Kinship, Organisations and ‘wannabes’: Aboriginal Identity Negotiation in South-western Sydney

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ambiguous and dynamic nature of Aboriginal identity in south-western Sydney. While for most of the Aboriginal people in rural and remote areas, identity has been primarily a matter of kinship ties associated with their perceived place of origin, Aboriginal people often recognize each other as Aboriginal by sharing and recognizing certain ‘Aboriginal’ cultural mores and traits. These two principles of identity are flexible enough to be extended to those who are not raised in an Aboriginal family environment; one meeting with their Aboriginal family is a minimum requirement. In south-western Sydney, where organizations dealing with Aboriginal issues provide ways of connecting Aboriginal people from various backgrounds, in line with the government’s homogenized notion of Aboriginality, Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family environments encounter those who cannot even meet this compromised criterion. Their presence gives rise to tension and conflict revolving around the concept of Aboriginality. Aboriginal cultural values that emphasize actual engagement provide ways of overcoming such dilemmas. Through common participation in the activities of the aforesaid organisations, Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney develop a new sense of ‘Aboriginality’, which embraces those who cannot claim kinship ties.

Key words: urban Aboriginality, kinship, organisations, identity, south-western Sydney

This paper explores Aboriginal identity negotiation in south-western Sydney. Despite the fact that more than sixty per cent of Aboriginal people now live in urban contexts (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006), identity among Aboriginal people in the city has attracted little academic interest. The primacy of identity based on kinship ties associated with place of origin has been emphasized in anthropological research. As well, continent-wide Aboriginal commonality and pan-Aboriginality developed through urban Aboriginal activism have also been documented. However, the relationship between these variously achieved identities has rarely been examined. This paper investigates how some different ways of establishing Aboriginal identity have interacted with each other among urban Aboriginal residents in south-western Sydney. Morgan (2006:139) states that Aboriginality is ‘constructed and reconstructed in the shifting social and political conditions of post-war Australia’. How this process of construction and reconstruction of Aboriginality is experienced in relation to the ambiguous and dynamic social relations in south-western Sydney will be discussed and analysed.

In anthropological research, Aboriginal identity has been seen as primarily based on kinship ties associated with the person’s place of origin. In rural areas, in closely knit communities such as missions, reserves, or settlements, from which most current urban Aboriginal residents originally came, Aboriginal people developed a strong sense of identity as ‘Aborigines’ based on kinship ties and a shared history of painful and oppressive contact with the dominant non-Aboriginal society (e.g. Fink 1957; Morris 1988). The situational differences between one region
and the next resulted in ‘many localised groups of Aborigines, each with its own regional focus, and consequently, in many different identities’ (Berndt 1977: 8). Anthropological studies undertaken in Melbourne (Barwick 1964, 1988[1971]), Adelaide (Gale 1972, 1981; Gale and Wundersitz 1982; Inglis 1961, 1964; Schwab 1988) and Brisbane (Smith and Biddle 1975) reveal that localized kinship ties continue to shape Aboriginal people’s primary social relations after they move to the city, where they encounter Aboriginal people who are not connected to them either by kinship ties or by place of origin. A similar trend has been observed in inner-city Sydney (Staveley 1993), although there are no detailed ethnographic studies focusing specifically on Aboriginal social relations other than kinship ties.

Some anthropological studies have noted the presence of another kind of Aboriginality among Aboriginal people in urban areas (Crick 1981; Mullins 2007; Schwab 1988). Their argument supports studies which insist that certain cultural styles or values are shared by Aboriginal people continent-wide, such as the importance of kinship ties or certain ways of interaction among them (e.g. Chase 1981; Sansom 1982, see also Macdonald 2000). This commonality is maintained by people raised in the ‘Aboriginal world’. Schwab (1988) notes that in Adelaide certain cultural styles shared by Aboriginal people, although not always adopted, are open to include non-related Aboriginal people in the kin-based Aboriginal community.

