

JUST IMAGINE –A SOCIETY WITHOUT WAR

Throughout the written history of the world, a period of 5,000 or so years, there have been innumerable wars of conquest and invasion. Empires in Europe, Asia and Africa have risen and fallen over this period, but there were no wars of invasion and conquest in Australia before 1788.

Often when I have put this proposition, people have argued vigorously that it cannot possibly be true. The problem is that war has been such an endemic part of recorded history we are led to believe it is actually an element of human nature, and therefore part of all societies.

The reality is however that all wars of conquest and invasion are economic wars, even if they are sometimes dressed up in religious or other justificatory clothing. If people are living sustainably in an area of land, with a stable population matched to the carrying capacity of the land, then there is no survival need that would see them seek land belonging to others.

As far as I can see, all wars of invasion and conquest arise from this basic economic imperative. Even when climate change might have caused mass migration in the past, this is still an economic imperative.

In rebuttal of the idea that there were no real wars in Aboriginal society, one eminent historian counted up the intertribal killings that had been observed and recorded by settlers in frontier times. It was then announced that these intertribal killings surpassed the number of Australian soldiers killed in the First World War.

What a ridiculous exercise to undertake. All it did is prove the point I am making. Aboriginal people were dispossessed, forced off their land and onto the lands of other tribes. The intertribal frontier conflict observed was not 'normal', but was created by the new economic reality.

This however does not mean that Aboriginal society was without conflict. Like any other society there were issues of law and order and tensions between tribes. However these tensions were subject to very close ritual control and agreed protocols, right across Australia.

We are all aware of tribal 'payback' where a real or imagined grievance might lead to an act of vengeance. This then leads to retaliation and the escalation of payback to involve more people or families. Ultimately it escalates to hostilities between tribes.

At the point where one tribe decides that the matter can only now be determined by pitched battle, they cannot sneak up and massacre their opponents in a surprise attack. They must instead give 28 days notice and cannot turn up with more warriors than the other side can muster.

On the appointed day the Elders meet prior to hostilities commencing. They check that the numbers on each side match and agree on what outcome will resolve the hostilities. For instance it might be when the first blood is spilt on the ground.

The battle then commences whilst other onlookers yell derisive comments at the opposing side. However the respective Elders watch dispassionately. As soon as one warrior falls to the ground bleeding, the Elders call a halt and declare the argument has now been resolved. Everyone from both tribes then join in a celebratory corroboree marking the resumption of friendly relations.

Anyone daring to continue the payback after this formal resolution incurs an automatic death penalty. The tribal executioner, known as the Kidney-Fat Man, is delegated to carry out the task. You only get this job if you are the best hunter and greatest fighter in the tribe.

When he finally tracks you down, he strangles you with a garrotting cord, then surgically removes one kidney, whether you are still alive or not. He then takes it back to the Elders and it is ritually burned. If the victim is not dead already they die of infection with no help or succour from anyone, because that too is a death penalty.

The nature of Aboriginal law and economy therefore acted against the possibility of wars of conquest, but there were also religious reasons for its absence. Aboriginal people universally believed that to die outside your own land meant your spirit could never be at peace, until your body was returned and buried in your own Country. It was therefore quite impossible to remain in another Country, even if you had just successfully invaded it.

Some people have said to me that because Aboriginal people had no written history, it cannot be proven there were no wars. Not so. A culture is readily understood by its myths and legends and there are plenty of these available from Aboriginal Australia.

I challenge anyone to find any myth, legend, story or song from anywhere in Aboriginal Australia which talks about a Warrior King, the overthrow of an evil despot, or the conquest and enslavement of others. Clear proof that it just never happened.