

## Clapsticks and Karaoke: The Melting Pot of Indigenous Identity<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In recent decades, a mixed-style dance festival has been held at camping grounds near the town of Laura on Cape York Peninsula, including contemporary forms of music and dance. The Laura Festival has its roots in the funding of Aboriginal dance festivals in the 1970s across northern Australia with the aim of fostering the sharing, recovery and maintenance of Aboriginal traditional dance forms. The range of cultural forms at the Festival clearly reflects a broad expression of Indigenous identity, from the classic traditional styles to creative forms that explore symbols and motifs, to modern cultural forms that adapt western forms with an Indigenous style. Questions the authors reflected on at the Festival were: "Where is God in the Laura Festival?" and "What does the Festival say about Aboriginal spirituality in general and Aboriginal Christian spirituality in particular?" In answer to these questions we felt that the Creator was very much present in the vitality and creativity of the Festival and in the shaping of new expressions of Indigenous identity in the modern world. Further, the Festival affirmed that there is a foundational place for Aboriginal spirituality in the formation of Aboriginal Christian identity and spiritualities through a combination of traditional spiritual foundations linking people to creation, culture and to the Creator known through Christ, and a creative shaping of contemporary expressions of belief and practice.

### INTRODUCTION

THE AUTHORS ATTENDED THE LAURA FESTIVAL near the small town of Laura in the centre of Cape York Peninsula in July 2005 as staff of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, Cairns, a combined church-based College for leadership development in Indigenous churches and communities (and partner College of Nungalinga College, Darwin). We attempted to reflect on the events of the Festival from a particular missiological

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1. This article emerged from the joint reflections of the authors, David Thompson being the primary writer of the first four sections and Michael Connolly of the remaining sections.

perspective, that is, drawing on the insights of Aboriginal theology and anthropology. Key questions we posed were: "Where is God in the Laura Festival?" and "What does the Festival say about Aboriginal spirituality in general and about Aboriginal Christian spirituality in particular?"

The Aboriginal theological reflection was based on the process of contextual theology that is the basis of Indigenous theologising at Wontulp-Bi-Buya College. This involves a three-way process of finding connections between Bible, traditional cultural values and the contemporary context. Anthropological insights are added from our various experiences in this field, particularly in relation to the native title claim process.

The Festival was a mirror of the cultural variety among Aboriginal people in particular and Indigenous people more generally. The variety ranged from:

- northern communities closer to traditional roots and lifestyles and in some cases still speaking or having knowledge of Aboriginal languages, to
- large communities such as Yarrabah, Palm Island, Woorabinda and Cherbourg near regional cities, to which many people had been removed and separated from their homelands, speaking Aboriginal English rather than traditional languages, to
- dispersed families in towns and cities in more obvious minority status in the broader society, often seeking to recover their roots and identity.

#### BACKGROUND TO THE LAURA FESTIVAL

The Laura Festival, held biennially at camping grounds near the small town of Laura on Cape York Peninsula, 300km north of Cairns, has its roots in the Aboriginal dance festivals held across northern Australia in the 1970s. These were sponsored and organised by the Aboriginal Theatre Foundation (later Aboriginal Cultural Foundation) under the energetic leadership of Lance Bennett. Federal funding allowed dance groups from various communities to come together by means of charter flights and to be catered for by a host community.<sup>2</sup> Groups attended from other Cape York Peninsula communities and from Groote Eylandt. The visitors camped in their groups along Quintel beach while the Lockhart River people exercised their hunting and

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2. *Lockhart Festival*, a video of one such festival held at Lockhart River in 1974, is available from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), PO Box 553, Canberra City ACT 2601. See <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au>.

fishing skills to provide food for the large crowd. Dampers and fish were multiplied. Dugong, turtle and beef were added.

