



THE ROAD TO ELDERSHIP: HOW ABORIGINAL CULTURE CREATES SACRED LEADERS

PhD Abstract by Tjanara Goreng Goreng

Harvard Professor Robert Kegan, a research psychologist working in educational leadership, says that sacred leadership is a particular order of consciousness that applies to people who have navigated their emotional stages of development to become individuals who go beyond the ego to become 'sacred' in their thinking, being and doing. They are leaders who motivate and inspire others to follow them.

In Aboriginal communities in Australia, Elders have always been considered leaders because of similar qualities to those espoused by Kegan and other western sacred and visionary leadership theorists. Indigenous researchers and writers in the field express the wisdom of our Elders as leaders in language that espouses similar theories of sacredness.

My PhD research examined Elders as sacred leaders through the process of their development in Aboriginal culture, education and experiences and analyses that through the western and Indigenous leadership theoretical lens. The research was undertaken utilising Kegan's theories of western leadership, in particular, his work on higher levels of thinking in transformational leadership from an educational psychology perspective and Erik Erickson's Stages of Human Development, in addition to examining the research of Indigenous leadership researchers and writers internationally and nationally.

In addition, to explain the transformative processes of achieving higher levels of thinking when one's development is arrested through any traumas for example; colonisation, violence, abuse, dependency and acculturation, the research sought to find what practices or events in cultural development supported an individuals' movement through the levels of thinking to sacred leadership based in these theories. The thesis examines whether these western theories have any application, correlation or parallels in Aboriginal culture.

Utilising an Indigenous research methodology, I share the biographical stories of four Aboriginal storytellers on their Roads to Eldership and describe their life's journeys which are then analysed to ascertain their development stages, levels of thinking, and their values and motivations as leaders and Elders. The aim being to ascertain whether these storytellers have achieved higher levels of thinking on their road to Eldership, through navigating their stages of development, and overcoming any arrested development experiences, challenges, adversities and their transformational actions. Furthermore, the research shows how Tjukurpa Pulka - following the Law in action, and the inclusion of

cultural and ceremonial life - contributes to healing arrested development and enables development to Eldership and the choice to move onto become visionary and sacred leaders.

On the basis of my findings, the stories told, point to a contemporary practice of an ancient form of leadership development that mirrors the qualities and traits of Kegan's research into higher levels of thinking in leadership – a sacred level of leadership. It shows how sacred leadership levels can be achieved through participation in cultural life, living in the Tjukurpa – the Law and spiritual business – and engaging in ceremonies, service to community, visioning and healing recovery processes.

This study is important to show that Aboriginal culture has held onto an ancient form of personal and leadership development where they had a generational process of educating children and young adults with the vision of creating Elders as leaders who can serve their communities. The research also showed how in our modern world the leadership development crosses clan groups despite the impacts of separation caused by colonisation. The research has a contribution to make to sharing this ancient knowledge to the world, in the maintenance of Aboriginal cultural knowledge specifically and to understand more deeply the oral teachings and learnings of an ancient culture, as well as showing how this information can be applied to leadership development and theory in the present modern world across cultures and communities.

I decided to study this whilst working as a senior consultant in transformational leadership development at a corporate company working with the CEOs , GMS and Board members of major Australian and international companies in the energy, mining, banking, insurance and resources industries. Whilst working to breakthrough leaders into higher levels of thinking I began to think about our Elders in my culture and how they had the qualities of 'sacred leadership' as described by the leadership educational researchers. I wanted to explore this and share it with the world.

Tjanara will be bringing Sacred Leadership to Australia's business community
in Sydney on Tuesday 19 June 2018 - for further information visit
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