Another argument that presents continent-wide Aboriginal identity deals with what is often called pan-Aboriginality, created through the political process. The concept of ‘Aboriginal people’ or ‘Aborigines’, which treats Aboriginal people as one homogenous group was created through the European colonization of Australia (Attwood 1989; Reece 1987). Although it has always been imprecise and unfixed, an image of the ‘antiquity’ of Australian Aboriginal culture has been present in most cases. This homogenized image of Aboriginal people has provided the ‘cultural context in which Europeans (especially the state) have acted’ (Beckett 1988b: 192) and as such it has tended to be accepted. This continent-wide Aboriginality also has provided a way for Aboriginal people to unite against oppressive policies. Aboriginality was strategically created and deployed in political movements. An Aboriginal movement in the 1960-70s spread pan-Aboriginality nationally, supported by a nation-wide network. It emphasized the common experience of oppression and Aboriginal cultural continuity from pre-colonial times as a symbol, with land rights as the common cause (e.g. Attwood 2003; Beckett 1988a, 1988b; Burgman 1993; Jones and Hill-Burnett 1982; Merlan 2005). This movement also changed the ruling notion of Aboriginality (Beckett 1988b; Tonkinson 1990). Cultural continuity was accepted as antiquity. At the policy level, the definition of Aboriginality changed from one based on the concept of race to one based on self-identification and community acceptance in order not to exclude urban Aboriginal people (cf. Weaver 1984). The Aboriginal movement began to lose its momentum in the latter half of the 1970s. While mainstream society has become more conservative since the latter half of the 1990s, the dominant representation of Aboriginality shifted from one that emphasizes political resistance to one that emphasizes cultural continuity (Tonkinson 1999).

Given these arguments, Morgan (2000, 2006) suggests the development of another pan-Aboriginality. While the Aboriginal people he deals with have experienced the era of Aboriginal movements, this pan-Aboriginal identity is now developing in contemporary city life through locally based organisations. Although Morgan himself does not write in detail about social relations in the city, Pierson (1977a, 1977b, 1982) and Plater (1993, 1995) examine the role of organisations dealing with Aboriginal issues in urban contexts in Adelaide and inner-city Sydney respectively. It is through involvement with organisations such as Aboriginal health care programs, sports clubs, school programs, and dance schools, that Aboriginal people, who are not connected through kinship ties, develop relationships with each other.

While these different bases for establishing Aboriginal identity in the city have been documented, the relationship between them is rarely examined in situations where social relations are not dominated by kinship ties. Schwab (1988) notes the interaction between
localized kinship-based expressions of identity and continent-wide Aboriginal style and their limits in Adelaide. However, social relations among Aboriginal people in Adelaide are predominantly based on kinship ties. Indeed, apart from the work of Pierson (1977a, 1977b, 1982), social relations of Aboriginal people that are not based on kinship ties have rarely been explored in ethnographic works. The focus of this paper is primarily on Aboriginal people’s experience of Aboriginal identity in south-western Sydney, where different kinds of Aboriginal identity are interwoven and in conflict with each other. While kinship ties are the basis of identity for many Aboriginal people, they have been negotiated, together with Aboriginal common cultural traits and values, to incorporate those who were not raised in the Aboriginal world. Organisations dealing with Aboriginal issues, on the other hand, are government agencies and as such carry the government notion of homogenizing Aboriginality beyond this negotiation. While pan-Aboriginal ideology from the 1960-70s has limited influence in this situation, it is through participation in the activities of contemporary organisations that the Aboriginal cultural value of emphasizing actual engagement works to develop another form of pan-Aboriginality in the urban context.

This analysis draws on fieldwork conducted in south-western Sydney, an area located approximately 27-51 kilometres south-west of Sydney comprising the Bankstown, Fairfield, Liverpool and Campbelltown Local Government Areas (LGAs). As of the year 2006, the 7,658 Aboriginal people living there accounted for approximately one per cent of the total population (ABS 2006). In 2004 I lived in Green Valley, a suburb of Liverpool, for a period of six months. Over the next year I commuted to south-western Sydney from the city four to six days a week. Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney often travel between LGAs to join with other Aboriginal groups and participate in Aboriginal events. The term ‘south-western Sydney’ is used to describe the areas in which their lives are spent on a daily basis, although many occasionally visit the inner city to attend special events. Significant numbers travel to rural areas regularly to visit their family members. I personally interacted with groups and attended events held by organisations dealing with Aboriginal issues. I also visited Aboriginal families. As well as engaging in participant observation, I conducted twenty in-depth interviews. The focus was on the interviewees’ views of Aboriginality, sense of community, and social diversity in south-western Sydney. All were conducted with the interviewees’ consent. Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney are not clustered into particular discrete neighbourhoods. Informants who participated in this research were people I met through attending Aboriginal meetings, events and groups, and their family members, who were spread all over south-western Sydney. This research is not comprehensive; the data analysed are only representative of the people who participated in the study. Nevertheless, despite their partiality and their particular situations, their information provides significant insights into the dynamics of the experiences of Aboriginal people. In addition, the unboundedness and partialities of human relationships need to be considered as a feature of suburban lives.

