

Busking or Begging

Most of us don't find it easy to say no to someone we pity. And since we tend to pity our black brothers and sisters more than we do our own kind doing it tough, we are susceptible to emotional blackmail at the hands of Aboriginal opportunism. Such vulnerability will likely wane over time as we learn the ropes, but initially we are suckers for a sorry look or a plaintive whine. The astute blackfella knows this only too well. Whining, for instance, is a tried and tested begging technique practised by many. David McKnight recalls encountering it among the Lardil people of Mornington Island: *'There was a pathetic whining tone that old women in particular used when requesting food, tobacco, or something else. They would go on and on protesting that they had nothing. I found it very annoying and to get rid of a whiner I would give what was requested. I eventually realised that was the reason for using the whining tone.'*¹

Most of us have come across this kind of emotional manipulation at some stage, the blatant appeal to the generosity of the target with nothing offered in return. But what of the market peddler sitting cross-legged on the ground with a few painted rocks for sale, or the tuneless singer with only his handclaps to accompanying himself, appealing to our better nature? And is our 'better nature' really what they're targeting anyway? Is that what encourages us to pay good money for what we know is a sub-standard product (or at its kindest, not to our taste), or is it more like guilt or insecurity or even the fear of having to exchange something real of ourselves instead, like our time or genuine interest in them as fellow humans?

Anyone who works in sales can tell you it's not all about the product. Sometimes the product is just the bait to lure the customer in, and the exchange is less than straightforward. Arnhem Land people were trading with the Macassan trepanners long before the arrival of the Europeans. The Macassans brought rice, cloth, knives and fishing hooks and exchanged them for fishing rights, labour, artifacts and the favours of Aboriginal women. From what we know they were (mostly) amicable trading partners, and when the southeast winds arrived to take the Macassan fleet home the Yolgnu people would stand on the beach and sing them departure songs as their visitors hoisted their sails, with some even travelling with the Macassans back to Celebes (now Suluwesi) to experience their world. Clearly, these are elevated trading terms, paddling in the gene pool, swapping language, sharing humanity. Balanda is still the preferred word for whiteman in Yolgnu matha (tongue), taken straight from the

¹ David McKnight – From Hunting to Drinking, 2002

Macassarese word for Hollander.

While not strictly speaking a longgrasser, there is a woman at Mindil Beach markets called Sylvia who paints rocks. She has many rocks, and sticks, and pieces of coral, all painted in various combinations of red, black, white and yellow, and I have heard people disparage her artistry, remarking that it is little more than glorified begging. But if you talk to her she will tell you the colours represent blood, blackman, whiteman and Macassan. The connection is her great grandmother, who was one of those who went back to Suluwesi with a Macassan man. If you take the time to listen, she will tell you of the occasion when her Macassan family came back to visit and they had a big get-together on the beach, and you will smile. This is what you are buying from Sylvia: her story. The rock is just a memento.

Incidentally, Sylvia's story is not an isolated incident. From the late 18th century to the early 20th century when the trepang industry was halted by the NT's introduction of duty on the catch, more than a few north Australian Aborigines travelled back to Suluwesi, had families and integrated into Macassan society. I'm curious why there is no mention of antisocial behaviour from those Aboriginal people misplaced in a foreign land. Surely if they had 'reverted to type' and behaved as inappropriately as we accuse them of doing in Darwin it would have been documented somewhere in the records? It can't be entirely because the Macassans practiced Islam and prohibited alcohol, because grog (arrack) was still procurable, especially for the seafaring prau captains and crew. Archaeologist Campbell Macknight observes; *'The men concerned knew a great deal about the world beyond the small society they had left behind. By necessity they picked up new languages and experienced social relationships of a kind unknown at home. They observed, even if they could not fully understand, the economy and technology of [Sulawesi] and elsewhere.'*² So it sounds like they fit in quite nicely, or at least their differences were accepted by their hosts. What does that say about our own society? Our intolerance? Food for thought, in any case.

Twenty paces from my site at Mindil sits Joey, from Gunbalanya. Before him on the ground is a busking permit held down by a few coins and one thong. He's percussing with an empty water bottle on the asphalt and left-handed slaps on his thigh. He has a pleasant baritone voice and a good sense of rhythm, and for a one-man band without much to play with, he delivers overs. The last time I heard him he was harmonising with an old woman from Maningrida and the sound was quietly arresting. On that occasion he told me he was being taken to Hawaii to sing. I could well believe it and wanted to know

² Campbell Macknight – quoted in Dreamtime Voyagers Mike Dash, 2016

the story. He told me a man named Reuben picked him out while he was singing at the Injalak Arts Centre at Gunbalanya. Now they're going to Hawaii for two weeks, back to Sydney for two weeks, then over to London for two weeks to sing for Charles (the King, I presume). All with his 13-year-old daughter in tow, who he assures me he loves very much.

'What about her mother?' I ask him, shit-stirring. 'Taking her too?'

