

ABORIGINAL CULTURE

Essay on the Australian Aboriginal style of life and their vicissitudes.

Written by Alberto Gandini at Brighton Secondary School, Adelaide, with the help and under the supervision of Mr. Mario Pigazzini, Psychologist & IPA Psychoanalyst.

Preface

The first time I heard people speaking about the Australian Aboriginal community was at school during the lesson of Australian Studies, one week after my arrival in South Australia. I felt very interested in listening how the natives lived before the first fleet dropped its anchor in Botany Bay in 1788. Later, I felt shocked studying the genocide perpetrated by colonialists who pretended to be the members of a superior civilisation. Following this intense emotional experience, I decided to write this essay to show my friends in Italy how Australian Aboriginal people lived. I would like to emphasize the high level of culture they have reached, their style of life, vividly related to nature, their sense of spiritual participation to the whole, which has been dramatically changed after the colonisation, the genocide and the “stolen generation”, the difficult process of reconciliation and the ongoing reorganisation of their particular culture. Finally, I would like to demonstrate how Aboriginal people were the last civilisation that linked our culture to the origins of mankind.

INTRODUCTION

This research will be divided into seven main sections. The first section (entitled “the past and the present”) will be a general introduction on Aboriginal history before the time of colonisation. In this section I will also describe the genocide and the effect of the assimilation policy and of the stolen generation. The last chapter of this section will describe the difficult process of the reconciliation between Aboriginal people and white Australians.

Section two will be an introduction to the concept of “Dreaming” and, in general, of their beliefs and what they mean for Aboriginal people around Australia with particular regards to Aboriginal mythology.

In sections 3,4 and 5 I will describe the social, economical and political organization of the Aboriginal tribes referring also to the Aboriginal laws and the complex system of kinship.

Section 6 will summarise the complexity of Aboriginal languages and their system of gestures.

Finally, in section 7 I will talk about Aboriginal art, referring particularly to rock art.

Part 1: “The past and the present”

1.1 Prehistory

Talking about Aboriginal prehistory, there are two questions those anthropologists from all over the world try to answer about the Aboriginal people of Australia:

- a) Where did the Aboriginal people originally come from?
- b) How long have they lived in Australia?

After many years of researching, it is now assumed that Aboriginal people came from Southeast Asia. There are few hypothetical “routes” that Aboriginal people could take during the first migrations. According to Professor Geoffrey Blainey, Aboriginals travelled from the main continent through to Java, to Borneo and to Timor before their final arrival on the north west coast of Australia. Professor John Mulvaney suggests another route that started from south China to Papua New Guinea that, at the time, was part of Australia.

Other anthropologists tried to make comparisons between other factors, such as race, languages or genetics, to find other links between Aboriginal people and other civilisations.

Talking about *race*, according to American anthropologist Birdsell, there were three waves of migrations from Southeast Asia. The first one was made by a group of Oceanic Negroids with the same characteristics of people from New Guinea. These people were shorter in stature and lighter in colour to Australian Aborigines. They were also the ancestors of the Tasmanians and of a group from the Cairns region in Queensland. The second migration was probably made by the Ainu people from the Hokkaido Island in Japan. Professor Birdsell classified them as Murrayians because they lived in the Murray region in southeast Australia.

The third and last migration named the people of this migration as Carpentarians. They were taller than the Murrayians and they had some association with people from south India and Sri Lanka.

Genetics had not helped very much because research done on the blood groups of people who lived near Australia, such as Indonesians, Melanesians or Philippine underlined that there are no genetic relationships between these civilisations and Aboriginal people.

Professor Collin Yallop in his studies about Aboriginal *languages* underlined that there are no relationship between the Austronesian (that includes also Indonesian, Melanesian and Polynesian) and other Asian or Pacific language groups.

After archaeological researches all over Australia and Tasmania analysis of tools, paintings and human bodies, reported that some of these items are dated 50,000 years ago. Like all archaeological discoveries, this date is not sure. Other archaeologists recently found items dating to 100,000 years ago.

We are not sure about these two important questions of Aboriginal history. The most common answers are that Aboriginal people arrived here from Southeast Asia about 40,000 years ago.

1.2 History

During the prehistory, all the Aboriginal tribes throughout Australia had developed a well oriented social structure, they were able gatherers and hunters and they had also developed refined technologies in every field. There were about 600 to 700 political units that shared common languages and knowledge.

Before the British had claimed Australia as their colony, Aboriginal people had contact with some Asian civilisations. The contacts with inhabitants of Papua New Guinea go back thousands of years. There are also some Aboriginal stories talking about people who came from the sea.

Chinese Great Admiral Cheng Ho of the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), after great voyages in Africa, India, Java and Sumatra, arrived in 1432 near Darwin. As a proof of this contact, in 1879, a statuette and some porcelain were found in the Gulf of Carpentaria and near the capital city of the N.T.

