# Keep All Alive!

An Aboriginal Model for Sustainability

**by**
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# Abstract

While societies outside Australia emerged, prospered and went under, Aboriginal society withstood and proved its sustainability over 40 000 – 60 000 years of dramatic events, until the Europeans' arrival in 1788. This paper examines how the Nhunggabarra people of Australia organised their society to survive for so long; their rules of governance. The article is based on a selection of Nhunggabarra law stories as told by their custodian, Tex Skuthorpe. The content and interpretation of the stories form the core of the data, and written sources, interviews and site visits complement the stories. The study is, as far as I know, the first serious attempt to use Aboriginal traditional law stories for their original purpose: to convey knowledge about the law. It is also the first attempt to recreate their society model from an organisational perspective.

The Nhunggabarra society was carefully balanced with checks and balances and reinforcing loops. Their economy was dominated by intangible production and consumption. The farming methods were built on intimate knowledge of the ecology of the land. Individual know-how was the decisive power factor; keeping a tight rein on men's ego-drive spread leadership roles; building community also outside one's own country kept peace and increased survival rates. Their spiritual belief was that 'all are connected', the core value 'respect' for all life, so care for the ecosystem was not only a matter of immediate survival, but also the purpose of humanity: to 'keep all alive'.

The paper argues against the perception that modern industrialised societies cannot learn from indigenous societies. Although many practices and solutions are not viable for our time, we can learn from the principles and the governance model as a whole. The Nhunggabarra society model provides a set of principles for sustainability, which can be used as starting point for a discussion about a model that fits our times.

The paper is based on research done for (Sveiby & Skuthorpe 2006), *Treading Lightly – the hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people.*

INDEX

Abstract ..... 2
Purpose, Contribution and Limitations ..... 4
Traditional Stories as a Data Source ..... 4
Methodology ..... 5
The Nhunggabarra – the People that Disappeared ..... 6
The Nhunggabarra Law ..... 6
The Crane and the Crow – A Nhunggabarra Law Story ..... 6
Interpretation – Four Levels of Hidden Meaning ..... 7
Summary of the Laws contained in the Crane & Crow Story ..... 8
Core Value: Respect ..... 8
Respecting Life: Keep All Alive ..... 8
Primary Resource: Knowledge ..... 8
Core Belief: All are Connected ..... 9
Economy: Intangible ..... 10
Leadership: All have Role ..... 10
Society: Build Community ..... 11
Prevent Centralised Power ..... 11
Keep Intercommunity Peace ..... 11
Summary and Conclusions ..... 13
Implications for the Western World and Future Research ..... 14
Future Research ..... 15
References ..... 16

## Purpose, Contribution and Limitations

The purpose of this paper is twofold: to re-create the model for governance of one of the Aboriginal societies, the Nhunggabarra people, and to discuss the implications for our world today. The paper describes the principles for organising their society. How the Nhunggabarra dealt with the environment is only covered briefly.

The paper is a contribution to the discourse on sustainability of society; in particular it is the first attempt to use traditional indigenous knowledge (the Nhunggabarra Law stories) to reconstruct the model of an Australian Aboriginal society from the time before the arrival of the British in 1788. The focus is on one single society; this allows reconstruction of the model as a whole. I am not suggesting that the Nhunggabarra society was unique. I believe there is much that is general of many Aboriginal communities across Australia and – possibly – also of societies of other nomadic people. I have used this belief as a source of inspiration, but I do not try to generalise.

The method is qualitative and the outcome is a theoretical construction from a management/organisational perspective – the Nhunggabarra people would not have described their society in the terms used in this article. Due to the nature of the data – the Law – the generated model is a theoretical Weberian ideal; how the society was meant to function. We will never know to what degree people actually conformed. Still, their achievement is undeniable. The Australian Aborigines sustained their societies on their island continent into our days for a minimum 40,000 years. This makes their society both one of the earliest we know and their survival record one of the longest that we have evidence of.

## Traditional Stories as a Data Source

The central source in this paper is the Law stories of the Nhunggabarra – an Australian Aboriginal people that once lived in North-western New South Wales. The words aboriginal and indigenous are in ethnographic sense synonyms. However, “Aboriginal” is today used mainly to refer to the Australian indigenous peoples. This paper follows a generally accepted definition of indigenous people quoted by Purcell (1998) as “existing descendants of non-Western peoples who, in general, continue to occupy their ancestral lands even after conquest by Westerners, or who have been relocated forcibly in the process of colonization.” The terms “Western” and “Westerners” also follows Purcell as being Europe and North America and Europeans and Americans respectively.

The trouble for all studies of Aboriginal society, especially in the Australian southeast, is that maybe half the Aboriginal population of the southeast – some sources suggest even higher casualty numbers – succumbed within a few years of the first settlement due to diseases, probably unwittingly introduced by the white. Apart from the incomprehensible suffering experienced by the people, a large part of their enormously rich, intangible asset base therefore disappeared before Westerners even set their eyes upon it.

All that is available today about the original society in the form of written sources has been largely filtered through the minds of the early white explorers, colonists, ministers and priests and inexperienced anthropologists. The first anthropologists (who at the time were taking tentative steps in what was later to become an academic profession) did not realise that what they saw of Aboriginal culture in New South Wales was but remnants of the once blossoming Aboriginal Australian southeast.

What we do have, though, is a wealth of traditional stories kept alive by a few Nhunggabarra people into the present day. It is a selection from this treasure – the Law stories – that is used as source in this article. Oral tradition preserved them, so they have travelled through the disturbances of the 19th and 20th centuries virtually untouched. A Nhunggabarra Law story can thus be likened with a time capsule and be a more reliable source about how Aboriginal society was meant to function than the European eyewitnesses, who could only observe societies severely disrupted by diseases and stressed due to the loss of their lands.

This is the value of the law stories for the purpose of the paper: they contain the rules that governed Nhunggabarra society before the arrival of the Westerners. (Sources for Aboriginal law in general are Berndt & Berndt (1999: 336–66) and Tonkinson (1978: 139–51)).