The structure of this paper is as follows. First, I provide an overview of south-western Sydney, i.e. its brief history, socio-economic features, a history of Aboriginal migration. Second, I explore Aboriginal people’s social relations in south-western Sydney. No previous ethnographic study in this area has been undertaken, so data are based on my own field research. Next, identity issues that Aboriginal people encounter are explored based on the field data. Cases are analysed to show the degree to which social relations and cultural values are interwoven. Finally, I draw some conclusions vis-à-vis the relevance of examining and analyzing Aboriginal identity and social relations, and contemplate the possibility of a new Aboriginal identity in south-western Sydney.

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE IN SOUTH-WESTERN SYDNEY

Within thirty years of the British arrival on the Australian coast in 1788, the area now called ‘south-western Sydney’ had become the ‘first white frontier’, with agriculture as its main activity. After
World War II (1945), suburban development started. Along with private housing estates, large public housing estates were established in suburbs. Cheap land and housing attracted people with relatively low incomes including ex-servicemen and migrants (Keating 1995). By the year 2006, the total population in this area was 658,061, with expectations of further growth (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Since the start of its suburban development, this part of Sydney has been considered a low socio-economic area (cf. Keating 1995): the cost of living is cheaper compared to the eastern or inner-city suburbs of Sydney; the population is generally less well educated, suffers relatively high unemployment rates, and tends to have low income levels (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). Crime and safety are issues of some concern (Bankstown City Council 2004; Campbelltown City Council 2004a, 2004b; Fairfield City Council 1999, 2003; Liverpool City Council 2003, 2005; New South Wales Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research 2008). The image of ‘Dodge City’ with ‘unsophisticated’ residents (c.f. Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Butler, Peters and Yallop 2001) has been the widespread stereotype of this area.

The original Aboriginal population was decimated following the European occupation of this area. Disease and violence took their toll: few records and studies have survived. Currently, except for a handful of families claiming to be descendants of the Tharawal1 people, the original inhabitants of the Campbelltown area (cf. Campbelltown City Council 2004a), there has been no record kept or study made indicating the presence of descendants of the original inhabitants living in south-western Sydney (see also Everett 2006). According to the 2006 census of the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), there were 7,658 Aboriginal people living in south-western Sydney. Campbelltown LGA, with 3,831 Aboriginal residents, had the second largest concentration of Aboriginal people in Australia. Most of them originally came from many different areas of south-eastern and south-western Australia and were not descendants of the original inhabitants of south-western Sydney (cf. Beasley 1970). The Aboriginal population of south-western Sydney is younger, less well educated and experiences higher unemployment rates and lower income levels than the non-Aboriginal population. They have higher rates of one-parent families and are more likely to live in cheaper houses rented from public authorities.

Aboriginal people, on coming to Sydney, mostly first took up residence in inner-city suburbs such as Redfern. Migration to this area started as early as the 1880s as employment was available at a railway workshop in the area (Taksa 1999). In time, their overcrowded housing situation caused public concern, which led, from the end of the 1960s, to the government setting up major public housing projects, including a special program later to become known as the Housing for Aborigines (HFA) program in outer suburbia (Morgan 2006). In 1970, Beasley (1970:138) estimated that there were about 6,000 Aboriginal people in Sydney, approximately one-quarter of whom were in the outer suburbia. From 1971 to 2006, the Aboriginal population of this area jumped from 491 to 7,658 (ABS 1971, 2006). Morgan (2000, 2006), who examined the Housing Commission documents, notes the friction between the obligations of Aboriginal kinship and the assimilationist Housing Commission policy, particularly as households often grew through the addition of extended family members. In addition, what was called the ‘salt and pepper’ housing allocation policy was designed to ensure Aboriginal people lived dispersed among non-Aboriginal people. Morgan’s work explores the mid-twentieth century measures undertaken to assist Aboriginal people and the role of government housing but does not include ethnographic study of contemporary social relations. My field data discussed in the next section extend this research.

ABORIGINAL SOCIAL RELATIONS IN SOUTH-WESTERN SYDNEY

There is no single kinship connection which covers all, or many enough to be dominant, Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney. They do not live in a geographical cluster. In this situation, Aboriginal people’s social relations are established through two nexus: relationships formed through kin and through the activities of local organisations dealing with Aboriginal issues. Neither of them is comprehensive. Kin relationships were formed amongst Aboriginal
people before they migrated to south-western Sydney. Relationships based on the activities of local organisations are more recent.

