

BONDS ACROSS THE AGES

There are undoubted differences and striking similarities between the histories of the Indigenous peoples of Australia and Timor-Leste.

Geography

Australia's huge land mass dwarfs the tiny half-island of Timor-Leste and the mountains of Timor contrast with the flatness of Australia. The two nations are separated by the Timor Sea – a very small sea indeed when you consider that it takes a mere 55 minutes to fly across it from Darwin to the Timorese capital Dili.

Colonisation

Both nations experienced European colonisation. The Portuguese came to Timor in 1515 and considered it a trading post for the next four centuries, while British settlers first arrived in Australia in 1788.

The Timorese have had a checkered history of foreign involvement. Long after the Portuguese came, a small number of Australian soldiers arrived unannounced in Timor in December 1941, and unwelcomed by the Portuguese authorities.

The Australians' presence drew the Japanese to the area in February 1942, thus beginning a four-year occupation by at least 18,000 Japanese troops. (Japan had avoided all Portuguese possessions in its sweep south, but once the Australians entered Timor they decided to invade.)

Over 40,000 Timorese died during that occupation, a direct result of their friendship and assistance to the Australians. Thirty years after the War, Indonesia invaded East Timor and remained for 24 years. During that time the Timorese suffered greatly again, this time losing about a third of the population violently.

The British colonisation of Australia also resulted in death and dispossession of the original inhabitants. The contraction of western diseases accounted for many deaths and over 400 massacres are recorded, including many deliberate poisonings.

Unique among the experiences of Indigenous peoples the world over, the Australian Aboriginal people officially were said to have no claim to the land they occupied. The British government used the term "Terra nullius" to declare that the land belonged to no one, and that settlement could therefore be justified.

This legal concept remained in force until 1992.



Timorese students at a rally in Dili in June, 1998

Photograph: Chafes Dharapak © AAP

Populations

When the Portuguese left Timor in 1974 there were roughly 600,000 Timorese people, and in 2023 the number approached 1.5 million. It is estimated that when the First Fleet arrived in Australia, there were about 500,000 Indigenous people here, growing to 984,000 in 2021.

Languages

A person's identity is fundamentally tied to their first language. Language is the basic human tool of communication, is nourished in the family, and each language contributes to the immense array of human ingenuity, intricacy and beauty.

The languages of the Timorese people are Melanesian in origin whereas the Australian languages are said to have developed in Australia itself from a form known as Proto-Australian. The main local language of Timor-Leste is Tetun, although a greater number of people have other mother-tongues as their first language, such as Makasae and Mumbai.

The Portuguese language dominated the administration of Timor, although only 2% of Timorese were given an education by the Portuguese, a policy made to facilitate business and bureaucracy.

The Timorese people lived in hamlets separated by the mountains and so distinct languages had developed for centuries. It is accepted that there are 16 full languages, as well as various dialects. Portuguese, English and Indonesian are also used. At the beginning of Australian colonisation there were 250 Aboriginal languages, with that number now reduced to about 100.

Timorese languages are being influenced more and more by Portuguese and Bahasa Indonesia, and most Timorese people speak a number of languages fluently. In contrast, Australian Aboriginal languages have had fewer influences. They are notoriously difficult to master, with rich, complex and intricate structures that express relationships to others and deep spiritual connections with the rest of the physical world.

Identity

Europeans and Asians brought to both Australia and Timor-Leste large and mixed bags of influences that both Indigenous peoples are still grappling with. Benefits have been many, including education and access to the richness of other cultures. The detriments have also been huge. Both peoples have suffered needless deaths, racism, destruction and belittlement.

The policies of Portugal, Britain and Indonesia tended to consider the people into whose lands they ventured as primitive, useless and of little importance.

There were concerted efforts to subjugate the peoples under the dominant power structure: in Australia through neglect, assimilation and a belief that they would die out, and in Timor through military oppression, including politically induced starvation.

Nevertheless, the Timorese people's sense of identity was strengthened by the attacks on who they were. Internal divisions were shelved as they sought to maintain their fundamental unity. Australian Indigenous peoples also have been drawn together as never before, with the Uluru Statement from the Heart expressing their basic belief in themselves as the First Peoples of Australia.

In both Australia and Timor-Leste, efforts to obliterate the unique identity of the original peoples have failed. It is advantageous to everyone in both nations that the Indigenous peoples have not chosen violence as the answer to their problems. Neither the Timorese nor the Australian Aboriginal peoples have fallen into the trap of revenge.

Extraordinarily, both groups have offered their hands in friendship to the world, including to those who oppressed them. There have been no wholesale revenge killings, bomb throwings, or social upheaval as in too many other nations.

In 2000, during the visit of a Timorese choir to NSW, Father Tony Doherty described the Timorese people's response to the violence inflicted on them as "beauty and grace". And in 2023, the heartfelt magnanimity and truthfulness of the Uluru Statement is leading the Australian nation towards

official recognition of the Indigenous peoples in the Constitution.

The Future

There is something in the human spirit that admires courage and resilience in the face of oppression.

The general Australian population reacted

with enormous respect and fellow-feeling as the Timorese strove with great self-belief and dignity to free themselves from Indonesian subjugation.

What a wonderful opportunity the whole Australian population now has – to once again champion a group of people reaching towards the place in society that is theirs by right of their identity.

They do not suggest independence as a separate nation, but to be recognised, respected and heard. To have a Voice.

This time it is Australia's own Indigenous peoples who are the focus of a challenge to Australians as a whole.

They stand with immense pride in their successful occupation of this land for 65,000 years. With gracious humility they are asking for, and deserve, our support.



Maningrida Children's Day - Northern Territory 2020

Sister Susan Connelly
Darug Land
14 Yerrick Road Lakemba NSW 2195
susan.connelly@sosj.org.au

05.10.23