Indigenous stories and oral tradition are unusual as sources in management and organisation studies. The issue is what is considered legitimate knowledge. Since the epistemological revolution during the 17th century, legitimate knowledge in the Western world has been equal to knowledge that has passed muster through the scientific process. The scientific concept of knowledge has not much in common with the knowledge of indigenous people, which is largely based on personal experiences, oral tradition and uncontrolled, undocumented observations.

Still, even scholars trained in scientific thinking, can never be free from unreflected cultural blinders. I experienced my Western blinders the first time I met the custodian of the Nhunggabarra Law stories, Tex Skuthorpe. I asked him: 'What is the word for knowledge in your Aboriginal language?' 'We don't have a word for it,' Tex replied. 'Our land is our knowledge, we walk on the knowledge, we dwell in the knowledge, we live in our thesaurus, and we walk in our Bible every day of our lives. Everything is knowledge. We don't need a word for knowledge, I guess.' The answer took me by complete surprise; I had not anticipated that a language could not have a word for knowledge. And this is precisely the problem Westerners have had trying to understand a culture as completely different as that of the Australian Aboriginal people. Our pre-understanding makes us ask the wrong questions.

The Aboriginal people were therefore from the first encounter with the Western world defined from a deficiency perspective – they were (compared to the Western world) lacking technology, lacking agriculture, lacking housing, lacking clothing etc. It was even believed that they were lacking leaders. The prevailing Western scientific perspective has prevented scholars from appreciating indigenous knowledge in general – a Western deficiency that we have come to regret.

Environmental damage and ecology disaster issues dominate the sustainability discourse and this is where indigenous knowledge is treated increasingly with respect also by scientists. The value for the Western world of indigenous knowledge about medicinal plants and healing techniques is also slowly beginning to be recognised by Western scientists, for instance the ethnobotanist Paul Alan Cox has been awarded for his work with Samoan healers (Cox 2006) and even scholars educated in Western evidenced-based medicine as witnessed by this quote from Stephens C., & al., (2006) in The Lancet: 'Without Indigenous peoples' knowledge, we might not be able to understand the full value of the ecosystem for health and medicine, not only for Indigenous health but also for us all.'

Indigenous people are, however, generally disregarded by management/organisational scholars and what little there is tends to be applications of theories with a Western perspective. An example is the scholars Clark (2002) and Castro (2004), who apply Marxist theory on the American native people's efforts to maintain indigenous cultural habits and protect geographical areas against exploitation and environmental degradation. In their terms it becomes a struggle between societies.

The opposite perspective, that is what we today can learn from how indigenous people organised their societies has however been largely ignored in the sustainability discourse. As the geographer Jared Diamond says in the prologue of his book *Collapse – How societies choose to fail or succeed* published 2005: 'I naively thought that the book would just be about environmental damage'. He certainly confirmed environmental degradation as the main factor trigging a society's collapse and he found that severe climate change was another reason. But he also found three organisational and societal factors, which determine the final outcome: How the society in question responds to its environmental problems; how it handles hostile neighbours and whether friendly trading partners are present. This article covers those three factors.

## Methodology

The main informant is Tex Skuthorpe, the last custodian of the Nhunggabarra Law stories. The core data in this article come from the law stories, ten of which have been published in Sveiby & Skuthorpe (2006). The process of producing the data was as follows: Tex Skuthorpe concentrated on expressing the stories in a written form with the help of his partner Anne Morrill (most of the stories had never been put to paper before) and to make their meanings explicit. I focused on reading written sources available in the AIATSIS library in Canberra and the state libraries and museums in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane.

The content and interpretation of the Nhunggabarra law stories form the core of the data. Tex would tell a story and describe its content and meaning to me. I then went to the written sources to find something that confirmed or rejected the interpretations. Sometimes it was the other way around – I found something in the written sources that might be relevant and Tex confirmed or rejected it, based on the stories and his knowledge of the Nhunggabarra traditions. Tex and I also discussed interpretations thoroughly. In situations where the sources were in conflict with the stories or when our interpretations did not agree, one interpretation was selected in the main text of our book and the alternatives with source references were commented upon in the notes. For lack of space the alternative interpretations have not been included in this paper. We also made visits to sacred sites where I made observations, took pictures and wrote field notes. Three interviews with anthropologists have also been conducted.

Since the choice of themes was guided by the content in stories the process can be described as inductive and exploratory, but not grounded theory.

The written sources are journals written by the early explorers, archaeologists' accounts, and reports by anthropologists. All data were submitted to qualitative text analysis; texts from all the sources were written in MS Word, stored and analysed in MS Excel and the text analysis program nVivo.

# The Nhunggabarra – the People that Disappeared

While we know fairly well the band organisation and nomadic life of the desert-living Aborigines, very little is known, besides traditional tales, about how the Aboriginal societies in the relatively fertile Australian southeast lived before the Europeans disrupted their societies. It seems that people along the rivers – like the Nhunggabarra – were probably living a more sedentary life. Their camps resembled villages according to the early explorer Thomas Mitchell (1839/1847) and the communities lived together and moved only a few times during a year;.

Analyses of various population estimates in Sveiby & Skuthorpe (2006) suggest that the Nhunggabarra and their 25 neighbouring communities may once have had a population exceeding 15,000, i.e. 500-1000 people per society on an area approximately the size of Belgium. When the white settlers arrived in Nhunggal country, probably in the 1840s, it was however not densely populated. The most likely explanation, supported by observations made by the first explorer in the area, Charles Sturt, is that outbreaks of diseases, which preceded the first explorers, had depopulated it, (Sturt, C. 1828/1983). Atrocities and massacres committed by the early white settlers completed the tragedy. (Reynolds 1981, Broome 2005).

Today the original Nhunggabarra people have disappeared almost entirely from their home country – their language is not spoken, and not even the name of their country remains in official records.