The purpose of these occasions was to recover and renew traditional dance forms and to strengthen Aboriginal identity in the face of the intense assimilationist pressures of Queensland Government control at the time, and the resulting social turmoil. The video shows the groups taking turns at presenting a rich variety of dance styles. There is also a brief view of a young white priest and a Torres Strait Islander deacon conducting a beach communion on the Sunday.

These Dance Festivals were very significant at the time in affirming a conscious Aboriginal identity after the fashion of earlier times when different groups walked from far afield to join in periodic ceremonial activity including initiations. In the 1970s, they helped to resist the tide of European cultural and managerial dominance. In the following decades of the last century, political changes eased the assimilationist thrust of the 1970s and led to greater self-management, Aboriginal Councils and now Shire Councils under Aboriginal Mayors. The Land Rights era brought the hope of greater degrees of self-determination as access to traditional lands and waters began to be recovered.

Paradoxically, the Queensland Government attempted to counter criticism of its policies by later starting up Festivals at Laura, aiming for a wider audience including tourists. Prizes were introduced. The Laura Festival in 2005 was the sixteenth to be held.

#### THE LAURA FESTIVAL OF 2005 – A BENCHMARK OF CHANGE

The Laura Festival held in July 2005 presented an interesting benchmark of changes that have occurred in the 31 years following the Lockhart Dance Festival of 1974. Participants and audience came from much further afield. As well as Cape York groups, there were others from Yarrabah and Woorabinda, urban-based Aborigines, visitors from southern states, a contingent from the Torres Strait islands and a variety of tourists. The traditional dance forms remained the backbone of the Festival but were complemented by contemporary forms that reflected a blending of traditional themes and modern influences.

The traditional forms occurred during daylight hours and other forms followed into the nights. There was a focus at the Festival on young people, and the number of teams of school age children dancing reflected the efforts to teach cultural studies in schools. However, the numbers of adults participating in most dance teams were low. This reflects the day-to-day pressures of modern community life where other forms of song and dance dominate and traditional performance tends to be focused on a few elders teaching the forms to school children, and

some performances on special occasions. At the Laura Festival, great respect was shown for the traditional forms but there was a degree to which they appeared to be overshadowed by the vibrant forms of the broader Indigenous scene. A Torres Strait Islander dance was performed and a group of TAFE students from Cairns performed some contemporary dances with influence from the Sydney Aboriginal Dance School. Other daytime activities included demonstration of traditional weaving skills, film screening and other activities for children. Numerous tents and camps surrounded the central dancing area, stage and viewing area, plus a range of food and information stalls.

Then, at night, modern Aboriginal music burst into life on the stage with electronic equipment and lighting. The first night was a Karaoke competition in search of the "Laura Idol". An amazing array of talent was displayed and, despite the form, Indigenous style and humour were quite evident. A young woman from Cairns and an older woman from Townsville shared the \$500 prize. We discovered that both have Christian connections.

The second night was given over to rock bands and singers on the lit stage while the audience sat in the moonlit surrounds under the gum trees. Again, Indigenous style, themes and character were evident in a great collection of talented groups. Women had a significant place, including an all female band. Here was a dynamism that was contemporary and expressive of modern Indigenous experiences and aspirations.

#### REFLECTIONS

We reflected on these questions: "Where is God in the Laura Festival?" and "What does the Festival say about Aboriginal spirituality in general and about Aboriginal Christian spirituality in particular?"

In answer to our first question, we felt that God was in the sense of identity being expressed and asserted in various ways by these different groups and being renewed in the face of the leveling pressures of the dominant society. All Indigenous contexts face these pressures through the taken-for-granted features of modern society such as technologies, education, employment, welfare and contemporary forms of government. The important identity question: "*Who am I?*" was being answered in terms of cultural and spiritual roots lived in the context of the changing post-modern world.