For thousands of years Aborigines had contacts with the Macassans, from Indonesia. These visits are well documented in Aboriginal art; anthropologists found similarities in technology and linguists also found some Macassans words in Aboriginal languages.

In the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish and Portuguese had contacts with Aboriginal people. First of all, Commander Pedro Fernandez de Quiros, after claiming the island of Vanuatu, sailed near Australia but his death stopped the Spanish interest in this land. Quiros' deputy, Luis Vaez de Torres sailed though the strait that bears his name. He captured some islanders but he never arrived in Spain.

From 1606, the Dutch sailed around Australia but they did not claim this continent because it did not respect their rich expectations of gold and spices.

The first contact between British and Aboriginal people was in 1688, when pirate William Dampier spotted Australia but he wrote a negative report about the land and the "naked hunters" who lived there.

1.3 Colonisation:

Captain James Cook claimed this land in the name of King George III on the 26th of January 1788: with this date started the white Australian history. The new settlers started to destroy Aboriginal land straight away and, because of this, conflict started to grow between the two groups. The first governor, Sir Arthur Philip, made some attempts to deal with Aboriginal people without violence but his attempts failed and resistance grew.

After some Aboriginal victories, the British had better success with the indigenous people. After a century of battles, Aboriginal Eora and Dharuk tribes were destroyed and only small plots were left in the area near Sydney.

1.4 Genocide

The first missionaries and settlers had the idea to civilise Aboriginal people and to assimilate them into the “normal white society”. Since 1870, the *Assimilation Policy* was that kind of racist policy that Aboriginal people would assimilate into “normal white society”. They would lose their links to their Dreamtime beliefs and the tribal way of life that also included the loss of their language and, in general, of their culture. They started to build missions where Aboriginal people had to live, under strict control, learning the English language and the traditional British style of life. They were also forced to believe in the Christian religion.

Another way to civilise Aboriginal people was to remove Aboriginal children from their families and to force them into dormitories. The *Aboriginal Protection Board* was a law made in 1869 that substituted the “Victorian Central Board”. With this law the Governor could order the removal of any Aboriginal child and to force them into a reformatory or an industrial school. Children required permission to visit their families on the station. The “Welfare Board” replaced the Protection Board in 1957. The “Welfare Board” was abolished in 1967.

1.5 Stolen Generation

It was the practice of forcibly removing Aboriginal children from their parents and placing them in institutions such as Children’s homes. We have two main “Stolen Generation”:

1) Started in 1814 when governor Macquarie opened the “Aboriginal School” in Parramatta (NSW). This school was directed by a missionary, William Shealy who taught the Aboriginal children reading and writing. He also taught the boys farming and his wife taught the girls domestic work, like sewing. After Shealy’s death in 1823, his wife directed the school for one year. In 1824, the school moved to Black Town where the children could have contacts with their parents. But the children were actually stolen from their culture, they could not speak their own language and they could not practice their customs. Witnesses said that Parramatta was a “concentration camp”.

2) Started when the “Aboriginal Protection Board” was established in 1869. The Aboriginal children were stolen from their families, legally (with judgement of a court) or illegally (with the help of the police), and they were strictly controlled by a “white manager”. The children were also at risk of sexual abuse. Journals of that era talk about non-Aboriginal people “led by God” and reporting successes over Aboriginal children.

1.6 Massacres

Apart from the racist laws and the stolen generation, there are some clear episodes of massacres.

The first example is the Pinjarra massacre in 1834. In Western Australia, governor Stirling led 25 mounted police against Aborigines. Official records say that 14 Aboriginal people were killed. Aboriginal accounts suggest a tribe was wiped out in the attack.

Australian white history is full of episodes like the one above.

1.7 Survivors

What are actually the results of the “Stolen Generation”?

A 1994 survey made by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) found that people who were forcibly removed in childhood are twice as likely to assess their health status as poor or only fair (29%) compared with people who were not removed (15.4%).

People removed are not better educated, not more likely to be employed and not receiving significantly higher incomes than people not removed from their communities. The survey found also that people removed were arrested more than once.

1.8 Reconciliation

The reconciliation process aims to encourage co-operation and improve harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. First of all, Aboriginal people want Australia to apologise for the history of the past 200 years. The reconciliation policy must abide to the Co-existence program that includes:

- 1) Abide to the High Court’s MABO and WIK decision;
- 2) Confirm all valid property rights;
- 3) Establishing a system for negotiation agreement.