# The Nhunggabarra Law

The Nhunggabarra Law was a code of moral and social behaviour. It regulated life both in the community and between communities. The behavioural code was imprinted upon a child even before they could walk. Its authority was unquestionable and considered to have been given to the Nhunggabarra at the time of creation, the *Burruguu*. The law hence provided a moral authority outside the individual and beyond human creation. The law stories thus tell us the shared understanding of what it meant to be a 'proper' Nhunggabarra person.

The image emerging from the law stories is that the ideal Nhunggabarra person was someone who was expected to share generously, unselfishly and without hesitation; an active provider of care for children, for the old and the in-laws; a person who fulfilled kinship obligations without question. They were supposed to show compassion for others and respected integrity. The ideal Nhunggabarra person was unassuming and non-aggressive, someone who took responsibility for actions towards both one's own people and for other communities.

This is the ideal, of course, and it does not tell how the Nhunggabarra actually behaved before the white people arrived. There must have existed non-ideal behaviour and non-ideal people, from naughty children to ego-driven adults and individuals committing serious offences like adultery, kidnapping and murder. It is not possible to know how common such offences were, but what matters for the purpose of this article is what was considered to be the 'normal' behaviour.

Aboriginal law all over Australia was not a law in the Western sense: it was not upheld by formal courts. But crimes against the law were recognised as offences and carried penalties, which were enforced by the *wiringin* (shaman, 'clever' man or woman), who acted as the 'chief justice'.

## The Crane and the Crow – A Nhunggabarra Law Story

*Garraagaa, the crane was a great fisherman. He could catch many fish by hunting them out, with his feet, from underneath the logs in the creek. One day, when he had a great many on the bank of the creek, Waan, the crow, which was white at that time, came up and asked the crane to give him some fish.*

*The crane told the crow to wait until the fish were cooked but the crow was hungry and impatient. He kept bothering the crane, who told him to wait. Eventually the crane turned his back. The crow sneaked up and was just about to steal a fish, when the crane saw him, seized a fish and hit the crow right across the eyes with it. The crow felt blinded for a few minutes. He fell on the burnt black grass around the fire and rolled over and over in his pain. When he got up, his eyes were white and the rest of him black, as crows have been ever since.*

*The crow was determined to have his revenge. He waited for his chance and one day saw the crane fast asleep on his back with his mouth wide open. He crept quietly up to him and stuck a fish bone right across the root of the crane's tongue.*

*The crane woke up and when he opened his mouth to yawn he felt like choking. He tried to get the thing out of his throat and, in the effort, he made a strange scraping noise – 'gah-rah-gah, gah-rah-gah'. But the fish bone could not be moved and still the only noise a crane can make is 'gah-rah-gah' – the name by which he is known.*

## Interpretation – Four Levels of Hidden Meaning

This deceptively simple story would have been one of the first a Nhunggabarra child heard. At the surface level the text explains natural features and animal behaviours. This level answers some of the fundamental questions that little children probably pestered their parents with: why does the crow have black feathers and white eyes? Answer: The crow used to be all white, but then he turned black, except for the eyes.

Two of the hidden layers of meaning concern inter- and intrasociety relationships. They do not come straight from the text and they were never told explicitly. Each individual had to extract the meaning as part of the education and one had to have some pre-knowledge about the law to be able to do this. This level therefore has therefore remained hidden for non-initiated people until now. This is the first time the interpretation of the Nhunggabarra law stories has been put to paper.

Altogether the Crane and Crow story contains eleven laws. Eight of the second and third level meanings are relevant for the purpose of this paper. The story also contains three laws related to the sacred, fourth, level, which taught spiritual action and psychic skills, but they are beyond the purpose of this paper.

***Do not impose your view on others.*** Instead of giving the raw fish to the crow, the crane tries to force the crow to cook it first. The crane is the expert fisherman so he believes he has the right to impose his views on others. It is an attempt to use his power of superior knowledge to influence the crow's behaviour. Instead he should have shown respect by letting the crow eat his fish in the way it wanted. To impose a view on another person is an abuse of power.
***Share the knowledge.*** The crane does not share his knowledge about fishing. This is wrong: as the expert he should have shared the knowledge in order to enable the crow to independently feed himself. A core value among the Nhunggabarra was that individual expertise must never be used for individual benefit. There were two reasons for this. If the crane kept his knowledge to himself it would make the crow dependent; the crow would become powerless and the crane would hold a power monopoly. The other reason is that if knowledge were individually owned and not shared it would disappear when the owner died; the Aboriginal people would not be able to feed themselves and they would die too. This was why knowledge belonged to everybody and the land. Knowledge was not for keeping; it was for sharing.
***With knowledge comes responsibility.*** An expert is expected to fulfil a role for the whole community, not for oneself. As the expert fisherman, the crane should have been fishing for the whole community (represented by the crow), but he fulfilled the role only for himself and his own individual benefit. The European settlers were perplexed by this custom. They could not understand why the successful hunter had no power over the division of his game and could well end up with no meat at all.
***Split the roles.*** The crane performs three roles in the story: catching, cooking and dividing the catch. This is wrong. Work must be split up to prevent someone from taking ownership of a whole chain of knowledge. The roles connected with fishing (net-making, trapping, catching, cooking), hunting (tracking, spearing, collecting and cooking), storytelling and many other activities were split among different people.
***Do not stay in one place.*** The crane exploits the fish in the river by fishing more than he needs to. If he continues in this way the crane will deplete the stock of fish. This explains why the Nhunggabarra had to live a nomadic life. If you move camp according to the seasons the resources will be at their prime at each place and you will find food with less effort. If, on the other hand, you become sedentary, you will give the breeding stock no time to recover, and you will very rapidly deplete the resources in this one place. Another benefit of nomadic life is that if you stay in one place you will start changing the appearance of the country and then you will break the links between land and story and start to lose your knowledge (which is contained in the land).
***Do not deplete the breeding stock.*** The Narran River goes dry at regular intervals, leaving only disconnected waterholes. If the crane stayed in one of the waterholes during the dry season, he would kill all the breeding stock in that waterhole and extinguish the whole species. This would endanger all the bigger fish, which depend on the same small fish on which the crane was feeding. The big fish were more valuable, so by depleting one piece of the food chain, you deplete the whole chain. The story in this way teaches a holistic perspective. The Aborigines were very careful to maintain the breeding stock of both animals and plants so it was a form of farming, but not agriculture. It has been called 'fire-stick farming', (referring to the frequent use of fire as tool), but their