Culture is not static, and inevitable changes and adaptations have continued to take place. Change may be destructive but can also be beneficial, particularly if blended with continuing underlying elements of social and cultural foundations. Nevertheless, there is tension

between the old and the new. The traditional lifestyle may be characterised as the “slow world” and the modern bi-cultural lifestyle as the “fast world”. The slow world does not live by the clock – dances do not start according to the program time but when the dancers know it is the right time for them to begin. People’s lives are ruled more by personal relationships and obligations to kin than by rules and regulations. The fast world is more in tune with the faster pace of the individualistic, youth-oriented consumer society, but the Indigenous participants also maintain continuing cultural ties and struggle to retain their own identity in the dominant society.

While there was some feeling of dichotomy between the traditional and modern music forms at the Festival, the modern identity has its roots in the other through the commonality of connections to land, people, law and language identity. It is these cultural roots that provide the spiritual foundation for a modern bicultural Indigenous identity.

Nevertheless, there is risk for both the “slow world” and the “fast world” of Indigenous identity. The risk for both involves the loss of spiritual roots. There is a danger of the traditional forms losing their stories and becoming mere performance. Once their vitality is lost, they are harder to sustain. The few knowledgeable members of the older generation are rapidly passing on. One who was a founder of the Laura Festival, Dr G. Musgrave, a Kuku-Thaypan elder of central Cape York Peninsula, died in February 2006. He was described as a “walking library” of traditional knowledge.<sup>3</sup> As children, he and his brother were hidden in mailbags to prevent them being forcibly removed from their family.

The modern identity suffers from this loss of the traditional vitality not just in the loss of such knowledgeable elders, but also in the danger of becoming merely secular with notional attachment to Indigenous symbols and themes. For some, the native title era has brought a re-vitalisation of traditional values and roots, but sadly the bar is set too high for many to gain recognition of their native title rights. We saw God active, then, in this grounding of Indigenous identity in cultural and spiritual roots, which from an Aboriginal Christian perspective are also foundations for an Aboriginal Christian identity.

#### ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Just as the modern Aboriginal identity needs the traditional spiritual roots to maintain its vitality, we can see a parallel for Aboriginal Christians in that their Christian spirituality in Christ finds a vital

3. News report by Margo Ziotkowski in *The Weekend Post*, Cairns, Saturday 11 February 2005.

meeting point with traditional Aboriginal spirituality. This meeting point is in the *creation* and is the source of inspiration for a rich Aboriginal Christian theology. Christ is connected to creation in these key references: John 1:1-4, Hebrews 1:1-3, and Colossians 1:15-17.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. (John 1:1-4 NRSV)

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. (Hebrews 1:1-3 NRSV)

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers--all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17 NRSV)

For us, when the impact of these verses is grasped, then it is clear that Christ was not a latecomer to this land. Rather, Christ was involved in its creation from the beginning. With this understanding in mind, Aboriginal Christians can readily connect their stories of creator beings to the Creator of all, known through Christ. Aboriginal traditions need not be denied but can be drawn upon, refined and interpreted from a Christian perspective. Such theologising is found in the 2004 Resource Book, *Milbi Dabaar*,<sup>4</sup> prepared by the Working Group in Indigenous Theology of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, Cairns.<sup>5</sup>

With such theology in mind, we were able to see God present in the various expressions of identity at the Laura Festival, including the dance forms that related to the "dreaming" stories and activities of ancestor beings of Aboriginal tradition. It followed then, in answer to our second

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4. Working Group in Indigenous Theology, *Milbi Dabaar* (Cairns: Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, 2004), available from Wontulp-Bi-Buya College, PO Box 960N, North Cairns Qld 4870. See <http://www.wontulp.qld.edu.au/publications.html>.

5. See also, Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit Theology* (Blackburn: HarperCollinsReligious, 1997) and David Thompson, *Bora is Like Church* (Sydney: The Australian Board of Missions, 1985).

question, that this Aboriginal spirituality is not to be dismissed as outside God's favour, but is a treasure to be mined in a positive way in the theology of an Aboriginal Christian identity. Some of what this means is expressed in the following sections.

