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From Recognition to Sovereignty: An Institutional Tension Analysis Between "Cultural Recognition" and "Decolonization" in Cultural Policy

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Abstract. Australian policies about culture pay special attention to indigenous cultures. But recognizing these cultures may at the same time go against the goals of decolonization. This essay will mainly analyzes how these laws and cultural customs interact and how culture is practiced in national societies. Drawing on cultural identity and decolonial theories, this study critically examines Australia's national cultural policies since the White Australia Policy, with particular focus on the content and impact of the Revival: National Cultural Policy (2023–2027). This article studies mixed reality being used in places like the National Museum of Australia and the Melbourne Museum to learn how technology influences how culture is perceived and shared. Even though policies have increased knowledge of indigenous cultures and interested the public, the main issue of inequality continues to exist. The government hosts cultural exhibitions even now and technology has not greatly helped indigenous communities with cultural and power matters. Because of this, this article suggests that the cultural policy in Australia should enable indigenous artists to take more responsibility and produce more, so they can be heard in the cultural sector.

Keywords: Cultural Policy, Cultural Identity, Decolonization, Indigenous Art, Indigenous Rights.

1. Introduction

This study investigates how Aboriginal groups have been subjected to ongoing discrimination in Australia with regards to land, language, culture, and lifestyle from the time of the British arrival in 1788. In recent years, the Australian government has attempted to respond to historical traumas through the "Cultural Identity" policy, especially in the "Revival: National Cultural Policy (2023-2027)", which has made "First Nations First" a core strategy, aiming to enhance the visibility and participation of indigenous cultures [1]. Analyzing how well this policy is applied is extremely valuable for finding out if the current cultural policy actively supports issues around "decolonization", as many indigenous communities are still fighting for their rights and culture.

The study focuses on comparing policy texts and cultural practices with the help of cultural cognition theory and decolonialist theory. A literature analysis was used to systematically study cultural policy documents, existing literature, and museums related to Australia from the past to

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now. With these research methods, one can uncover the beliefs and influences behind certain policies. This work is aimed at discovering if current Australian policies have appropriately supported the decolonization of indigenous cultures and suggesting real reforms. To accomplish this goal, the main idea of this article will compare cultural visibility to cultural sovereignty.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. Cultural identity theory

Cultural Identity Theory stresses the need to identify the culture and identity of marginalized communities. This theory is an indispensable dimension for achieving social justice [2,3]. With this theory in mind, experts can now assist marginalized communities in standing up for their rights and gaining attention from others in the community. Taylor pointed out in "The Politics of Recognition" that the recognition of cultural identity not only has symbolic significance, but also is related to the social status and self-esteem of individuals and collectives [2]. Meanwhile, Honneth, from the perspective of social relations, holds that "acknowledging struggle" is the core path to achieving justice in modern society [3].

For Australia, specialists in cultural policy use the theory of cultural identity to examine the government's actions. For instance, Altman pointed out in his research on the economic and cultural rights of indigenous people that although the state provides financial and platform support, "cultural recognition" is often a political arrangement for the state to set boundaries and may not truly respond to the autonomy needs of indigenous communities [4]. Simone Bignall further pointed out that government-led cultural identity would give rise to "governed differences", that is, enhancing the visibility of indigenous cultures through means such as exhibitions and funding, but failing to grant indigenous communities substantive decision-making power and cultural sovereignty [5].

Meanwhile, Rey emphasized in his research on Aboriginal identity in Australia that for Aboriginal groups, identity is dynamic and actionable, relying more on internal community interactions and ritual practices rather than government labels and classifications [6]. With this reasoning, symbolic changes are not enough to really connect the state with its culture.

In conclusion, the theory of cultural identity is important for marginalized groups, yet often such groups confront being integrated into the national system or being manipulated for different purposes. If the government takes charge of deciding who is indigenous without broad consultation, it is most likely to turn the recognition process into a political action rather than genuine assistance. As the researchers have shown, respect for cultural identity must involve more than symbolic gestures and involve changing unequal power structures to enable indigenous groups to display and define their cultures on their own terms.

2.2. Decolonization theory

The Decolonial Theory emphasizes that decolonization is not merely a symbolic manifestation of cultural diversity or a policy-based inclusive arrangement, but rather a fundamental reconstruction of the legal system, knowledge system and sovereign structure [7,8]. The theory started with criticizing how the state functioned continuously after colonization, urging that colonial knowledge needed to be dismantled and native people’s culture and governance should be restored.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith pointed out in her classic book “Decolonizing Methodologies” that the Western research system deprived aboriginal people of their intellectual autonomy for a long time in the colonial history, and its methods and language constituted "knowledge colonization" [7]. Tuck

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and Yang explicitly criticized in "Decolonization is not a metaphor" the trend of simplifying "decolonization" into symbolic and cultural operations, emphasizing that true decolonization must include land return, legal system reform and sovereignty reconstruction [8].

