

# THE ABORIGINAL EDUCATION SYSTEM

In thinking about educational stages in traditional Aboriginal culture, several similarities can be drawn with Western cultures. For instance, in both cultures, education stages are readily divided into kindergarten, primary school, secondary school, tertiary, post-graduate, and professorial levels. However, this is with the proviso that after primary school level, there are in Aboriginal culture, separate curricula for males and females.

At kindergarten level in both cultures, the emphasis is on peer socialisation and learning motor skills through play and imitation. However, in Aboriginal culture there is rather more emphasis on observing the child's emerging natural interests and abilities. This then becomes part of a lifelong educational process of grooming and mentoring each individual, so that they maximise their vocational potential in adult life. Memory is the most prized of all abilities in Aboriginal culture, so the quicker you learn the quicker you progress.

This individual grooming becomes more evident as primary schooling progresses. Those children who learn more quickly or show particular aptitudes, are given individual and group tuition that corresponds with their learning stage, rather than their age. This means that a gifted child might be at the end of their primary schooling at age ten, while another child might be thirteen.

This also applied to girls, and menarche was therefore not the sole determinant of the timing of graduation from primary school. Graduation to secondary education was a significant ritual occasion for both boys and girls, with a mixture of ages from eleven to fourteen. For ever after that, each member of a graduating class would see themselves as brothers or sisters.

Over the course of secondary schooling, each child received general and vocational training, in both individual and group contexts. However, only the brightest would then be chosen to proceed on to tertiary level education in their chosen vocation, whether it was in the areas of law, medicine, diplomacy, astronomy, environmental management, art, dance, theatre, or suchlike.

However, high expertise in a particular field did not of itself guarantee you of progression into Elder status, and on to the equivalent of postgraduate and professorial levels. Elder status could only be achieved through meeting the twin tests of Knowledge and Character. You might well be the smartest person ever in your chosen occupational field, but if you were intemperate or devious in manner, it would exclude you from Eldership. One of the most important attributes required of an Elder in tribal society was the ability to weave consensus, rather than the ability to impose an arbitrary decision.

Those men or women who achieved the status of Elder, were therefore 'Knowledge Keepers' in their area of expertise, and equivalent in status to an Emeritus Professor at a university. These Elders sit as two gender-separate Elders Councils, each with their own

areas of inviolate authority. For instance, in tribal times the women Elders had complete authority in marriage planning. They decided who was to marry who a generation ahead, in a process of mother-in-law gifting. The male Elders therefore had no power to overrule the women on marriage planning, but they might nonetheless ask that some consideration be given to a particular diplomatic issue.

Similarly, within each of these two separate Councils of Elders, there was no ability to overrule an individual Knowledge Keeper. Each Elder was the equivalent of an Emeritus Professor, but they might nonetheless take the views of their fellow Elders into account. Also, just as the business of a university needs to be co-ordinated by a Chancellor, so each of these Tribal Councils had to have a Chairperson, whose job was to weave consensus. There was therefore never an arbitrary vote in traditional society, where fifty percent plus one took the cake. The matter had to be talked to death until a consensus was crafted.

Unfortunately, many anthropologists and historians have interpreted this tribal coordination role in military terms as a 'Chief' or 'Headman'. However, the plain fact is that in Aboriginal society, being a great hunter, tracker, fighter or football player, would earn you a certain level of respect for your ability, but it did not bring any inherent authority with it. That only came through you having demonstrably met the twin tests of knowledge and character.

Succession as a tribal leader or Knowledge Keeper could therefore never be gained by force, by subterfuge, or by right of inheritance. Aboriginal society instead operated as a true Meritocracy, with each Elder responsible for succession planning in their field of expertise.

At any time, an Elder would have handful of trainee Elders under their tutelage. The immediate successor would then be formally designated as 'Number Two Man' and a gradual transfer of power would then take place. The Knowledge Keeper would give the Second in Command the authority to 'Speak with my Voice' on certain matters. Then when the Knowledge Keeper died or retired the new Keeper now spoke with their own voice.