

RECOGNITION OF INDIGENOUS TERMS OF REFERENCE:

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INTRODUCTION:

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today: and to acknowledge their ancestor spirits. We walk in their footsteps. Over tens of thousands of years, they learned to care for this land. As a mother and teacher, the land has taught them how to live in harmony with it, and one another – both within each language group, and with their neighbours. And in spite of what the colonisers hoped and worked for, and what many people would still like to think was achieved, they have survived.

And they are still here, secure in their identity, standing proud of their ancestors' achievements: resistance to the colonial invasion, survival of the regime of isolation on reserves, and of assimilationist agendas and campaigns.

I come from that much larger island to the north: and identify with my mother's mother's Gungulu country in what is now known as Central Queensland: and my father's country, Biri-Gubba/ Wiri country, closer to the coast around Mackay.

This sort of introduction reflects one aspect of persisting Aboriginal culture – identity with our land. No matter what part of Australia we come from, whenever we meet another Aboriginal person, the first thing we want to know is: "Where do you come from? Who's your mob?" - never "What do you do for a living? What sport do you play?"

And we are gradually replacing the colonial word, Aboriginal, with names shared over wide areas. In most of Queensland and part of NSW, we call ourselves Murris. Koori, Nunga, Mulba and so on are used in other parts of the land. But when I say Murri in this talk, I mean it to include all the indigenous people of this land. And when I say "this land," I'm talking about the whole of Australia.

COLONISATION:

So that the full impact of what I want to say is understood in its context, let me begin with a short lesson on colonialism. This is necessary, because colonisation is seen in western minds as something in the past, that should stay there, and be forgotten about. While the impact of the process on the colonised is recognised, there is a reluctance on the part of the colonisers to recognise how they, too, have lost something of their humanity. So many in this land still see the difference between Murris and those boat people who began coming here 216 years ago, as being one of race, rather than the difference between coloniser and colonised.

That difference, and the historical legacy of colonisation, is at the root of much of the conflict throughout the world today. Resolving it can contribute insights into the resolution of other conflicts, globally and locally.

Gilbert Murray, an Australian-born classics scholar who served as a Professor at both Oxford and Harvard Universities in the early decades of the last century, made this observation :

"Unnatural affection, child-murder, father-murder, incest and the violation of dead bodies – when one reads such a list of charges against any tribe or nation, either in ancient or modern times, one can hardly help concluding that somebody wanted to annex their land." (1)

In other words, myths are developed about the peoples targeted for colonisation, to de-humanise them, and assert the superiority of the colonising society. These myths are then used to justify both the process and its brutality.

In "The Wretched of the Earth", his classic book on colonialism, Frantz Fanon also gets to the heart of what is involved in the process. The invention of a new category of human being:

"It is the settler who has brought the native into existence and who perpetuates his existence." (2)

The coloniser appropriates to himself this power of definition: The coloniser is civilised; the Native is primitive, and if he offers resistance, savage. The coloniser is not interested in understanding their history and culture, beyond what he needs to know in order to control them, and exploit their labour and resources of their lands. The myths he creates persist: and the coloniser also controls the means of maintaining them, through the language, written word, the media and education systems which he imposes.

THE EARLY MURRI EXPERIENCE:

In the wide range of examples of colonisation, there were variations in the degrees of resistance, violence, co-operation with the Indigenous peoples.

As part of that spectrum, what happened here has a number of unique features, which place Murris in a position to contribute much to the understanding of colonialism, and the resolution of conflict within society today.

One feature of the Murri experience in this land, which seems not to have been shared by other peoples who have been colonised, is this: before being colonised, we had uninterrupted stability for an exceptionally long period.

Stephen Oppenheimer of Oxford University, in a recent book on the findings of DNA analysis (3), suggests that our ancestors were in this land some 15,000 years before homo sapiens entered Europe, let alone England. And while there were contacts and exchanges with people to the north, there were no disruptive incursions from overseas.