Although there is not a large family group in south-western Sydney, family is important for most Aboriginal people in social, economic, emotional, and cultural terms. The patterns of the distribution of family members and their interaction with each other are different between families. Most of the Aboriginal people, as mentioned before, migrated from rural areas of the south-eastern and south-western parts of Australia. Some Aboriginal people migrated to south-western Sydney to join their kin. Some had not known anyone in south-western Sydney but had applied for public housing and accepted the offer. There seems to be no predominant pattern of migration. As a result, in south-western Sydney, Aboriginal family structures are diverse. Some families have local kin networks large enough to warrant sixty people attending a birthday party. Some people’s kin live predominantly in rural areas, either a hometown or dispersed among towns, cities, or even states they have migrated to. Many have kin elsewhere in Sydney, in the inner-city or in the outer suburbs. Both interaction between the family members and the functions of the kin relationships are also diverse. At one extreme, some Aboriginal people regularly and frequently visit their relatives in and outside south-western Sydney and have their relatives visiting them. They usually provide social and material assistance to each other in the form of food, accommodation, money, and raising small children. Some Aboriginal people see their family members in south-western Sydney frequently and provide material and social support, but visit their relatives in rural areas once a year or less. In this case, the material and social assistance they provide to each other is much less significant. Some have not visited their relatives in their original place after their migration to the city, which could be some decades ago. In such a case, material and social assistance is limited to the immediate family members living together in south-western Sydney. There could be various reasons for this non-visiting. Some might have found it difficult to keep up the demands of kinship or might have had a conflict with their kin and left for the city.

There is also a considerable number of people who do not have kin in any of the ways described above. They could be members of the ‘Stolen Generations’, a term that refers to Indigenous people who were forcibly removed by government officials from their parents during childhood, and subsequently raised in institutions or non-Aboriginal homes (cf. Read 1982). Some of these have established regular contact with their Aboriginal family members. However, some have found it difficult to keep close ties with them or have not been able to find them. Another group comprises those referred to as ‘newly identified’. There are various reasons for their histories. Some people told me that they knew about their Aboriginal descent (referred to as having ‘Aboriginal blood’) but had kept it hidden for a long time. Others said their parents had only recently told them they had Aboriginal blood. Some carried out genealogical research and discovered their Aboriginal blood. As a result of recent changes in attitudes towards Aboriginal people in the wider society, which started in the 1960s with the pan-Aboriginal movement, and the new advantages which Aboriginality may accrue, they have decided to re-identify as Aboriginal. While some went in search of their Aboriginal families (e.g. Morgan 1987), others opted not to explore family connections. One man told me that he did not think he needed to find his family because he knew he was Aboriginal.

Relationships based on the activities of local organisations are more recent. Aboriginal organisations focusing on Aboriginal social issues such as health and education have been established since the late 1960s as a result of the Aboriginal movement and have mushroomed particularly since 1972, when, supported by the Whitlam Labor Government, federal funding became accessible to Aboriginal people. Although the dynamics are different between remote, rural and urban areas today, it is not possible to understand the urban Aboriginal experience without understanding the centrality of these organisations (cf. Rowse 2002).

In Sydney, many Aboriginal organisations were established in the inner-city, in and around Redfern in the 1960s. Concomitant with Aboriginal people’s migration to outer suburbia and the localization of the funding allocation, Aboriginal organisations were established, targeting
local Aboriginal issues. In south-western Sydney, Aboriginal people’s involvement with organisation-oriented socialities was established in the 1980s. One of the characteristics of these organisations in south-western Sydney is that their aim and activities are locally oriented. In 1983, the Gandangara Local Aboriginal Land Council and the Tharawal Local Aboriginal Land Council were established under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (New South Wales)* 1983. Other Aboriginal as well as mainstream projects addressing Aboriginal issues mushroomed. Currently, there are two Aboriginal organisations in Liverpool LGA and eleven in Campbelltown LGA which run projects, monthly meetings and annual events for Aboriginal people. In Liverpool and Campbelltown, City Councils employ Aboriginal project officers and hold monthly meetings. The South Western Sydney Area Health Service (SWSAHS)\(^2\) has employed many Aboriginal health care workers and runs Aboriginal Elders’ Groups, Aboriginal Men’s and Women’s Clinics in Liverpool LGA and Campbelltown LGA, and an Aboriginal women’s group in Bankstown LGA. SWSAHS also funds projects for another non-government organisation, which runs an Aboriginal playgroup in Fairfield. Some local schools employ Aboriginal Educational Assistants (AEA) or Aboriginal Liaison Officers and have programs for Aboriginal students and parents. These projects are run by Aboriginal workers, who are connected through loose networks. Local Land Councils, some Aboriginal organisations, City Councils, and various community organisations jointly or separately hold annual Aboriginal events such as NAIDOC (The National Aboriginal Islander Day Observance Committee) Week celebration and the Sorry Day Service. Aboriginal Health Care Workers jointly hold an annual festival for Aboriginal women throughout south-western Sydney.

