

# Reclaiming Aboriginal Identity through Australian Rules Football: A Legacy of the 'Stolen Generation'

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## Introduction

One of the key findings of the National Inquiry (1997) into the separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families - the 'Stolen Generation' (NISATSIC)<sup>72</sup> - was the sense of shame that many witnesses felt regarding their Aboriginal identity. As one witness so poignantly asked:

How can you be proud of being Aboriginal after all the humiliation and the anger and the hatred you have? It's unbelievable how much you can hold in inside' (NISATSIC, 1997:15).

The National Inquiry (1997:4) found that the practice of forcibly removing children from their families was widespread and this is reflected in the life stories of Aborigines<sup>73</sup> in elite Australian football (Harris, 1989; Hawke, 1994; *AFL's Black Stars*, 1998; Stone, 1998; Connolly, 1998). Given that these men have adopted football as their principal mode of survival, it is appropriate to consider the role of the field as the basis for reclaiming Aboriginal autonomy and identity. Accordingly, this paper argues that the normative structures of Aboriginal kinships and identity, severed through familial separation, are re-emerging in a new and vibrant identity through the Australian Football League (AFL). This paper concludes that, in line with the recommendation of the National Inquiry (1997:30), the injustices associated with assimilation cannot be fully reconciled until a formal apology is offered to Aboriginal Australians. This paper also concludes that, despite the positives to flow from the field, there is a need for caution

regarding the limitations of football as a vehicle for stemming Aboriginal disadvantage. That is, irrespective of the emerging identity through elite Australian football, the structures of inequalities in Australian sport and indeed core society remain largely unchanged.

## Assimilation and Cultural Genocide

In order to set the context for analysing the link between football and identity, this paper commences with a brief review of the policy of assimilation as the fundamental basis for removing Aboriginal children from their families. Moreover, in drawing on the work of Beresford and Omaji (1998) *Our State of Mind: racial planning and the stolen generations*, this paper briefly reviews the long-term impact of assimilation.

Assimilation is simply one step in the long process of controlling Aborigines. Since invasion in 1788, Aboriginal Australians have been subjected to legislation designed superficially, at least, to protect them but ultimately to displace them. Under the Aborigines Act, the Central Board of Victoria adopted a policy of removing children designated as 'half or lesser caste' from their families (McConnochie, Hollinsworth and Pettman, 1991:109). Other states were to follow including West Australia and Queensland. Significantly, the practise of removing children continued right through to the 1960s and this contravened an international covenant, which Australia signed in 1945, to abolish racial discrimination (National Inquiry, 1997:27). Two ideological components underpinned assimilation. They comprised the absorption of the 'half caste' children into mainstream society and the demise of 'full-blood' Aborigines. Indeed, the

<sup>72</sup> From here on, the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children (NISATSIC) will be referred to as the National Inquiry (1997).

<sup>73</sup> The term Aborigine is intended, in this paper, to be inclusive of Torres Strait Islanders.

1937 Conference of Native Welfare Ministers concluded that:

'The destiny of the natives of Aboriginal origin but not the full-blooded lies in their ultimate absorption by the people of the Commonwealth, and... all efforts should be directed to that end' (Quoted in McConnochie et. al, 1991:109).

Such selective social engineering was widely practiced. The National Inquiry (1997:4) estimated that between one in three and one in ten indigenous children were forcibly removed from their families and communities between 1910 and 1970. That the removal of children was carried out over a period of sixty years is a clear indication that more than one generation was taken, thus, leading Beresford and Oamji (1998) to use the term the stolen generations.

Assimilation included strategies that set out to dismantle Aboriginal culture and to sever familial ties through the denial of parental access. For example, the National Inquiry (1997:15) found that the children removed from their families were taught to feel contempt for their Aboriginality. The National Inquiry (1997:14-15) also found that the children were often told that they were unwanted or that their parents were dead. The removal of Aboriginal children was, and still is, justified, particularly by conservative sectors of the political spectrum, on the basis that it was to 'save' the children. However, documentation of human rights abuse of the children taken from their families render it difficult to agree with the rationalisation that the children benefited from being taken. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that the rationale that separation was positively intended was merely the rhetoric to obscure the organisation of a marginalised labour force. For example, the National Inquiry (1997:16) found that children were placed in work and that these children did not receive their wages. The National Inquiry (1997:17) further found that many of these children were subjected to sexual abuse in the workplace. Clearly the children were not better off.

The trauma of being taken is eloquently expressed by a former player, Syd Jackson, in the documentary *Black Magic* (1988) which celebrates the achievements of Aborigines from West Australia in sport. Jackson, who enjoyed a distinguished career in the Victorian Football League - the predecessor to the AFL - recalls the pain of being separated from his mother. Whilst much of the focus, quite rightly, in analysing the effects of forced separation has been on the children, the impact on those left behind should also be recognised. Similar to the experiences of the children, the National Inquiry (1997:21) found that the families suffered grievously as well. In a cruel twist, however, the National Inquiry (1997:23) also found that some adults experienced difficulties in gaining acceptance from their communities. This is a stark reminder that the underlying agenda of assimilation was successful in so far as, for some, the links to family appear irrevocably severed.

