

An indigenous understanding of reciprocity



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Reciprocity is an underlying principle expressed throughout Aboriginal societies. Outline and Illustrate the Importance of this fundamental concept In the economic, social, spiritual and political spheres of Aboriginal life (refer to reciprocity In the index to Edwards 2005). The word reciprocity's conjures up a feel good image of 'caring and sharing' (Schwab 1995: 8). However according to Peterson (1993: 861) there is a darker more sinister side to this word when applied to Indigenous Australians.

He defines it as 'demand sharing' rather than reciprocity and he states that Blurter Jones (1987: 38) labels it tolerated theft. Peterson (1993: 860) goes on to assert that little 'giving' is purely altruistic because the giver might simply be protecting themselves from 'pay-back' if they do not give, or be expecting some mutual benefit. Edwards (2004: 76) espouses that white Australians disregarded the reciprocity of traditional territorial rights and misunderstood the code of mutuality in social relationships.

They also failed to identify the privileges and responsibilities central to Aboriginal society based on relationship and reciprocity (Edwards 2004: 24). In order to enter a discussion on reciprocity with regard to our Indigenous culture, it must be looked at on two levels. First how reciprocity is a central principle that has pervaded Aboriginal societies for millennia and secondly the impact that reciprocity with the Western culture has had on this Indigenous community, since the advent of Colonization.

The Western way generally requires the borrower to formulate a case of need, whereas the Aboriginal approach is slanted towards the giver having to explain why he cannot give (Schwab 1995: 8). However there is an

increasing recognition that mutual benefit worked better within the Indigenous community when Aboriginals were hunter gatherers than it seems to in today's welfare society. Schwab (1995: title page) leans towards this realization in his discussion paper short titled "The Calculus of Reciprocity", where one could interpret the meaning of 'calculus' to be the study of changed {mathematical}.

He outlines an accepted act of generations of give and take, to one that is gradually changing to take' and either delayed 'giving back or not at all. In the past the food or other goods were shared out until they were all gone (Schwab 1995: 3-4) but increasingly a 'complex yet subtle calculus is employed on a daily basis as individuals decide which expenses (or gifts) require immediate attention and which can be deferred' (Schwab, 1995: 15). Reciprocity influences the political climate of Aboriginal society, especially the law, which was, is now, and always will be.

According to Needing, Davis and Fox (1986: 42) an Elder sums it up when he says the Aboriginal Law never changes, "always stay same" while conversely, Western law is "always changing". There is an interconnectedness of all things, an agelessness which bears witness that spoilt exists now, as it did before and that creation exists as an historical fact and also has present currency and will into the future. In Colonial times, the principle of reciprocity was enigmatic to the Westerners and a constant source of acrimony - politically, legally and culturally.

The Aboriginal philosophy of reciprocity encompassed the idea that if the balance of life was disturbed, there must be a 'corresponding action' to

repair the Imbalance and the status quo must be preserved aboriginal life and this essay will discuss the importance of reciprocity with regard to economic, political, social and spiritual spheres of Aboriginal life, although it is difficult to compartmentalize Aboriginal society due to its complexity, as there is an overlap and interconnectedness in all things.

The economy is interwoven with politics, as social life is melded with spirituality. Pre Colonially, the concept of reciprocity had ensured the survival of Indigenous Australian peoples' lifestyle as a distinct economic style for thousands of years (Sermons, H. 2005: 70). In more recent times, colonial interference with its autocratic removal and relocation of key individuals and whole groups resulted in virtually a complete collapse of the traditional Aboriginal economy.

As hunting and gathering is no longer possible for city dwellers, the concept of reciprocity becomes even more important, from an economic point of view, due to the nature of extended families all co-habiting in one small dwelling because of mutual obligation or reciprocity. According to Smith (1991) household structure has to stretch to encompass the extra-household fiscal networks it now accommodates. One must consider the concept of reciprocity or mutual benefit to obtain an understanding of domestic expenditure patterns.