Some of these groups meet two or three times a week, some only meet monthly. Most attract between ten to thirty people to their activities. Even those organisations that hold activities frequently do so for only one to three hours at a time. And because there are no central organisations or places that attract everyone, the building of strong social relations is limited. However, in this area, many Aboriginal people do not have large family clusters around them; they live dispersed amongst non-Aboriginal people. Organisations are places where they can get to know other Aboriginal people and keep in contact with them. Many have come to south-western Sydney not knowing anyone; some Aboriginal people have come to know others through their children’s schools. The children make friends and in time their parents meet. Some go to the Land Council or attend Aboriginal Health Care Services. When Aboriginal workers start new projects, they visit organisations in order to introduce themselves as well as their projects. Organisations offer opportunities to those who are not connected through kinship ties or do not have any known kinship connections with Aboriginal people. They provide opportunities for people from the Stolen Generation or those with ‘newly identified’ backgrounds to become involved with Aboriginal people without being connected to their own Aboriginal families. Even for Aboriginal people with kin close by, the regular meeting places provided by such organisations can still be important venues in which to catch up with others in this dispersed suburbia. Aboriginal people with large extended families, who live in this area, often attend the activities of the organisations together. In some cases, for these people, the demands of kin and those of the organisations can result in conflict and entanglement. Not everyone participates in both kinds of relationships. While some participate only in kin relationships, others may have only organisational links. The vast majority is involved at some level at some time during the year. However, there is one more point to consider. Most organisations are directly or indirectly funded by the government. This means that an organisation’s role, programs, and agendas are ultimately decided and controlled by the government. The implications of this are explored in the next section.

**AMBIGUOUS ABORIGINAL IDENTITY**

Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney come from different places and backgrounds. They frequently talk about differences such as language use, or certain kinds of behaviour that
distinguish them from Aboriginal people coming from other areas. For example, people from the north-western area of New South Wales are called ‘rough’ by people from other areas. However, this has not resulted in their forming groups according to the places from which they came. Aboriginal groups or meetings are attended by Aboriginal people from many different areas. On these occasions, it is observed that they share certain cultural traits such as a particular way of talking or child-rearing. They tend to use derogatory words to address each other (Carter 1988) and give much more freedom to their children compared to mainstream Australians (Hulsker 2002). When raised in an Aboriginal family, these distinctive cultural styles and traits are ‘handed down’ to them. Although many cannot articulate these Aboriginal cultural mores, they can still sense a difference between those who effect an Aboriginal cultural style and those who do not. When Aboriginal people gather together, they engage in these cultural practices with little concern for the reactions of non-Aboriginal people. Family gatherings or the gatherings of Aboriginal organisations are ‘Aboriginal spaces’ in which they can freely exercise these practices.

However, not all Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney share these Aboriginal cultural mores and traits. Many Aboriginal people in south-western Sydney were not brought up in an Aboriginal family environment, for example, those from Stolen Generation backgrounds who relatively recently found their Aboriginal families. This situation makes the concept of Aboriginality ambiguous. In Aboriginal groups and meetings in south-western Sydney, ‘what is Aboriginal?’ sometimes becomes a huge argument. As Bauman (1999) said, identity is argued about because it is not taken for granted any more, which could be observed in the case below:

In one Aboriginal meeting, the topic went to ‘what is Aboriginal?’. One woman said, ‘it is difficult now because we now have fair skin, but if we go back to the mission we are from, we all know about it.’ Some people nodded and said that they were thinking about the same thing. Another woman, Lily, said that there were Stolen Generations, but if they go to Link-up, an organisation established to find out the Aboriginal family of the members of Stolen Generations, and talk and yarn with people, it is so easy to find their family. To this, a woman Penny said, ‘Not everyone. I must disagree with you.’ Lily said, ‘Yes, well…I just mean…’ Then the topic moved to someone they knew as a ‘wannabe’. They laughed and said that she once came with her aunty and tried to be accepted through the association. But she never came back.

