Session 5
Indigenous Medicine in Australia/Torres Strait
Department of Social Sciences
Session Aims

- To describe the historical and cultural context of the medicine of Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Island communities
- To explore Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Island worldviews
- To describe Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Island medicine practices
This map attempts to represent the language, social or nation groups of Aboriginal Australia. It shows only the general locations of larger groupings of people which may include clans, dialects or individual languages in a group. It used published resources from 1988-1994 and is not intended to be exact, nor the boundaries fixed. It is not suitable for native title or other land claims. David R Horton (creator), © Aboriginal Studies Press, AIATSIS, 1996. No reproduction without permission. To purchase a print version visit: www.aiatsis.ashop.com.au/
Migration to the Australian Landmass

- Last Ice Age ended 12,000 years ago, submerging large areas of coastline connecting Papua New Guinea and Australia
- Migrations appear to have occurred between 40,000-65,000 BCE, most likely from peoples of Africa or southern Asia, eventually spreading across the continent
- Subsistence economy developed – birds, fish, animals and plants being hunted and gathered

European Exploration of Australia

- 1606 – Dutch explorer Willem Janszoon made first recorded contact with Australia, in the Gulf of Carpentaria
- 1606-1770 – numerous European ships landed, including those from Dutch East Indies Co and Abel Tasman, who undertook extensive mapping
- 1770 – James Cook declared the east coast to be part of the British Empire
- 1788 – Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay

Australian Aboriginal Peoples
Society and Health

- Great cultural diversity developed over a long timespan
- Three main cultural groupings: Northern, Southern, and Central
- Over 400 cultural groupings have existed across the continent with both shared and unique culture and language
- Up to 5600 tribes have existed within these broader groups

Society and Health: Historical Context

- Arrival of the First Fleet in 1788 pushed many Aboriginal people from their hunting grounds, dislocating them from their land and significantly impacting their health.

- Tragic development over the next 100 years saw many Aboriginal people either killed or forced to remote areas.

- To rectify the situation, a desperate government developed a policy for a series of Reserves to ‘protect’ the Aboriginal people, which were a total failure.

- With a sense of ‘place’ being fundamental to self-identity and spiritual wellbeing of Aboriginal people, loss of connection to their home has had dire inter-generational effects on the health of Aboriginal people.
White Australia & Assimilation Policies

- In 1901, Australia became a Federation and *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* was passed, severely limiting non-English-speaking immigrants from migrating to Australia.

- Reflective of a governmental attitude towards maintaining Eurocentric culture in Australia, which also targeted indigenous people through various assimilation policies.

- Policy started to be phased out in 1949, but parts remained within Australia’s Foreign Policy until as late as 1973.

- Aboriginal people were also denied civil and voting rights at Federation in 1901 under the Commonwealth Constitution, which was not repealed until referendum in 1967.

- This marked the start of the Reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.
Stolen Generations and Apology

- 1937: Initial Conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities enacted a policy of assimilation promoting the ‘absorption’ and ‘conversion’ of people with mixed indigenous and white heritage into white society.

- Up to 50,000 children were forcibly removed from their families and country from 1910-1970, a group now known as the Stolen Generations.
Mabo Decision

- An historic land rights ruling by the High Court of Australia in 1992
- The ruling recognized the indigenous people’s ownership of Mer Island in the Torres Strait
- Constituted a rejection of the previously upheld belief that Australia did not belong to anyone prior to European colonisation
- Land and water rights issues are ongoing however
Close the Gap Campaign

- 2006: Close the Gap Campaign launched
- Focused on achieving health and life expectancy equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people
- Campaign is ongoing and the aim is to close this gap within a generation
- It is a growing nation-wide group with many stakeholders involved – indigenous groups, NGOs and human rights organisations
- Equality focuses on life expectancy, age/rate of death, infant/child health, chronic and communicable diseases, oral health, mental health and disability, as well as education and employment factors
Society and Health

- Since the 1970s there has been increasing repatriation of Aboriginal people to their homelands.
- There has also been a growing reconnection of Aboriginal people to their traditional medical practices, especially in remote communities.
- Studies have shown lower rates of diabetes, obesity and hypertension in homeland people as compared to those living in centralised communities in central Australia [Hetzel 2000]
Society and Health

- A ‘two-way-medicine’ is now practised, where Aboriginal health workers use traditional medicine alongside Western medical practice/practitioners.
- Traditional healers have been employed by the Northern Territory Department of Health successfully since the early 1970s.
- Even if Western medicine is chosen to treat illnesses, indigenous patients continue to explain and understand the cause of disease through traditional beliefs.

[Devanesen 2000]
Concepts of Health and Illness

- Traditional Aboriginal medicine regards ill-health as more than physical illness, but a manifestation of a multitude of factors, including spiritual and emotional alienation from the land, culture and family.