Mabo: In June 1992 the High Court of Australia handed down a decision that has become known as Mabo. It was a turning point in Australian legal history in respect of land rights and Aboriginal people. The main determination was the recognition that prior to January 1788, native title existed over the entire continent and overturned the concept of *terra nullius* (the land belonged to no one). The High Court determined that native title had to be recognised where any Crown Land remained and where indigenous people, still observing laws and customs, had continuing association with that land. The Mabo laws have made important statements, such as the following one: Native title and the persons entitled there are ascertained according to the laws and customs of the indigenous people who, by those laws and customs, have a connection with the land. Membership of the indigenous people depends on biological descent from the indigenous people and on mutual recognition of a particular person's membership by that person and by the elders or other persons enjoying traditional authority among those people.

Wik: this was a decision by the High Court handed down in December 1996 regarding the traditional lands of the Wik people of North Queensland, which was subject to a Pastoral lease, but had not been used for many years for grazing cattle. The people claimed that Native Title had not been extinguished by the grant. Previously the court had decided in the Mabo judgement that Native Title could be extinguished by a law or an act of a government that showed a clear intention to do so. The relevant Queensland law did not reveal this intention and the court found that the lease did not give the leaseholders the right to exclusive possession of the land.

At the same time the court found that where a conflict existed between the exercise of a lease (using the land under the lease) and Native Title rights, the leaseholder rights prevailed.

This resulted in the call by farmers and others for legislation that extinguished Native Title on pastoral leases.

Self-determination: It is the right of every nation to determine and control its own development and destiny. IT IS THE RIGHT TO FREEDOM FROM COLONISATION AND IMPERIALISM.

In this way, Indigenous people can direct their cultural, economic and social development and participate fully in the democratic life of the entire community.

This concept was the official policy of the Federal Labour Government of the 1970s, led by Prime Minister Gough Whitlam. It changed government direction towards Aboriginal affairs from assimilation and paternalistic attitudes of action and controls that excluded Aboriginal people in the processes, to involvement of Aboriginal people in developing government policies and managing community based organizations.

Aboriginal people were employed as public servants and were invited to become members of various committees. In 1990 the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was formed. It comprised a number of Regional Councils (with members being elected by Aboriginal people in communities); Commissioners and an administrative arm of public servants.

Part 2: “The Dreamtime”

2 Introduction

The word *Dreamtime* is a Western Culture word that denotes what Aboriginal peoples relate to the beginning of earth and life and, because everything is perceived as continuous flowing from the beginning, Dreamtime is also related to past, present and future. For the indigenous peoples, who call it in different words following the different languages, Dreamtime is a set of stories, transmitted by generations or performed during the ceremonies, which represent their relationship to land, family, tribe, fauna, flora and provides

them information to survive as well as natural laws and ethical behaviours.

Steven Mithen expresses this fundamental concept in the book *“The prehistory of the Mind”*: *“For the modern hunter-gathering (60.000 B.C.) there are not two worlds of person (society) and things (nature), but just one world – one environment – saturated with personal powers and embracing both human beings, the animals and plants on which they depend, and the landscape in which they live and move”*. He also wrote that: *“They had a similar attitude to the social and natural worlds: **they were one and the same.**”*

This means that they lived in a world in which they shared the same forms and shapes, structures and its functioning with nature. Sharing means that they, doing the same things, used, but also respected, all living and non-living presences as a part of their bodies. They felt similar to animals and plants because all of them have skin or bark or crust; all have arms or legs and fingers, roots or branches and more small branches and finest roots; all have hair or fur or leaves, all grow up, change during their evolution, reproduce and die, all eat and drink water, plants included.

This identification and similarity with nature was the source of answers to a number of existential questions: Who am I? Where do I belong? Where do I come from? It was therefore a source of wisdom, what the Western Culture calls the elements of philosophy, psychology, spirituality, art, dance and so on. It was also the basis of educating and preparing people for life.

Australian Aborigines did not have a religion. This word, as many other words such as mythology and culture, does not exist in their languages. The natural world and the life cycles were the container of any understanding. The creative acts were performed by their ancestors, who had taken spirit-forms, but this did not lead to the worship of them. There were no stone or wooden images of gods; no sacrifices and no priestly caste.

2.1 Totems

The word totem is an American Indian term that Europeans adopted to explain the system of relationship in Australian Aboriginal tribes. The term *totemism* means: *the use of totems (emblems or image of an animal or bird) to distinguish groups of people in terms of tribes, clans or families.*

Like any other dimension or aspect of Aboriginal life and customs, totemism is a system of knowledge *“which allowed the people to understand the natural and social universe as an organized whole”*.

On a corporate level totemism formed individuals into social groups and on a functional level dictated obligations in regards to teaching, initiation, marriage, ceremonial life and death.

Local totemism linked each person to a specific geographical area. Western anthropologists formulated the 'conception' theory that states that during the creation period, the ancestors created spirits of

every living creature. Each individual was linked to the place where his or her mother was believed to have become pregnant. This may have happened when a woman was visiting an area or within the area she lived.

