vancouver actually asked me to leave his shop."

"Why?"

"He didn't give an explanation, just didn't want me in his shop. I said why? He said I don't want you in my shop. I was buying some jumpers and clothes for the kids, doing some last minute shopping, and the shopkeeper, a Greek guy I

think, he said it just like that: 'Out you go, I don't want you in my shop.' I went next door and bought something like six hundred dollars worth of clothes.

"Today, when I get on a train in Sydney, in peak hour, you know how trains are packed, but I always have a whole row of seats to myself... with people standing, but I have the seat, you know how three or four people usually fit on a benchseat... There you go, that's how it is, even today."

"Goomblar, what can I say, you are one scary man!"

"Well, you can laugh, but it's not a joke, I know I'm scary. The only people who would sit next to me on the train are alcoholics or lunatics. Yes, perhaps you are right, I am a scary man, but that doesn't happen only to me, it happens to everyone, every Aboriginal person."

"Yes, the general public seem to be uneasy around Aboriginal people. I don't know what it is, is it the media, but the majority of Australians are scared of Aborigines.

"People are usually scared of the unknown. Not knowing about you, being uneducated, could be one reason."

"Are *you* scared of me?"

"Hmmm, let me think about it, ha, ha, I'll get back to you..."

"Even if you were, at the sight of me, you wouldn't give in to that, would you? You can see beyond the surface, when I play for you—you close your eyes and I know you can really hear me..."

"But what you say is very true; most people are scared of the unknown."

"When we talk," I said, "what you say often confirms what I either felt or suspected or realised, reaffirms what I know. I keep coming across the same things, ignorance and prejudice and fear.

"With things being as they are, I want to ask you how can I help? With this book, what can I do to help in changing that perception, especially that irrational fear?"

“How can you help?” Goomblar fell silent, kept smoking, looking at me, thinking, for a long time.

I waited.

He is a proud man, belongs to a proud people, perhaps the notion of ‘help’ makes him uncomfortable.

“Well,” he finally said, “What’s been hurting us most is that the truth was untold for so long. What can you do? How can you help? Just tell the truth.”