Sarah Keenan proposed that the legal system mitigates the contemporary demands of indigenous communities by "historicizing" them and uses the narrative strategy of "returning to the past" to weaken the indigenous people's right to participate in the modern sovereignty and legal agenda [9]. She examined the relationship between law, property, identity and race in the book “Subversive Property”. Keenan further proposed the concept of "decolonial moments" to describe the key nodes when indigenous communities reject state discipline and actively reshape their narratives in policy, legal and cultural expressions [10].

While these important research findings are useful for learning about “decolonialism”, we need to address some critical gaps in knowledge right away. While many studies look at the concepts of sovereignty and return in law, anthropology and politics, they have not explored in detail how cultural strategies and tools impact unequal structures in decolonial situations. In contrast, not much critical analysis from a de-colonial point of view is available on the role of mixed reality technology in such civic initiatives. Therefore, this paper will fill the existing research gap, start from the intersection of cultural policy and media practice, and combine the "decolonialism theory" to analyze how Australia's national cultural policy (especially "Revival: National Cultural Policy 2023-2027") handles the representation, discourse power and sovereignty expression of indigenous culture, and assess whether it truly touches upon the structural changes required for decolonialism [1]. It will give the necessary grounds to start reforms that support cultural sovereignty.

In conclusion, both the theory of cultural recognition and the theory of decolonialism give different but related viewpoints on how the status of indigenous culture is understood in contemporary Australian cultural policies. Cultural recognition theory helps improve the way marginal peoples are seen and respected which makes a difference for policy and politics. Still, being dominated by states and having specific rules sometimes results in unsubstantial politics. It can be said that decolonialism theory prioritizes unmaking the current legal, knowledge and institutional structures, so local communities can recover their right to speak and rule their culture which amounts to a significant challenge to existing policies.

3. Historical context and policy analysis

3.1. Impacts of historical policies

The Immigration Restriction Act 1901, enacted in 1901, marked a significant adjustment in Australia's immigration policy [11]. This policy reflected the mainstream concepts of society at that time and had a profound impact on indigenous communities by means of assimilation [12]. From the 1910s to the 1970s, some indigenous children were placed in non-indigenous families or institutions, a phenomenon recorded in “Bringing Them Home Report” [13]. Such events have affected the cultural heritage, family life and self-identity of the indigenous people and have also provided a background for later changes to social policies.

3.2. Contemporary policy adjustments and challenges

In recent years, the Australian government has launched a series of policies, such as the Indigenous Cultures and Intellectual Property Agreement (ICIP) and the Closing the Gap program, aiming to support the protection and development of Indigenous cultures [1]. They make sure that indigenous

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communities are first considered in cultural matters and try to promote equality in society through set plans. However, there are still some challenges in the process of policy implementation, such as uneven resource distribution and the difficulty of implementation in remote areas [14]. It reveals that both the plan's structure and better implementation matter to reach its main objectives.

4. Museums and mixed reality case studies

With the popularization of immersive technologies such as mixed reality (XR), augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR), major museums and cultural institutions in Australia have been attempting to enhance the presentation effect of indigenous art through technological means. Even though these technologies are suggested to improve both how cultures are seen and how audiences engage, their authority and control problems should still be studied further.

The exhibition "Connection" (2022) at the National Museum of Australia is a typical case. Exhibition visitors get to see indigenous art from all over, with immersive images and space-filling sounds to highlight Torres Strait Islanders' work. According to MDPI Arts (2022), this exhibition attempts to break the static narrative of "indigenous people" as "the other" in Western exhibitions [15]. For some projects, indigenous artists are present right from the design stage which could contribute to giving back to communities. Yet, it is not well explained in public resources if the community ought to have the exclusive right to decide on the direction of museum.

The Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW) showcases the art of Torres Strait Islanders through AR technology [16]. Although this has helped viewers interact more, it does not show if the content involves consulting with the community. As Dudgeon pointed out, if technology is not controlled by indigenous communities, its "innovativeness" may instead become another means of "technological colonization", allowing cultural digital reproduction to be incorporated into Western visual logic and narrative structures [17].

The Melbourne Museum 's Awaken project uses XR technology to reconstruct the presentation of indigenous artifacts in its collection [18]. Even though digital methods made things more interactive and fascinating, some people in the field say that the project puts emphasis on computer-based enhancements and fails to express the vision and perspective of the indigenous curators.

The Boola Bardip Museum in Western Australia has set up large digital art screens to promote local indigenous art, but its exhibition structure is still mainly dominated by the authorities and does not reflect a true community governance structure [19]. Although the work is visually impressive, from a decolonialism view, it appears that cultural power is still mostly possessed by the elite and big businesses.