### **The Impact of Assimilation**

The impact and consequences of assimilation are devastating and long standing. Beresford and Omaji (1998:191) contend that although the practice had ceased by the 1970s, unresolved grief and psychological dysfunction continue to plague the Aboriginal community. Not surprisingly, some, including Beresford and Omaji (1998), have linked familial separation to Aboriginal deaths in custody. For instance, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody found that of the 99 deaths it investigated, 43 were of people who had been separated from their families as children (The National Inquiry, 1997:13). In addition, a survey conducted by the Western Australian Aboriginal service suggested that separation is a significant factor in the over-representation of Aboriginal people in the justice system and the loss of cultural and spiritual identity (Beresford and Omaji, 1998:191). It could be argued, as a consequence, that the incarceration of Aboriginal men constitutes the contemporary form of controlled separation and dislocation of Aboriginal culture. Thus, the cycle of damage underpinning Aboriginal culture suggests that the vision of assimilation, which

was to dismantle the structures of Aboriginal culture, was largely realised.

### **The Football Field as a Site for Reclaiming Identity**

The rise of Aborigines in elite Australian football is a recent phenomenon. With few exceptions, Aborigines until - the last fifty years - were generally excluded from competing in the VFL/AFL. For example, in 1949 there were only two Aborigines listed with the Victorian Football League (VFL) compared to 42 with the Australian Football League (AFL) in 1999.<sup>74</sup> Arguably, the rise of Aborigines in the AFL - an institution which demands only that a new recruit have the talent to succeed at the top level - is due in part to closure and lack of access to the mainstream labour market. The body of literature documenting the marginalisation of Aborigines in the labour market (Miller, 1987; Williams, 1992; Taylor, 1995; ABS, 1996; Sully, 1997) would support this. For instance, the 1996 *Census of Population and Housing* (ABS, 1998:33) states that indigenous males experienced higher unemployment rates (24.6 percent) compared to the total male population rate of 9.9 percent.

Aside from the social and economic factors which may propel Aborigines toward professional football, of significance, to this paper, is that many former players experienced, first-hand, the trauma of being taken including Syd Jackson (Harris, 1989) and Graeme Farmer (Hawke, 1994). Furthermore, many of the current generation of AFL players are the children of stolen children including Michael Long (Stone, 1998), Scott Chisholm (Connolly, 1998) and Jeff Farmer (Brady, 1998). However, whilst assimilation was unquestionably inhumane, the orphanages provided children with rare opportunities to gain life skills through football. For example, anecdotal evidence<sup>75</sup> indicates that Aboriginal boys spent many

hours playing kick to kick at the orphanages. Given that it is public knowledge that at least three former players grew up in orphanages - Norm McDonald (Harris, 1989), Graeme Farmer (Hawke, 1994) and Syd Jackson (*Black Magic*, 1988) it is conceivable that the missions constituted the early breeding grounds for Aboriginal excellence in football.

Not only did mission football foster skills development, it also aided the process of reforming kinship networks with other Aboriginal children. In that context, football represented an important symbolic site for reconstructing a sense of connection with other Aboriginal children. Conceivably, part of the reason that Aborigines appear to take draw on and take strength from football is the spiritual connection that Aborigines attribute to Football. For example, Atkinson and Poulter (1993) argue that the skills demonstrated by Aborigines stem from a connection to the traditional Aboriginal football played at corroborees in which teams were decided by a player's totemic or spirit being. In the contemporary context, the importance of football as a meeting point for Aboriginal communities, similar to the corroboree, is reflected arguably in the recently formed Rumbalara (meaning, the end of a rainbow) Football Club in Shepparton Victoria (Pinkney, 1997).

In recent times, the AFL field has served as a potent political site for reclaiming Aboriginal identity. This was no more apparent than with the eloquent actions of one of the leading Aboriginal players, Nicky Winmar. In 1993, Winmar lifted his guernsey, pointed to his black skin and declared his pride in his Aboriginality in response to racial heckling from opposition supporters (Editorial, *The Age*, 27.4.1993:12). The significance of Winmar's gesture is that it represented a shift in race relations in so far as he refused to be ashamed of his Aboriginality and to further tolerate abuse on the basis of his Aboriginality. Moreover, Winmar's show of pride, arguably, set the precedent for Aboriginal footballers, in particular Michael Long (Smith, 1995), to lodge complaints with the AFL regarding their mistreatment on the field and for the subsequent introduction of

<sup>74</sup> Data on Aboriginal footballers provided by Colin Hutchinson, the AFL Statistician.