This gave us time to develop a mature, sophisticated and humane society. Over 300 distinct but often related language groups developed a relationship with clearly defined areas of the continent. The trade and cultural exchanges we had with one another strengthened the harmonious relations and interaction between us. We developed a very strong culture, based on custodianship of land.

Let me give one example. Some 20 years ago, Stephen Davis was teaching at a school at Millingimbi, on the coast in Arnhem Land. He noticed that when he went fishing with the Murris up there, they often turned the boat around if it drifted across some invisible line. They told him that was another mob's place. He started taking bearings from things on the land to draw a map, and found that everyone seemed to know where the line was. Later he was able to map the sea floor, and found that the lines followed ridges under the surface, which would have been exposed during the last ice-age, 15,000 years ago. (4)

Think about that: knowledge and law developed, and passed on from generation to generation, without being written down, or drawn on a map: and respected in a way which meant there was no need for any armies, or prisons.

Another feature of our experience: the violence involved in our dispossession was far worse than most other colonies. Apart from a brief interlude in the late 1830s, when Governor George Gipps took action on the 1838 massacre at Myall Creek (5) in northern New South Wales, we had no protection from the coloniser's law. Despite the slaughter, the rapes, the abduction of women and children, and the general brutality which

occurred in Queensland, it was not until 1883 - 45 years after the first squatter incursions into that State - that a European was successfully prosecuted in that colony for any crime against an Aboriginal person. For the northern part of the country, white incursions came in the wake of the emergence of theories of social Darwinism. These made even more remote the possibility of our being recognised or treated as human.

This history might help explain why there was never any serious consideration of entering into a treaty with us: another unique feature of our experience. To borrow an expression from the Australian Prime Minister, we were never able to decide who could come to this country, and the terms under which they came.

And one further feature of our story: we are one of the few colonised peoples scheduled for extinction – the “full-bloods” were expected to die out; the rest to be bred out by miscegenation, following the breaking up of families and removals of children.

But to borrow from the words of the 1970s Aboriginal band No Fixed Address, ‘we have survived the white man's world, and the shock and the horror of it all’.

Throughout that history, there were exceptions: squatters who showed respect for the Murris of the area, referring to them as “our landlords”. They tried to protect them, and benefited from their advice on weather and flood patterns, where to put buildings and fences. And there were some who were able to see beyond the colonial myths to appreciate and record aspects of Murri culture and ceremonies.

For example, Gunther, a missionary in central New South Wales in the 1840s, recognised the contrast with the hierarchical structure of his society, and its inequalities, and observed that Murris had:

“ this peculiar form of government admitting of no distinction of rank, but allowing each man to share in their consultations and decisions as to any questions arising among them (which) stamps a feeling of independence and haughtiness with the appearance of dignity on the character of the men rarely to be met among differently governed natives. As they have no titles for distinction nor a proper name for a chief so they have neither a word in their language to signify a servant . . . no man has an idea of serving another. This idea of their dignity and importance is carried so far that they hesitate long before they apply the term “Mr.” to any European even though they know full well the distinction we make (between master and servant).”

Apart from the fact that he could have included women along with the men as showing independence and dignity, and differently governed whitefellas along with natives, he got it pretty right. While they don't always prevail, those characteristics, and the priority given to seeking consensus, are still evident in Murri communities throughout the land. My own father, who worked as a stockman on many properties, and was often treated very badly, would never call any of his bosses “Mr.”

And throughout the whole history, there were many examples of Murri people and communities who did protest and campaign for their rights and dignity. But for the most part, we were out of sight, and out of mind.