#### THE EXPERIENCE OF ABORIGINAL CHRISTIANS

As I (Michael) reflected on the festival as an Aboriginal person, my mind wandered back to the experiences of those of us Aboriginal Christians from Yarrabah who dedicated our lives to Christ and wanted to do further Bible studies. We enjoyed local studies but felt that we had to broaden our horizons by meeting Indigenous students from other denominations and other parts of Australia. So some of us enrolled in the Bible College in Darwin called Nungalinga College, an Indigenous ecumenical college that was backed by the Anglican, Roman Catholic and Uniting Churches. It was there and at subsequent studies in Wontulp-Bi-Buya College in Cairns, North Queensland, (also Indigenous and ecumenical and an off-shoot of Nungalinga College) that we learnt about Indigenous Contextual Theology. It was mind-blowing, to put it mildly, to those of us from Yarrabah!

Up to then we were led to believe that our culture was of the Devil and we had to renounce our culture in order to be put right with God. With the benefit of hindsight we could see that we were so brainwashed in that area that we believed worshipping God only in Euro-centric fashion was true worship. Woe betides anyone who tried to introduce traditional Aboriginal worship into this style as they were in danger of hellfire! We had to be good little Europeans and displaying their culture to be accepted by God.

At first, we took the College teachers to task for leading us astray with the teaching of Contextual Theology (with me, metamorphosis had truly set in), but they were very patient and before long we could see that what we were being taught was not only correct but very exciting. Our minds were further settled when one of the main teachers of this topic turned out to be our "mookai" or elder tribal brother, Pastor George Rosendale, of the Lutheran Church. Now many of us from Yarrabah are Bible teachers of Wontulp-Bi-Buya College who watch with uncontained joy as we see others of our people come to realise that God loves us and accepts us as we are, culture and all.

Oddly enough, we have our own language name for God, and so do people from the other tribes, but somehow it didn't connect that God walked with us long before the first Europeans arrived. I guess we never got over the earlier mindset that to be good Christians we had to jettison our culture altogether. Now that our eyes are open, as Indigenous

Christians we are also able to discern and reject certain practices and beliefs that have crept into our culture that are not of God.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR ABORIGINAL CHURCHES TODAY

##### Contemporary Forms of Indigenous Worship

We live in a multicultural society and it is inevitable that Aboriginal Churches will be witnessing a mix of cultures in their congregations as expressions of worship that will take many forms. In such forms as dance, song, language, and art, cultures can enrich each other, but Aboriginal leaders must be careful that one culture does not become so dominant that their own is lost. Just as Aboriginal and contemporary music joined together at Laura to form new expressions of modern Aboriginal identity, so with the Church. We have found in Yarrabah that when we built culturally appropriate communities of faith, more and more of our people are drawn to the Church. Cultural revival has been taking place through the Church for many years now, and non-Indigenous Christians expressed how blessed they were to take part in Church services that have distinct Aboriginal forms of worship.

Aboriginal Christians are aware that what makes it doubly hard in the Australian setting for Aboriginal peoples to accept Christianity in the mainline churches is past practices of the Church. It was not long ago that the Churches were seen as just another arm of the racist, oppressive Government, and the stigma still clings today. The positive side of carrying out mission is that those who respond to the call to accept the Lord Jesus are doing so of their own volition. No longer is it a mandatory call to worship Christ as in the "mission days" but a matter of them hearing and accepting the gospel. As Jesus says in John's Gospel: "my sheep hear my voice, and come" (John 10:3).

When our people do come it would be far more welcoming to enter a church with surrounds that are culturally appropriate, allowing the new believers in Christ to feel comfortable and secure. After generations of being on the outer of the wider Australian society, many of our people are still very sensitive to their surrounds.