approaches were much wider than so. Their careful maintenance of the whole ecology could perhaps be called ‘natural farming’ or ‘eco-farming’.
***Behave with responsibility towards other communities.*** The crane was behaving as if he owned the river and the fish, but he did not. He should not have been fishing more than he needed to. By depleting one part of the food chain the crane was endangering animals further downstream – the species that depended on the smaller fish. The river flows into a lake, so if you live in a society where people behaved like the crane, the animals and the birds in the lake would be affected by the loss of one species in the food chain. The river and the lake represent two different communities, so this value also describes the relationship with other communities; each community depends on responsible behaviour by the others.
***Punish only your own.*** The story ends with the crane choking on the fish bone that the crow had pushed into his throat. This was the crane’s punishment for breaking the law. However, the crow did not have the right to punish the crane. No one except your own people was allowed to punish you. So therefore the crow was also punished. This particular law stopped revenge behaviour. A pay-back or vendetta custom did not exist among the Nhunggabarra and their neighbours.

## Summary of the Laws contained in the Crane & Crow Story

This deceptively simple story is thus quite complex. It taught the experts how to behave when one possesses the power that comes from supreme knowledge: Do not impose your view on others, but share the knowledge and remember that with knowledge comes responsibility. The law also regulated a process that prevented individual power monopolies: Split the roles. It taught a behaviour which reduced environmental damage in the Nhunggabarra society, do not stay in one place; and two other environmental rules which taught responsible behaviour and prevented competition about natural resources, do not deplete the breeding stock and behave with responsibility towards other communities. Finally, if you came across some one breaking the Law remember that you must only punish only your own.

# *Core Value: Respect*

The Crane & Crow story displays a recurring theme in all the Nhunggabarra law stories, which can be summarised in one word: *respect*. The story tells you to respect the view points of others, particularly of you are an expert; to respect the animals; to respect other societies; to respect the environment. ‘Respect’ in the Aboriginal sense is an action, a verb.

Respect permeated one’s understanding of what it was to be a Nhunggabarra person. In the traditional Nhunggabarra society it started with a general respect for life itself.

## Respecting Life: Keep All Alive

To the Nhunggabarra, the role of humanity was to maintain the world as it was at the time of Creation and to keep everybody and everything alive, including animals, vegetation, every feature of the earth, knowledge, even the Ancestors in the *Warrambul* (the Milky Way). The Nhunggabarra had to continue to tell the stories, and perform the dances and the ceremonies, or else the animals, the earth and the Ancestors would die.

If they failed, say, to preserve the emu species on earth, the intangible spirit of the emu would also disappear from the spirit world and, because of the interconnectedness of everything, all the Aboriginal people of the emu totem on earth would also die. This enormous commitment put pressure on each individual and on the Nhunggabarra people as a whole.

When the Nhunggabarra performed the dances, sang the songs and told the stories it was not trivial entertainment; it was ‘work’ and a lifetime commitment. It was to fulfil the mission to *keep all alive*; (the plants as well as the rocks and the soil), the totems (the animals), and, last but not least, to keep the Nhunggabarra people alive.

# *Primary Resource: Knowledge*

The Nhunggabarra had three main forms of life to serve: the animals (totems), the plants and the land. They also knew what they had to do: keep them all alive or the people and the community would collapse. The Nhunggabarra, as individuals, had to learn everything worth knowing about their ’constituency’, otherwise they could not fulfill their needs. They had three collections of resources at their disposal: the people with their capacity to act, the tools and ceremonies, and all the various forms of life on their land.

They had to build their know-how in performing the ceremonies and they had to learn the proper execution of ceremonies or else risk the ceremony losing its power. A society that kept its harmony both inside and in its dealings with other communities was crucial: they had to tend to an architecture that was sustainable long-term. Last but not least, they had to keep themselves alive, otherwise their struggle was pointless and the whole world would go under anyway.

The Nhunggabarra had many methods for ensuring the flow of the knowledge between individuals: buurras, storytelling, learning tracks, initiation, songs, dances, artwork, ceremonies, walkabouts, learner-driven education, to mention but a few. Education was imperative for an individual to function as an adult in this society; in particular, the demands on every man to learn were very high – men were not regarded as fully functioning adults until the age of 32. We can compare this with the present-day Western world, where the highest degree awarded in the education system (doctor) can in Australia be accomplished as early as the age of 24, and very few achieve it.

The Nhunggabarra used their skills and other individual capacities to improve animals' capacity to live, grow and multiply. They cultivated the countryside to increase land suitable for animal habitats; they created breeding sanctuaries and performed reciprocity ceremonies (for instance, 'sorry dances' in preparation for a hunt).

Knowledge flowed the other way, too. The Nhunggabarra people learned from the animals, the earth and the plants. The totem system ensured a group of dedicated and knowledgeable individuals, who would always act in the best interest of their totem animals. Education also gave the Nhunggabarra insights into the relationship between various animals and the best vegetation types for sustaining them. Features of the landscape served as navigation aids.

The Nhunggabarra also converted the knowledge they learned from their 'constituency' into better tools and processes, such as new natural medicines, new songs and new paintings. They invested time and creative effort in developing new tools and traps. Over time they also adapted the stories to changing circumstances. The tools and processes helped the Nhunggabarra to be better hunters and gatherers. Tangible tools, like the spear and the spear thrower, enabled them to hunt more effectively; ceremonies prepared them for the hunt; stories supported their navigation in the landscape; the law ensured that the community functioned socially.