THE RECENT MURRI EXPERIENCE – THE PRESENT CYCLE:

Peter Read's 1988 book, *A Hundred Years War*, (6) refers to the second hundred years of colonisation: the war to maintain our dignity and identity. He traces cycles of administrative or missionary zeal inflicted on the Wiradjuri people of central southern New South Wales. People determined to do good for Murris lay out a path from misery to their incorporation into white society. These efforts were tainted by paternalism and an assimilationist agenda. Frustration with the Murris' failure to co-operate led to more authoritarian measures: disillusionment and/or frustration led the proponents to retreat, blaming the victims, who were left to stew in their own juice, in the forlorn hope that this may make them more amenable to the artisans of the next cycle, who showed little sign of having learned from their predecessors.

Read's book appeared in the middle of the present cycle. Greater media coverage of international events - like decolonisation in Africa and Asia, the civil rights movement in the USA, and protests against Apartheid during the South African Springboks' 1971 tour of Australia – helped create a climate in which Murrís became more active and vocal. The Aboriginal tent Embassy erected on the lawns of Parliament House in 1972 became a symbol and a rallying point.

I want to outline the participation of both whites and Murrís in this cycle, and then talk about the challenges each of them faced.

White participation:

More whitefellas were ready to hear our voices, and wanting to help. Journalists started writing stories about Murrís, Murri communities, and racism in country towns, in cities, real estate businesses, schools, police force. Academics started doing research and investigations into “the Aboriginal problem”, and began getting Murrís to work with them. Anthropologists and sociologists became aware of the influence of colonial myths and perceptions on earlier studies: some started from scratch. Books were written and published.

For example, Kenneth Liberman (7), an American sociologist, worked as a book-keeper in a remote community near Alice Springs. Fascinated with the way the community functioned, in 1988 he wrote a book, “Understanding Interaction in Central Australia”, which confirmed and enlarged on the observations Gunther had made in NSW 140 years earlier – the importance of consensus, priority given to congeniality and harmony, non-promotion of self, and so on.

Doctors and Lawyers became aware that the services provided by their professions and institutions just didn't reach Murrís, and volunteered to help set up Aboriginal Medical Services, Children's Services, Legal Services. Teachers, schools and even education departments set up home-work centres, and committees to try and work out why they were failing Murri kids/students, and to make up for those failings. Churches expanded or began setting up committees and services to help, attract and involve Murrís. Local committees, and organisations like Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders expanded, and others like the Aborigines Advancement League, One People of Australia League, Treaty Now, and the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action emerged, followed by Australians for Native Title And Reconciliation. Even Politicians responded; Governments became active, setting up inquiries, consultative committees and councils, and trying to involve Murrís: The Ranger Uranium Inquiry, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and the Inquiry into the Stolen Generation. Equal wages and Anti-discrimination laws were passed, Equal Opportunity, Land Rights, Reconciliation were on the agenda. Historians began breaking what W.E.H.Stanner described in his 1968 Boyer Lecture as the 'Great Australian Silence'.

Murri Participation:

While all that was happening in the white community, what was happening among Murrís? We were moving from being one of the most inquired into and surveyed group in the country, a people to whom things happened, we were becoming more active and vocal, and taking initiatives in establishing our own services and agenda. Protests at the Commonwealth Games in Brisbane, and the bi-centenary “celebration” in Sydney were massive. Along with State, regional and local protests, they unified us, strengthened our resolve. New bands, singers and songs emerged. Books started to appear: the life stories of Murrís “as told to” some white author were replaced by ones in which Murrís wrote their own stories. Plays, and later musicals, were written and performed, and later, we started making movies. Murrís got time slots on community FM radio stations, and then went on to establish their own stations. Many did courses to better equip themselves to work in Murri organisations and services. Some of us went back to school, determined to get the education denied to us. Some took up the new opportunities to go into all sorts of institutions, organisations and universities.

But in all that ferment, many differences came into focus. Let us now look at the challenges involved for each group.

Challenges to whites:

Many whitefellas who got involved found themselves on a steep learning curve. They had regarded themselves as normal: but as Frantz Fanon said, in a racist society, it is normal to be racist. So they had to confront their own racism, and that of their community: and to recognise the persisting colonial perceptions, attitudes and relationships which underpinned it. Some had difficulty recognising their paternalism: in Brisbane, we used a slogan:

If you have come to help me,
you are wasting your time.
If you have come because your liberation
is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.

