

***FILLING THE ANOMIE VACUUM***

**By John M Wenitong**

**Abstract**

For many years Australians have experimented with social welfare and educational programs designed to progress disadvantaged indigenous to an equitable level with mainstream citizens. This presentation examines a lack of racial and historical pride as a major cause of social issues among indigenous people and maintains that without a foundation, the various often well-meaning programs have little hope of success. The foundations of this hypothesis are based on twenty years of practical work across our sacred lands. In education, social welfare and via an innovative program aimed at building support structures for academically talented youth from remote communities. Youth currently on scholarships at high achieving 'partner' boarding schools in mainstream urban areas of Queensland. The presentation scrutinizes traditional culture, relevant leadership role models and argues that these essential foundations have been buried beneath the weight of a push to drag indigenous Australians into the 20<sup>th</sup> century with no regard to delineating the sense of anomie that has interrupted the natural adaptability of indigenous Australians.

At the beginning of the end was *the* word, and the word begat from the all-powerful pale invader gods. This word was forcefully injected and intellectually accepted by the Australian Aboriginal people as truth and a new reality. This *truth*, used in conjunction with absolute power, quickly began to undermine at least, 30- 50,000 years of living with pride and dignity and began a downward spiral of self-doubt and initial belief in the powerlessness and worthlessness of all known culture, law and religion. Thus, in following Nature's principle that there cannot be a vacuum, a single, immensely powerful word evolved to fill the void and in doing so, gained a destructive power over many indigenous people since non-indigenous settlement: that word is *shame*.

Why do many Aboriginal Australians remote and urban, adult and youth, seem to lack energy, with no real goals or enthusiasm for 'betterment' as Indigenous Australia purportedly steps with mainstream Australia into the contemporary world? Why so many remote community suicides? Where are our future leaders? Many indigenous and non-indigenous in Australia, having worked for many years for, and in the area of indigenous leadership and advancement has repeatedly asked these questions.

We know that Aboriginal people are not handicapped by an 'intelligence impairment', as was once mistakenly thought by the colonially minded invaders (Banner, www, 2005, p.20-28). We now have professional Aboriginal people in almost all areas of professional Australian society: including medical doctors, nurses, social workers, psychologists, lawyers, politicians, teachers, engineers, tradespersons, authors, media, multi-media professionals, intellectuals and yet, we also have documented and ostensibly, almost insurmountable social problems in many urban and remote indigenous communities throughout Australia.

During my own career as an indigenous health worker, alcohol and drug counselor, media trainer, university Lecturer, youth worker, community development adviser and scholarship administrator, I have examined issues that I and other indigenous

professionals attacked with naïve gusto, albeit with some individual success, in attempting to advance indigenous people in diverse areas of modern Australia's societal life. However, one particular issue kept raising its head and would not allow a delineation that we could examine and find solutions for. My first real understanding that this issue was a foundation and crisis area in indigenous advancement, came when I determined to deconstruct the use of a very common word, used regularly in indigenous communities in both urban and remote areas.

That word is *Shame*: of which, the generic English dictionary definition is: *1: a negative emotion that combines feelings of dishonor, unworthiness, and embarrassment; 2: the capacity or tendency to feel shame; 3: a state of disgrace or dishonor*. From my own point of view (and with the benefit of hindsight), I could never understand what my people - that had survived around 50,000 years in one of the harshest environments in the world: the last 'ice-age', invasion, loss of country, slavery and attempted genocide - had to be ashamed about (Lippmann, 1996, p.9-10). It occurs to me that any people who could survive this, should be extremely proud to still exist and even prouder to have emerged as a minority population, albeit alienated in their own land. However, I and many other articulate and educated indigenous Australians have used the word 'shame' in a self-derogatory sense in every second sentence since I was a child. "Oh! But biggest shame eh!" we repeated daily.

In examining the concept of shame in indigenous life through inquiring and working with traditional, semi-traditional, urban and community elders, leaders, parents, students, professionals and youth, I found that the frequent utilization of the word shame was not especially from being black nor being different. Neither is it from a lack of English literacy and numeracy competency, or our easy acceptance of the worst of the Western social habits, like drug and child abuse and gambling. It is from what is best described by the French sociologist Durkheim as a sense of "...anomie, in which old values have lost their meaning and new values have not been accepted to take their place. People in this

state appear to lack a sense of purpose and meaning to life,” (cited in Edwards, 1996, p110).