<sup>75</sup> Kooris from the Victorian Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation Co-operative informed me, in 1997, that football was one of the few past-times that Aborigines were permitted to engage in at the missions and orphanages.

the Racial and Religious Vilification Code of Conduct by the AFL in 1995.<sup>76</sup>

Winmar's gesture, in many respects, also paved the way for the Reconciliation Match between the Aboriginal All Stars and the Collingwood Football Club - a club noted for its abuse of Aboriginal footballers - played in 1994 (*Souvenir Program*, 1994). However, the goodwill to flow from this match, which was won by the All Stars, was diminished when Dale Kickett, an Aboriginal footballer with the West Australian team, the Fremantle Dockers, was subjected to verbal abuse of the most insidious kind at the Collingwood home ground, Victoria Park in 1997. Patrick Smith, the senior sports journalist with the Melbourne newspaper *The Age*, observed (6 June 1998:20) that in the wake of National Sorry Day, which acknowledged the injustice of Aborigines taken from their families, Collingwood supporters could be heard calling out: 'Sorry Dale'.

It is suggested that the hostility directed toward Dale Kickett constituted a backlash similar to that which invariably accompanies concessions made to Aboriginal Australians. For instance, Beresford and Omaji (1998) note that support for Aboriginal issues declined after the 1967 Referendum granted citizenship rights to indigenous Australians. Given the historical tension of resentment toward Aborigines, one could argue that Michael Long's call for Essendon players to wear black arm bands in recognition of National Sorry Day (Stone, 1998) is unlikely to be repeated in subsequent years because to do so risks an unwelcome reminder of Australian racism. Such a gesture might also be seen as yet another concession for an undeserving minority.

Finally, it is conceivable that the disruption of separation re-emerges during the post-football period. Articles reporting on the problems encountered by some of these men, during

their retirement, suggest that the Inquiry got it right in its finding that the trauma of being forcibly taken can never be forgotten. For example, there have been reports on the gambling problems experienced by the former great, Graeme Farmer (Russell, 1998) and this is indicative that football, in part, can only sustain the players for the duration of their careers.

## Recovery and Redemption

The general consensus is that a formal apology to the 'stolen generation' is a necessary precursor to the recovery process. For instance, the National Inquiry (1997) argues that going home is fundamental to healing. Similarly, Beresford and Omaji (1998:236) also argue that an apology is a fundamental part of the healing process. But, for some, this is impossible. As the Inquiry observed, some witnesses who told their story were never able to go home as the links with those left behind were irrevocably severed.

'We may go home, but we cannot relive our childhood. We may reunite with our mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts, uncles, communities, but we cannot relive the 20, 30 40, years that we spent without their love and care, and they cannot undo the grief and mourning they felt when we separated from them' (NISATIC, 1997:3).

Aboriginal Australians negotiate the shifting terrain of their life experiences amid the trauma of separation and the spiritual and psychological vacuum created in its wake. The dismantling then of the structures of Aboriginal culture through dispossession, dislocation and assimilation means that the 'stolen generation' must constantly reconstruct a new sense of 'going home' in order to survive. In that context, the field represents part of the core of Aboriginal self-determination in reconstituting a vibrant and self-proclaiming identity where few opportunities exist elsewhere. However, there is a need to caution as the field may obscure the limited application of football as a panacea for redressing Aboriginal injustice. As Atkinson (1991:6) argues, there is a very real

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<sup>76</sup> Given that the focus of this paper is the reformation of Aboriginal identity through football, there is limited scope for analysing the application of the Code of Conduct. Suffice to say, the Racial and Religious Code of Conduct, as it stands, has shortcomings the most notable of which is the lack of accountability for wrongdoing.

danger that the institutionalisation of recreational and sporting activities will only serve to subordinate and marginalise Aboriginal people within the Australian system. In addition, evidence of repeat offenders engaging in racial vilification (Smith, 1998) suggest that some non-Aboriginal players are yet to fully comprehend the significance of racism particularly for those affected by separation. Therefore, unless there are ongoing and substantial efforts to achieve social justice, there can be little prospect of substantially improving the conditions in which Aboriginal Australians conduct their lives (Final Report, 1992:1).

## Conclusion

The interpretation of assimilation as genocide, I believe, is accurate. To remove generations of children from their families is, effectively, to remove the very foundations upon which a culture is built. Therefore, until such time that the Australian Prime Minister, Mr John Howard, offers an apology on behalf of the nation to the Aboriginal peoples there can never be any meaningful reconciliation between black and white Australians on a national level. Arguably, the absence of an apology is a reflection of Australian racism that is grounded in both a denial of Aboriginal injustice and a deep suspicion of Aboriginal Australians. Despite the ramifications of this, Aboriginal Australians have managed to reassert themselves and to reconstruct an Aboriginal identity that reflects their sense of autonomy and human dignity through the political fields of the AFL. Whilst it is important, however, to recognise the contribution of football to Aboriginal society and vice versa, it is equally important to consider the marginalisation of Aborigines in the mainstream labour market and the impact of this in propelling Aborigines toward sport as a career option.

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