Many realised that they knew nothing about Murris, their history, their culture, and how the community functioned: but came to realise that they needed some of this knowledge if their contributions were to be effective. They had to learn – often from their mistakes - how to consult with the community in an appropriate way, how to work with, rather than for, people.

Challenges to Murris:

What did Murris learn from their participation in this activity? Involvement in the new interaction and discussion highlighted the differences between us and the colonisers, which made cooperation difficult. We found ourselves reflecting on the hows and whys of those differences: and trying to identify and enhance persisting traditional Murri protocols, practices and values, which had contributed to the emergence and maintenance of a society in which people had lived in harmony with the land, with one another, and their neighbours. So the importance of striving for consensus; of not competing with one another; of not promoting, or big-noting oneself; of not trying to be a boss, not control everything, and everyone, and not treating others as servants; of allowing people to get their gripes with others off their chests in an appropriate way; of working to enhance the dignity and self-worth of each person.

Murris use things whitefellas have brought to this land. We live in houses, we drive cars, have TVs and videos, mobile phones. And we had to face up to the fact that in taking these up, some Murris had also absorbed white values, practices, and attitudes. These needed to be identified and questioned: sayings things like “That’s not a Murri way” or “You’re talking like a whitefella now” was part of the process to ensure that Murri values are not forgotten or lost, for our sakes, and for what they can contribute to white society. We were determined to identify and work on Murri terms of reference; and not to allow the colonising society do what Fanon had recognised: perpetuate our existence as “the natives”.

Fanon highlighted the difficulty of that path:

“The intellectual who is Arab and French, or Nigerian and English, when he comes up against the need to take on two nationalities, chooses, if he wants to remain true to himself, the negation of one of these determinations. But most often . . . they cannot or will not make a choice.” (8)

Many of us made that choice: and were determined to work to ensure that every Murri could be proud of their identity, and never be under any pressure to deny or conceal it.

My dear old Mum's skin was fair: indeed, a 1915 Police report to the Chief Protector of Aborigines in Brisbane when she was six years old described her as a "white child", living in Rockhampton with her Mother, Lily, who had a certificate exempting her from the operation of the 1897 Aboriginal Protection Act. But one of her favourite songs from the moment it came out was Coloured Stone's "Black boy, black boy, the colour of your skin is your pride and joy."

An Example: University

Let me give an example of the difficulty of choosing Murri terms of reference. Some 20 years ago, a Murri from what is now Western Australia was studying law at the University of Queensland. The expectation that he adopt an aggressive, belligerent approach in cross-examining a hostile witness put him under considerable pressure: he was expected to raise his voice, accuse the witness of lying and so on. He just couldn't do it: he had grown up in a fairly traditional community: and so he just said "No! I can't treat people like that".

I was a tutor in Aboriginal Welfare Studies at the University at a time when a lot of Murris were enrolling. At informal get-togethers with them, they talked about how uncomfortable they felt about conforming to the expectations of the institution. To help Murris participate on their own terms, I developed an Interdisciplinary Course on Aboriginal Perspectives. Initially, it was for Murris; but a number of white students enrolled.

I was determined, as far as possible, to make it reflect a Murri approach to learning. We sat in a circle; I had input, and I circulated articles for them to study: but as much came from the students as from me. Marking was not graded, but pass or fail, based to a large part on attendance, participation in the discussion, telling of relevant stories. They had to be there on time: and for the first ten minutes, just talk to one another. At times the discussion got quite heated: in that case, I would stop it ten minutes before the scheduled end of the session, and ask them to tell jokes – no racist ones allowed, no anti-female, no blonde, no handicapped jokes. They were not allowed to leave until everyone was laughing.