When the argument becomes about ‘what is Aboriginal?’, there are usually people who talk about their families and say things like ‘we know if we go back where we come from’, or ‘being Aboriginal have to be from where you come from.’ This idea is symbolized by a practice I call ‘family identification’, which establishes not only who a person is and where he/she is from, but more subtly whether the person understands what ‘being Aboriginal’ is about. This practice refers to the time when people first meet, when they work to place each other within a social and geo-social space that will form the basis of their relationship. When people meet for the first time, they will ask each other where they are from and who they are related to. If one person says, ‘I’m from Nowra’, the other says, ‘Oh, then, do you know so and so?’ Then they try to find someone they both know. It may not be easy to find a mutual link without some digging, but with the large kinship networks of Aboriginal people, one can usually find someone who knows the family in question after verbal exchanges with a certain number of people. By following this trend, very old Aboriginal traditions are perpetuated albeit in distinctively transformed ways (cf. Macdonald 1986; von Sturmer 1981). It is a conventional Aboriginal way of placing people in kinship and country, not only in New South Wales but all over Australia.

In south-western Sydney, being able to conduct family identification is the primal
condition of being accepted as ‘Aboriginal’. Some Aboriginal people even claimed that they conduct family identification to distinguish Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. This status that family identification has gained in south-western Sydney, among Aboriginal common cultural mores and traits, indicates not only the significance of kinship ties but also the identity negotiation among Aboriginal residents from various backgrounds. The importance of kinship ties for Aboriginal people cannot be exaggerated. Kinship ties are the way to locate each person as an Aboriginal person (cf. Macdonald 1998). It is ‘what makes you Aboriginal’ (cf. Peters-Little 2000). Many studies suggest that the kin relationship among Aboriginal people does not necessarily rest on biological descent (e.g. Macdonald 1986, 1998, 2000; Myers 1980, 1986; Sansom 1980). Macdonald (1986) emphasizes doing the right thing by kin. What is important is the actual doing and engaging. For example, in cases where a woman is the birth mother of a child, but does not take care of it and the child is raised by a sister, the biological mother will not be seen as the child’s mother. The sister will be treated as ‘the mother’. Kin relationships need to be ‘activated’ to be meaningful by regular visiting and by providing material and social assistance and care (e.g. Birdsall 1988). In south-western Sydney, not all Aboriginal people have kept their ties with their Aboriginal families in their place of origin. Some have not visited them since they left for Sydney. They might not be accepted by their kin in rural towns. However, they can still conduct family identification. Even those from Stolen Generation backgrounds who met their Aboriginal family only once are able to do so. In south-western Sydney, the practice of family identification was elevated over other Aboriginal cultural mores and traits so that the Aboriginal community can include those who have been away from their Aboriginal families. Identity negotiation has been based on both kinship ties and Aboriginal common cultural mores and traits. This does not necessarily mean that the Aboriginal cultural value of emphasizing actual engagement is abandoned. An Aboriginal friend of mine, talking about the members of Stolen Generations, said to me that although he knew that many of the Stolen Generation members did not want to see their family, in order to be accepted as Aboriginal, they should go and see their Aboriginal family at least once. Some actual relationship or at least face to face meeting is required. As regards the members of Stolen Generations, being able to conduct family identification is considered proof that they have met their Aboriginal family and have been recognized by them to the degree that they were given knowledge about their family.

The argument between Lily and Penny, however, indicates that some people who identify as Aboriginal cannot even comply with the practice of family identification. They could be members of the Stolen Generation who have not found their Aboriginal families, or ‘newly identified’ people who have not yet connected with their Aboriginal family. Some of them even do not seem to bother about finding their Aboriginal families. Lily’s assertion that the members of Stolen Generations can easily find their family members and her disconcertion when facing Penny’s objection indicates that for her, Aboriginality is too problematised. In such a case, as the shifting of the conversation topic shows, some people can be accused of being ‘wannabes’, someone who is white (usually Anglo-Australian) but pretends to be Aboriginal. At Aboriginal meetings, groups, or other social gatherings in south-western Sydney, it is not rare to hear people talking about someone ‘who is supposed to be Aboriginal, but actually not’. The rejection of someone’s claim of Aboriginality could be seen as one way of dealing with the ambiguity of Aboriginality. By doing so, Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family backgrounds re-draw the boundary between ‘Aboriginal’ and ‘non-Aboriginal’, which has become blurred. A similar situation was observed by Schwab (1988) in Adelaide, where Aboriginal boys rejected one boy’s claim to be Aboriginal not only because he was not related but also because he could not understand the subtle essence of Aboriginal cultural styles. In the case of south-western Sydney, identity negotiation has provided a way to include some who do not share most of the Aboriginal cultural mores and traits but cannot cover those who have not been connected with Aboriginal families at all.