At present, Aboriginal Christian traditional dance teams from Yarrabah are being utilised to carry out mission to all parts of Australia as the knowledge of their existence grows. They incorporate the gospel with traditional songs and dances, and their popularity is growing. The ability to meet the demands for their presence are being met thanks to the Anglican Board of Mission (ABM-A) who now see the need for this type of mission.

## Land and Spirituality

Anthropologist Professor Bruce Rigsby has described the dual connection of Aborigines to land in the linked propositions: "Aboriginal people belong to the land and the land belongs to Aboriginal people."<sup>6</sup> The *belonging to* land derives from their spiritual connection with it. Their spiritual essence has its source in the spirit stuff of the specific country or place to which they are joined by their descent from recent ancestors and distant creative ancestor beings who formed the landscape and its features, its law and its language. The essential spirit connection to land is an inalienable connection. The spirits of the ancestors remain in the land because those who die return to their homelands.

In Aboriginal theology, the ancestor beings (called Stories or Dreamings) are expressive of and representative of the Creator of all, known through Christ who himself participated in the creation. Ancestral lands in their spiritual dimension are part of the Kingdom of God through the Creator's immanent presence in his creation.

Flowing from this spiritual belonging of Aborigines to land is their material relationship with the land. "People's rights *in rem* ['in a thing'] to country derive from their spiritual relationship to it *in animam* ['in spirit'] and depend on it. This provides the root of their traditional title to land."<sup>7</sup> Hence the *land belongs to* the Aborigines who have spiritual connection to it:

...we can say that specific groups of people have specific rights in specific tracts of land "as against the world". These include rights to live on the land, to use it in various ways, to speak of it and to present themselves as its owners and to exclude others in various ways from exercising the same rights.<sup>8</sup>

If there is one major discovery revealed by the Native Title movement it is the fact that many Aboriginal people have lost most of the vital ingredients of tradition that identify them as a distinct people. Their stories, songs, dances, language, art, and sacred sites have been lost in too many cases, mainly from the arrival of the Europeans and their dominant culture. Connections to land that join the people to their

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6. Bruce Rigsby, "Aboriginal people's spirituality and the traditional ownership of land", *International Journal of Social Economics*, Vol. 26 No. 7/8/9 (MCB University Press, 1999) 963.

7. Rigsby, "Aboriginal people's spirituality", 965.

8. Rigsby, "Aboriginal people's spirituality", 966.

country like an umbilical cord have differing degrees of severance, with total cut-off to country too common.

As such, the majority of Aboriginal people are losing, or have lost connection with the source of their spirituality, the land. For many, their country is now a concrete landscape polished by millions of tyres screeching over it daily, with petrol, oil, and constant unnatural noise adding to the desecration. The only satisfaction they will get is recognition of their country, with no hope of reclamation, resettlement or compensation, but many are realistic enough and happy enough to accept recognition alone. It can be unsettling to Aboriginal people in such circumstances, causing them to despair that they cannot refresh and reinvigorate themselves without land.

We could remind our Christian people of earlier times in the Bible when another group of God's people were traumatised with invasion, and lost the source of their ongoing spiritual vitality. We are talking about God's chosen people of the time who were the victims of the Babylonians who invaded them and took them into exile. They were cut off from their main source of spiritual strengthening, the Temple, which was destroyed, and their manner of worship was one of the first casualties (Psalm 137:4).

From this Temple emanated the core of their spiritual activities, and it was unthinkable that God would accept their worship and hear their prayers, now that it was gone. When the Romans invaded them centuries later the Jewish people had another Temple in place in Jerusalem, and Jesus was now on the scene. He saw that the people put great reliance in the Temple, to the point that he had to put things in perspective for his followers.

He told them that the core of their spirituality and worship was the Temple, and yet he was greater than the Temple (Matt 12:6). He gave the earth-shattering prediction that the Temple would be destroyed to the extent that "not one stone would be left on another" (Matt 24:1-2). It was a real culture shock because they and their neighbours, the Samaritans, used to go to a central point to worship God; Jews to the Temple at Jerusalem, and Samaritans to Mt Gerizim. When the Temple was destroyed as Jesus prophesied, Jewish people had to find other ways of worship, of revitalising their spirituality, and found that in their synagogues. Those are still their main centres of worship today, thousands of years later.

