

Indigenous Australians and Japanese Migrants: For 'Open' Reconciliation

Minoru Hokari

[Research Fellow, Japan Society for the Promotion of Science]

Australian Declaration Towards Reconciliation (2000) emphasises the importance for 'all Australians' to learn 'our shared histories', and states 'our hope is for a united Australia'. Therefore, it is clear that the purpose of reconciliation initiated by the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation is re-imagining the 'united' nation-state of Australia. This paper calls such a style of reconciliation 'closed reconciliation', in which the global implications of Australian colonialism are largely ignored.

If a closed reconciliation process promotes a united Australia, how, for example, can Asian immigrants (who have been victims of white racism) share histories of British invasion with mainstream white Australians? Instead, it is suggested that reconciliation should promote a 'divided Australia and beyond' by exploring different people's perspectives and memories and the implications of the colonisation of Australia. Thus, this article calls for 'open reconciliation' which seeks to de-nationalise Aboriginal reconciliation by articulating histories of Asian migrants and Australian Indigenous people.

As a case study, this paper examines pre-war Japanese immigrants who worked for the Pearl-Shell industry in northern Australia. Previous studies on Aboriginal-Japanese relations in this industry often emphasised the peaceful working relationship between the two ethnic groups by contrasting them with the empowered racist authority of white Australians. Such a view may promote and celebrate histories of multicultural Australia. However, what is lacking in this type of narrative is the obvious fact that Japanese workers were also colonisers and racists towards indigenous people. Although careful and substantive research needs to be done in future, this paper briefly explores two aspects of possible colonial exploitations by Japanese labour migrants: economic exploitation of Aboriginal land and marine resources, and sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women. In short, the Japanese should not be left outside the process of Aboriginal reconciliation.

In order to explore the ways of conceptualising global responsibility for Australian colonialism, Tessa Morris-Suzuki's conception of 'implications' is worth considering. Morris-Suzuki suggests we may not be responsible for colonial invasion itself, but we are responsible for historical implications in which we receive benefits from the past (and present) exploitation of Aboriginal people and their land. In this context, it is strongly suggested that Aboriginal reconciliation crosses national boundaries.