

CULTURAL AND PERSONAL PRINCIPLES FOR INDIGENOUS GOVERNANCE

Gregory Phillips*

Introduction

In this paper I outline the cultural basis of governance systems in general, describe some of the cultural clash in governance strengthening for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, describe how two cultural principles can sometimes be misused in practice, and discuss some ways we can put lessons of the past into action.

Culture and Governance

Governance is culturally bound. All peoples across the world develop systems of governance based on their cultural and spiritual beliefs and practices. Therefore, no one cultural system of governance is more superior or inferior than another.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, as an example, have lived quite effectively and happily under our models of governance for about sixty thousand years. While each tribe may have operated under distinct law and governance models, some common features are apparent. They include:

- An expectation of individuals to respect and contribute to the common good in return for their autonomy and licence;
- An intimate understanding of the interconnections between humans, land, waterways and all things;
- The critical nature of human inter-relationships, reflected in our complex kin systems; and,
- Belief in spirit beings and ancestors as integral to daily life.

These cultural systems of governance have come under attack in recent history by way of dispossession and genocide. Whole tribes were killed, people were forcibly removed from their families, and languages and ceremonies declared illegal. The effect of these catastrophic social and political changes has ensured that many Original Australians are only now renewing or re-establishing their models of governance. Some cultural principles and practices have survived through the onslaught of the past two hundred or so years, and have served us well. Others have been twisted and deformed, and mixed with western values that sometimes render our decision-making capabilities as inadequate or ineffective. I would argue though that it is often not the cultural

* Gregory Phillips is a *Waanyi* and *Jaru* medical anthropologist in private consultancy. He has an honorary lectureship at The University of Melbourne.

and spiritual belief itself that is wrong or to be judged, rather, the dysfunctional way that it is sometimes practiced.

Additionally, Westerners have imposed their cultural systems of governance on the Original Australians. Some of the cultural beliefs underpinning the Westminster system of responsible government, for example, include:

- Belief in individual autonomy and responsibility at all costs;
- Strong belief in elected officials, mediated through hierarchy, class, gender and racial priorities;
- Strong belief in majority rules and an adversarial decision-making system; and,
- Responsibility of the individual to defend their rights through the courts.

These cultural beliefs and systems have evolved over a few hundred centuries, and now play a major part in the cultural clash that is contemporary Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance development.

Cultural Clash

One of the features of a dispossessed people's reaction to dispossession is they often unwittingly mirror the oppressor's social and political structures in an effort to gain legitimacy¹. Or the oppressed are forced to accept such structures and beliefs because the dominant power wants easy transactions (the dominant power wants to work on their own dominant terms), and because the dominant power seeks to assert their cultural systems of governance as 'standard' and everyone else's as inferior or defective. Unfortunately, this usurping of one cultural system of governance with another also has the side-effect of the oppressed assuming some of the oppressor's cultural beliefs and practices. Therein lies the cultural clash.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community organisations and councils and other attempts at contemporary governance systems have often been bugged by issues of one or more clans/families dominating proceedings, by questions of cultural relevance to local land (who speaks for who, and for what land), and by the decision-making process itself; is 'majority rules' actually sensible or effective? How much of this tension is about Aboriginal cultural beliefs being inadequate or ineffective? Is it about Aboriginal governance principles being inherently good but just not fitting in with western systems? How much of it is about a reaction to oppression? How much of it is about dysfunctional personal responses? How much of it is about greed, power or ego?

¹ Mirande, A. 1985. *The Chicano Experience*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Patrick Dodson pointedly stated to me one late night after a long day of meetings about Indigenous representation, ‘the challenge for you young ones is to find a new system of governance that marries the cultural way of doing things with the modern way of doing things’. He was clearly stating that we haven’t quite got it right yet, and that we have some more work to do.

ATSIC, Self-Determination and Community Control

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have attempted many modern structures to attempt to address the challenge Patrick talks about.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) for all of its excellent efforts, was unable to make good on the promise of self-determination. The federal government was never fully committed to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples making their own decisions because they continued to quarantine 85% of its budget. Secondly, it was hamstrung by the tension between strategic and administrative roles, in that Commissioners made budgetary and strategic decisions as well as operational and administrative ones. Thirdly, the shady activities of a few unfortunately tainted all those others who were working hard to make a difference. The then conservative government chose this as a reason to get rid of the whole structure rather than implement the research-based reforms recommended in its review.

