
From 1910 until 1970, the Australian government supported a program designed to assimilate the Aborigine into Australian culture. Thousands of Aborigine children were taken from their parents and placed in government sanctioned orphanages or adopted by white families. According to many of these children, who call themselves the "stolen ones," total destruction of the Aborigine culture was the goal of the Australian assimilation program. The following passage was written by an Aborigine woman who was taken from her family as a small child. The reading supplements information about minority treatment found in Chapter 9: Inequalities of Race and Ethnicity.

At least a tenth of Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families from 1910 to 1970. Tjalaminu Mia, taken when she was ten, demands that Australians treat these festering wounds.

Ironically, I am the offspring of two parents—one Aboriginal and the other non-Aboriginal—who both experienced removal and institutionalization for different reasons.

My father was born in England, where he was placed in the care of a Dr. Barnardos Orphanage. When he was ten years old, he was shipped out to Western Australia to the Fairbridge Children's Farm. My mother and her sister, meanwhile, were taken away from my grandparents and placed in the care of the Catholic nuns at the Home of The Good Shepherd, where they were strongly encouraged to take up the Christian faith and become nuns.

The pattern was repeated in my own childhood. In 1962, at ten years of age, along with my six brothers and sisters, I was taken from my parents and extended family and placed in Sister Kate's Children's Home. There were about 12 cottages in the grounds of the Home and families were broken up and put into separate ones. My brothers and sisters and I were scattered between at least four of them. It was terrible, as we weren't used to being apart. The shock of going from the richness of family life to this isolated, lonely and alien environment was almost more than I could

bear. There was no sense of family, affection or personal attention. This made it very difficult for me to relate to people later in life.

It was only after we had all grown up and were able to talk with Mum about some of the things that had happened to us that we began to understand on a deeper level the terrible manipulation. This manipulation was designed to break down the strong bonding that existed in most Aboriginal families. They wanted us to think our families were not interested in us, so that we would leave our heritage behind and take our place in "white" society. This experience made all of us confused, hurt and insecure for a very long time. But slowly, things have turned around for us, though only after a traumatic road travelled to adulthood, maturity and for some of us—happiness and inner peace.

In hindsight, I can see all the negative ways in which institutionalization damaged the lives of my brothers, sisters and me and how it made it hard for us to reconcile with our mother and each other as a family. Bringing Them Home, the recent report of the National Inquiry into the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children were separated from their families, records this grief and unresolved trauma suffered by successive generations of people—which has in turn resulted in violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, suicide, crime, family breakdown and widespread health problems.

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The scale of this crime, and the resulting trauma and legacy, by today's standards fits the United Nations' established conditions of genocide. Aboriginal activist Mick Dadson explains: "Genocide is not just the physical destruction of a people—and Australia signed the Genocide Convention—but genocide includes the forced removal of children from one group to another group. And the best outcome, according to the authorities, depended on their being de-Aboriginalized, if you like, and made into white fellas. That became official national policy in I think 1937, and it was the official policy in some jurisdictions up until the mid-1980s."

However well-intentioned, religious and committed those people were, it doesn't detract from the fact that a terrible crime was committed against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and their families. We were caught up in a system not of our making, and those good-hearted and well-intentioned people, who unwittingly supported those policies and the process of removal, helped to denigrate and destroy Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander life.

The spirit of future reconciliation, which leads towards a united Australia, starts with understanding and accepting the history of this relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the wider community. We continue to fight patriotically for the protection and well-being of the land, sea and the freedom of our people in various ways.

For thousands of years, traditional ownership and custodianship has established a

caretaker relationship with the land that centres on customs and the "Dreaming". The Dreaming encompasses the past, the present and the future, reinforcing the culture and land as a continuum—highly valued and affirmed for future generations.

From the time of European invasion, indigenous people were forced off their land—dispossessed—which had devastating effects on them. Despite this, we still remain deeply connected to our country (our place of origin) with strong spiritual beliefs and a deep sense of custodial responsibility to land, tradition and each other.

In a few instances this is being sustained in history-making cases via the High Court and Parliament—the High Court ruling on the Mabo case pressured the Federal Government to make laws on Native Title which took effect in 1994. Since then, there have been other rights acknowledged and given back to the people, as with the Wik people of northern Queensland and now, following a recent court ruling, with the Miriwung Gajerrong people in the far north-west of Western Australia.

If true reconciliation is to permeate throughout society, then non-indigenous Australians must cultivate a deeper understanding of the extreme effects of removing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island peoples from their land and family. The nation as a whole must take responsibility before healing can occur.

Tjalaminu Mia, et al., "The Stolen Ones," *New Internationalist*, Issue 311 (April 1999), pp. 20-22.



THE STOLEN ONES

DIRECTIONS: Using information from the reading, answer the following questions.

1. Why did the Australian government adopt a policy that destroyed Aborigine family bonds? What did the Australian government hope to gain from the assimilation policy?

2. What were the long term effects of the assimilation policy on the Aborigine children? Do you think the adult "stolen ones" have the right to be angry with the Australian government?

3. The author of the article describes the Australian assimilation policy as genocide. Do you agree with this assumption? Why or why not?
