

Aboriginal dispossession

[Government](#), [Colonialism](#)



In the 1950's, a vast deposit of bauxite was found at the Yirrkala Methodist mission in the Northern Territory. When the mission lease expired, the Federal Government changed it to a special purpose lease that could be taken away for mining, but no Aboriginal people were consulted. When the Methodist missionaries Edgar and Ann Wells arrived at Yirrkala, they learnt that the Aboriginal people were very disturbed and anxious that the mining would violate their sacred sites but despite the feelings of the Aborigines, the Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, announced that a mining project was to go ahead at Yirrkala. The Methodist mission was to be reduced from over 500 square kilometres to about one and a quarter square kilometres. This caused major trauma to the Yirrkala people and made them feel dislocated from their religion and their life, until they petitioned against it, which led to the Yirrkala Bark Petition. The Yirrkala Bark Petition was of great significance because it focused attention on Aboriginal affairs in white consciousness and influenced other missionaries to protect their sacred land. Dispossession is the process of the expulsion of a person or group from land, through the process of law. This dispossession has had a continuing detrimental effect through a loss of spiritualities. For the Stolen Generations, those who were removed from their Aboriginal families, the trauma has extended to the loss of personal identity. Aboriginal spirituality lies in the belief in a cultural landscape. Everything on the vast desert landscape has meaning and purpose. The land is both an external landscape and an internal relationship with the ancestral spirits. Landmarks are both metaphysical and physical. As an example Uluru can be seen as an epic poem, a source of sacred law, a physical landmark and a repository of knowledge. Separation from the land

meant that cultural practices and ceremonies associated with the land could not be carried out. They were also restricted in their access to sacred sites and much tribal lore and law was lost. Aboriginal people were unable to draw effectively on the spiritual power of the Dreaming and the ancestral spirits. Dreaming stories were rendered meaningless: stories only hold meaning if one has connection with the land. Aborigines had their lives robbed of meaning as it subsequently destroyed their spirituality as well. Many Indigenous people felt alienated and isolated from their culture.

Dispossession broke up Aboriginal nations and disturbed the religious and cultural beliefs and practices around which their lives had been centred. Kinship integrates culture, rituals and hierarchical roles. The continuing effect of being separated from kinship groups led to them not being able to fulfil their spiritual requirements such as taking care of their personal totems, nurturing the land and conducting ceremonies and rituals. Aboriginal people lost their sense of identity and belonging, not only to the land, but to each other. One of the main effects of dispossession was the loss of language, this was caused the Europeans. The Europeans forbade Indigenous people to sing and dance, and they even forbade them to speak in their own language. Language is the most important way in which humans make sense of their world. It is through language that people express their world views, their concepts, and their ideas and definitions of themselves. Loss of language meant that Indigenous people also lost many of their traditional beliefs and the means of expressing spirituality. Song was also an important part of Aboriginal lifestyles. Songs provided the collective memory of the tribe and were used to ease members through each rite of passage.

Separation from kinship groups also led to demoralisation and depression in some Aboriginal groups, which led to alcoholism, drug use and violence. In the Stolen Generations, when children were removed from their families and placed in institutions, and when Aboriginal families were removed from their land to missions, kinship groups were broken down. Children were removed so that they could assimilate. This meant acquiring the basic attitudes, habits and way of life of white culture, even changing their names to European ones. Children were exposed to sexual, physical and emotional abuse in these institutions. Most children grew up without learning their religion or culture. The 'Bringing Them Home Report' identifies psychiatric and psychological damage that was done to these forcibly removed in their childhood. Without the intense and loving nurturing of their family, self-reliance was undermined. Without the models of good parenting, the skills of effective parenting were not passed on to the members of the Stolen Generations and the harmful impact extend to the generation that followed the Stolen Generation. In the twentieth century, forced assimilation encompassed extinction of family links, identity, culture and language. A highpoint in reconciliation was reached in 2008 when Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, apologised for previous government policies. He acknowledged that the Government policies that separated Aboriginal people from their land inherently separated them from the Dreaming as well. The amazing thing is not that so much Indigenous culture was destroyed, but that so much of it has been retained and, more recently, reclaimed.