‘Community Control’ is a term most commonly used in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health sector. The belief behind this principle is that community members themselves should plan and implement health services according to their own needs. International evidence shows that when Indigenous people make decisions and direct the way services are delivered, then outcomes are more likely to improve. The same evidence also shows values such as accountability to community and respectful lead-by-example leadership to be equally important.

In Australia, some, not all, of our community organisations and individuals have retained the decision-making and direction functions without necessarily retaining the accountability to community or lead-by-example governance functions. Some individuals say they represent community when realistically they may only represent a few family or clan members. Some national organisations say they represent all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally when clearly there is no direct governance mechanism - cultural or contemporary - to justify such a claim.

I argue that the term ‘control’ is making us sick. The more we argue for ‘control’ and power, rather than the specific functions of decision-making, direction, accountability to community and lead-by-example leadership, the more we sometimes dig ourselves into a hopeless chest-beating argument with the federal government. Shouldn’t we focus on the best ways to deliver on such values to get solid outcomes? In essence, the *principle* of community control is one I defend and believe in absolutely, so long as the critical matters of accountability to community and lead-by-example leadership are also enshrined in constitutions, strategies and operations.

I strongly believe that much of our community politic is not so much about the particular issue of the day, but whose family or foe offended who else months, sometimes years ago. It is sometimes about personal coping and negotiation skills being less than effective. One of the ways oppressed or traumatised people react to oppression is to try to grab power or a feeling of powerfulness wherever they can to deal with their underlying inherent feeling of disempowerment or shame. That is – we sometimes take our feelings out on each other – we feel *powerless*, so we attack each other to feel *powerful*. This is sometimes referred to as lateral violence. This is of course not an excuse for corruption or ego-driven power games for example, but it is most certainly part of the explanation.

Thus, any attempt to develop contemporary systems of governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples must heed the lessons of both cultural clash and the personal principles required for effective leadership and governance if we are to succeed in moving forward.

Healing is a Part of Governance

If a community leader is not herself or himself sober, how can they ask their young to keep a strong cultural identity and participate in community affairs? If an Aboriginal male leader tries to ‘come on’ to young Aboriginal women in their employ, how can they consider themselves strong men? This is of course not to say all Aboriginal men are predators or that all Aboriginal people in community organisations are dysfunctional. And it is not to say these are particularly Aboriginal phenomena – non-Aboriginal people have these issues too. It is it to say that we do have to face our demons, acknowledge where this behaviour comes from, and heal ourselves in an attempt to then make better decisions about our lives and our communities. Mona Phillips, an Elder, says:

When someone takes the risk to deal with their own demons... they become spiritually strong and connected, which then gives stability and common sense thinking. It is the basis for clear sound decision making when the human heart is clear of anger and malice and genuinely wanting to do things for the good of all mankind.

The more we personally heal ourselves and take responsibility for lead-by-example leadership, the more we can look with dignity into our grandchildren’s eyes.

This is not in any way to be construed as supporting any of the mantra or myth of Noel Pearson and his supporters. While they correctly identify a set of health and personal functioning problems, they naively assume economic independence and the force of controlling people’s welfare will fix them. Their response to the situation has been at best unsophisticated and lacking in evidence, and at worse, dangerously courting the racist and fascist view that ‘Blacks should just pull themselves up by their own bootstrap’. Yes addiction is a problem, and no, forcing people onto welfare control or supply reduction systems as the only option is not the solution. It’s never worked anywhere else

in the world despite being tried many times over.

What has worked is where communities themselves choose to deal with their demons and take steps to rectify the situation for the right reasons, not national political ones. Government controls and military interventions are not the appropriate solutions to get people to live productive lives; healing and humanitarian responses are.

When I use the term healing, I mean emotional healing to heal the wounds of trauma; mental healing to heal the wounds of victim-hood; physical healing to heal the wounds of government neglect and self-abuse; and spiritual healing to heal the wounds of shame and feelings of hopelessness.

There are many different approaches to culturally appropriate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing programs, and these are currently being renewed, developed or strengthened. What is clear is that as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, we must commit to facing our demons and cleaning out the fears, shame, personal emotional distress and victim-hood from our actions if we haven't already done so, particularly those who consider themselves as leaders. We don't have to be perfect, and it's not as if other communities and people don't face similar issues, we just have to acknowledge that practicing what we preach is important, and commit to it.