Pan-Aboriginal ideology, developed in the 1960-70s, also plays a role in this situation,
although not in such a way as to include people who have not found their Aboriginal families. Pan-Aboriginal ideology that developed in the 1960s-70s Aboriginal movement changed the image of Aboriginal people. Not only have mainstream social attitudes towards Aboriginal people become more accepting, the image of ‘ancient Aboriginal culture’ has become a national emblem (Attwood 1996). With this change, some people, who hid their Aboriginality, started to re-identify as Aboriginal (Tonkinson 1990; Hulsker 2002). For example, one woman, who re-identified about ten years ago, said that her daughter was very excited to know that she had Aboriginal blood and was very keen to learn Aboriginal culture. Thus the potential number of those who claim to be Aboriginal but who are not connected with their Aboriginal families has increased. Pan-Aboriginal ideology, however, does not necessarily persuade Aboriginal people from an Aboriginal family environment to include these newly identified people. Its ambiguous influence is expressed in the comment of an Aboriginal man in his 50s, Henry, about newly identified people:

But now I can’t, like with that organisation, the majority of the talkers and the decision makers in it are people only become Aboriginal in the last ten years or five years. And for them to make the decisions on cultural issues and cultural connection to the land, it’s not very appropriate to my eyes because they don’t have a sense… and this is not being disrespectful, hey, but they don’t have a sense of what they grew up, being, being black. Or aren’t they, they being denied something, but they didn’t live being black. And to live being black is, in my day and age, like to live being black is very, very hard….I was one of the best sportsmans around….And all my mates love me on the football field or in the cricket team or swim team and that. But when we went back to the pub, and they was telling jokes or talking about black people. You were left all the time…And the people that in the making decisions now, in that organisation, we’ve got two elderly women that are passed themselves as Aboriginal, and they’ve only been Aboriginal for the last ten, five years. And they expect me to call them elders. But I don’t, it’s not disrespecting them, because I don’t want to disrespect the elders, that people that grew up all their lives always being black. I went to ah, Northern Territory to, Alice Springs in September and that. And I found out what the elder is up there. Then also I come back in and I rang up few people and that, yeah, and like, Aboriginal activists and that. And they told me, you know, the elder is a person that practice their culture all their lives and that have been given their knowledge to do it and pass it on. So people that come, even though they are at their 60s and 50s, they are only being black for the last five years, they can’t be elders.

Henry is torn between the need to include those who were not raised in an Aboriginal family environment and the feeling of discordance. Although he admits that ‘they being denied something’ and asserts that he is not disrespecting them, he also strongly feels that ‘they don’t live being black’. Pan-Aboriginal ideology which emphasizes common experience of oppression and cultural continuity might have made him recognize that having one’s Aboriginality denied is one form of oppression but also gave him a reason to show his sense of discordance in relation to those who have not experienced the life of ‘being black’. Henry cites his experience in Alice Springs and his conversation with long-time Aboriginal activists to justify his sense of discordance. This indicates that pan-Aboriginal ideology enabled him to identify with Aboriginal people in a remote area and Aboriginal activists who have spent their life ‘being black’, but this identification has made him feel rather at odds with the Aboriginal people who have not been raised in an Aboriginal environment.

The first part of Henry’s comment on a particular organisation indicates the role played by the government’s notion of homogenised Aboriginality. Organisations provide the space for Aboriginal people to see and keep contact with each other, but also often include those
whose claims to be Aboriginal seem to be problematic. This situation stems from the government notion of Aboriginality. The government definition of an Aboriginal person is based on self-identification and acceptance by the Aboriginal community. In practice, for government agencies, Aboriginal people are those who possess an Aboriginal certificate. It enables people to receive services for Aboriginal people and to apply for jobs designated for Aboriginal people. The Aboriginal certificate is issued by designated Aboriginal organisations. The fact that it is issued by Aboriginal organisations is supposed to ensure that that person is ‘of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent’ and ‘is accepted as such by the community in which he (she) lives’. Some Aboriginal organisations claim that they require those who request a certificate to demonstrate their Aboriginality by family identification. However, there seem to be subtle ways of using political and financial influence to acquire certificates of Aboriginality. Many Aboriginal people talked about organisations known to issue certificates indiscriminately to ‘anyone’, indicating that a claim of Aboriginality based solely on a government certificate is not reliable. However, this does not seem to concern government employers. As long as the applicants have Aboriginal certificates, they often ask no further questions. Government employers assume homogeneity of Aboriginal people. This approach allows those raised within non-Aboriginal environments, including those who do not even intend to find their Aboriginal family, to apply to the organisations for jobs or services designated for Aboriginal people. For government employers, having an Aboriginal worker gives a sense of legitimacy (cf. Howard 1982). Aboriginal workers who have not been connected with their Aboriginal families are often treated as spokespersons of the Aboriginal community most of whose members were raised in an Aboriginal family background (cf. Pierson 1977a). As Henry’s comment on organisations suggests, it is easy for them to deal with the organisations because they are familiar with the mainstream system, whereas Aboriginal people raised in the Aboriginal world have to be ‘biculural’. As a result, there is a considerable number of people who work or receive services as Aboriginal, but are not perceived as ‘Aboriginal’ even in the compromised criteria of the south-western Sydney Aboriginal community. Thus in south-western Sydney, the space for Aboriginal people provided by the organisations also makes them encounter those who claim to be Aboriginal but have not been in touch with the Aboriginal environment. This is why the ‘wannabe’ accusation is frequent. Aboriginal people have negotiated a way to include them by selecting family identification as a symbol of the minimum-required connection with Aboriginal families. However, the government ideology of homogenous Aboriginality pushes this boundary and increases the tensions and conflicts.