Animals, plants and the earth contributed considerable knowledge to the stories (they populated the stories, they functioned as mnemonics), the law (the totem system was inspired by the animals) and the tools (in the form of tangible materials). The animals even inspired the Nhunggabarra's language; many words in their language are derived from or inspired by animal sounds. Many methods were implemented with a dual purpose: to both sustain the 'constituency' and to sustain the 'mob'. Fire was a crucial tool in sustaining the animals' habitats and improving the topsoil for edible plants for both animals and humans; the fi sh traps ensured survival of the breeding stock and provided food simultaneously; the ceremonies reached and communicated with the animals' spirits; the law made sure that the Nhunggabarra moved around so they did not deplete the animal stock, the vegetation or the soil.

The stories, the songs, the ceremonies were all aligned under one spiritual paradigm and they supported each other. A story would be supported by a song and a painting and a dance; tools would have multiple uses and also feature in stories and ceremonies. The Nhunggabarra spent a large proportion of their most productive resources on building community and common context. In addition, the mission emphasised a holistic view, which maximised value creation.

And the mission was kept alive too; by telling and retelling the stories, by acting and living it in everyday life, in a society of high transparency.

## Core Belief: All are Connected

Westerners, raised with a Judaeo-Christian worldview, think of themselves as separate from the natural world in which they live. In contrast, Aboriginal people considered themselves integrated with and part of the natural world.

The world according to the Nhunggabarra was created in the Burruguu; the time of creation, which is a better word than the popular English word 'dreamtime'. The Burruguu was a creative era when the Ancestors travelled the universe. Their travels, their fights, adventures and hunting made imprints on the earth's topography and created the landscape. These ancestral beings possessed superhuman powers, but they were subject to human traits, pleasures, desires and vices; they fought, quarrelled and made mistakes. Aborigines always refer to them as

their 'Ancestors'; they were not gods. When the Ancestors had created the earth they returned to the Warrambul in the sky, where they still live.

The Nhunggabarra did not worship any gods – not even nature spirits. Instead, for them every rock and every land form, every plant and every animal had its own consciousness, just as people did. Everything was 'alive'. The earth that the Nhunggabarra walked on was the mirror of the Warrambul; the earth was the explicit and tangible expression of their Ancestors' intangible world. Every form thus had both a tangible and an intangible expression. Plants, animals, the soil, even a piece of rock had an intangible counterpart in the sky, just like the people.

Hence, every land formation and every creature on earth held hidden meanings. The Ancestors and the connection to the Burruguu were always present in the landscape for the Nhunggabarra people – thus their presence was felt concretely every day when the people walked their country. The Nhunggabarra were at any time able to connect to the spiritual world, either individually or collectively, through a whole range of means.

## Economy: Intangible

Sir John Eyre, an explorer with experience from many different areas of Australia, observed in 1845: 'In almost every part of the continent which I have visited, where the presence of Europeans, or their stock, has not limited, or destroyed their original means of subsistence, I have found a native could usually, in three or four hours, procure as much food as would last for the day, and that without fatigue or labour' (author's underscore).

Both early explorers and later studies have produced similar evidence: the procurement and preparation of food for Australian Aboriginal people living in the southeast was an everyday activity taking with an average of between two and five hours per person per day. There were seasonal fluctuations but, except during extreme droughts, it was not hard work. This begs the question: what did they do with the rest of their time?

The European settlers and explorers could not detect any activity they recognised as proper work. Their conclusion was inevitable: The Aboriginal people were considered indolent or even lazy. Grey noticed in 1846 that, although they could procure their food in a few hours if they wanted, 'their usual custom is to roam indolently from spot to spot, lazily collecting it as they wander along'.

Spiritual life was much more significant than material life for the Australian Aboriginal people. Instead of putting their surplus energy into squeezing more food out of the land, Aborigines expended it on intangibles: spiritual, intellectual and artistic activities.

Because food and a few personalised tools were the only tangible production that Western scientists and economists recognised and were able to measure, they long dismissed Aboriginal economy as producing very low value. What they missed was more than half the economy – that is, Aboriginal society's very high production of intangible value: education, knowledge, art, law, entertainment, medicine, spiritual ceremonies, peacekeeping and social welfare (measured by how time was spent).

It is in the mind and the creativity of the spirit – in the intangible rather than the tangible artefacts – that Aboriginal society stands out. Aboriginal 'high-technology' was largely intellectual and intangible.

## Leadership: All have Role

When Europeans met Aboriginal people in the early days of colonisation, they would invariably ask to be shown to the 'king' or 'chief'. Both were alien concepts for the Aboriginal people, who, confused, sometimes would bring the Europeans to the wiringin, sometimes to the oldest person around.

The Nhunggabarra had no warrior class, no warlords or kings, no government roles and no roles for religious intermediaries like priests and clerics. The wiringin had several unique roles, and in that sense was the most 'powerful' person of the community. But he was not the leader; his role was one of expert in psychic matters, custodian of the sacred (fourth level) law and chief justice. Nor was there excess capacity in the Nhunggabarra that the wiringins could draw upon for their services; they had to cater for their own sustenance and build their own camp, just like everybody else.

The most experienced hunter would be respected as the leader, but he would not order the other hunters to follow him; he merely made his decision known about the direction and target of that day's hunt. The other men would follow him, if that was their role. If they chose not to go, they would know they were breaking the law, but they were free to decide and the leader would not exert authoritarian power to make them follow him.

The well-known labour activist Mary Gilmore (1986) describes in her memoirs a team of Aborigines who were felling and positioning a tree as a barrier in Wagga Wagga in the 1860's: 'every man was alert; no man got in another's way; and each was captain in his own place'.

The same ideal would have applied to all organised activities involving several people: The Nhunggabarra person with a certain role had undisputed leadership and power in that field of knowledge, but at the same time they had to accept the leadership of others and be the follower in other knowledge fields. So every adult had both leader roles and follower roles at the same time – who had the leader role and who was the follower depended on situation and context. One could therefore call the Nhunggabarra's leadership style both *non-hierarchical* and *context-specific*.

# Society: Build Community

The Nhunggabarra law stories prescribe several processes and institutions for preventing centralised power and for keeping inter-community peace.