- Aboriginal Australians define identity holistically in terms of kinship, ritual, spiritual relationship and responsibilities, all of which are interconnected and inseparable from the land [Morgan et al 1997]

- Balance is a central concept – between family members, tribal group and nature [Jackson/Ward 1999]
Concepts of Health and Illness

- “Traditional Aboriginal medicine is a complex system closely linked to the culture and beliefs of the people, knowledge of their land and its flora and fauna. Its survival is explained by its ‘embeddedness’ in the social fabric of Aboriginal culture.” [Devanesen, 2000]

- “Individual sickness or injury will be understood by Aboriginal people in terms of their impact on a person’s ability to fulfill social and spiritual commitments.” [Morgan et al 1997]
Revision Questions

- How did climate contribute to the migration of the first people into Australia?
- What were the effects of colonisation on the health of Aboriginal peoples?

Other food for thought:

- Why do you think so many different cultural/tribal groupings developed in Aboriginal Australia?
The Dreamtime

- The overarching Aboriginal cosmological and philosophical framework
- Consists of stories and myths that explain Aboriginal beliefs about creation of the universe, the land and the people
- These stories and beliefs vary between cultures and places but share common threads
- Referred to as an “everywhen”
- Dreaming ancestors created the landscape from a formless origin

The Dreamtime

- Expressed via song, ceremony and through art
- Communicates the interconnectedness of all peoples, places, animals and things
- The purpose of existence is its continued creation, which is achieved through the maintenance of ‘balance’
- Each part of the whole must sit in equilibrium with every other part for this to occur

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‘The Dreaming’ is an English translation of a highly nuanced concept referred to in different ways by different groups:

- *Altjiranga ngambakala* (Arunta people)
- *Djuguba/djugurba* (Great Victoria Desert area)
- *Duma* (Rawlinson Range)
- *Djumanggani* (Balgo area)
- *Ngarunggani* (eastern Kimberley)
- *Tjukurrtjanu* (Pintupi people)
- *Wongar* (northeastern Arnhem Land)
Social Structure

- Kin-based tribal societies
- Nomadic
- Absence of crop or livestock cultivation
- Movement based around access to food sources
- No written languages
- Knowledge transmitted orally

By Don Hancock -
Healing Principles

- Health related to balance
- Ill-health often due to the influence of harmful spirits
- Healing often aimed at resolving spiritual affliction

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Healing Practices

- Ceremonial dancing & chanting
- Healing the spirit, by Ngangkari
- Physical manipulation
- Herbal medicine
- Bush tucker

Ceremonial Dance and Song

- Often occur during celebrations
- Ceremony forms the foundation for song, music, dance and art
- Dance records the ancestral history
- Passed down through the generations
- A method of expressing community bonds and love

Ceremonial Dance & Song

- Song carries the local history, traditions and knowledge of tribal kin-based groups

- Series of songs referred to as ‘songlines’ which form a map of the country

- Each song is part of a larger picture that forms the web of knowledge and understanding of that group

**Healing the Spirit – the *Ngangkari***

- *Ngangkari* are capable of seeing a person’s spirit
- They see inside people and see at night
- This sight is used to diagnose illness
- *Ngangkari* Law is passed down from the elders to the young, the transmission of this knowledge enables apprentices to learn how to heal

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Image: "The wizard of the Worgaia, a great medicine man of Central Australia, as the signs on his body show. He instructs tribes in mysteries". 

Healing the Spirit - *Mapanpa*

- *Mapanpa* are the tools that *Ngangkari* use to carry out healing
- Also referred to as ‘powers’ and as a ‘force’
- Inherited through ancestral lines
- Carried in a bundle, can be bone, feathers, tobacco
- Individual healers will find and be given their own unique *mapanpa*
- They are objects of spiritual and symbolic power, used by *Ngangkari* in carrying out their work
Healing the Spirit - *Mamu*

- *Mamu* are malevolent non-physical beings
- Principally understood in Aboriginal societies as the cause of illness
- *Mamu* steal people’s spirits causing them to be unwell
- *Ngangkari* are able to see them with their ‘*Ngangkari* eyes’
- *Ngangkari* do a form of spiritual battle with *mamu* to protect the members of their society, and to restore health to those suffering spiritual affliction
Healing the Spirit - *Kurunpa*

- This is the term for a person’s ‘spirit, will or self’ in Central Australian communities
- *Mamu* steal a person’s *kurunpa*
- *Ngangkari* work to block *mamu*’s access to people
- If a *mamu* has stolen a person’s *kurunpa*, the *Ngangkari* will follow them as ‘spirit beings’, do battle with the *mamu*, retrieve the person’s *kurunpa* and then place it back in the sick person
- The afflicted person might exhibit sadness, depression, lethargy and vomiting until they have been healed
‘Seeing’ & Healing

