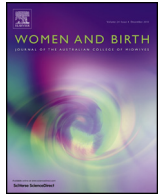




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Original Research – Qualitative

# Challenging the colonisation of birth: Koori women's birthing knowledge and practice

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination for social and cultural development. This fundamental right has been impeded worldwide through colonisation where many Indigenous peoples have had to adapt to ensure continuation of cultural knowledge and practice. In South East Australia colonisation was particularly brutal interrupting a 65,000 year-old oral culture and archives have increasing importance for cultural revival.

**Aim:** The aim of this research was to collate archival material on South East Australian Aboriginal women's birthing knowledge and practice.

**Methods:** Archivist research methods were employed involving a search for artefacts and compiling materials from these into a new collection. This process involved understanding the context of the artefact creation. Collaborative yarning methods were used to reflect on materials and their meaning. **Findings:** Artefacts found included materials written by non-Aboriginal men and women, materials written by Aboriginal women, oral histories, media reports and culturally significant sites. Material described practices that connected birth to country and the community of the women and their babies. Practices included active labour techniques, pain management, labour supports, songs for labour, ceremony and the role of Aboriginal midwives. Case studies of continuing cultural practice and revival were identified.

**Conclusion:** Inclusion of Aboriginal women's birthing practices and knowledge is crucial for reconciliation and self-determination. Challenging the colonisation of birthing, through the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge and practice is imperative, as health practices inclusive of cultural knowledge are known to be more effective.

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#### Statement of significance

#### Problem

In South East Australia the process of colonisation actively eroded Aboriginal women's knowledge and practice of birthing. Access to this information held in archives is vital for cultural revitalisation and self-determination.

#### What is already known

Archive materials relevant to this area have never been collated and access to this information is poor.

#### What this paper adds

This paper allows access to collated archival material on Aboriginal women's birthing knowledge and practice.

### 1. Introduction and background

The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples states that Indigenous peoples have the right to self-determination for social and cultural development.<sup>1</sup> This fundamental right has been impeded worldwide through

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colonisation where many Indigenous peoples have had to adapt to ensure continuation of cultural knowledge and practice.<sup>2</sup> Whilst loss of knowledge has occurred, the teaching of past stories and reviving of culture as a political statement has been implemented to address the imposition of colonial practices.<sup>3</sup> These processes are of high significance in relation to South East Australian Aboriginal (herein called Aboriginal) birthing practice and knowledge.

In the South East area of mainland Australia colonial processes were particularly brutal for Aboriginal people. After initial European incursion into the country of Eora peoples in the Sydney region from 1788, Aboriginal groups whose country is now within the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria were subjected to widespread dispossession, violence, and introduced diseases in the nineteenth century as Europeans took up large areas of country and forced Aboriginal communities onto missions and reserves. Some communities in the South East of mainland Australia felt the effects of European diseases before they even met the people themselves, with smallpox sweeping through Aboriginal populations along the rivers of central and western Victoria from an epidemic that first hit Aboriginal people in the Sydney region in 1790, and then another in 1830.<sup>4</sup> Once colonisation had begun in Victoria in 1835, Aboriginal people in that colony were quickly subjected to large-scale settler incursion. During the 1830s and 1840s the Western District of Victoria had a reputation as one of the two worst areas of violence in the colony of New South Wales (prior to 1851 the colony of New South Wales included Victoria).<sup>5</sup> In the early years of the colony of Victoria there were astounding rates of population decline amongst Aboriginal communities, with declines estimated to have been 80 per cent in less than twenty years.<sup>6–8</sup> By the mid to late nineteenth century, Aboriginal populations were being relocated to missions and reserves, brought under increasing levels of surveillance, and subjected to intense pressure to give up cultural practices, including practices where governments were enabled to legally remove Aboriginal children from parents.<sup>4</sup>