## Prevent Centralised Power

The stories contain a wide range of principles and rules that prevent individuals from rising to absolute power. This shows that the Nhunggabarra society was not an egalitarian utopia populated by idealistic people with altruistic motives. On the contrary, the mere existence of the rules suggest that the Nhunggabarra had at some point in their history experienced the consequences of criminality, power abuse, over-exploitation and war and had done the best they could to prevent them from occurring.

One such rule was role-splitting (from the Crane and Crow story). The Europeans were (and still are) perplexed by this custom, which seems inefficient. However, role-splitting accomplished three things that to the Nhunggabarra were more important than efficiency: it involved more people in key activities, it forced people to work together in teams, and – above all – it reduced the risk that someone would rise to a monopoly on knowledge. For example, the law stories had four custodians in prehistoric times; all four would know the whole story, but each was allowed to teach only their own part. All hunters (a male role) would hold all the knowledge about an animal and its related ecosystem, and all would be able to perform all four roles, but each man was allowed to perform only his own role. Female foraging and gathering tasks were not split into roles, which suggests that Nhunggabarra law was more concerned about the potential power abuse by men.

The Nhunggabarra community was no democracy, but they appear to have understood power issues quite well, because they had also developed several power-balancing processes, such as respect, consensus decision making and context-specific leadership. If those processes were implemented, they should have prevented power abuse and given reasonable guarantees that individual concerns could be raised.

## Keep Intercommunity Peace

### *Community of Communities*

In many ways the Nhunggabarra and their 25 neighbouring people were no different to many other Australian Aboriginal societies. They were quite diverse, speaking many different languages and had a wide variety of customs. Yet, something perhaps less common was that the Nhunggabarra and the surrounding countries had developed a highly advanced level of cooperation, a community of communities or 'cultural bloc' (Berndt & Berndt 1999: 154). Several processes and legal institutions, which tied them together, are described in the stories. Two that can mentioned here were the *marriage laws* (you had to marry a person from another country) and the *18-20 year journey of knowledge* for men (as part of their education all men had to travel to and live with all 25 neighbouring countries). .

### *Network to Avoid Wars with Neighbours*

Aboriginal society seems violent when judged by today's standard: for example, capital punishment was meted out for offences that we would call minor today. However, provided a Nhunggabarra person did not break the law, they had a very low risk of dying at the hands of other people, since war, as the rest of the world knows it, was unknown to them.

The Western mind finds this hard to believe. Settlers also reported intra-Aboriginal wars in the early 1800s in the New South Wales coastal areas, at least one involving several hundred warriors on each side. Also the early

anthropologist Howitt (1904: 326–30) claimed that warfare between tribes was fairly common in the early days before European arrival.

These wars, however, occurred after European arrival, when the society infrastructures had disintegrated due to diseases and when the communities were under severe stress because they had lost their land. Interestingly, one of the Law stories describes the devastating consequences of civil war, (The Black Swans story, cited in Sveiby & Skuthorpe 2006) – thereby outlawing it. The Nhunggabarra apparently knew quite well what could happen in a severe crisis, when the rule of law was no longer upheld, and had addressed it through their laws.

Later anthropologists, Berndt & Berndt (1999: 37, 223), Kaberry (2004: 139) and Elkin (1977: 28), however, agree: there were no European- or Asian-style wars deliberately designed to take over other countries or enemies on the Australian continent before the Europeans arrived.

Land hunger as a motive did not exist in pre-European Australia and the anthropologists concur that the reason for this was the spiritual connection with the land, which made the idea of taking over another country completely meaningless. If a war campaign happened to be successful it would only mean more responsibility and more work. Personal deadly feuds must certainly have existed, but organised war was against all that the Nhunggabarra law stood for.

All adult men walked practically all learning tracks around the cultural bloc as part of their education and should have got to know quite well at least their kin in all the neighbouring countries. This allowed an extraordinary blending of blood lines, friends, kin, knowledge and experiences and it makes the law against punishing people from other communities believable. This *anti-vendetta* principle (from the Crane and Crow story) must have been a crucial peacekeeping mechanism; witness the terrible and long-lasting effects of vendetta in other parts of the world. The *tuckandee law* was another trust-building mechanism, (you had an unknown 'brother or 'sister' in neighbouring country, who in case of your premature death would care for your children's education). Who would unwittingly risk killing the knowledge safe keeper of their children in a war? The *Big Buurra*, a gathering where everybody from all countries jointly conducted a live learning experience, further reinforced both diversity and commonality.

The *trading practice* based on barter (see below) was also designed to minimise inter-community conflicts. And when we add the close kinship relationships due to marriage planning, the model virtually guarantees peace among the communities that made up the cultural bloc. It seems quite unlikely that the Nhunggabarra were involved in wars with their neighbours.

## Trade for Trust

Trade in Aboriginal Australia was based on physical exchange of goods, also known as barter trade. No money was involved.

Economists generally identify two disadvantages with barter trade compared to money transactions. One is that it depends on the 'mutual coincidence of needs'. Before any transaction can be undertaken, the needs of one person must mirror the needs of another person. So, if you have a surplus of stone axes and need spear points, you must find someone who has a surplus of spear points and needs more stone axes. To overcome this problem, intermediaries in medieval Europe stored and warehoused huge volumes of commodities – a very risky business, which they had to cover by increasing prices.

The other disadvantage with a barter compared to a money transaction is that the exchange value of the goods is harder to fix and easily becomes an issue of conflict.

The Aboriginal model (applied all over Australia) was to select items from their country that they had a surplus of and bring them to the trading place on the country border. There they placed a message stick and left. The neighbouring people would see the message stick and leave items of their choice at the trading place. Both trading parties had to accept all the items, even if they did not need them; to leave anything would have shown disrespect. What they did not need they would in their turn trade with people further away. In this way a vast trading network was maintained across all of Aboriginal Australia. (McCarthy 1938-40)

Their Aboriginal community to community trading model for tangible goods seems designed to minimise conflict. By leaving the goods in a neutral trading place they avoided arguments about the value and they also avoided entirely the risk inherent in warehousing goods. Instead of trade in tangible goods being risky and a potential source of conflict it became a trust-building mechanism.