Students – both Murri and white – still come up to me at functions to thank me, and say how much they learned from that course. And a fan of John Henry Newman's lectures on The Idea of a University, said he would have been proud of my efforts.

But I was aware of the limitations of what I was trying to do. Again, Frantz Fanon's warning was pertinent:

"You will never make colonialism blush for shame by spreading out little-known cultural treasures under its eye. At the very moment when the native intellectual is anxiously trying to create a cultural work he fails to realise that he is utilising techniques and language which are borrowed from the stranger in his country." (9)

Let me refer briefly to another example of bringing co-operation out of conflict. In 1982, a Senior Tutorship became available in my Department, and a number of staff suggested my contribution be acknowledged and enhanced by promoting me to the position. But rules are rules: and at that time I didn't have a degree. Students joined in the discussion and campaign to make an exception. This culminated in a lengthy debate by the Academic Board, which eventually endorsed without dissent, - quote - "the principle that selection criteria for academic teaching positions in Aboriginal Welfare studies should have regard to Aboriginal standards of excellence in intellectual life." Eventually the Vice-Chancellor got around the rules, and appointed me to a lectureship: but the important thing is that Aboriginal knowledge, Aboriginal teaching skills, were given a place in the University.

WHERE ARE WE NOW? The Backlash:

Let's go back to the cycle we were talking about: where are we now? I suspect that we're approaching the end

of this cycle. Good things have happened: but many of them have provoked a reaction. The ten-point plan has blighted the promise of land rights. There are plans to contract-out the tasks of many Aboriginal services. Efforts to provide employment and promotion for Murris are condemned as discriminating against whites.

Murris who have made a wonderful contribution, like Dawn Casey at the National Museum, are squeezed out. The search goes on for less threatening black faces – Murris who are prepared to work within, or at least compromise with colonial terms of reference. Reconciliation has been downgraded to “practical” reconciliation. In a recent article, Tony Abbott, the Minister for Health and Aged Care, wrote: ‘We’ve all moved on from ‘identity politics’ . . . a new generation of indigenous leaders want to be modern Australians as well as distinctively Aboriginal’. (10) I don’t think so. Equality, and equality of opportunity, often means competing with white people in institutions and structures which reflect white terms of reference.

Some people have resorted to the individualistic approach of exploring the privileges of whiteness. But individuals are merely small branches that may be plucked off at any stage of growth. That does not stem the growth and regrowth of the tree of systematic and institutional racism rooted in colonisation.

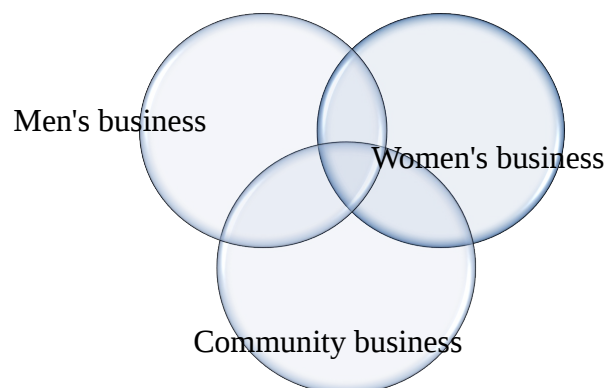
There is one matter on which, for the sake of the nation’s maturity and integrity, I would ask everyone here to reflect and act on. I refer to the history wars. The progress whites have made in owning their history in this land was belittled by the Prime Minister and others as black-amband history. Over the last few years other schools have been promoted, and given considerable doses of the oxygen of publicity by a national newspaper – from the white blindfold, best-we-forget approaches, through to extremes comparable to the denialism of David Irving, the denier of the Holocaust. Please, I ask each of you to do whatever you can to ensure that this episode becomes nothing but a shameful memory in Australia’s history.