These processes have impacted on ability to maintain cultural knowledge and practice to fulfil the United Nations right to self-determination, including birthing knowledge and practice. Despite this extraordinary level of colonial interference and genocide Aboriginal people have staunchly maintained and revived cultural knowledge and practice. Revival began gathering momentum in the 1980s with the repatriation of physical cultural material<sup>9</sup> and management of intangible cultural heritage, such as, sharing cultural knowledge through a Aboriginal lens and instead of a colonial one.<sup>10</sup> Australian Government inquiries such as the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody<sup>11</sup> and Bringing them Home Report<sup>12</sup> raised the profile of archives in relation to the vast amount of Indigenous cultural and family knowledge constrained within them that needed to be returned to communities. The knowledge within these archival records has become vitally important to addressing United Nations right of Indigenous peoples to practice and revitalize cultural traditions and customs.<sup>13</sup> However access to this knowledge is still difficult.

Australian health practices often omit Indigenous knowledge and focus instead on the illness and pathology that has arisen from colonisation imposing a western cultural model that is not inclusive of Indigenous modalities of wellbeing:

“These approaches have been limited in their success because they fail to deal with the root cause of the problem. They remain external to the local culture and therefore community, and in doing so have the capacity to contribute further to a community’s sense of dislocation and loss of identity. Featuring prominently here are medical and psychological approaches emphasizing individual sickness and removing the problem from the historical and contemporary experiences of people

with cultural dispossession. Revitalisation projects offer an alternative to these extrinsic and externally imposed projects. They are often established by or with communities. Rather than targeting the symptoms of the illness, revitalisation projects target the cause by attempting to revive community cultures and reconnect people with their lands.”<sup>14</sup> p.20

Challenging the colonisation of birthing, through the inclusion of Aboriginal knowledge and practice is an imperative as health practices inclusive of cultural knowledge are known to be more effective.<sup>15</sup> In order for Aboriginal women to enact self-determination in their birthing, the women require access to cultural knowledge that is essentially derived from two sources; knowledge and practice retained in families and information contained in institutions.<sup>16</sup> The aim of this research was to collate material on South East Australian Aboriginal women’s birthing knowledge and practice via archival search for artefacts containing this.

## 2. Methods

Archivist research involves the study of existing artefacts and the compilation of identified materials from these into new collections of scholarly interest.<sup>17</sup> This process involves understanding the context in which these artefacts were created, as often, the aim of the artefact creation differs significantly from the aim of the archivist research.<sup>17</sup> This archivist research was conducted by an interdisciplinary partnership and focused on searching Victorian institutions and broadened to include some relevant national material.

Authors: two and three are archivist historians; one and four are health and wellbeing researchers; one, two and four are Indigenous and; one and two conducted the archival search. For each located artefact this included literature, photo or public cultural site we recorded: the identified relevant information; the citation; Indigenous status of the author; the place from which the material in the artefact originated for instance language group or geographic area; circumstances surrounding the artefact creation and; any relevant citations. Where citations of material were provided we sought the original material. The material extracted was analysed by authors one and two and author three and four provided expertise in contextualisation of the artefact material

The document search had no year limit, as relevant literature available was known to be limited. We searched institutional catalogues for public artefacts including early settler diaries, Aboriginal oral histories, and early colonial writings; both published and unpublished. These types of artefacts are often housed in institutions where the knowledge held within them can prove difficult to find. This is true on a practical level, where the type of information sought out for this project was in collections that had not yet been indexed and was hidden, being marginal to broader narratives. But it is also true that Aboriginal cultural information in these archives is often given from a European perspective

We initially searched Melbourne based institutional catalogues for historical artefacts using a combination of search terms that included Indigenous (Aboriginal Australia, Indigenous Australia, Koori, Koorie, Native Australia) and maternal (women/woman, mother, maternal, female, baby, infant, pregnancy, labour, post natal, ante natal, midwife, birth) terms. Melbourne based institutions searched included the State Library of Victoria, Public Records Office Victoria, Monash Indigenous Centre Elizabeth Eggleston Library, the Koorie Heritage Trust Library, University of Melbourne Library, RMIT Library, LaTrobe University Library and Deakin University Library. We also searched for online artefacts in catalogues of the National Library of Australia and Australian

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