



**The Australian
Black Panther Party**

The study of the Australian Aborigines reveals they are one of the oldest civilizations in the world. Their remains have been found dating back 40,000 years.

Before the coming of the white man, the aboriginal population of Australia lived as hunters and gatherers. Food was abundant, as was fresh water and shelter. They had no need to travel far from their lands, since resources around them was abundant and trade with other tribal groups was well established. People only needed to work 4 – 5 hours a day to ensure their survival.



The arrival of the British brought to Australia disease, armed conflicts and a complete disregard for Aboriginal people's culture and the environment. The white man depleted the fish by netting huge catches, reduced the kangaroo population by massive hunting, cleared the land and polluted the water. Food shortages soon became a problem and the Aboriginal population grew close to starvation.

To most of the white settlers, the Aboriginal people were considered akin to the kangaroos, dingoes and emus and thus viewed as having to be eradicated to make way for the modern development of the land.

Over the years, the Australian Aboriginal communities have been consistently plagued with high unemployment, juvenile delinquency, school dropout, drugs, crime, domestic and sexual abuse.

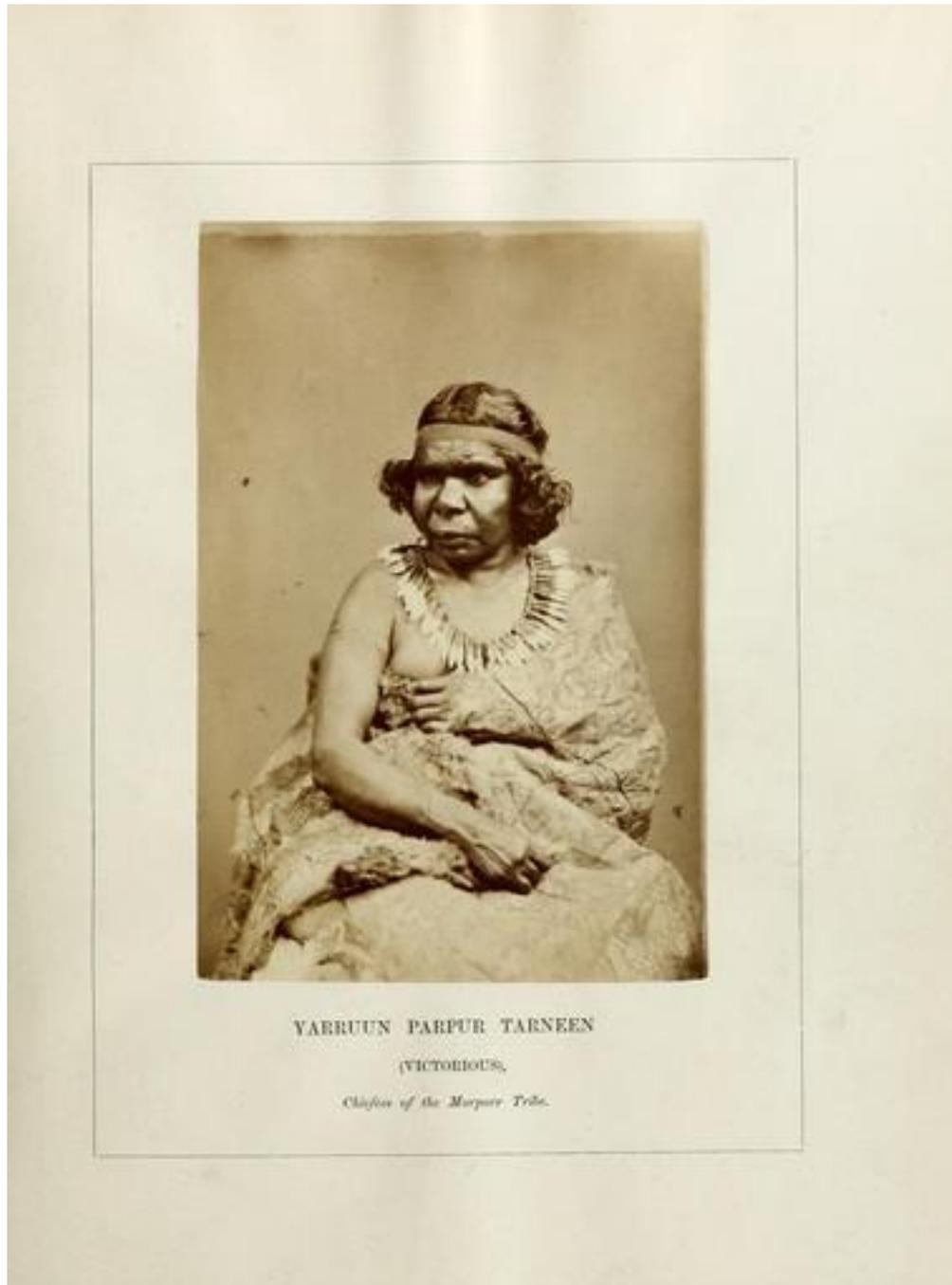
Because of these factors, it was a widely held belief that they will die out. Strategies were adopted to protect the remaining population. They were segregated into



reserves and missions and forcibly taken off their lands through assimilation policies. It was thought they would have been better off if they became more like the Whites. This led to what was called the “Aborigines’ stolen generation”. Whereby mixed-race children were forcibly removed from their parents.