Consensus

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples have long suggested consensus rather than majority rules is a better decision-making process. Some Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people alike think consensus is impossible, inappropriate or ineffective in a contemporary governance system.

In Nunavut in Canada, the parliament makes all decisions by a concept of consensus that requires one hundred per cent agreement, and sometimes this is effective in process but inefficient in time.

An Elder recently clarified this apparent conundrum for me. Aunty Lilla Watson said:

Aboriginal concepts of consensus are not the same as white people's idea of consensus. White people think consensus means everyone has to agree one hundred percent. That's not the Aboriginal way of doing things. In the Aboriginal way, it's more important for people to be heard and to all sit down together and come up with something that we can all live with. Even if we don't all agree, it's more important that we've all had a say and then work out a way to go forward together.

This Aboriginal concept of consensus is what is often meant by the term 'community consultation'. Community consultation is how we in a modern context attempt to make sure Aboriginal concepts of consensus are reached.

Thus, rather than all people having to agree on minute detail, it is more important for all people to be heard and to have their views seriously taken into account in the negotiation stages of decision making.

Sometimes this concept is abused however, such that victim-hood, personal fears and ego get in the way of decisions and actions being taken. Like

‘community control’, this is where the *principle* of consensus and the *practice* of the matter can sometimes become confused. The principle of consensus is not to be ignored or negatively judged, but the practice of it may be. When the principle *and* the practice are done in line with the Aboriginal governance principles outlined in the first section of this paper, that is, with true respect; then we are more likely to see productive community development.

Thus, personal functioning and leadership are as important as the structures or models used in governance.

Cultural and Personal Principles in Action

So how do we action these cultural and personal principles for effective governance?

Contemporary western and Indigenous governance structures are still working out how to do this effectively, efficiently and in a sustainable manner.

I am not so much concerned about the final model for an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative body, so long as it is developed, owned and operated by us. What I am more concerned about is that the cultural and personal principles outlined here are respected and put into practice in its development. Here are some suggestions in that regard:

- Renewing the roles of Elders - strengthen and renew Elders Councils, made up of Elders who walk their talk, not just those who are elderly. Anybody who wants to take leadership roles in the community should consult with their Elders Councils and commit to remaining accountable to them;
- Healthier coping skills - we need culturally appropriate training modules developed in personal coping skills for all community members around co-dependency, healthy boundaries and how to give healthy feedback;
- Healing centres - we need Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander healing centres to be established in every region, based on culturally appropriate models, and where staff and board members go through treatment or training to deal with their own issues and learn healthier coping skills;
- Leadership with personal integrity – we should have healing and personal coping mechanisms as part of our leadership development programs; and,
- Lead by example - we should make a commitment to no alcohol, gambling, drugs or sexual acting out, at least while we’re on the job.

These things are not suggested as away of being moralistic, religious or unrealistic. They are in fact based on our cultural and spiritual principles and practices we’ve operated on for millennia! It’s called respect. Regardless of how much racism, oppression or structural disadvantage still exists in Australia, we will be a lot better prepared to cope and deal with our challenges

if we ourselves are more personally and spiritually together.

A Final Word

Dealing with racism, structural disadvantage and white privilege is non-Aboriginal Australia's business, not ours. It is up to them to educate themselves and each other if they haven't already done so. It is their responsibility to rebuild a level playing field and to ensure the majority of Australians understand why such reforms are necessary. Australia needs a *truth and reconciliation* commission, not just polite reconciliation.

Dealing with our demons and Indigenous affairs in general is Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's business, not that of other people. Of course we'll need help and we'll ask for it when necessary, but the situation will not be helped by non-Aboriginal people meddling in our affairs and trying to 'fix' us as if our problems are inherent to our Aboriginality.

When these two sides can begin to deal with their own issues and history without unnecessary interference or paternalism, then we may be more ready to come together in true national unity and partnership. Perhaps a lasting peace and agreement between the Original Australians and other Australians, where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples truly feel welcomed and accepted in their own land, might happen yet? Perhaps the old wounds of denial and shame might actually begin to be cleared? Perhaps this can be achieved as part of our national growth towards a republic as a strong and self-assured nation?

Good governance depends on healing. The healing of one is the healing of all.