

Identity Politics: The Construction of the Indigenous

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The focus of this chapter is the National Aborigines and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC), and the annual celebration NAIDOC Week. Within this chapter, the ideas of the modern and tradition will be applied to NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week to help understand what its role is and why it is important, but also to understand the present moment in which we live. The true significance of NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week will be grounded in the application of the modern and tradition to the change from before NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week to the time when it was established. The latter part of this chapter will discuss Aboriginal identity politics and explore the ways in which the ideals of tradition and the modern have shaped and constructed indigenous identities throughout the history of NAIDOC. From this, it will be assumed that tradition and the modern are opposite forces, creating different identities that contradict each other, but this idea will be critiqued through the discussion of the dialect that takes place between tradition and the modern, how tradition orientates the modern perspective, and how this resonates within the contemporary moment. Additionally, theories of how NAIDOC challenges the dominant construction of what it means to be Aboriginal will also be noted.

NAIDOC has a long and complex history in regard to its establishment and recognition within Australia. The history of the formation of NAIDOC clearly has roots in colonialism, but for the purpose of this chapter, the key moments in modern Australian history that emphasised the need for an organisation like NAIDOC will only be noted.

The need for an organisation such as NAIDOC became evident in the 1920s when Aboriginal rights groups realised their boycotts of Australia Day were being ignored by the larger Australian public (NAIDOC, 2012). In a reaction to this, Aboriginal rights groups such as the Australian Aboriginal League (AAL) were established in the aim to be active and gain recognition and equality from the government and the wider Australian population (NAIDOC, 2012). Following this, in 1938, The Day of Mourning made political and social history when protesters walked the streets of Sydney for Aboriginal rights, a moment which has been described as, 'one of the first major civil rights gatherings in the world' (NAIDOC, 2012, pp.1). However, despite these efforts, the Australian government still would not actively enact legislative changes to acknowledge or support indigenous Australians due to a lack of 'constitutional powers in relation to Aboriginal people' (NAIDOC, 2012, pp.1).

Following this, in the 1940's and 50's The Day of Mourning was being held annually as a protest for Aboriginal rights (NAIDOC, 2012). However, it was becoming increasingly apparent that the day should hold some aspect of celebration for the rich and diverse nature of Aboriginal culture, rather than possessing an ever negative and reactionary stance (NAIDOC, 2012). In response to this, the National Aborigines Day Observance Committee (NADOC) was formed (the incorporation of Islanders in NAIDOC was later made in the 1990's), as well as Remembrance Day which is held annually on the second Sunday of July (NAIDOC, 2012). In 1974 NADOC established NADOC Week, a week of celebration in regard to Aboriginal culture, tradition, customs and Aboriginal and Islander achievements, through a range of

national activities that support local communities (NAIDOC, 2012). In 1984 NADOC encouraged the government to recognise NADOC Week as an important national public holiday to illuminate the unique richness of Australian indigenous culture, which has still not happened despite various other Aboriginal organisations echoing the need to make the event an official holiday (NAIDOC, 2012).

These days, NAIDOC annually selects an appropriate theme and city for NAIDOC Week to reflect the important issues of contemporary Aboriginal and Islander people (NAIDOC, 2012). The week long celebration can be brought to life in a number of ways; from large scale community organised events such as markets, Aboriginal dancing and bush tucker stalls, to simple and easy individual tasks such as researching a famous Aboriginal person in history or appreciating Aboriginal art (NAIDOC, 2012). This year, the 2012 theme was the “Spirit of the Tent Embassy: 40 years on” which could be argued as the chosen theme due to its high media coverage in the beginning of this year with Tony Abbott’s comments that the Tent Embassy should be removed from Canberra, due to the fact that indigenous people were now equal (Griffiths, 2012). This was followed by a large scale Aboriginal protest, resulting with the PM Julia Gillard controversially losing her shoe and being escorted from the protesters by a security guard (Griffiths, 2012). Hence, this issue of the Tent Embassy reflects contemporary indigenous concerns and encapsulates the long term conflict between indigenous Australia and the government.