I will now ask you to consider the rationale behind Aboriginal Australians feeling this sense of anomie that could lead to such a deep sense of shame: simply for being an Aborigine. Imagine if you would, a race that had an ancient well-worked, structured survival-successful culture: formed over 50,000 years or more. A race, whose beliefs were absolute. Whose oral history supported that certainty and, who possessed a complete and utter confidence in their common strength and ability to survive anything their world could throw at them. This, coupled with an historically based self-assurance that this lifestyle would carry on for ever (Edwards, 1996, p.12-21). Now, walk for a moment in the ‘shoes’ of an Aboriginal child; post ‘settlement’. Their parents, elders, family and extended clan heroes were conquered, beaten, enslaved, killed, raped and treated as non-human. Their people, now fast becoming a powerless minority in their own land, had those foundations of personal confidence such as traditions, beliefs and life- narrative shattered (Kidd, 1997, p.146-232).

I would argue this loss of racial pride, felt keenly by an alienated and conquered generation, in itself would cause that sense of anomie to creep in to every Aborigine growing up in such a differing society from the known ancestral traditions. However, the very core of Aboriginal life, the Dreaming or foundation of the accepted common social religion was also degraded and *outlawed*. Aboriginal Australians were told that the religion they had believed in and respected since the days of creation (The Dreamtime), was not only heathen, but immoral! After 50,000 years of unquestioning belief and faith, Aboriginal people were now expected to accept a 2000-year-old ‘foreign’ religion, as the only *true* spiritual way for mankind (Rose, 1996, p.5). This aspect of colonization alone would no doubt cause a fundamental loss of race confidence, and in doing so, support that sense of anomie beginning to open the vacuum created by the loss of traditional values, which Aboriginal Australians were forced to leave behind.

And if that was not enough to crush the ancient spirit of a people, an Aboriginal child now saw with their own eyes: parents and adult family members working in menial and laboring positions in the new society, often for less or no wages; just to supplement their daily provisions for survival (Kidd, 1997, p.229-236). The message was loud and clear: Aborigines are not to be trusted. They are not *able*, nor privileged to be, or become equal partners in the unfamiliar mores and mechanisms of the new society. The sense of anomie grows and is strengthened by the strict punishable practicalities of life under the pale race of conquerors. The anomie *vacuum* sucks all optimism and any hope into its hungry maw and gives back only *shame* at being *born* inferior. Adding to the shame of being perceived as part of a primitive, uncivilized and unproductive people (Tench, W., accessed in <http://www.cityofsydney.nsw.gov.au/barani/themes/theme2.htm>, 2005, p.187), we have the English mainstream ethnocentric attitude to physical characteristics. Aboriginal Australians had no chance to compete equally in this area, as their common physical attributes were fashioned by practical adaptation over many centuries in an often cruel, hot and harsh land.

Aborigines were often perceived as the opposite of the mainstream European/English ideal in physical characteristics (Worgan, cited in Banner, www, 2005, p.26). Even in contemporary society in Australia today, you will not see a full-blood Aborigine advertising a commercial product on television, unless they are advertising *Australia* for an overseas audience that expect to see such a one. Put simply, the mainstream 'desirable' (beautiful) people of Australia's 20<sup>th</sup> Century *do not* have black skin, skinny legs, big flat noses and brows that jut out from the forehead, reminiscent of the stereotypical 'caveman' archetype. Thus, we can easily distinguish an argument for such a sense of anomie being present in contemporary Aboriginal people's lives, that are after all, only a few generations away from their first-contact indigenous kindred and, why even our contemporary selves put the word *shame* forward as part of our characteristic Aboriginality.

What we can do to fill the anomie vacuum and create space and a spiritual and practical foundation for much needed future leaders to lead from, is to examine the denigration of our traditional culture and consider the possibility that most, if not all of that ‘thought’ was *untrue*: that many colonial minded English’ historians were blinded by the ‘white is right’ (at any cost to the ‘othered’), and ‘different equals inferior’ Social Darwinist mentality that pervaded the English societal philosophical mindset of the time (Edwards, 1996, p.viii).

When we examine traditional (pre-contact) Aboriginal life from what we know today, we can perceive a co-existent national life-style that many European nations of the time, had no idea, could and did exist for many, many centuries in this large, diverse country and people. A mostly auto-adaptive and congruent group of people that maintained a spiritually ‘high’ religion, which involved ethics and morals that the contemporary Western world should be in awe of today (Edwards, 1996, p.55-64). This base of religious belief was the central point of a society that survived an ice age, mega-fauna, fifty year droughts and famine: and yet allowed different tribes in the society, the freedom of practical implementation of religion to live it as they chose. There are no traditional oral, or post-contact English written records the author is aware of, that tell of any tribe trying to make another tribe take up their particular localized beliefs, or take another’s land for profit or gain: converse to most of the smaller countries and societies in Europe in those very times.