To better understand the impact of reciprocity on a singlefamily, here is an example from the Lacuna community (Wallpaper people), which is currently representative of many Aboriginal communities (Sheathe, E 2005: 151). This anecdote illustrates how (poor) Aboriginal health is indisputably linked to their

economic situation and that reduced eating patterns (feast or famine Schwab 2004: 5) are encouraged by the government welfare system.

Elizabeth and David are out shopping for their extended family, when Emily approaches and asks for food explaining her welfare money has run out, she is given quite a large amount of food. Elizabeth explains 'I like to shop just before it closes, because there are fewer people here ... In the mornings there are too many hungry people waiting for you' (Sheathe, E 2005: 152). This means Elizabeth's family will eat well for a few days and then when the food runs out (earlier than intended because she has given some away) they will have to eat sparingly, or not at all, until the next welfare payment.

At the same time David has been approached by Steve to use his gun and ammunition. David is reluctant to give up his gun fearing Steve will damage it, but willingly gives ammunition. David says 'All the time people want things from you. It is no good.' Later Steve returns and gives David a very small proportion of his 'kill' (Sheathe, E 2005: 153); this is representative of a refused reciprocation. Steve's exchange is small because David did not share his gun. In the case of Emily, one can assume that if she has spent her welfare money before 11:55 am on the day she received it, then it is doubtful she will reciprocate Elizabeth's 'gift' of time in the future, as Emily has demonstrated she is unable to budget within her own economy. So, while reciprocation might have worked pre-colonization, it can be seen that in the present welfare economy, it is no longer a system of reciprocation, but rather a system of using and abusing one's kin because reciprocation is seen as a 'right' and seemingly no longer has to be 'repaid', however the 'shame'

involved in not paying back (especially if the person has the means) has not changed (Schwab 2004: 6).

The substance abuser, or the drunkard still have to be supported by their kin but they are an economic threat to the household and possibly provide no means of return of the traditional arrangements of reciprocity while advocating that Indigenous people accept more responsibility so a sound economic base can be rebuilt for Aboriginal Communities. Both Elizabeth and David's self-protectionist attitudes seem to reflect the 'modern' interpretation of reciprocity, that it is their kin's right to take', while sadly, they conceivably no longer expect them to repay in kind.

Therefore the economy of this single household is skewed by having to support the immunity in general, instead of specifically their own family. In the past this would have been balanced out by equal trade-off, from Emily and Steve (or their immediate kin) but now days, due to issues such as alcoholism, homelessness, lack of education and substance abuse, true reciprocity is not as ubiquitous as it once was.

A displaced sense of entitlement on the part of the taker' seems to be replacing the traditional sense of reciprocity and a certain wary counting of the cost seems to be reflected in the 'giver's' calculus where the whole concept seems to be becoming a social burden (Schwab 2004: 8). Indeed, Peterson (1993) in his article 'Demand Sharing: Reciprocity and the Pressure for Generosity among Foragers' asks the question " Why is there a positive enjoyment to share if sharing is commonly by taking rather than giving? " (p. 861).

When it comes to establishing the economic basis of a family, it becomes very difficult to measure their actual income due to people moving in and out of households, but Western society dictates that families meet eligibility criteria in order to qualify for welfare. The ideology of traditional reciprocity is not taken into account ND Schwab (1995: 16) suggests that politics, or policy makers 'accommodate rather than contravene' these monetary instabilities and the ever changing family support arrangements. Western politics or law is generally not taken on board by Aboriginal society, or if it is, it is with reluctance and resentment.

With this in mind, Schwab (2004: 2) wrote his discussion paper " The Calculus of Reciprocity' to further a 'better understanding of the principles of reciprocity in contemporary Aboriginal communities' in the hope that it would better inform government policy makers, at a local, state and national level. There are two sets of politics (law) that the Aboriginal people must abide by. On the one hand there are the Politics and Law of Australia and then there are their own laws and politics as illustrated by The Dreaming, where explicit moral lessons transmit the ideology of didactic human behavior (Schwab 2004: 3).