From this brief and time sensitive re-telling of Australian indigenous political and social history, it is clear that the history of the formation of NAIDOC reflects the contextual restrictions that were placed on basic Aboriginal human and civil rights, as the ideals that shaped the birth of NAIDOC were founded on the need for Aboriginal equality and recognition of their culture by the Australian government and people (NAIDOC, 2012). This ultimately portrays how and why the formation of NAIDOC took place; there was a significant need for an organisation that not only supported the right to passively protest for Aboriginal rights and equality, but more importantly, an entity that celebrated indigenous culture and encouraged others to celebrate its richness and diversity. Within its context, this effectively differentiated NAIDOC from other Aboriginal rights groups as it employed a positive and hopeful mission engaging communities from all walks of life (white or Aboriginal), rather than a politically fuelled ambition. NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week therefore defines and understands its own role as something which encourages the thriving of indigenous culture, the celebration of indigenous tradition and Aboriginal and Islander achievements, while as exemplified with the theme of the Tent Embassy this year, NAIDOC “naturally” understands itself as a voice for the wider indigenous Australian community; passively standing up for indigenous civil, social, legal and political rights (NAIDOC, 2012).

The theories of tradition will now be applied to NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week in the aim of further understanding its significance and importance. Gross (1992) states that tradition, ‘defined values, established continuities, and codified patterns of behaviour’ (pp.1). This definition is more or less the most generally accepted notion of tradition; that tradition is tied to the past, it is a way of living in the present through the ways of the past, and it seems to overtly oppose the ideals of modernism such as progress and revolution (Gross, 1992). Eagleton (2008) adds to this idea of tradition, but critiques the ideal that, ‘the work of the past will always deepen- rather than say decimate – our present self understanding’, and goes on to say that tradition is a, ‘grossly complacent theory of history’ (pp.63). The concept of tradition, as a way of life through precedent of the past, can be applied to indigenous culture in respect to their strong religious and spiritual beliefs, and their way of life which they complacently

lived until European colonisation (NAIDOC, 2012). This is because Aboriginal culture is heavily reliant on traditional values and lessons of the past, which in essence is what they were fighting for throughout the formation of NAIDOC; that their culture and traditional values be recognised by the Australian government and people (NAIDOC, 2012). Hence, it is evident that the notion of tradition can be applied to the Aboriginal way of life before European colonisation, but therefore can also be applied to the underlying values that saw the process of the formation of NAIDOC; which was the fight for these traditional values to be recognised rather than shunned (NAIDOC, 2012). This is a core reason why the formation of NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week is so significant, as it means that NAIDOC was formed through a long history of resistance to modernism by the fuel of traditional values, and by “being” NAIDOC now envelops both the ideals of tradition and the modern.

However, Hobsbawm (1993) has a different understanding of tradition, as he believes that there are predominately only, “invented traditions” and that the notion of “custom” more accurately embodies ideals that were previously understood to be a part of “tradition”. Hobsbawm’s (1993) idea of the invented tradition is;

‘Invented tradition’ is taken to mean a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.... However, insofar as there is such reference to a historic past, the peculiarity of ‘invented’ traditions is that the continuity with it is largely fictitious. In short, they are responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition (pp.1).

From this definition, it could be argued that the invented tradition surrounding NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week is the function of “celebrating” indigenous culture, rather than ‘fighting’ for it. This idea of collectively *celebrating* indigenous culture and Aboriginal and Islander achievements (with the aim to gain recognition and so forth) rather than *protesting* for this, had not been established before NAIDOC (NAIDOC, 2012). However, nowadays this idea of celebrating indigenous culture is seen as a “tradition” or “custom” due to various other organisations, groups, and general pop-culture taking on this same role (Hobsbawm, 1993). Put simply, since NAIDOC, the idea of celebrating indigenous culture has become so embedded into Western culture due to its repetition, it has become a custom/tradition and perceived as normal (Hobsbawm, 1993).