## *Summary and Conclusions*

The Nhunggabarra, and most likely, other Australian Aboriginal societies, had achieved something the industrialised world is still struggling with: a sustainable society on earth. The Nhunggabarra law stories reveal a set of rules that – taken together and if people conformed – constitute a carefully balanced model with checks and balances and reinforcing loops. We can distinguish economic, ecological, social and spiritual elements in the model.

A striking feature of the Nhunggabarra society is an economy dominated by intangible production and consumption. A predominantly intangible economy plus nomadic life ensured that the ecological pressure of the economy was kept low.

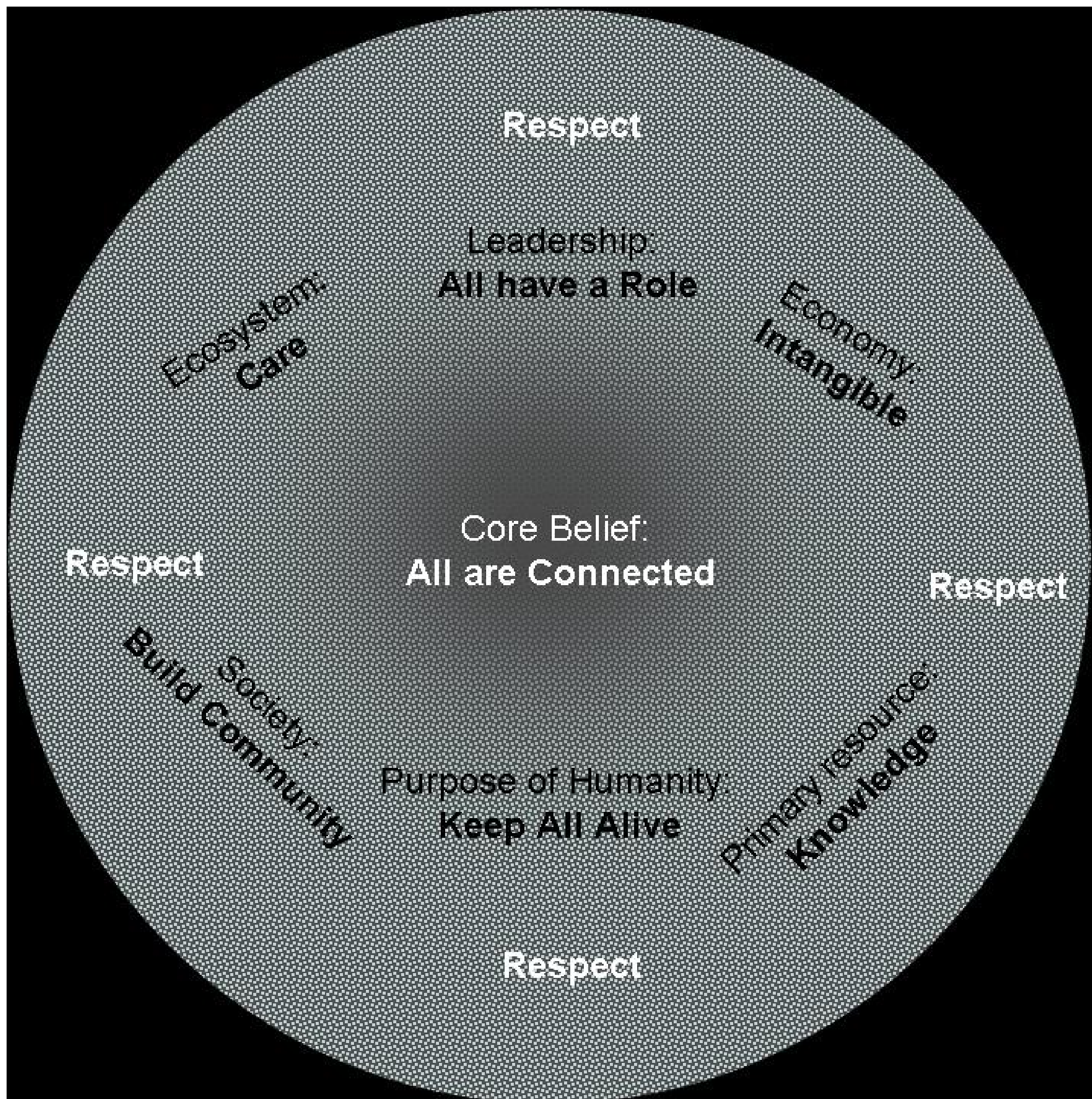


**Figure 1. Principles for a Sustainable Society. (The texture in the circle represents the all-permeating and connecting value of 'Respect'.)**

Aboriginal farming methods were designed with the purpose to keep all alive and built on intimate knowledge of the ecology of the land. The methods hence were indistinguishable from nature itself (carefully managed fires to create grazing habitats, fish traps in all rivers, wild-life sanctuaries protected by law, etc). Consequently, the methods have been dismissed as 'primitive' both by arriving settlers and by scientists into our day.

The law ensured that the Nhunggabarra maintained the breeding stocks, that the methods for trapping mimicked nature, and those methods that did have a considerable impact, particularly fire, were carefully managed to maintain the ecosystems.

The spiritual belief system required a high level of ceremonial work, i.e. production of intangibles. Making individual know-how the decisive power factor, and keeping a tight rein on men's ego-drive spread leadership roles; building community also outside one's own country kept peace and increased survival rates.

## Implications for the Western World and Future Research

How valid is this model? It is a construction based on organisation- and management theory concepts – I am not implying that the Nhunggabarra openly discussed spirituality, legal principles, values and leadership style in these terms. In the short term at least, the laws were unquestionable.

The main argument against modern industrialised societies learning from the Aboriginal society model is that we cannot learn from old societies, because they were too different from the modern industrialised world. Jared Diamond has been criticised by among others political scientist Thomas Homer-Dixon (2006b) for referencing historical and old societies with dubious relevance for today and this is a criticism that can be raised also against this study.