There is outrage in Australia at the suggestion that certain individuals seek to impose elements of Shari law, but we turn a blind eye, or have a lack of understanding of Indigenous people carrying out their version of reciprocity when it comes to breaking their own laws. Some of the punishments imposed by Aboriginal Law include, death, spearing or other forms of corporal punishment (e. G. , burning the hair from the wrongdoer's body), individual 'dueling with spears, boomerangs or fighting sticks, shaming,

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public ridicule, exclusion from the community or total exclusion (Australian Law Reform Commission ND: 1).

The code of reciprocity controls the mutual rights and kinship obligations of the individual and encompasses the cultural norm of 'payback for wrongdoing (Fryer-Smith, S 2002: 2. 18). As well as an understanding that reciprocity means the sharing of tools and food, there is also a oral principle of reciprocity with its negative forms encompassing retribution and revenge (Alkali and Johnson 1999, in Burbank 2006: 7). Burbank (2006: 7) stated that be killed, then reciprocity can be satisfied by the killing of another family member as due to the intricacies of kinship they are considered one and the same.

This viewpoint would be considered barbaric in Western culture and would not be tolerated. As Edwards (2004: 73) states, the person who breaks the law must serve the sentence and for another person to pay the penalty would not be justified or even permitted in Western law. In indigenous land management, the politics of reciprocity (between Western and Indigenous) should involve knowledge and understanding but the white Australian man tries to impose his vastly different practices onto the Aboriginals who have been practicing successful land management for millennia.

Disappointingly much of the thousands of years of Indigenous knowledge are often disregarded by Whitefishes' (Baker, Davies, Young, 2001: 158). To illustrate the disparity of understanding of the principles of reciprocity in Colonial times, Edwards (2004: 73) outlines the anecdote where the Elder showed he settler a waterhole and then considered it a reciprocal action to

later kill a sheep for food when the settler used the waterhole to water his flock.

This Aboriginal would then be dealt with by the police and the courts and he would be mystified as he could see no justice in a system such as this where reciprocity did not play a part. In his law, laid down by The Dreaming it would be sanctioned behavior to take the sheep as pay back for food for his clan. Western politics plays a part in the downfall of the concept of reciprocity, firstly by taking away the dignity of Indigenous people who cannot reciprocate for their welfare payments in any quantifiable way.

Secondly because life has so drastically changed for the indigenous people since Colonization, they now find themselves stripped of their place and their land and instead find themselves in the undignified position of being passive welfare recipients. So many have fallen by the wayside and become victims of alcohol and substance abuse due to their once well organized and purposeful life being ripped away. This has made them reliant on their relatives generosity, which leaves them no self-respect and minimal fiscal, physical or emotional resources to pay back with.

Therefore the notion of reciprocity as a system of checks and balances to maintain social equilibrium (Bourne and Edwards, 1998, 100, p 106. In Fryer-Smith, S 2002: 2. 18) is stymied for some. Traditionally social stability has been maintained within the Aboriginal society because reciprocity has functioned as a means of equilibrium. Reciprocity has been important throughout all social and family relationships, where a complex system of kinship lines exists. This system relies heavily on the responsible and

reciprocal participation of all members from the give-and-take of tools and hunting weapons, to the sharing of food.

As one Elder explained: " Sharing Just a way of life for Aboriginal people, probably in our genes or something. Might be left over from the old days when we were hunters and that .. . All Aboriginal people know what it's like to be hungry. We just can't turn away someone who says he's hungry ... I guess white people have a hard time understanding that one" (Schwab 1991: 145), whereas Western society is built on capitalism, meaning that some of its central values are totally opposed to the tradition view of Aboriginal culture (Richardson J 2006: 144). Moieties subtle and often invisible to some (Schwab 2004: 3). Indigenous societies place emphasis on social identity and the obligations individuals have to conform to the expectations their society has mapped out for them, whereas in Western societies the emphasis is on the individual and the rights and freedoms of that individual and there is no expectation that people will conform (Edwards, 2004: 52). Almost any behavior is accepted, as long as their actions do not harm others.

