

The matter of Indigenous funerals

Milton James

This paper discusses how the contemporary funeral practices of Indigenous people are a cause for the widening of the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. These contemporary practices occur in the context of a welfare economy and attempts at cultural reconstruction.

On 13 November 2010, two participants of the Boys from the Bush (BFTB) Projects - Remote Area Work Scheme from Ali Curung in the Northern Territory were contacted by their adoptive mothers. Let's call the participants Victor and John. Their adoptive mothers told them that their biological father had passed away and that they had to return home immediately. The moment they received the call, they packed their bags and went straight to the main street of Narrandera to catch the first available bus back home. They did not give notice to their employer, nor did they mention anything to me or their workmates. Victor and John had been in our project for exactly nine months.

This was a breach of the BFTB Projects - Remote Area Work Scheme - Participation [Responsibility] Agreement that specifically stated that returning home for the funerals of close relatives must be in accordance with a proper procedure—walking out on their employer without notice and without explanation is not the proper procedure. This breach would not have happened had I not been away on a recruitment drive at the time. When I heard what was going on, I immediately rang their senior uncle in Ali Curung, and informed him of the situation. He promptly contacted the boys and instructed them to return back to work and follow the proper procedure as set down by the Participation [Responsibility] Agreement.

I later contacted their mothers and questioned them about their disregard of the proper procedure. Their reply was to deny any knowledge of the procedure. They also claimed to not understand why the boys were unable to leave their employment for a funeral, even if it was without notice, and even if it meant abandoning their rental agreement and defaulting on their utility payments.

They were, of course, pretending – they knew very well what the proper procedure was.

I will now put this situation in a broader historical and social context.

Evidence was presented at the 1966 cattle industry equal wage case [*Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission: The Cattle Station Industry (Northern Territory) Award, 1951*] on a number of failed experiments to engage Northern Territory Aborigines into mainstream employment. This included failed attempts to use Aboriginal labour in the Katherine and Darwin abattoirs. The reasons for these failures were, *because of their poor working record and frequent absenteeism.*¹ Attending funerals had been cited as one of the causes of their high rate of absenteeism.

A similar situation was being experienced in other parts of the country by other industries at that same time. It was reported by J.E. Tonkin, Chief Personnel Officer, Comalco Aluminium, in 1966 that:

*The rate of absenteeism amongst the Aborigines is distressingly high. In general it is no less now than it was 7-8 years ago and averages about 15% of the total ordinary hours of work. This rate would not be tolerated from southern workers. ... All of the Aborigines have been on and off the payroll many times because of absenteeism, and if the normal commercial disciplines that applies to imported workers was applied, then none of the aborigines would now be employed.*²

I will now come forward fifty-six years and cite an extract from a 2010 publication by the Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (SNAICC) titled, “Working and Walking Together”:

*Because Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are extensive, and observe significant obligations around Sorry Business and other bereavement protocols, assumptions should not be made about the perceived “closeness” of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to the deceased in their need to attend a funeral or conduct Sorry Business. It can also be a cause of great distress if an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person is unable to fulfil their bereavement obligations. Adequate arrangements for bereavement leave should be available for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff to attend funerals and observe Sorry Business.*³

SNAICC stated that the purpose of this publication was, *to provide ideas, information, tools, practical tips and encouragement to assist non-Indigenous organisations, and their non-Indigenous staff, to strengthen their relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations.* The publication, however, makes no mention of the ongoing concerns of teachers and employers about Indigenous people’s long and regular absence from school and work to attend funerals. SNAICC had overlooked that “working and walking together” needs to be a two way street.

¹ Commonwealth of Australia Conciliation and Arbitration Commission, Case No.830 of 1965, in the matter of Cattle Stations Industry [Northern Territory] Award 1952, transcript, p.1315.

² J.E. Tonkin (1966), *Aborigines in the Mining Industry – An Industrialist’s Viewpoint.* Printed in *Aborigines in the Economy – Employment, Wages and Training*, ed I.G. Sharp & M.T. Tatz, Jacaranda Press.

³ National Aboriginal & Islander Child Care Inc. (2010), *Working and Walking Together – Supporting Family Relationship Services to Work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Families and Organisations*, SNAICC publication.

SNAICC was founded by the late Mollie Dyer from the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. Mollie and I were good friends back in the 1990s before she passed away, and I know that she was very concerned about those elements of contemporary Aboriginal culture that were holding her people back. Nor did she hold back in publically condemning these things in her published articles.

There are in fact numerous articles and other publications written in recent times that express concern about this ongoing problem. Furthermore, there are indications that the situation may be getting worse.