- *Ngangkari* use xray-like vision, where they can see into people’s bodies, to diagnose illness.
- They often see illness in the form of blockages of blood, referred to as ‘stones’ or similar.
- Drawing out the stone brings about healing.
- A physical representation of the blockage, in the form of an actual stone is shown to the patient.
- This is then discarded, to bring about closure.
- The symbolism of this act is believed to have healing effects on the sick person.
Physical Manipulation - *Pampuni*

- Referred to as “a kind of physio work” as well as a “healing touch”
- Bodywork applied by *Ngangkari*
- Used in conjunction with the breath
- Often applied using *irmangka irmangka* oil, a powerful bush medicine
- The aim is to ‘make smooth’
- The aim is also to touch the sick person’s soul, to “synchronise everything inside them” to bring about healing

[Ngaanyatjarra Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Women’s Council Aboriginal Corporation (2014) *Traditional Healers of Central Australia: Ngangkari*]
Herbal Medicine

- Women often held authority over gathering food and therefore developed intimate knowledge of herbal medicine and nutrition.

- Traditionally, men and women shared equal power in relation to the family’s survival and this extended to healing practices.

- Women were often the more skilled herbalists owing to the greater contact they had with herbal ingredients.

- ‘Women’s business’ constitutes ceremony, ritual and secret knowledge around fertility as well as particular usage of herbal ingredients – a vital part of Aboriginal lore.
Bush Tucker

- Expertise often the domain of women, for the same reasons as medicinal herbs
- Traditional diets were very balanced and highly nutritious
- Food supplies were diverse and gathered/hunted for immediate consumption
- Pre-colonial Aboriginal people were healthy, lean and strong, due to a diet that was low in fat, sugar, salt and high in micronutrients, antioxidants and phytochemicals

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Oral Transmission of Knowledge

- Not having written language, information was passed down via word of mouth
  - This included:
    - Dreamtime myths and stories
    - Healing beliefs and practices
    - Herbal lore
    - Location and usage of bush tucker

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Importance of ‘Country’

- The people belong to the land, not the other way around
- Ideas of ownership of land and property unique and antithetical to Eurocentric ideas of acquisition
- Sense of ‘place’ deeply entwined with community and individual health
- Healing then incorporates repatriating a sick person with their land
Revision Questions

- What are the main forms of medical practice in Australia Aboriginal societies?
- Describe the role and function of the Ngangkari.

Other food for thought:

- What might be some of the strengths and drawbacks of having knowledge passed down in oral format?
Tea Tree

- *Melaleuca leucadendra*
- Named by Captain Cook as his men made tea from the leaves
- Produces a rich nectar from which bees create a strong honey
- *Melaleuca alterniflora* used to create Tea Tree Oil
- Indications include:
  - Antisepsis
  - Antibacterial
  - Anti-inflammatory
  - Antiviral

Silver Box/Smoke Tree

- *Eucalyptus pruinosa*
- Bark prepared by decoction
- Widely used for its medicinal effects
- Indications:
  - colds and influenza
  - general ill health
  - analgesia for aches, pains and muscle soreness
  [Williams, 2010]
Honeypot Ants (*Melophorus*)

- These ants store honey in their distended abdomens
- Eaten as a snack
- Good energy source
- Rich in sodium, potassium, magnesium
- Lower levels of calcium, iron and zinc
- Also found in North America (*Myrmecocystus* species) [Williams, 2010]

By HoneyAnt.jpg: Photo by Greg Hume, CC BY 2.5, [https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20812465](https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20812465)
Torres Strait Islanders

- Torres Strait Islander Australians have Melanesian origins, which are independent of the origins of mainland Indigenous Australians.
- First migration into the area believed to be around 70,000 BCE.
- Strong link between TSI people and the people of Papua New Guinea.
- Part of the state of Queensland, annexed in 1879.
- Current TSI population around 20,000, with 15,000 being on mainland of QLD.
Society and Culture

- Originally TSI people subsisted on fishing, hunting and crops
- Trade of objects made of pearl shell, turtle shell and feathers
- Pearl fishing the major industry from 1860s - 1970

Concept of Health

- Family/kinship structures form the basis of society
- Health is holistic in nature, encompassing:
  - Cultural wellbeing
  - Spiritual wellbeing
- Land, familial and cultural traditions are intertwined
- Being connected with one means connected with all of them – and this contributes to being healthy, physically and spiritually
Healing Philosophy

- Well-developed healing traditions
- Belief in metaphysical causation of illness
- *Puri puri* – sorcery as a cause of illness
- Also attributed to magical practice and the impact of spirits, especially recently departed familial spirits
Revision Questions

- Why was the Mabo ruling so important for Aboriginal people, from the perspective of health and healing?
- List some similarities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ideas about health and illness.

Other food for thought:

- If Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people had differing origins, why do you think their healing traditions have so many similarities?
References

References continued


- Williams, C 2010, *Medicinal plants in Australia: volume 1 bush pharmacy*, Rosenberg, NSW.
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