According to the research covered earlier and what was found in these projects, it can be understood that cultural recognition theory has become a reality in increasing cultural displays and encouraging more people to be involved, but it also shows that the theory has its limits: culture is recognized but not held by one authority; the technology was introduced, but the community still operates it. It also points out that genuine cultural decolonialism is concerned with both the technology used and the group of people who narrate and publish the stories. Therefore, for the application of mixed reality technology in museums to have the legitimacy of de-colonization practices, two basic conditions must be met simultaneously: (1) The content design and decision-making process is dominated by indigenous communities; (2) Respect the sacredness, non-commercialability and non-simplification of its cultural knowledge.

Using case studies such grounded research emphasizes both the challenges in implementing cultural policies and the immediate need for change in digital cultural production, as well as giving lessons and support for further action in this area.

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5. Tensions and critiques in cultural policy

5.1. Symbolic recognition and the absence of self-determination

Paola Balla pointed out that current cultural policies are often limited to symbolic cultural recognition and fail to touch upon deeper issues of indigenous sovereignty and land return [20]. Although the "Revival: Australia's National Cultural Policy (2023-2027)" ostensibly expressed respect for indigenous cultures through slogans such as "First Nations First", the academic community generally believes that these policies have more played a role in softening criticism and soothing the public rather than promoting the self-determination and land return of indigenous people through practical measures. There have been no major developments when it comes to land and legal sovereignty. In a way, getting cultural recognition now often means gaining political support. Because it lacks true powers, this recognition only reaches the cultural and official level and does not help the indigenous people gain actual advantages or independence. As a result, when cultural recognition does not bring meaningful changes to land, political and cultural rights, it may help maintain colonial-style injustices and keep indigenous communities excluded for the long run.

5.2. Technology and recolonization

MuseumNext and Dudgeon emphasize that emerging technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR), if lacking community-led participation, could become a continuation of colonization. Though people often view technology empowerment as an important way to promote cultural and educational development, especially around the globe, technology is recognized as a strong tool for making culture and its features more visible [16,17]. At the same time, technology solutions based on indigenous cultures are still mainly developed and implemented by people and organizations outside the community, which continues to override the influence of indigenous cultures when applying technology. Indigenous people’s voices and creative rights are usually ignored in cultural stories and in the making of content. Although technological efforts can lift the status of indigenous cultures, they normally do not alter the main pattern of passing down cultural values. These new technologies have transformed indigenous cultures into items that are shown, rather than things that people can still take part in and preserve. So, for any indigenous culture, true progress happens when the community leads in technology or else it ends up just repeating the process of colonialism.

5.3. The persistence of structural inequality

However, over the past few years, social and structural difficulties have been uncovered as Australia tries to carry out its cultural policies. The Remote Arts Alliance (2023) pointed out that there is obvious inequality in resource allocation in Australia's cultural policies [21]. Financial support usually does not reach artists in remote and indigenous communities. It is clear from the data that promises to make the distribution of funds more equal have led most of the finances to big city art institutions and government projects like exhibitions, leaving indigenous artists and provincial communities almost without enough support. Having little internet access, problems with language and difficult paperwork keep these individuals out of many opportunities. Therefore, it is clear that the fairness in cultural policies depends more on creating equal participation chances and help for marginalized groups than it does on the distribution of money.

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6. Conclusion

Australia has taken some steps to recognize its culture, especially in official documents and at museums, but the real process of decolonization is still not moving forward. Large national policy changes usually provide official recognition for indigenous people but leave important local decisions up to others. Often, cultural recognition goes hand in hand with limited power and it just pretends to hide ongoing inequality. Because of this, it is necessary for Australian cultural policies to be radically changed to help the real process of decolonization.

The overall aim of future policies should be to ensure indigenous artists take an active part in society, get equal treatment, are found in more places and the decolonization process gradually improves. In particular, cultural policies should boost the presence of indigenous artists in cultural events, artistic projects and making crucial decisions by giving them more roles and influence. This is the only way that the appearance of culture is overcome and what really matters is given to minorities and support for their cultural destinies.

The study supports and guides the future creation of cultural policies and the decolonization process in terms of improving indigenous artists' involvement, protection of their rights and how they are shown in the community. The study points out that indigenous groups can become more autonomous in expressing their culture if cultural policies focus on resource sharing, decentralizing efforts and giving everyone equal chances to contribute to cultural activities. Experts should devote their efforts to supporting and encouraging indigenous artists using tools such as support from institutions, digital spaces and cross-cultural discussion, so that the culture becomes more diverse and fair.

Policies in the future should strive to provide more public display for the artwork of indigenous artists, support their entry into the world art scene and encourage greater cultural exchange and notice. By designing fairer policies and resources, let remote communities and indigenous artists take part in the cultural sector. As a result, current policies will be leveled to give indigenous artists more help and support. To ensure that indigenous communities are in charge of their cultural and social matters, future plans should focus on giving them power over aspects such as cultural management, land issues and how things are governed.

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