Would that not also be true of the land of our Aboriginal peoples? Perhaps that tells us as Aboriginal Christians that it is no longer essential to depend on traveling to our tribal country to revitalise our spirituality as our land is part of the Kingdom of God to which we

belong. Many of us have lost physical connection to land forever, but when we are connected to the Creator of the land, we have recovered the spiritual link to our own homeland. We do not need to go to extremes like Naaman who personally received God's blessings on Israelite soil, and hauled some soil back home to his country so that he could stand on it (2 Kings 5:17-18). If we can recover the physical connection to our land through the recognition of native title rights or still have access to our country, then we should count our blessings, but to those of us who cannot, we should not despair.

One of the Bible verses that seem to leap out at us and enfold us and give us a new sense of belonging is Romans 8:16, "God's Spirit joins himself to our spirit to declare that we are God's children." As members of his family, we belong to the Kingdom of God and we have spiritual connection to our homelands within it. [The Kingdom of God or heaven is where God is. God is both transcendent (above and beyond creation) and immanent (within creation but not of it). Hence God (and heaven) is present within Aboriginal ancestral land.] This theologising of connection to land may be viewed as a spiritual sop to the material loss of land. However, from a spiritual perspective it presents a powerful reconnection that can strengthen Aboriginal identity and encourage the revitalisation of Aboriginal values and customs.

As Christians, Aboriginal people are now connected to the Great Spirit, Jesus Christ, who promised that we ourselves shall have life-giving water flowing out of us (John 7:37-39). We ourselves are life-giving billabongs. We have a new family in Christ, and our sense of belonging and ongoing refreshing comes from worshipping our God in our local congregation, gossiping the gospel in our community, and fellowshiping in general. We still carry out the cultural practices we used to do when we did not know Christ, like hunting, fishing and gathering, and camping out, but our conversations are markedly different. If we do go out bush and it is not our country, we should acknowledge the traditional caretakers. But wherever we go, when we are joined to Christ, and obedient to his will, our spirits will be refreshed (Isaiah 4:31).

In Yarrabah in the 1960s, people's refrigerators used to have bottles of water in them that were fetched from many kilometres away on foot and on roads that were no more than rocky and hilly tracks. This water came from a sacred pool and was used to heal the people physically and spiritually. The few that use it today use it for physical healing. Jesus has taken the place of that pool for many of the people and students from Yarrabah that attend Wontulp-Bi-Buya College have written a lovely song in the local language that affirms that Jesus is now their cleansing pool.

## CONCLUSION

The examples above illustrate the working out of Aboriginal Christian theology in practice, both in outward forms and style, and also in the co-joining of spiritual roots in a way that does not deny the traditional roots but reinvigorates them. At the same time, it should be stressed that this process of theologising is not a taking over the traditional roots but a drawing from the same wells.

In places where traditional stories are told and traditional ceremonies, including initiations, are held, they stand in their own right. However, the positive connections with Christian theology actually strengthen the recognition of the traditional roots.<sup>9</sup> This does not mean that a critical eye is not cast on traditional practices. Practices such as sorcery or personal abuse are not accepted but redirected into the Christian ministries of deliverance, healing and reconciliation. Particular stories of creative ancestor beings are illustrative of and representative of the All-Father Creator of all and are important in providing the specific connections between people, land, language and law.

As said above, culture is not static and changes will continue to occur. The Laura Festival helped to affirm to us the importance of spiritual roots in contemporary Aboriginal identity, and that helping to keep the spiritual roots strong is a contribution that Aboriginal Christians can make in the face of the pressures of the "fast world" faced every day.

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9. For an example, see Thompson, *Bora is Like Church*.