Nevertheless, the social relations developed through participation in activities of the organisations support another kind of Aboriginality, evident in a conversation I held with an Aboriginal woman, whom I will refer to as Natalie, about how she dealt with people who claim to be Aboriginal but cannot demonstrate their Aboriginality by kinship ties:

*Natalie:* But also there is an acceptance for those who cannot do it (family identification). For example, there are some Stolen Generation people who do not know their families but still are accepted. It is important to be involved in the community.

*Yuriko:* Does it mean being involved in NAIDOC week and other activities?

*Natalie:* It is not only that but also like being part of the committee, part of the school Aboriginal programs, like ASSPA (Aboriginal Student Support and Parent Awareness), and so on, being more actively involved in these things.

Natalie suggested that through being involved in the activities of the various organisations, persons who do not manifest the characteristics associated with being Aboriginal can be accepted as such. This attitude stems in large part from long-standing cultural values which emphasize that rights and recognition are extended to people on the basis of committed...
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practice, which has been also the basis of Aboriginal kin relationships. What Natalie suggests, while predicated on similar cultural values, is based on the specific way in which Aboriginal social relations develop in south-western Sydney, where organisations play crucial roles. While the criterion of acceptance based on the engagement with kin relationship has been compromised, being involved in the activities run by organisations is what ‘Aboriginal people do’. These organisations provide opportunities for those who cannot meet the requirement of family identification to be accepted as ‘Aboriginal’ in a different way. Aboriginal identity can be developed through mutual commitment to engagement in the activities of the above organisations, an ‘Aboriginality’ peculiar to the particular character of south-western Sydney. This is what Morgan (2006) suggested as constituting the contemporary pan-Aboriginality constructed in city suburbs. This, however, is not a comprehensive identity. Not all Aboriginal people recognise it, as frequent ‘wannabe’ accusations suggest. It is not a pan-Aboriginality that is relevant to Aboriginal people continent-wide. However, this is a form of ‘Aboriginality’, which can bring people from different backgrounds together. In that sense, it is the ‘pan-Aboriginality’ of south-western Sydney.

CONCLUSION

In south-western Sydney, Aboriginal identity is ambiguous and constantly under negotiation according to the arrangement of social relations. While identity based on kinship ties and identity based on Aboriginal continent-wide commonality has been compromised to include those who were not raised in an Aboriginal family background by making family identification as a minimum requirement of acceptance, the government notion of homogenized Aboriginality has created a situation beyond this negotiation. It has provided a way for those who have not been connected with their Aboriginal family at all to access and become involved with Aboriginal people from Aboriginal family backgrounds. The pan-Aboriginal ideology that developed through the urban Aboriginal movement sits ambiguously in this picture, encouraging those who have not identified as Aboriginal to identify or re-identify, and giving Aboriginal people from an Aboriginal family background a reason to express feelings of discordance in relation to them at the same time. Nevertheless the Aboriginal cultural value of emphasising actual doing provides a way, albeit partly, of overcoming this cultural gap and developing a ‘pan-Aboriginality’ specific to the situation. Although it is not comprehensive, it is nevertheless one of the possibilities of connecting people from different social and cultural backgrounds.

NOTES

1. Alternative spellings of this word encountered in the literature are: Dharawal, Tarawal, Darawa:l, Carawal, Turawal, Tharawal, Tharrawall, Turuwal, Turuwul, Turrubul, Ta-gary.
2. The South Western Sydney Area Health Service was amalgamated into the Sydney South West Area Health Service in 2005. However, their function at the local grass roots level has remained the same.

REFERENCES


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