Quop Maaman: Aboriginal Fathering Project

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Information Sheet One

Fathering and Noongar culture and traditions

There is no single way of thinking about Noongar fathering. This is partly because: 1) introduced European approaches to parenting have strongly shaped the traditional role of the father, 2) there are still many old Noongar systems that influence families today, and 3) there is a very long and disruptive history of wedjela (white) policy impositions on Noongar families. It is important to understand all three influences as, combined, they shape the way that many Noongar men attempt to work their way through parenting today.

Interestingly the Sanskrit word for father ‘pitṛ’ not only refers to a father but also to the spirit of departed ancestors. It is also the case that phonetically ‘pitṛ’ is close to the English word ‘spirit’. The Latin word ‘spiritus’ and the Old French word ‘espirit’ also refer to the act of breathing on something to bring vital force to humans. In many traditions there is a very powerful language relation between father and things deeply spiritual. For example the word ‘father’ (often written with a capital ‘F’) is used to refer to God/s, the ultimate spiritual being.


Many European traditions connect the idea of ‘father’ with the part a man plays in bringing another life into being, the human element that allows life to become and remain animated. To put it another way, Europeans have a long history of seeing ‘fathering’ as the act of bringing life and the responsibilities associated with maintaining spirit. This is something that Noongar fathering shares with some of the European traditions.

On the other hand fathering can be very different from European tradition for many Noongar. To understand this difference and to appreciate Noongar old parenting traditions it is important to grasp the interrelationship between boodjar (country), moort (family) and katatjin (knowledge or law) and value its place in Noongar cosmology.

For many Noongar old people parenting is also more likely to be associated with the relationship between a koorlangka (child) and their boodjar (homeland or place), their moort (skin or position in the kinship structure). This is because in Noongar cosmology, one’s weirn (spirit) emerges from the boodjar (earth), entering either a mother or father to take on a human life force as a child. When people pass away, their weirn (spirit) returns to boodjar (country) in a living form where they maintain a strong connection with boodjar to live as custodians of law, tradition, language, and the health and wellbeing of their family. In this way Noongar ‘spiritual experience’ is connected to a set of interrelationships between boodjar (country), moort (family), and katatjin (knowledge systems) kura, yeye, boorda (across time).

To think about the spirituality of our sons and daughters without reference to country is akin to talking about the future of a child without reference to its mother. This is because in Noongar traditions boodjar is the place where present living family, ancestors, and as yet unborn children dwell. This means that, as a member of one’s family, country demands care. In turn, country offers care. To visit country, travel through it, hunt on it, make fire on it, and sing to it are much like visiting an older relative. It is through these acts that one maintains relationships, obligations and ‘keeps alive’ one’s family. By visiting country, dancing on it and warming its soul by fire, both country and community are kept healthy.

In old times Noongar were divided by birth into different groups. These moort (skin groups) were social markers allowing people to cross language groups and regions while understanding one’s group and knowing how to relate to others. Within this general system, some groups were considered ‘straight skins’ and were,“ thus able to marry. These grouping
systems identified generational and sexual division so that a parent and their children belonged to a different group, as did a husband and wife. It meant that people had large sets of obligations to many brothers and sisters, uncles, aunties, nephews, and nieces. Importantly, this allowed outsiders new to a community to be instantly placed within the social system and to be recognised and assigned particular responsibilities while enjoying support, certain rights, and obligations. Today some of these ways of doing moort (family) remain, often within family groups rather than skin groups.

This way of doing family means that living people are included in these moort (family) arrangements. Animals, birds, fauna, rocks, and features of country are also included, allowing certain places, animals, and plants to have lives, to act as repositories of stories and law, and to hold the ability to reproduce, see, hear, and respond to the presence of people. One can have animals who are brothers, plants who are aunties and places who are fathers. Likewise dead ancestors also maintain their family affiliations, protecting those that ‘come along behind’, looking after country, carrying out justice, speaking and being spoken to, and watching and reacting to the movement of family and strangers. In this way family obligations do not finish when one dies.

Particularly important here are the obligations that come with age to nurture those who ‘come along after’. This process of ‘holding’ or ‘carrying’ young people is expressed in a range of interconnected ways. It includes the obligation to nurture, teach, and ‘grow up’ children. This is taken so seriously that one’s status as an older person is tied to the extent to which one takes responsibility and offers protection for their koorlangka (children and younger ones).

An important consequence of these systems of family is that children are cared for in a multitude of ways by more than one father and more than one mother. In Noongar traditions every man who shares his father’s skin takes on the same role as his father. In many areas every man who has the same skin as his mother’s brother takes on a special role (often associated with knowledge acquisition) in the raising of a young person. In addition, the grandparents of a child (and their fellow skin members) often play a key role in providing material and emotional support to the child. Many have described this kind of parenting as ‘built around a “collectivist” kinship system’. This is beautifully captured
elsewhere when Aboriginal people use the phrase ‘one community, many eyes’³.

For many Noongar today there is a tendency to morph these traditions so that affiliations are associated with region and family surnames. This is because many groups were forced off their boodjar (country), taken from their moort (family) and pushed onto missions and reserves. Nowadays new processes such as funerals, Welcome to Country events, football carnivals, NAIDOC events and other local festivals keep many of the features of the old family systems functioning so that uncles and aunties, grandparents and others from an extended network take on an active role in parenting and raising children. Despite many changes much of the emphasis on care, obligation and looking after one another has remained. The central role of senior people, both living and passed also often remains.

Another element in Noongar cosmology central to parenting is connected with how people transmit knowledge systems through narrative or stories. In the southwest regions of Australia, this system goes by the name of katatjin. This idea represents the thread or vehicle through which the interconnections between country and family can be made.

Katatjin (knowledge system) is important for at least three interrelated reasons. The first is that katatjin holds the rules for how parents bring up their children. The second is that katatjin is the means through which children learn rules for living. Thirdly, passing on katatjin to children is the central means through which the health and sustainability of the community is maintained. To put it another way, the relationship between fathers and children is made possible through the vehicle of katatjin.