When viewed from this perspective, it can be safe and advantageous in filling the anomie vacuum to ask as indigenous Australians: who were the real barbarians of that first contact? Many intelligent indigenous people have expressed total bewilderment at being perceived as primitive, once England and Europe’s bloody history of superstition, greed and power/land grabbing is exposed via study. Although a diminutive discussion point in working with indigenous people in attempting to begin to fill the anomie void and assemble a base for Aboriginal Australians to build that previously strong group and

personal confidence, a distinct if small change in attitude has been noted in indigenous groups and individuals, relearning their traditional history: in conjunction with Europe's history on the same timeline.

Examining traditional Aboriginal religion can also help to fill the anomie vacuum, as many Aboriginal and non-indigenous Australians still do not appreciate that many aspects of traditional religion in Aboriginal society, incorporated many of the values that Christianity and other major eminent religions promote as their basic tenets. David Unaipon, one of a few mainstream-famous Aboriginal Australians from the turn of the century, saw that his people's customs, laws, stories and religious beliefs were being lost, and to counter this, he went out among the surviving tribes in Western and South Australia and documented many oral narratives that would have been otherwise lost. Below are some of his views on Aboriginal religion, in comparison to other global religions and, translations of the tenets of an Aboriginal religion that give testimony to the falsehood that all Aboriginal religion was 'heathen' in any sense whatsoever:

Wonderful is the soul of man. A capacity for the Great Spirit of the Eternal God. Go back into those ancient civilizations and review the wonders. Those sensational discoveries in the valley of the Nile or in the jungles of Indo-China, or let your mind be carried away to far-off Peru or Yucatan, or think of the grandeur that once was Rome's, the glories that once belonged to Greece. Amongst these ruins are monuments and fragments of magnificent temples erected to their gods. These are evidences that go to prove that man is a worshipping creature irrespective of color, language, or climate. The only difference is, as a nation's conception of the Great Spirit, so is their form of worship (Unaipon, D., cited in Muecke and Shoemaker, 2001).

It is worthwhile remembering here that while Unaipon was writing so eloquently and with such spiritual passion, many fellow Aborigines were being used as non-human slaves and having forms of genocide practiced against them in various other parts of Australia. Unaipon goes on to speak of the differing ways of worship in different lands and of grand buildings, monuments and Cathedrals worldwide. Of his people's religion he tells:

Not so with the Aborigines of Australia. We build no place of worship, neither do we erect altars for the offering of sacrifice, but, notwithstanding this lack of religious ceremonies, we believe in a Great Spirit and the Son of the Great Spirit. There arose among the Aborigines a great teacher, Narroondarie; he was an elect of the Great Spirit. And he spoke to our forefathers thus: 'Children, there is a Great Spirit above whose dwelling-place is Wyerriewarr. It is His will that you should know Him as Hyarrinumb.

I am the Whole Spirit and ye are part of the whole, I am Your Provider and Protector. It has been my pleasure to give you the privilege to sojourn awhile in the flesh state to fulfill my great plan. Remember (porun) children (nukone illawin) your life is like unto a day and during this short period on earth you are to educate yourself by your conduct to yourself as a part of myself and your conduct to others, with the knowledge that they are part of myself.

Live as children of your Great Father. Nol kal undutch me wee (control your appetites and desires). Remember never allow yourself to become slave to your appetite or desire, never allow your mind to suffer pain or fear, lest you become selfish, and



selfishness causes misery to yourself, your wife and children and relations, and those with whom you come into contact.

Selfishness is not of the Great Spirit. Cultivate everything good, moderation in food and pleasure, be generous to others, develop a healthy state of mind and body. Body and mind governed by good and pure morals with kindness for others, remembering that they are a part of that Great Spirit from whence you came...

(Unaipon, D., cited in Muecke and Shoemaker, 2001).

As we can observe through this translation of traditional religious beliefs, the commonly held belief that 'the religion Aboriginal people practiced was primitive and of heathen values' was utterly erroneous (Edwards, 1996, p.75-76). This small point again substantiated the opinion that the English point of view of another, and major part of Aboriginal life could be revisited, and examined in light of *fact* and not accepted as another 'conqueror's truth'. Again, contemporary Aboriginal Australians were excited to hear such factual edification regarding pre-contact religious beliefs, especially from a traditional man who exemplified being able to live in both 'worlds' and reveal respect for another, very different culture, while retaining a passionate faith in his own: their common ancient religion.

