

## District 9455's Aboriginal Reference Group

In the February 2017 District Governor's newsletter I provided a few tips on "*How can we engage with Aboriginal people?*" This month I will focus on the question asked by many Rotarians, "*I don't know a lot about Aboriginals and their culture, history, heritage and issues?*"

My initial response to this question is usually "*you are like most Australians*"! Most of us have grown up in communities having little contact with Aboriginal people (though in many cases we don't recognise them because they look like us). When we went to school we were taught very little about Aboriginal Culture and History. Much of our information on Aborigines came through the media and it was generally not positive. Occasionally we had personal negative experiences which reinforced general community stereotypes. When we had personal contact with them we did not know how to relate to them – we didn't know how they thought or felt and they seemed so different from us – we did not feel comfortable about starting and continuing a conversation (particularly a personal conversation) with them.

As Non-Indigenous people it has become clear that we need to talk to them to begin the development of an understanding and appreciation of them as people and to become informed about their culture.

So here are some useful facts about their many cultures.

At colonisation in 1829 in Western Australia, there were about 131 distinct Aboriginal language groups (often referred to as Aboriginal Nations) in the State. A few languages have disappeared and a few Aboriginals can no longer speak their original language. However, many people have retained significant parts of their unique languages and culture. Some Nations have many fluent speakers of their languages and much of their cultures have been retained. Different languages correlate with different cultures and cultural practices. Similarly, different environments (e.g. deserts versus colder rainy areas) usually mean different words, cultures and cultural practices. This means you can't treat all Aboriginal people as alike.

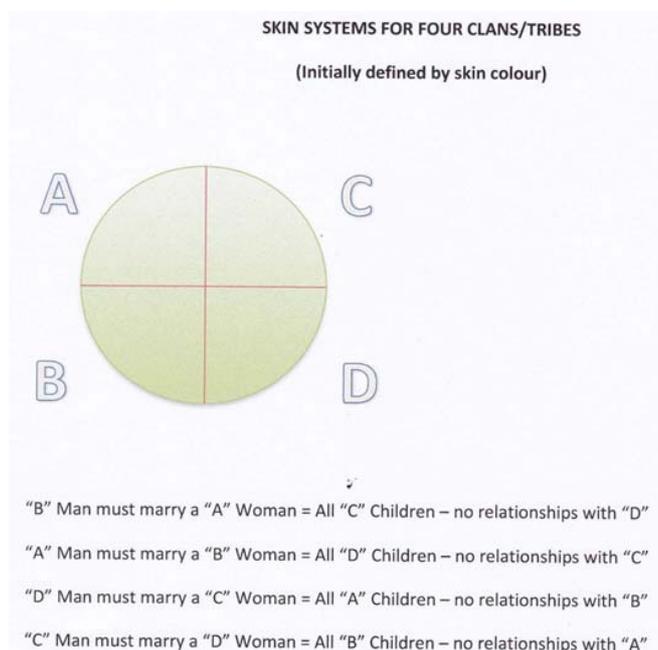
Aboriginal Culture is a verbal culture. Information is passed from one person to another through yarn-ing and story-telling. Dance, songs and art serve an important role in the transfer of cultural knowledge. A culture that transmits itself verbally is vulnerable. Removing children from families in the past meant that many Aboriginal children gained limited information about their culture, language and traditions, and how they belong within their culture. The high incarceration rates for Aboriginal men (especially fathers) also has seriously interfered with the transfer of cultural information. The absence of fathers and mothers during their children's formative years has impacted heavily on the transfer of knowledge regarding culture, heritage, traditions, languages and kinship connections. This has left many children "lost" with little motivation, much like "Lost Children from the Empire" who were moved from England after World War II to the colonies. At later periods of their life, these children spent an inordinate amount of time looking for their connections to family, as do many "Stolen Generation" Aboriginal children.

There is general agreement in the research literature that Australian history commenced at least 40,000 years ago with Aboriginal people occupying our continent. Some carbon dating research suggests that our Aboriginal history may go back 60,000 to 70,000 years, not just 40,000 years. While there is a significant amount of research which indicates that they arrived in Australia via land-bridges through Indonesia and New Guinea from Africa via Asia when sea levels were lower in the past.

