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In Australia: atonement through employment

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Light skin, long curly hair, the small glasses of an intellectual ... there is nothing to indicate Wendy Dawson's membership in the Wiradjuri aboriginal tribe of New South Wales, Australia. *"My mother was aboriginal, not my father,"* she says. The 53-year old could easily blend into Australia's Anglo-Saxon population; instead she belongs to another camp, that of the victims.

In 2009, Wendy Dawson left a well-paid position as a director in Australia's Indigenous Affairs bureau to become Director of Diversity within the Australian subsidiary of Sodexo Group (6,000 employees, 300 million euros in revenues). *"I help the company develop its policy vis-a-vis indigenous communities,"* she explains. Wendy Dawson recruits aborigines for all positions with the global services company, setting up training courses and forming partnerships with communities.

Her work is part of a broad movement of positive discrimination undertaken by the Australian government on behalf of aborigines and their counterparts, the Torres Strait Islanders, another indigenous community. After decades of persecution, a movement of atonement is underway, requiring companies to develop specific hiring policies.

The economic integration of aborigines, however, is no simple matter: according to a report of the Australian Commission on Human Rights, eight in ten aborigines have no access to the labor market due to illiteracy, alcoholism, or serious psychological trauma. In some rural areas, 70% of children do not attend school. The native population's health problems are unworthy of a developed country.

At Karratha, a semi-desert zone of Western Australia, Sodexo manages several villages ("remote sites") in which reside engineers and technicians building a liquefied natural gas plant. Through a contract, the services company committed to increase the number of aborigines in its 120-employee workforce to 15%, from 10% today. It is a gap that should be filled by the end of the

July 16, 2010

contract except for a form of structural "instability" with regard to aboriginal workers. It is not uncommon that, after working for several weeks in a row, they disappear without warning.

This apparent indifference to the rules of work life reflects the primacy of family and clan over every other form of contractual relationship. When a death occurs in the tribe, all of the friends and relatives instantly leave their work and traverse the country-continent, if necessary, to participate in the mourning ceremonies. Nobody knows when they will return because it is the "elders," the leaders of the clan, who determine when the funeral ends, possibly not for several weeks.

One way to stabilize the indigenous workforce is to convey the idea that the company can be a provider of "care" (protection, solidarity), much like a family. Thus, if an employee who quit his job without warning shows up at the company's door six months later, *"our attitude will remain open and welcoming. If we need to change the schedule of someone in order to keep them, we know how to be flexible,"* says Prakash Seenarain, a Mauritian and manager of Sodexo's Gap Ridge village in Karratha.

Wendy Dawson recognizes that everyone's memories are *"so fraught with unspoken grievances and traumas, they have trouble believing that a company will give consideration to them or their problems."*

In this regard, the attitude of Annette Bennell, of the Noongar tribe (Perth region), a housekeeper for three months on the Gap Ridge remote site, is considered a victory by Wendy Dawson. When Annette Bennell is asked what keeps her in the company, she does not mention her gross annual salary of 70,000 euros, but rather the fact is that she feels "at home;" she says she is *"connected to Sodexo family"* and senses the same "caring" as that which binds together the members of the tribe.

To stabilize indigenous staff, many companies are investing in young people. Mowarin Mikaela, 17, of the Ngarluma clan, is a student at the College of Karratha four days a week but on the fifth day, she works in the Gap Ridge village. It is an incremental career path, punctuated by meetings, interviews and negotiations with members of her family.

"We are investing in Mikaela, but we do not know if we will be able to retain her or whether she wishes to pursue a career with us," says Wendy Dawson. *"She expressed her interest in school, we detected potential, interviewed her, asked her parents. We also hold one-to-one meetings and show her the different possibilities."*

July 16, 2010

Wendy Dawson relies on word-of-mouth to attract interest. If Mikaela Mowarin is happy at Gap Ridge, she will tell others, who may apply. *"We spend a lot of time to try to weave a fabric of trust. A lie will be judged not only by our aboriginal employees but also by the whole community, where word-of-mouth is very powerful."*

The second difficulty retaining employees relates to salary which is rarely seen as individual property. A housekeeper can earn an extraordinary salary of 70,000 euros per year at Ridge Gap - salaries are high because of the conditions of life - but never have the feeling that this money belongs to them.

Naomi Knapp, of the Noongar tribe, works in the kitchen of the Boddington remote site adjacent to the largest gold mine in Australia, operated by the U.S. company Newmont Mining Industries. She has three boys aged 18 to 22. One is in training, the second works at the gold mine and the third is looking for a job. Naomi Knapp financially supports her children, but also her mother, who is 66. Bonds strengthened by suffering: at 4, Naomi Knapp was stolen from her mother and placed in an orphanage like her brothers and sisters. She was then adopted by force by another family. *"The government had her mother sign papers saying that she relinquished her maternal rights. But she did not know what she was signing."*

The aborigines were victims of a special form of attempted genocide that involved the taking of mixed race children. From the 1920s until the 1970s, 45,000 to 55,000 children born to a white father and aboriginal mother were confiscated from their families and placed in orphanages or adoptive families where they grew up far from any affection and often subject to violence.

The mass kidnapping was based on the idea that the aboriginal population, condemned to extinction, should not be reinforced through mixed marriages. Naomi Knapp, who was a victim of what is known as the "stolen generation," saw her mother again at age 9 but they were not reunited until age 13. Did she suffer abuse? *"I cannot even talk about it, it still makes me suffer so much,"* she says. For all the natives, money has one function: to heal the wounds of members of the clan.

If the work of aboriginal women is a component of integration, it also accelerates the transformation of indigenous societies. While persecution destroyed the status of men as providers of food and security, women have sustained themselves through the role they maintained with their children. Today, the wages that they redistribute to the clan makes them the backbone of the tribe and contributes to the continued diminishment of men. The more the employment of women increases, the more the structure of family and tribe is unbalanced.

July 16, 2010

However, all is not tragedy in the lives of indigenous Australians. Matthew Dawson, son of Wendy Dawson, has directed one of the gyms at Gap Ridge for the past year. It was he who gave his mother the idea of joining the private sector. *"I knew they needed someone like my mother,"* he says.

Matthew Dawson has good relationships with the technicians who live at Gap Ridge and are building the liquefied gas plant a few kilometers away. He welcomes them to his gym and advises them on their diet. He also monitors against depression. If he sees anyone of his gym patrons suffering from the blues, he talks to their friends to be sure the person is surrounded by others.

For Matthew Dawson, the problem is not racism, but - perhaps - the possibility of finding a soul mate. There are not many women, and even fewer young women in the camp. With the exception of Amanda, the bartender. Amanda Korp, 24, of the Wemba Wemba tribe, could have been a model, but probably didn't think of it. Three weeks ago, she left the bank where she was branch manager to tend the bar at Gap Ridge.

The function appears to be less prestigious, but the pay is higher. Amanda Korp is aboriginal by her grandmother while her grandfather was an immigrant from Austria. She does not need to send money, because all her brothers and sisters work. Amanda Korp speaks only English - the language of her clan has been lost. She calls her brothers and sisters every day, regardless of the distance. As integrated as she is, the family remains an essential part of her life.

Yves Mamou, Karratha (Australia)

Special Envoy