According to Hudson:

*CDEP payments help fund attendance at funerals and sorry camps. Lasting several weeks, ... sorry camps have become a major feature of remote existence, providing a respite from the boredom and frustration of life in remote communities as well as an excuse for indulging in feasts of packaged goods, alcohol, and marijuana. Many remote community leaders have become disturbed by the disruption to work and schooling that these prolonged funerals cause, arguing instead to a return to traditional burial ceremonies that only required one to three days attendance spread over several months.*⁴

In one study of remote communities it was found that 28 percent of the CDEP participants attended funerals, ceremonies or festivals in the previous three months, whereas only 6 percent of the mainstream employed reported attending these kinds of events.⁵

Taylor, Bern & Senior have also described the situation in most remote communities.

*People's awareness of death as a frequent event is heightened by the fact that a death in the community involves everyone. Death interrupts the life of all residents in the community. Upon notification that someone has died a sorry day is declared, work ceases, school children are sent home and the shop is shut. Later when the body is returned to the community family members are required to hide indoors. Finally the entire community stops work and schooling to attend the funeral. Lost days due to deaths and funerals impact most adversely on the education of children, whose outcomes are already affected by irregular attendance. At the end of term in October 2001 only one week out of ten that had not been affected by such an event.*⁶

⁴ CDEP: Help or Hindrance? The Community Development Employment Program and its Impact on Indigenous Australians, Centre for Independent Studies, Policy Monograph 86, 2008.

⁵ JC Altman MC Gray and R Levitus, Policy Issues for the Community Development Employment Projects Scheme in Rural and Remote Australia, Discussion Paper 271/2005, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU (2005) IX.

⁶ J. Taylor, J. Bern, and K. A. Senior (2000). *Ngukurr at the Millennium: A Baseline Profile for Social Impact Planning in South-East Arnhem Land*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research: The Australian National University, Canberra.

Geoff Guest, an old stockman and horse handler of part Aboriginal descent in a private interview with me at his outstation on Cape York Peninsular had this to say about Aboriginal funerals:

These days we see funerals being held up, sometimes for months, while they wait to contact certain people and sorting out squabbles. They will squabble over where the body is to be buried, who's going to be in charge, and how's it going to be organized. This didn't happen in the old days; it was not the tradition. The longest I ever saw a funeral go on for was about 3 weeks. It was 1939; I was 13 years old at the time, when we were mustering up in the Kimberly country. The funeral was delayed while things were being organized and while some of the new ones learn the ceremonial dances. It was important for them to get it right. Also in those days, only local people could be reached. People outside the area didn't feel guilty if they couldn't be contacted or couldn't attend. That was understandable.

There were always squabbles, but in those days it would be sorted out very quickly, you had to sort it out quickly. But these days with refrigeration it can be put off. And with the advent of telephones and charter flight everything changed, people far away could more easily be contacted, and this has caused a lot of problems since. The funeral can be put off until they are able to contact certain people, or for someone to get a lift, or for someone to get the money to travel.

Funerals have now become like a social event; a bit like a party, people coming from far away and staying for longer. Many might hardly know the deceased person, but they are still expected to go to the funeral or think they should go. For some it's like a power thing, where families try and put it over one another. If someone doesn't turn up they will get wild with them. It looks like they are showing respect, but it's not for the benefit of the deceased person. Others just come along for the food. And these days it's much easier to go away. With a key card you can draw out your Centrelink payments at any time anywhere. They can stay away for weeks. This couldn't happen before. I know some people who are professional funeral goers, you know, attending funeral all the time and all over the country. I can understand it when the deceased person is close to you, but not if they are distant, and you hardly know them. A lot of these people will leave the kids at home to look after themselves with no money, sometimes for weeks. This is when the kids get into trouble, breaking into places to get food.

These people don't understand that culture is for people, not people for culture. If the culture becomes a problem or no longer has benefit for the people it should be dropped. If we get locked into a culture that's no longer a benefit, it holds us back. People need to be educated about these things.

A number of employers in the meat processing industry have expressed to me their reluctance to employ Aboriginal people for exactly the same reasons as stated in 1966; *because of their poor working record and frequent absenteeism.* The Australian Centre for International Business conducted a survey of 227 Chief Executive Officers (CEO) on their views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The CEOs' identified three main factors constraining the greater employment of Indigenous

workers: 1) shortage of job applicants, 2) difficulty in retaining, 3) high absenteeism.⁷

A certain level of workplace absence is to be expected and can be beneficial for an organisation. Attending work when genuinely unwell is a health and safety issue, for both the sick employee and others working in close proximity. On the other hand, high rates of absence are costly and impact on individuals, business units and the organisation as a whole. Excessive absences often coincide with poor performance, high turnover rates and low organisational commitment. The costs of absence can be divided into two categories: direct costs and indirect costs. Direct costs include salaries, recruitment costs, overtime, and replacement staff costs. Indirect costs include training costs, service disruption, negative public perception, poor moral and lost productivity, business continuity and interruption.

