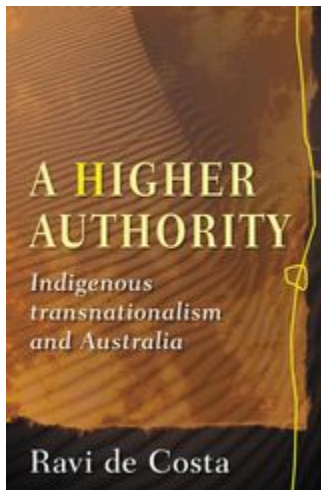


*A Higher Authority: Indigenous Transnationalism and Australia* by Ravi de Costa. Sydney: USNW Press, 2006, pp.xiv + 239, AUD \$44.95 / £20.95 Paperback, ISBN: 0868409545.



In this book Ravi de Costa explores how Australian Aborigines have made connections with the rest of the world, in particular with other indigenous peoples. The result is a definitive account that traces the history of these links from prehistory to the present day.

During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century most connections with the world outside Australia were through intermediaries, in particular missionaries and later communist and left-wing trades union activists. While both groups undoubtedly had good intentions, de Costa argues both sought to replace Aboriginal belief systems with their own. The post-World War II period marked the beginning of a process that led to the achievement of full civil rights by Aborigines in the 1960s. For the first time they were able to engage with the world without intermediaries. De Costa suggests that

the connections Aborigines were able to make with other indigenous peoples in the world helped make this possible. They also learnt to use these transnational connections to draw attention to their struggle for justice. For example, they embarrassed Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, who was a fervent support of human rights and decolonisation in Zimbabwe. Native American protestors drew attention to Aboriginal human rights when Fraser received an award from the B'nai Brith in New York in 1980.

Not all of the overseas connections were with other indigenous peoples. In the mid-1960s Aboriginal leaders drew inspiration and expertise from the American civil rights movement. At that time, a situation similar to segregation existed in parts of Australia, such as in the central-west of New South Wales. Aborigines organised 'freedom rides' similar to those in the American South to draw attention to this.

From the 1970s Aboriginal organisations began a significant engagement with transnational organisations. During the time the ALP was in power during the 1980s and 1990s the federal government also funded Aboriginal participation at the meetings of some of these organisations. However, since the return to power of the Coalition in 1996, Prime Minister John Howard's belief that this does not merit government funding has led to a decline in the numbers of Aborigines who are able to engage with transnational organisations.

De Costa's book suggests that Aborigines have been able to borrow some useful strategies from indigenous and minority ethnic peoples in other parts of the world. However, when transnational organisations have criticised the way Aborigines are treated in Australia neither federal nor state governments have usually been willing to change their policies. This suggests that participation at the meetings of transnational organisations might not necessarily be the best use of the limited resources of many Aboriginal organisations. Nevertheless, de Costa believes that the renaissance of indigenous Australians, if and when it arrives, will be a transnational phenomenon. His belief that transnationalism is still worthwhile for Aborigines may be over-optimistic.

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