Aboriginals believe there is a balance within ourselves that incorporates our social lives and our spiritual lives and to integrate ourselves into the ecology and consciousness of this oral, we need to intertwine these two worlds in our daily existence (Lower 1991 : 49). The requirement of reciprocity underpins most aspects of spiritual life, including ritual, ceremony and the protection of sacred sites (Fryer-Smith, S 2002: 2. 18). If one gives to the ancestor's by way of ceremony, song, ritual and dance they reciprocate by giving the strength, power and knowledge of the spirits (Lower 1991 P: 48).

Likewise if one honors the earth, the earth will reciprocate with an abundant harvest. An Aboriginal had/has a responsibility to perform the rituals that released the creative powers that abide in the land and if these rituals are not performed, great harm could befall the land. Even today, Aboriginal land management techniques rely on understanding the religious links between the Indigenous peoples and the land (Baker et al 2001: 113). Western society puts its faith in science and technology, while keeping an eye on the weather, to reap the finest harvest.

They do not pray or perform religious services to interact with the land. Indigenous people believe the whole environment is formed by The Dreaming, there is a sense that all things partake in the sacredness of life. For millennia, Aboriginal people have co-existed with spiritual beings in their daily life. The essence of spirituality is present throughout the material world and through a cryptic sense of time; Aboriginal People seamlessly connect with the Dreaming origins of their spiritual being (Edwards 2004: 86).

Aboriginal religion is bound up in The Dreaming and dictates that responsibility consists of acting in accordance with a few moral principles. For Aboriginal people, being deprived of their land means a "deprivation of access" to The Dreaming and the severing of a certain life-force which breaks the link with The Dreaming. It is this very real deprivation that has broken the spirit of many an Aboriginal person, leaving them empty and heartsick (Triggering 1988: xv-xvii).

Aboriginal people base their claim to ownership of the land on their belief that the spiritual forces which shaped the land also created them and still

inhabit this land today (Edwards: 19). Rose (2004: 42) points out that earth is the initial mother, the mother of everything. She goes on to say that all knowledge and all living beings in their diversity are ultimately born of earth. Non-indigenous Australians often countryside the significance of the land to Aboriginal people; however The Aboriginal Land Rights and Native Title movements have increased awareness of this issue.

As Rose (1987) says in her article " Consciousness and Responsibility in an Australian Aboriginal Religion", if people protect the land by burning, using the country, performing ceremonies to increase the bounty and by protecting the dangerous Dreaming sites so that no harm escapes, the land will repay them by reciprocal relationship that ensures the continuity of life for all involved, the land, humans, animals and the plant life (peg. 262). Partaking in this exchange of life will lead to balance for the land and its inhabitants. DRP.

Pollinate in " Looking after our Spirit" (Pearce, M 2012) states that we have aduty of careto engage in reciprocity with the earth and to ensure that the environment we have inherited is left in the same, if not better condition, than when we got it. This is an ideal philosophy, but unfortunately the greed of many non-indigenous ventures such as mining for minerals and gas in many traditional lands has caused an imbalance and to the eyes of the Indigenous peoples, many landscapes are now out of balance and the aim of cooperation has been pillaged.

Non-indigenous ventures plunder the land and they take, but they do not reciprocate by giving anything back, although Western conservation laws are

beginning to address this situation. As this essay has demonstrated, reciprocity is an economic means of survival and the Indigenous political system is built on the presumption of reciprocity, while the Australian Judicial system has been influenced by Aboriginal philosophy. Such documents as 'Aboriginal Customary Laws and Sentencing, Aboriginal Customary Laws and the Notion of 'Punishment" by the Australian Law Reform Commission, (ND) and the

Aboriginal Bench book for Western Australia Courts (2002) by Fryer Smith have been distributed to foster an understanding of the concept of reciprocity that Aboriginal life is founded on. Society is based on complex kinship lines where reciprocity is expected and accepted but is open to exploitation as demonstrated by those abusing the passive welfare system and who no longer honor the traditional social norms. A fulfilling spiritual life revolves around maintaining relations with the Dreaming Spirits.