GENDER DIFFERENCE:

The Murri experience has lessons for other areas where conflict arises from difference. Let me turn briefly to another point of difference to be discussed at this Conference: gender difference. From our experience, we can share with the women’s movement a vision of liberated women working on their own terms of reference. I’m not the first person to suggest this parallel: some years ago Anne Summers, in her book *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, put forward the proposition that over the centuries of western civilisation, men had colonised women.

A long time ago, Murris had worked out ways of ensuring that gender difference did not become a source of conflict. For us, there has always been women’s business and men’s business. Both genders had their own terms of reference; and respected those of the other gender. Let me use a diagram to explain how they were arranged:

Diagram 1.



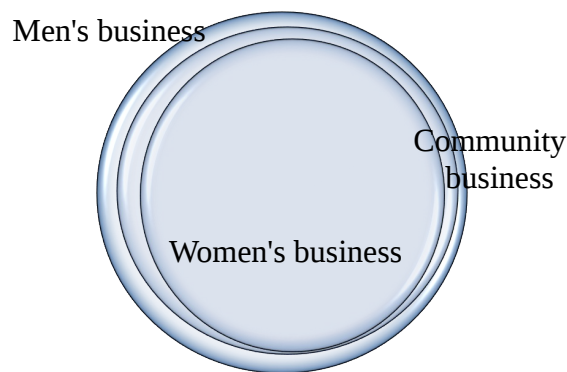
This depicts the relationship in a mature society: there is a balance between men and women, and co-operation in the area of public business. Public business may be a matter which is no the concern of either gender: or it may be a matter so important that dealing with it adequately will require the combined input of both men and women, working cooperatively and through a process of consensus, from their own positions of strength.

Women carry responsibility for their own knowledge, and the enhancement of their own lives as women; for their own ways of thinking and acting; their own contribution to maintaining harmony and managing conflict; for women's mental and physical health, the menstrual cycle, the sacredness of conception and childbirth - we never had male gynecologists. We have our own responsibilities for child rearing, growing girls up to become women, and letting go of boys at initiation ceremonies so that they could be made into men.

You won't find much about this in the writings of early anthropologists. Not only were they wearing colonial blinkers, but they had the disadvantage of being men. They could only talk to Murri men, who wouldn't have talked about women's business, even if they did know something about it. Thankfully, female anthropologists like Dianne Bell have made significant contributions.

From a Murri perspective, what does the relationship between men and women in Western society look like? The way it has appeared to me – at least until recently – is illustrated in this diagram:

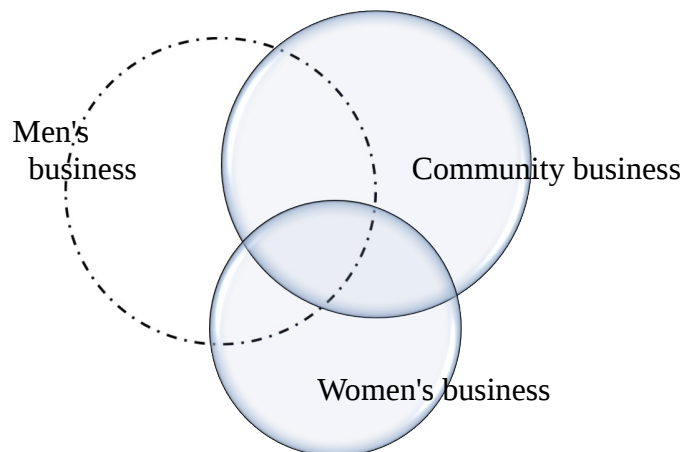
Diagram 2.



In western society, men had assumed the right to define and control the rights and role of themselves, of public business, and women. Public business was virtually indistinguishable from men's business, and women's business was totally contained within male definitions, subject to male oversight, expected to work within male terms of reference.

This next diagram depicts my perception of the effect of the women's movement is having on gender relations within western society.

Diagram 3.



As women define and strengthen their own terms of reference, they remove their business from men's knowledge and control. And so the borders of men's business become shaky, as their definitions are no longer operative. They will have to go through a period of reassessing just what is their business, and find out how to operate as men in cooperation with women, instead of seeking to control them.