Similarly, the invention of this tradition, ‘implies continuity to the past’ evident through the history of the formation of NAIDOC as stated earlier, from a re-active role to a seemingly fluid pro-active and positive role (Hobsbawm, 2003, pp.1). Some examples of how this invented tradition has become so accepted and embedded into society through repetition are; the Garma celebrations, Reconciliation Day, Croc Festivals, The Deadly Awards, the recent film *Bran Nu Dae* and many more (Creative Spirits, 2012).

On the other hand, custom, defined by Hobsbawm (1993) as discussed earlier, takes on a similar role as Gross’s (1992) idea of tradition; Hobsbawm states that custom gives, ‘any desired change (or resistance to innovation) the sanction of precedent, social continuity and natural law as expressed in history’ (pp.2). Therefore, the ideas of Gross’s (1992) tradition and Hobsbawm’s (1993) custom can be applied to the situation in history before NAIDOC

was established; as indigenous Australians were fighting and protesting for their traditional values to be recognised by wider Australia, while the idea of invented tradition and modernism can be applied to the situation after NAIDOC was established; the focus shifted to the celebration of indigenous culture, the celebration of Aboriginal and Islander achievements, and the improvement and progress by indigenous people for indigenous people (NAIDOC, 2012).

To modernism, Kant (1784) states that modernism and the modern age is, ‘mans emergence from his self-imposed immaturity’ (pp.1). Modernism is concerned with progress, improvement, and rationalisation, and through the ideals spawned from the enlightenment it gave rise to colonialism (Malpas, 2005). Similarly, the modern, ‘determines its own directions into the future’ (Kant, 1784, pp.1.), unlike custom/tradition which relies heavily on the ways of the past (Hobsbawm, 1993). Marx & Engels (1848) provide a clear distinction between tradition and the modern with the statement, ‘All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real condition of life and his relations with his kind’ (pp.2). This translates into the idea that modernity is a state of ongoing and constant transformation, opposed to tradition/custom which is perceived as stagnant and irrational.

Similarly, although there have been many critics who believe Aboriginal people and their culture will never embrace modernism (Gascoigne, 2002), it can be argued to be relevant in relation to the mission of NAIDOC to move forward, determine its own way into the future through the celebration of indigenous and Torres Strait Islander people’s achievements, and its aim to improve the life of indigenous Australians and educate the wider Australian public (Gross 1992; NAIDOC, 2012). This idea is nicely encapsulated in Artist and Spiritual Healer James Baban’s statement when asked about what NAIDOC means to him;

‘It makes me feel happy because it is acknowledging indigenous people, also makes you feel sad as well because it acknowledges what really has happened...I move forward into the positive because its about today, and what makes today is what makes tomorrow, so hopefully we’ll be able make a nice tomorrow’ (Baban, 2011, pp.1).

The idea of “moving forward” in order to make a better tomorrow (which is underpinned by values of social progress), is the very founding ideals that shape the theory of modernism, therefore it is an angle that can be applied to NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week which helps define its role within society (Gillen & Gosh, 2006). This is complemented by the idea that modernism is about ‘determining its own way into the future’ as discussed, NAIDOC did exactly that when it embodied principles of celebration, positiveness, and hope in its mission, opposed to anger, protest and politics (Gross, 1992). This means that NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week is a significant shift in indigenous history towards the concept of modernism, similar to the idea of invented tradition, it is the first time in which indigenous Australians created an organisation in the hope of moving forward, rather than fighting for the past (NAIDOC, 2012).

In addition to this, there are also issues surrounding identity politics and indigenous Australians. Identity politics concerns the idea that identity is increasingly defined by someone’s minority of status or cultural difference that is not accessible to the dominant culture (Shouls, 2003). This ultimately means that the idea of “identity” is heavily linked with context, and can be defined by what it is not (Shouls, 2003).