My experience is that the most important pre-condition for a successful work placement is where the young person's family understands the nature of real work and is committed to supporting the young person to fulfil his or her obligations. Where there is little understanding or support from the family, high rates of absenteeism is assured, followed by an early departure. Such a lack of understanding and support is more likely in families with little or no history of engaging in real work. In this regard, huge numbers of young people living in remote Aboriginal communities have got a serious problem and will continue to have a serious problem for many years to come.

BFTB Projects is, however, assisting to balance these issues. In mid-2010, Barry from Titjikala was called home to attend the funeral of his young niece. Rockdale Beef provided him with two weeks bereavement leave, which included the three days bus trip home and the three day bus trip back. Barry returned back to Narrandera and work at Rockdale Beef within the two week period. This was all facilitated by BFTB Projects.

In September 2010, the sister of Daniel from Alpururulam had passed away. After we had a chat, Daniel decided not to go home.

In the case of Victor and John, their adoptive mothers simply swept the proper process aside. This was typical of these women. From the day Victor and John arrived, their adoptive mothers were constantly pressuring them to come home. Their excuses included: they must come home to attend royalty meetings; they must come home to be by the side of a family member who had fallen ill; they must come home to protect the family from tribal fights; and they must come home to attend an initiation.

⁷ Professor Steven Nicholas & Andre Sammartino, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Workforce: Views of the CEOs, Australian Centre for International Business.

What frustrated their adoptive mothers was that each time they called with a new story as to why the boys must come home, I caught wind of what was going on and I then promptly contacted the senior uncle of the family requesting him to intervene. This is what also occurred when I caught wind of the adoptive mothers' disregard of the proper procedure in regards to the funeral of the biological father. The uncle again intervened and instructed the boys to remain working for JBS Swift until they receive further instruction. On this occasion, however, I was still on the road and unable to monitor everyone's compliance with the uncle's instruction. The next thing I knew was that both boys had returned back to Ali Curung.

It is a fact that funerals are often used by young people, and their families, as an excuse for getting out of school or work or detention. I have witnessed a number of incidences where young people returned home for a funeral only to find that they did not attend the service. Instead, they spent the day sleeping, playing video games, or indulging in drugs or alcohol with friends. And to get them back to school proved to be extremely difficult, and in many cases it marked the end of their education—they never went back to school. In the case of Victor and John, my fear was that this would mark the end of their working life.

What made the case of Victor and John particularly troubling was the fact that their father's funeral service never actually took place at the time the family was stating. The deceased man died on the 13 November 2010. It was on this day that the family called Victor and John to return home immediately. The disturbing fact was that the deceased man was not buried until 28 January 2011 – **seventy six days later**. Furthermore, it was the family's expectation that Victor and John were to remain at home until their father was buried. This family would often go on about their strict adherence to traditional culture. But this business of putting off a funeral for seventy six days could never have happened in traditional times, this is a modern construct supported by new capacities like refrigeration. As a result, two young people have lost their job, defaulted on their rental agreement and utility payments, and with little to show for their past nine month's effort. A year and half later I caught up to them again; they were back on the Youth Allowance and had no interest in work—just as I feared.

By way of contrast, Jewish and Muslim tradition requires that the deceased must be buried as soon as possible after death. This traditional practice is based on the fact that the Middle East has a hot climate, like Australia. In Biblical times, there were few ways of keeping the body from decomposing. Not only would this be generally undesirable, but allowing the deceased person to decompose in this way would be showing that person great disrespect. Decomposition would have occurred very quickly due to the constant heat—hence, the custom of burying the body as soon as possible. This practice has not changed, even with the advent of refrigeration.

Another worrying fact about this tale was the comment made by the Ali Curung non-Indigenous CDEP Manager. When I spoke to him about the disturbing nature of this business, he replied, *This is not unusual, they don't understand why we want to bury our dead so quickly*. I was surprised to hear him say this. This raises questions about the role service providers play (out of ignorance) in facilitating this recent practice involving gross distortion of culture that actively widens the employment gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

This paper is a revised version of Section 5.7 of Boys from the Bush Projects – Remote Area Work Scheme – Progress Report #4, dated 31 January 2011.