

The Cook Islands

The Cook Islands is a small group of islands spread over a vast area of the South Pacific. The nation was created by colonialism as the neighbouring French territories to the east are more similar to the southern group than the north western islands, where completely different languages are spoken.

The language and culture of the Cook Islands is similar to the Maori language and culture of New Zealand. The people have always been deeply spiritual and accepted the Judeo-Christian scriptures as being resonant with their own culture of human sacrifice, cannibalism and tribal warfare. This led to almost 100 years of missionary rule and then annexation by New Zealand for another 64 years.

The missionaries and the New Zealand administration provided schools on every island and a high school on the island of Rarotonga. Scholarships were available for children to study in New Zealand from the 1930s. Unfortunately, from the time of annexation, English was compulsory at school and children were punished for speaking the Maori language right up to the 1970s.

Today the islands are dominated by European businessmen, most of whom have married into the Maori communities and so their children have the all important right to inherit land. These families own the local retail business, the local airline, the oil company, the buses, and the tourist hotels. They are wealthy and pay their staff the minimum wage of \$5 per hour, perhaps \$6 or \$7. Many Cook Islanders prefer to go to New Zealand to work for \$18 per hour and so Fijian migrant workers are being used. The resident population of the Cook Islands has dropped from 11,700 in 2010 to 10,900 in 2011.

There is much concern being expressed about the thefts and burglaries from tourists as this affects the reputation of the Cook Islands as a tourist destination. In fact, there has been theft and burglary going on for many years as the poorest and the most neglected children steal food, money and alcohol from their neighbours and the local shopkeepers. There is very little obvious violence.

In fact, the entire community appears to be practicing a form of diversion from the court system. The local JPs are not legally trained and judges come out from New Zealand to hear the criminal cases. I was told that everybody knows everybody, and that is why the Police are helpful rather than harassing, the Prison and Probation Officers are kind rather than abusive, the Child Welfare services are seldom called in and the community says "these are our children, we don't want them to go to jail". There are no juvenile detention centres and nobody under the age of 18 is in custody.

The close relationships between all of the people in the Islands include inter-island marriages and what is known as "the feeding child". The first grandchild belongs to the father's parents and the second to the mother's parents. A namesake belongs to the person they are named for. This does not necessarily mean that the child lives with the grandparents or other relatives but it might. In addition, children born to very young parents, or to people who already have six or seven children, may be given to a relative to bring up. The child is usually free to move between natural parents and feeding parents once he or she is old enough to make the choice, and is quite relaxed about having two sets of parents.

These close bonds create a safety net for most of the children and the chances of them being "on the street" are small. I met 4 or 5 young people who had slept in abandoned houses and stolen food to survive but they were the children of parents affected by alcohol abuse, or victims of sexual abuse. Many Cook Islanders have migrated to Australia and New Zealand and so some families are now missing important links in their networks. The combination of mental illness/substance abuse and an incomplete family system may allow a few children to slip through the net into real poverty.

The overrepresentation of Indigenous Australians in our prisons and, even more so, in our juvenile detention centres, is a national disgrace and ought to be addressed far more vigorously than it is. When we wonder about the causes, we see at once that it is not about bad people or bad choices. Nobody could argue that Indigenous people make bad choices at a higher rate than non-Indigenous people. It is clearly about the social conditions in the different communities.

In the Cook Islands the people have been subjected to missionary rule, attempts to destroy their culture, epidemics of disease, colonisation, and European domination in business, politics and education. Although they have not been dispossessed, their traditional system of land tenure has been seriously affected by the transition to private ownership through the Land Court set up by a British Resident. There are now rich and poor, successful and unsuccessful, migrants, stayers and returnees.

The one thing that is still operating in the favour of the people of the Cook Islands is the family. Family does not mean mother, father and children in this community. It means extended family, grandparents, relatives, uncles, aunts, and feeding children. All members of the extended family on both the wife and the husband's side expect to care for each other and to be cared for by each other, so that poverty is redefined as neglect. Families remember their history, their descent lines and their roles. Some are the hereditary leaders and some are the descendents of the priests of the old religion. Although they would usually say that they are Christian, many of the wisdom speakers are still operating today. The links of the people with their present day families and with their ancestors are unbroken.

It seems clear that the settlement of Australia involved the "dispersion" of the Indigenous people, by any and every method. Shooting, forced removals, incarceration in reserves, removal of children from their parents, young people used as servants, all served to increase the wealth of the settlers and break the links between the people and their communities. Now, when Indigenous children are in trouble, homeless or neglected, we don't say "these are our children, we don't want them to go to jail". We have police and probation and prison officers from an alien culture dealing with the children of someone else.

I don't know how to repair this damage but I do know who is responsible for it. A new book by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) argues that it is economic inequality in a society that maintains the gaps in health and social problems between the different communities. Australia is listed as one of the most unequal countries in the world and this would be because we have the very rich and the very poor, ignored by most people. The Indigenous rapper Colin Darcy (Caper) sings "surrounded by poverty ... what about in your own country? What about Aboriginal communities? They too live in third world conditions".

Perhaps in the 21st century, after the loss of many extended family networks in Australia, it is about poverty. Crime is increasing in the Cook Islands as wealthy hotel owners charge tourists \$600 per night and the local people migrate to New Zealand for better wages. Many Indigenous people in Australia were evicted from their traditional homes on pastoral properties when the minimum wage laws were applied to them in 1968. This cold-blooded act of self-interest created homeless, jobless people vulnerable to old-fashioned English laws relating to such offences as vagrancy and public nuisance.

According to Wilkinson and Pickett, there is more than one way to create an equal society. In Sweden, heavy taxes provide extensive social services. In Japan, people are paid fairly equal wages. Both countries have very low levels of imprisonment and very healthy populations. As long as Australia continues to be an unequal society, the Indigenous people, the poorest, will suffer the most.