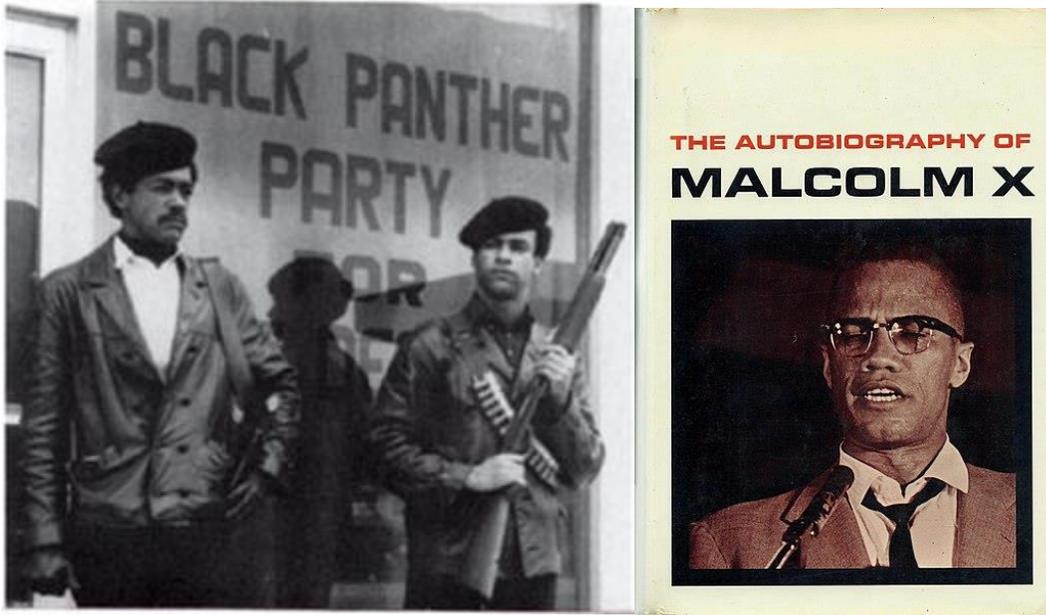
During this time, they could not travel without permission, and could not vote or own property unless they renounced their culture and cut family ties. The Aboriginals were not counted in national census until

1967, prior to which their affairs were governed under Australian flora and fauna laws.



When the Aborigines began protesting for their basic human rights in Australia, these protests were predominantly peaceful. Civil rights groups such as the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation* and the *Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement* took a passive non-violent posture to advance their cause. The most common mode of protest included petitioning for Indigenous people's rights, student tours to raise awareness of discrimination against Indigenous people and producing films depicting their horrific living conditions.

Soon the young members of the Aboriginal community became impatient with the apparent lack of progress these tactics produced. Disillusioned with the old method of writing letters and petitions which routinely produced lukewarm results, many of these young activists became inspired by African American heroes such as Malcolm X and Huey P. Newton. The methods, tactics and ideas introduced by these leaders were adopted by the Australian civil rights activists because of the success rate and concrete results they produced in America.



Huey P. Newton's Black Panther Party inspired the Aboriginals to strive for:

- A. Self-Determination: The right for Indigenous Australians to determine their own political, economic, social & cultural destiny.
- B. Remove segregation in town facilities such as restaurants, restrooms, theaters, buses and schools.
- C. Provide social service for disadvantage Indigenous people such as healthcare, food and education programs.



Members of the African American civil rights group, the Black Panther Party. Photo courtesy of theguardian.com.

On January 8, 1972 Denis Walker co-founded with Sam Watson the Brisbane based *Australian Black Panther Party*. At its initial inception the organization included Paul Coe, Gary Foley, Gara William and Billy Graigie as its' field marshalls. As the party's leader, Walker committed himself to the American Black Panther's ideology of armed self-defense of the Black community. Known for his abrasive and provocative militancy, Walker stated, "Everything was taken off you with a gun... the only way you are going to get it back is with a gun." The founders of this organization strongly felt the American Black Panther Party demonstrated to Blacks around the world how to stand up and assert their rights.



Denis Watson, co-founders of the Australian Black Panther Party.

Inspired by the American Panthers' "Feed the People" and "Free Breakfast for Children" programs, the Aborigine Panther group established similar breakfast for school children's programs, volunteered distribution of fruits and vegetables to Aboriginal families and fought vigorously for Aboriginals' land rights. They demanded equality of treatment in education, health and legal

representation, the end of police harassment and the abolishment of discriminatory legislation. Walker stated the Australian Black Panther Party was established to act as “the vanguard for all depressed people, and in Australia the Aboriginals are the most depressed of all.”



Founders of the Australian Black Panther Party.

The Australian Black Panther Party and other grassroots activists aggressively adopted a “Black” image or profile. Walker habitually dressed in a black leather jacket and wore dark sunglasses. Other activists of the time would wear the Panther’s black beret. Many were seen sporting the Afro hairstyle. The clenched black fist as a logos began to appear on badges, leaflets and Indigenous peoples’ newsletters. The African American saying “Black is beautiful” became popular at Aboriginals’ demonstrations and meetings. Many in the Aboriginal community found direction and inspiration in the writing and reports on Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis, Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver. But it was the autobiography and speeches of Malcolm X that was the most captivating for a large number of Aboriginal protestors. They sought to resist assimilation into the dominant White culture while maintaining a positive Black identity. The teachings and ideas of Malcolm X gave them directions to those ends.



The initiatives carried out by the Australian Black Panther Party had lasting impacts on Today's Aboriginal society. Many of the governmental programs for Australia's Aborigines grew out of the grassroots community programs launched by the Australian Black Panther Party. The Party's pioneer programs in free breakfast for school children, education, medical and legal services began to receive funding from the government and became a nation-wide system. Many of which are still in operation today.

With regards to the Black diaspora, the Australian Black Panther Party has contributed a significant chapter to this ever-expanding global narrative.