

IASTE 2008 Abstract

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'Inala Traditions: People, Places and History in Urban Indigenous Communities'

Tradition is a powerful invocation for Indigenous Australians. Pride in the ancient status of their culture is celebrated in many forms and frequently called upon for advertising and promotion of both Indigenous Australians and Australia generally. Yet urban Indigenous Australians are practicing different cultural forms which are seen as not being 'traditional' by mainstream critics and government legal instruments, such as the requirement for land claimants to demonstrate that their cultural practices are largely unchanged in order to demonstrate Native Title rights over land.

While there has been some investigation of urban Indigenous society in Australia, generally it is under-examined given its comparatively large proportion of Indigenous people. The main focus in the past by anthropologists, geographers, archaeologists and others has been on remote and regional Indigenous populations with their 'more intact' traditions, where urban populations are seen as having 'assimilated' or 'lost' their culture.

Current research by the author in Inala, an outer suburb in Queensland's state capital, Brisbane, investigates the traditions and human geography of Indigenous people in the suburb. The comparatively high proportion of Indigenous people in this area have created new forms of tradition which draw upon classical practices of Indigenous culture and relocates, reworks and reinvents them in a contemporary urban context to provide a distinct cultural practice which is neither mainstream nor classical, but the author would argue is a continuation of traditions.

This paper will discuss the creation of new social geographies, which emerged in the 1970s and retain their currency for some residents today. Groups based on residential location formed and divided the suburb into distinct territories with boundaries along natural watercourses, in a microcosm of the traditional boundaries between Indigenous groups in the pre-contact era. These self-described "urban tribes" are historically and socially powerful, and bind people, events and places into a meaningful experience of suburban life.

Yet the acceptance of new traditions is uneven within the Inala Indigenous community, and some do not find relevance in these socio-geographic groups, but instead share a distinct and equally novel sense of belonging and 'claiming' of Inala as their home territory, above any 'home country'

association usually given precedence in Indigenous place attachment. Different time of settlement in Inala, distinct experiences of work, schooling and opportunities has created diverse experiences within the Indigenous communities, with some political tension between groups.

Inala Indigenous traditions fall into several categories, which will be examined in this paper: traditions of ownership, traditions of kinship and belonging, traditions of social identity and traditions of gathering. Within these categories there are numerous and diverse manifestations, and through the description and analysis the diversity of traditions, and the diversity of attitudes towards tradition within and amongst the Inala Indigenous communities will be discussed. The research will show that contrary to a situation of culture loss, there is evidence of the 'invention' of new traditions, which add to the weight of culture, rather than demonstrate its depletion.