Also Karl Popper (1945/2002) advocated that 'open' societies, such as Western democracies, cannot implement solutions from 'closed' indigenous societies. He claimed that they tend to be marked by their taboos and obligations, which exempt individuals from moral problems; there is never any doubt about how to act. In Western societies, on the other hand, individuals are free to pursue any role in competition with others.

The Nhunggabarra did not have the same freedom of choice as we have today. This fact alone makes many of their practices unacceptable or unimaginable for us living today. It does not, however, make the underlying principles invalid. We cannot accept a law that forces us to marry only foreigners, but we have no problem with the underlying principles: to increase diversity and to reduce the risk for war. We can hardly return to nomadic life, but we can apply the principle behind it: to leave a small ecological footprint on the earth. We cannot abandon our market economy, but we can apply the underlying principle of barter to minimise inter-community conflicts resulting from unequal resource distribution.

This is the value of the Nhunggabarra model for us. It provides a set of principles for sustainability, which can be used as a starting point for finding a model that may fit our times.

A final argument against learning from Aboriginal society is based on Darwin's 'survival of the fittest' theory of evolution: Their model for society was not fit to survive. It is a derogatory argument rarely expressed openly today and it is just as well, because it misses the point. Evolution theory is not a social theory; it explains only biological consequences. Biologically, the Australian continent was a world almost cut off from the rest of the planet, and therefore very vulnerable to an invasion of alien microbes. This is also what happened in reality when they were invaded by the Europeans – the Australian Aborigines bodies succumbed rapidly to the wide range of epidemic diseases that hit them almost simultaneously.

However, the social consequences of European arrival on the Australian continent cannot be explained by evolution theory. Applied on fields outside biology, evolution theory is at best a metaphor, at worst very dangerous. Evolution theory has, for instance, been used to justify both the holocaust and colonialism. There was nothing 'evolutionary' about the European expeditions that colonised the Americas, Africa and Australia and marginalised the indigenous peoples – the expeditions were initiated and funded by people, who exercised their free will.

The Aborigines avoided most of the ecology-damaging problems of sedentary living, agriculture and tangible production, because they were using materials that recycled naturally, they used only renewable energy resources, their farming methods were ecological and they stuck to their nomadic life. Had they been living as the Australians today, in cities with coal-fired power stations, industrial agriculture and non-recycled physical production, the Aborigines would not have survived till our days.

The Nhunggabarra model for sustainability was based on respect, collaboration, community building and care. Their laws were designed to prevent competition between communities and individuals. Instead responsibility was emphasised – in many ways the Nhunggabarra model is the opposite of the modern Western society.

Since the genie of competition and freedom of choice was let out of the bottle in the late 1600's the Western world has experienced an unprecedented development. We know the material benefits very well. The trouble today, however, is that Western institutions, societies and individuals have been allowed to behave as if exploitation of natural resources and pollution of the environment do not carry any costs. The material affluence that we are so proud of is being generated at the cost of a rapidly growing, huge unmeasured and unaccounted-for liability that we keep rolling forward to future generations. Such behaviours would be illegal were we to apply Nhunggabarra law.

While a looming environmental catastrophe is our most pressing sustainability issue of today, this article argues that today's piecemeal responses to one ecology disaster after another will not be sufficient. The success of the Australian Aboriginal society teaches us that the research on sustainability needs a holistic approach with contributions from all areas of society.

## Future Research

In this article I have attempted to show that the Nhunggabarra had processes which helped them to avoid Diamond's (2005) three society/organisational factors that contribute to society collapse. The Nhunggabarra controlled their environmental problems; they and their neighbours had several processes to ensure friendly relationships and they made sure to reduce tension with their trading partners through barter trade.

How general is the model? Does it reflect Australian Aboriginal pre-historic society? I believe it does to a fair degree. While the practices may have varied the principles are fairly general and form a hypothesis that can be tested by comparing the model with other Aboriginal societies. The model can also be compared against other indigenous cultures on earth, because it is based on the law: how people were meant to behave. This is where political science and management/organisation theories can make a fresh contribution to the sustainability discourse – as a complement to the prevailing anthropological and archaeological theories.

Also, because the model is a Weberian ideal its principles can be compared to the ideal principles of other societies, such as the Western industrialised societies. The drawback is that we will never know how closely the Nhunggabarra people actually complied with the rules. There is however, some evidence that suggest the Nhunggabarra people did not deviate far from the law. One is the fact that the rules were unquestionable; this is one feature of a 'closed' society. The few reliable independent eye witness accounts preserved from the early days of white settlement also tell a story of people who lived by their laws. 'They were a finer people than the whites; they not only had better laws, but they lived up to them,' a white man who had lived with the Aborigines over long periods in the mid 1800s told Mary Gilmore (1986).

The Nhunggabarra society looks like a well-designed, comprehensive societal structure, where every element supports the whole. Was this the culmination of a very long fine-tuning and adaptation process? Or, had the society always been thus? The latter was the Nhunggabarra view; the Law had been given to them at the burruguu by *Baayami*, the first wiringin and the Law maker. The current generally accepted archaeological theory is that the first people arrived in Northern Australia some time between 40,000 and 60,000 years ago. Did the model (or its principles) arrive with them? Can the Nhunggabarra model therefore be the last scraps of an 'original blueprint' for organising of humanity, (one of) the first design(s) for governance, before the advent of agriculture and sedentary living? A comparative study of society models of indigenous people should shed some light on these issues.

Aboriginal society was carefully balanced and it did not grow very fast – it was as in a "steady state", a term used recently by the political scientist Homer-Dixon (2006a). It is a research area worth more careful study by economists, for instance to what degree John Stuart Mill's "stationary state" is an alternative as argued by economist (Chi-ang Lin 2006).

We may argue about the specifics of the Aboriginal society model, but we cannot question their achievement. Therefore we know at least one sustainability model that worked – one that is in many ways the opposite of the modern industrialised world. Are there any other models? Let us hope so. Or is time beginning to run out for a model that incorporates individual freedom of choice and competition?

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