'No,' he replies, screwing his face up like a rubber man.

'Why not?'

'No, no, no,' he shakes his head vigorously. 'No talk,' he signals an end to that line of conversation. 'But my daughter she is beautiful.'

I attempt to contact the mysterious Reuben for the backstory but the young man at the Injalak Arts Centre doesn't know anyone by that name. He does, however, confirm Joey is a cultural man about town and is indeed booked to sing in Hawaii this coming June as part of FestPAC, the world's largest Festival of Arts and Culture for indigenous Pacific Islanders, and again in Sydney on the way home. He can't confirm Joey has an audience with the King, though, so I ask the young man if he can put Joey on to re-confirm it for himself. But the young man is a good gatekeeper and won't allow it. Apparently, I can't talk to Joey without prior approval. From whom I wonder.

The last time I see Joey he's moonlighting, working the Darwin Festival crowd leaving Festival Park. It's late and he's striking statuesque poses in the half-light outside the solitary exit and doing quite nicely for himself. I slip him a fiver and ask where he's sleeping tonight. He points vaguely to some bushes nearby and says, 'Anywhere about.' I can't help but admire a man working hard for his dreams.

Not everyone gives. It's a personal choice, of course. I give when I feel like it and don't when I don't, or I haven't got it to spare. But if you're going to run the gauntlet somewhere you really should have a strategy. David McKnight talks about his strategy: *'of putting bills of small denominations in one pocket and bills of large denominations in another pocket. Unfortunately I occasionally put my hand in the wrong pocket. If someone asks for \$10 and they see that I have a \$20 bill they will invariably increase their request to \$20. I have learned to give money surreptitiously because if someone sees me giving money to X then they are sure to ask me for some. When I refuse, because one cannot give money to everybody who asks for it, they occasionally get angry or*

*even abusive.*³

My wife was accosted by some countrywomen while she was going into the shops the other day. She was in a hurry and brushed them off. But one of the women didn't take kindly to her dismissal and followed up with a loud, 'Hey sister! Who you think you are?' It annoyed my wife, she said, because she wasn't in the mood.

I tried to find a parallel between that woman and me selling my books at the markets. Just like her, there are times when I don't take a 'no' as graciously as I should, especially if the style of rebuttal gets under my skin. 'Been there done that' is one of my pet hates, largely because of its dim-witted arrogance. If I'm feeling feisty I'm just as likely to respond with sarcasm or contempt (which doesn't sell many books).

Is that so much different to the countrywoman giving my wife a mouthful? One could argue that in a market environment I have some licence to sell so I'm entitled to push, but not everyone likes a pushy salesman that's for sure. Yet if I don't push I don't sell. And if the countrywoman doesn't push she probably doesn't eat. Yes, she probably had a welfare cheque in the last week, which was likely taken by the men and used for drink. Now she just wants to eat. Or maybe drink, but that's her choice. So how is that different?

And then there is Tim, who is insolence personified. I meet Tim at Parap markets and he has his hand out before I've even settled my eyes on him. For some reason he reminds me of Dennis the Menace, with his strong jaw and irrepressible cheek. I oblige his 'you give me two dollar' demand and tell him I'd like to visit his camp the following day to talk to him. Without breaking stride, he issues me with a rider of the things he needs me to bring that includes a bottle of rum, cigarettes and takeaway food. I decide he's too pushy even for me and give it a miss. The next time I see him he admonishes me for not showing up.

Begging, of course, has been with us since the beginning. Most beggars find it shameful work and only do it to survive,⁴ although I'm not sure that applies so readily to the longgrassers, many of whom have a cultural predisposition for fronting up and asking for what they want. In any case, it's bordering on scandalous that it's illegal in all states and territories except NSW and the ACT and carries penalties ranging from a \$50 fine to two years' imprisonment. Like longgrassing, begging is considered an antisocial behaviour to be eradicated through such punitive measures, and decriminalisation initiatives are usually

³ David McKnight - *ibid*

⁴ Phillip Lynch – *Understanding and Responding to Begging*, 2005

thwarted. One notable pushback came from State Opposition Leader Robert Doyle in the leadup to the 2006 Commonwealth Games, when he suggested decriminalisation would lead to an increase in begging and insisted: *'The last thing we would want is to get a name in Melbourne as the "begging city" when we're on the world stage ... this is not something that we tolerate in our streets.'*⁵

A quick scroll through some online threads reveals a variety of approaches people take towards beggars. Some are happy to part with their loose change. Others refuse to give money and prefer to give food instead. One guy recalls staggering into an all-night servo three sheets to the wind to get something to eat and buying an extra toasted sandwich for the homeless guy sitting outside. When he gives it to the guy, he blathers something profound like, don't forget people still care, and swears the look on the guy's face humbles him and makes it worth every cent. Of course, there are also those who say they never give because they don't like to encourage them, perhaps hoping they'll go away. But they never go away.

⁵ Farrah Tomazin and Jewel Topsfield – The Age, February 2005