Don't be surprised if you are told about events that happened apparently in the recent past but which science confirms happened many years ago (e.g. one elder talks a lot about the time they used to walk to Rottnest and how the Swan River flowed to the sea to the North of the Island – science confirms when sea-levels were lower than today (i.e. about 7,000 and certainly 20,000 years ago). In recent years Aboriginal people (especially women) began talking about growing grasses and harvesting the seed to make bread. Researchers have now found many mortars carved in rocks with stone pestles which confirm that the culture made damper 30,000 years ago, 15,000 years before the Egyptians. Some Aboriginal women still cultivate the grasses for seed and flour making. Damper 200+ years old has also been found sealed into rock storages, confirming that Aboriginal cultures were not just hunter-gather societies. Hence, Aboriginal accounts of their culture can be more accurate than first thought to be.

Most Aboriginal cultures have a seasonal system that is different from the European Seasons of summer, autumn, winter and spring. Generally, from Albany to Broome Aboriginals have six seasons that relate to the availability of food throughout the year. Each Aboriginal Nation describes their six seasons in a different way related to the different coastal environments between Albany and Broome. In desert areas the number of seasons may be as few as five, and in the Kimberley there may be more than six seasons. From my perspective, the Aboriginal seasons are probably better descriptors of Australian seasons than those we borrowed from Europe.

Aboriginal people developed a skin system of kinship connections system to ensure that they kept their culture genetically healthy some 40,000 to 70,000 years ago. Skin systems were initially used to determine relationships and marriages. From Esperance to Albany around to Broome, most of the Aboriginal cultures have a fairly simple skin systems involving four tribes. In the Kimberley and Northern Territory they have a three-dimensional skin systems with up to 16 tribes. The Skin system for 4 tribes/clans (A, B, C & D) is explained in the sketch below.



Today, many of these skin systems are no longer used to determine marriages, though they are still very important to the understanding of kinship connections and where individuals belong in their culture.

In a future District Governor’s newsletter I will further elaborate on useful facts to help you gain an improved understanding of Aboriginal Culture.

### **Project Opportunities for Clubs Wishing to improve the lives of Aboriginals in WA**

An organisation called Kinship Connections Aboriginal Corporation which helps Aboriginal Youth in Noongar Country to re-connect with their people is running a Volunteer “Weed Choppers” Program where Aboriginal youth help the community (e.g. doing lawn mowing, gardening, home cleaning and car-washing) whilst they participate in their re-connection program. The aim of this program is to develop responsibility and leadership and, to develop work skills and routines. Kinship connections is looking for a **“people mover”** to move the volunteers from job to job in the community and **people interested in working as volunteers beside** the Aboriginal youth as they undertake these functions. Kinship Connections is Managed by Anne Oakley, and its metropolitan base is at 415 Acton Avenue, Kewdale 6105.

The Rotary Club of Melbourne has gained approval from Rotary Australia to establish an End Trachoma by 2020 program on an Australia-wide basis. They will be looking to WA Clubs to contribute to this worthy endeavour in the near future.

Trachoma is the leading infectious cause of blindness globally. Australia remains the world's last developed country where it still persists. It is caused by the bacterium *Chlamydia Trachomatis* and spreads by personal contact (via hands, clothing, towels or bedding), or by flies that have been in contact with the discharge from the nose or eyes of an infected person. Blindness from recurrent trachoma infections is irreversible. But trachoma is an entirely preventable disease, and infections can be treated quickly and effectively.



The World Health Organisation recognises that an incidence of 5% or less as an acceptable standard. In the recent past, Western Australia has had an incidence rate of 24% (similar to what currently exists in the Northern Territory and parts of South Australia). The Health Department's Country Health Services Teams and Environmental Health Branch have successfully reduced incidences levels from 24% to 2.6% through the use of common anti-biotics in every home in remote communities on a line North of Geraldton to Esperance between 2012 and the present. South of this line there may still be higher than acceptable incidences in Homewest Accommodation facilities where residents do not adhere to recognised hygiene standards.

In the northern part of WA, Trachoma will re-occur and the incidence will gradually increase unless preventative measures are taken. Northern Territory experience suggests that a return to a 24% incidence rate takes about eight years. The ARG is currently examining the types of preventative measures that need to be taken before recommending to Clubs how they should respond to the Rotary Club of Melbourne's initiative.

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26 April 2017