That's their job. Women can best help them by identifying, defining and enhancing women's terms of reference.

There are traps. Terms like equality, sharing, democracy, individual rights and freedom have been co-opted by men. "As good as men. . ." can mean "as bad as men". "We can do anything we want" can mean "we can do anything men are doing, and in the same way." If women can avoid that trap, avoid "sleeping with the enemy", they will bring humanising changes to the structures and ethos of many institutions, professions and society in general.

CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, let us think globally for a minute. Rather than going beyond conflict towards a more humane world, we seem to be going in the opposite direction. People seem more than ever to be polarised along lines of difference, more seeking to exploit difference to divide rather than cooperate. Land, rivers, sea and air are being degraded at an ever increasing rate. Inequalities and hierarchical structures seem to be growing. The cult of the leader - the strong leader – is growing: forthcoming elections are seen as contests between John Howard and Mark Latham; George Bush and John Kerry. Insecurity, insignificance and uncertainty lead many to resort to escapism in reality, and unreality TV shows: and to flourishing extreme fundamentalist religious groups – Christian, Zionist, Islamic. In the name of the same god, they condemn one another as evil.

Some commentators suggest that these elements point to and provide a fertile ground in which fascism could flourish.

Someone I was talking to about the theme of this conference gave me a quote from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians - " ... there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one ..."

Apart from the class difference between slave and free man, which Murris never had, and still reject, we had achieved that ideal long before those words were written. But we learned how to do it, not from a book or human being, but from the land, our Mother and Teacher.

Earlier in this paper, I quoted a nineteenth century missionary's perception of Murri society.

Wouldn't it be good to live in a world where every person was proud, independent and dignified? Where no one was either a servant, or a master?

Gunther wasn't talking about some ideal to strive for, but describing what had been achieved. I'm not suggesting that we go back to the past: but that we might all draw hope from the Murri experience, and learn from it, about what it might be possible to achieve in the future.

Seeking co-operation out of conflict can be a first step along the road. It will take time. But drawing on our experience as Murris, while we don't expect to see dramatic change in a life-time, we know change is possible. We see our future stretching out as far in front of us as it does behind us. And we hope that our contribution to the process will be recognised and valued.

Footnotes:

1. Gilbert Murray was born in Australia in 1886. He was appointed Professor of Greek at Oxford in 1908, and Professor of Poetry at Harvard in 1926.
2. Frantz Fanon: *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.28, Penguin, 1985; first published in France under the title *Les damnés de la terre* in 1961.
3. Stephen Oppenheimer: *Out of Eden; the Peopling of the World*, Peribo, 2004; cf. p.34, Sydney Morning Herald, 11-12 Sept. 2004.
4. Bill Neidje, Stephen Davis & Alan Fox: *Kakadu Man*; p.11. Resource Managers, Darwin, 1986.
5. Seven stockmen who had been part of a gang which killed some 25 Murris, mainly old men, women and children, who had been given refuge on Myall Creek station were executed in 1838. Five months earlier some of them had joined Major Nunn and his troopers in an attack on Murris at Waterloo Creek, 160km to the west. This was largely covered up in a report: but James Stephen, the Under-Secretary for Colonies in London, saw through it: "The tendency of these collisions with the Blacks is unhappily too clear for doubt. They will ere long cease to be numbered among the Races of the Earth." cf. Roger Milliss: *Waterloo Creek*, Penguin Books, 1992.
6. Peter Read: *A Hundred Years War*, ANU Press/Pergamon, 1988.
7. Kenneth Liberman: *Understanding Interaction in Central Australia*, Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1985.
8. Frantz Fanon, *ibid.*, p.176
9. Frantz Fanon, *ibid.*, p.179
10. Tony Abbott, *Moving on from 'identity politics,'* The Age, Melbourne, 5 Sept. 2004.