This is hugely related to indigenous Australians, the formation of NAIDOC, and white Australian attitudes throughout history. The perception of Aboriginal people being defined by discrimination is a predominant discourse within society now, and throughout the history of the formation of NAIDOC (Cowlshaw, 2009). Cowlshaw (2009) sums this up nicely with his statement that, “authentic Aboriginality was emerging locally as a living principle of discrimination” (p.160). This “authentic” identity could be argued to be viewed that way entirely due to context; the fact that the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were constantly fighting the government and Australian population for basic civil rights, created a focus on the struggles of indigenous people and their hardships (Cowlshaw, 2009; NAIDOC, 2012). This effectively constructed the similar identity of ‘the other’; the idea that indigenous Australians were not like Westerners, instead they were native, backwards and below them (Bradford, 2001; Thomas, 1994). This is emphasised in Attwood’s (1989) statement, ‘For Europeans the term “Australian” in 1800 still meant Aborigine; by 1900 they had successfully shifted the word to mean white residents in such a way as to exclude the original Australians’ (White, 1997, pp.1). The notion of modernism can be applied to these constructions of indigenous identities, as it was the ideals of modernism that fuelled colonisation (Malpas, 2005). For the purpose of this chapter and in relation to NAIDOC, the modernist constructions of indigenous identities are argued to be more heavily linked to the period before NAIDOC’s existence, which was the fight for recognition of their tradition and basic rights.

As NAIDOC emerged, the construction of indigenous identities can be said to have been challenged, as overtime, new discourses of what it meant to be Aboriginal flourished. Although NAIDOC still enveloped the identity of discrimination, the act of celebration added an extra dimension in the identity of indigenous Australians; it shone a light on their spiritual, creative, and colourful side, an aspect that the majority of westerners were ignorant to (NAIDOC, 2012). Ironically, although the formation of NAIDOC can be identified to have happened through something similar to a modernist movement (the process of moving forward in a new direction), the identity of Aboriginal people as something that enveloped optimism (in the eyes of westerners) can be related to the notions of tradition. This is because the identity that NAIDOC helped publicise, that Aboriginal people are part of a rich and dynamic culture, relates to the very essence of their past (NAIDOC, 2012). Simply, the identity that has become attractive to westerners through the establishment of NAIDOC is completely due to indigenous people’s rich traditional values and customs (NAIDOC, 2012).

It is important to note that for the purpose of this chapter the discussion on Aboriginal identity politics is very one-dimensional in order to properly apply the theories of tradition and the modern. From this discussion however, it is evident that modernism and tradition are interlinked, with the effect that meaning can only be made by interpreting and applying both theories to adequately understand NAIDOC Week, indigenous identity politics, and how this resonates within the contemporary moment. After this research, it is evident that NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week resonate in the contemporary moment as a liberating, positive, and traditionally respected organisation/festival that celebrates indigenous Australians and their achievements (NAIDOC, 2012). In relation to identity politics, this resonates in the contemporary moment as a complex subject with many layers of discourse and sensitivity that providing one identity without overlapping into other discourses of identity is impossible (Shouls, 2003).

In conclusion, NAIDOC and NAIDOC Week, through the application of tradition and the modern can be understood as a significant and history making organisation through its

modernist movement to move forward in a different direction in the hope of progress. This is argued to have been achieved through the invented tradition of creating an aspect of celebration. The irony lies in the fact that the modernist movement that gave rise to optimism and celebration, relates to the celebration of tradition and custom. This clarifies that the modern and tradition are closely tied in the process of understanding what NAIDOC's role is in contemporary society. Similarly, the construction of indigenous identities through the application of the modern and tradition can be understood as something inherently complex and emphasises the mutual existence of the two theories in order to adequately interpret meaning.

Notes on Contributor

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