

THE TRAINING OF ELDERS

Eldership in traditional Aboriginal society was of two types, Elders with a capital 'E' and elders with a small 'e'. All older people were due respect simply because of their age, but age alone did not give you a position of authority in clan or inter-clan decision making.

The older people in this situation with little specific formal authority I therefore I refer to as elders with a small 'e'. To be an Elder with a capital 'E' required a lifetime of training and grooming, with potential Elders being identified early in childhood.

The dual term 'training and grooming' is used advisedly because the acquisition of specific knowledge and skill was by itself not sufficient for high Eldership. The twin tests for the high formal Eldership were Knowledge and Character. This meant that not only must Elders have mastery of a particular field of art, science, diplomacy or law, but they must also possess and display character traits of patience, humility and inclusion.

As Aboriginal society did not have a written language, everything had to be memorised. So over the millennia a range of memory techniques were developed around story, song, dance, ritual and environmental coding. That is, the landscape itself and the rituals of daily life became agents for the transmission of knowledge. In a very real sense the most important and the most powerful people in Aboriginal society were those that knew the most songs and stories.

With this requirement for structured learning, it is scarcely surprising that those children displaying the best memory for detail were those chosen to be mentored into future leadership. Regardless of this, each child received close tuition in both individual and group situations, with their individual abilities, leanings and interests given every encouragement and opportunity for expression. After being exposed to a learning experience, children were asked to recall detail or demonstrate the skills they had been shown. The lesson was simply repeated until mastery was gained by each child.

Children were therefore **not** given instructions in age cohort groups like in present day school classes. Nor were they instructed in mixed gender groups. They were instead grouped by gender and also according to learning speed and level of functioning. The most precocious children were progressed in their group contexts quickly and also given additional individual instruction by their male or female Elders.

For instance locally, by the time Batman met the Woiwurrung on the Plenty River at Greensborough in 1835, people like Simon Wonga and William Barak, had been identified for future leadership roles. Wonga was at that time aged almost fourteen and Barak almost twelve.

Wonga had already been initiated into adulthood by the time of the meeting with Batman and it is most likely that Barak had been initiated in November 1834, after turning eleven. Some historians have opined that Barak was not formally initiated because of the

interruption caused by colonisation, but this is demonstrably wrong. Barak in his later years was seen to have keloid initiation scars on his chest and when asked if it had hurt, he replied *'I was a man.'*

The confusion actually comes from an initiation ceremony that Barak underwent at the Botanic Gardens in late 1839 when he was age sixteen. At that time his cousin Wonga was an 'Elder in Training' who had been seriously injured on an initiation trial at Mount Dandenong. It was feared at the time that Wonga might die. The ceremony that Barak underwent was therefore to formally elevate him to 'Elder in Training' so that in the event of Wonga's death he would take his place.

Wonga recovered and on the death of Billibelleri in 1846, Billibelleri's brother Berberry was asked to assume leadership. However, Berberry proved ineffective, so by the end of 1850 at age twenty-nine Wonga was asked by the Elders to assume tribal leadership. Barak later became 'number two man' to Wonga in 1860 and then succeeded him as leader when Wonga died in 1874.

Had this been traditional tribal times rather than the colonial period, both Wonga and Barak would have had to wait patiently for much longer before assuming their destined roles. First, a senior Elder would have retired, appointing his (or her) successor to *'Speak with my voice'*. Then when the retired Elder finally died their nominated successor would then be able to speak with their own voice.

By that time the new Elder would have completed the equivalent to two PhD's, one in Divinity and one in Arts, Law or Science. We only know about Wonga and Barak because of the advent of the colonial period, so how many iconic Elders preceded them? We know nothing about these people, only that they had for untold millennia maintained a society free of war, pestilence, poverty and inherited privilege.