These pre-contact, first-contact and contemporary role models and spiritual traditions must be utilized in combating this anomie we feel. They are our Martin Luther King, our Gandhi', our Mandela', whose words and actions can enable our people to rise out of our shame and lethargy; caused by acceptance of our race as an inferior civilization. Unaipon and other documented leaders were and are, role models that today's indigenous people can use to defeat that word shame, that has evolved out of this sense of anomie. If an

Aboriginal person like Mr Unaipon, that lived through such a terrifying and soul-destroying era of Australia's dubious indigenous past, could lead such an optimistic and positive life; while leaving such a telling footprint in both worlds, why cannot contemporary Aboriginal Australians equal his and other indigenous efforts? Especially, as we have a *semblance* of *equality* today (unfortunately, precious and 'needed' minerals, cattle, sheep and coveted liquids each crush aboriginal land rights and historical cultural significance every single day in contemporary Australia).

Unaipon is not the only exceptional early Aboriginal role model. Aboriginal leaders like Sir Douglas Nicholls: Governor of South Australia and exemplary leader for his people, can and should live posthumously as a foundation for a racial pride sorely missing in our future leaders hearts and minds. Eric Willmot, author of *Pemulwuy, the Rainbow Warrior* (1987) and a nationally renowned inventor that told the story of Pemulwuy's great battle over many years with the invaders of his land, is another. Pemulwuy himself was a role model, personifying not only the strength and pride of his people, but revealing an intellect that almost every English military and political leader has given grudging acclaim. Then there are those many early lay-journalist indigenous that struggled with the new written form of language: writing to assist their people and that bravely critiqued the various Governments for their treatment of Aborigines from 1836 to today (Rose, 1996).

We can perceive from this brief examination of Aboriginal and Australian history, why Aboriginal Australians would feel a sense of anomie and, why we would accept a false account of ourselves as a lower class of people. Why we would feel such shame of racial character and personage? As contemporary indigenous people, combating the sense of anomie that we *see* delineated in practical actions every day in our people, confronting those mistruths regarding our own, and our conqueror's history, traditions and culture, can and does assist in filling that appalling vacuum. And although revisiting the past and uncovering an arrogance and lack of awareness of actual cultural practice in non-indigenous Australia has often been perceived as a negative and unnecessary step in

advancing Aboriginal Australia, this step must be taken if the anomie void is to be filled and to support a meaningful and modern Aboriginal culture (Gilbert, cited in Edwards, 1996, p. 113).

We have attempted many diverse and often expensive ways of combating the many social problems occurring in many remote and some urban indigenous communities and the majority have failed. This paper would argue that without a foundation of racial pride to sustain future leaders as Aborigines and contemporary Australians, we will be condemned to a future of failure: with that sense of anomie growing larger as the gap between our heroes, our marvelous traditional history and contemporary 'assimilation' widens, and become merely a memory of our *shame*. Ignominy that will not allow our youth to claim that equality of personal confidence fundamental to leading Aboriginal Australia into any optimistic future.

We (Australia) have the resources to resolve this situation through honest examination and deconstruction of the 'victor's' perception of our culture. *We* have our own Aboriginal traditional and contemporary heroes that stayed strong, when many years of oppositional conflict gave way to despair and the demise of 50,000 years of a strong and proud culture. *We* have survived famine, flood, pre-historic animals, an ice age and many many centuries of the Earth itself changing and evolving into what it is today. *We* have survived humiliation, being conquered, being enslaved, being perceived as animals and we yet survive.

However, without a deep-seated sense of racial pride nationally, we are always going to exist in the stasis of anomie and behind mainstream advancement. All races, nationalities, countries and groups of humanity need to have that racial self-assurance and, with that foundation supporting our unique character, we can not only lead our people out of the anomie vacuum, but also lead our country into an optimistic and stable future. In fact this paper poses: who better to assist with leadership in today's often violent and destructive

world populace than perhaps the *only* race to have survived for such a period of longevity in such holistic societal harmony with the Earth and each other.

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✚ Courtesy: Presented at World Indigenous People’s Conference on Education (WIPCE). Hamilton, New Zealand, 2005.

✚ PDF @: [http://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/files/6-Leadership-Presentation-at-WIPCE-Conference-NZ%20\(1\).pdf](http://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/files/6-Leadership-Presentation-at-WIPCE-Conference-NZ%20(1).pdf)

### **Bio**

**John** is a 61-year-old indigenous Australian man of Kabi Kabi Aboriginal and South-Sea Island origin. His Australian indigenous mob is caretakers of the mainland area from approximately – the Fraser to Moreton Islands area of the SE-Qld coastline. John was born in Gladstone, Qld Australia. He plays guitar, photographs nature, writes poetry and songs and tries to sing occasionally. John has four children from 16 – 38 and 6 wonderful grandchildren. John’s mother – Aunty Lorna Wenitong – started the first Aboriginal Health Program out of Mt Isa in the late 1960’s and his younger Brother Mark, was one of the first indigenous Doctors in Qld and credited with being the mind behind AIDA in Australia.