Clan totemism was associated with local totemism and identified individuals to the clans and to family groups based on geographical sub-divisions. It established ritual ties to a particular area, which have also been called estates. Those people who are linked to the same estate had a number of "legal" rights relevant to ritual, sacred objects and stories associated with their Dreaming Place.

2.2 Mythology

Aboriginal societies were based on stories, ceremonies and songs that taught the people about creation, the history of their tribe, their laws and their lifestyle. What they contain are '*lessons for life*' which assist the people to make sense of the world. These stories also create the standard of living that shows relationships between mankind and nature as well as stories and songs that contained powerful messages about appropriate and inappropriate social behaviour, taboos and marriage regulations. Other songs were for simple amusement.

2.3 Creation

According to their Dreamtime beliefs, Aboriginal people live in Australia since the creation of the world caused by the Great Ancestors Creative Beings. Some of the Creative Beings appeared in human form, some others were both human and animals or plants. In the Aboriginal stories they were described as kangaroo-man, snake-man or native fig-man.

Aboriginal people also believed that they were present before the creation. When they emerged from the Earth, they started to travel around Australia shaping valleys, mountains, rivers and cliffs. Secondly, they created human beings, flora and fauna and they also established the land boundaries between Aboriginal groups and the sacred sites. The creative beings could act as a human, hunting and gathering food, or could also behave like their other parts. They also provided the model for how life is to be lived. The totem provided a link with the Aboriginal people and their Ancestors.

Part 3: Economical organization

3 Introduction

Anthropologists have divided subsistence economies in three different main types, which depend on:

- 1) hunting and gathering;
- 2) herding animals;
- 3) agriculture.

Australian Aborigines belonged to the first classification because of the lack of plants suitable for agriculture and of animals associated with herding. The dependence on hunting and gathering may also be influenced by cultural factors. In the case of the Australian Aborigines, cultural values were opposed to accumulation and so worked against any motivation to develop agriculture.

Aboriginal people were nomads. They travelled around the territory of their clan searching for food and water.

Australia is a land that embraced a variety of environmental zones, from tropical forests to deserts, from temperate seacoasts and plains to alpine regions. The variety in landforms, climatic conditions, seasonal variations, vegetation and animals was obviously reflected in the diversity of patterns of economic activities.

Nowadays there is an appreciation of the magnitude of the achievement of the Aboriginal people in maintaining their cultural life for thousands of years in environment, which Europeans have often found to be threatening and harsh.

3.1 Organization of Production

In all societies, the effective utilisation of resources requires some organization and controls to ensure that the resources are not exhausted.

One form of organization is the recognition of the right of certain people to have control over the resources in a given area. In Australia, the groups that had a totemic association with an area had the primary rights to the resources in that area. However, other people were allowed to associate with these groups and share the resources.

Another form of control imposed in Aboriginal societies was the placing of restrictions on the killing of some animals or the picking of other food. This resulted in the continuity of breeding stock and the regrowth of plants.

3.2 Division of Labour

In Aboriginal societies, and also in all the other societies based on a substance economy, it was important to share out responsibilities efficiently so that each person could be productive for the life of the clan. In all aspects of life in Aboriginal societies, the division on sex and age were crucial in determining the rights and responsibilities of individuals.

In the economic sphere, the duties were allocated largely on a sexual basis. Men were the hunters and they were expected to provide most of the meat food, such as kangaroos or emus. Women were responsible for providing most of the vegetable food by gathering seeds, fruits, honey and so on. They also hunted small animals, reptiles and fish. *Whereas the spear symbolised the role of the men, the digging stick symbolised the role of the female.*

The meat foods were shared amongst a wider circle of relations, while the smaller immediate family group consumed the foods brought by the women. Children and young women followed the older women in their duties in order to learn their future jobs. Men were also the toolmakers, the custodians of the law and of their rituals. Women had also to take care of the children and to preserve their own laws and rituals.

3.3 Technology

Skilful use was made by Aboriginal people of available wood, stone and animal materials to make the weapons and tools required to obtain food, water and other supplies. Spears had many different uses. The main one was hunting: each hunter had a number of spears depending on which animal he wanted to hunt and also on his possibilities to carry them. Each hunter had to carve his spears accurately bearing in mind both his weight and his height. They were made by heavy or lightwood and they also had a sharpened stone at the top. The spears were also used in ceremonies and as weapons in “formal wars”.

The spear was associated with a spear-thrower or *woomera*.

These were made in several shapes, for example, some in the north were longer, narrower and flatter while those in the centre were broader and concave. The woomeras served as an extension of the thrower’s arm providing more leverage and thrust. Another use of the woomera was to make fire by sawing across a piece of dry softwood.

Wooden tools used by women were the digging stick and wooden dishes. The digging sticks, sharpened at one end and hardened with fire, were used for extraction of roots, grubs and small animals and reptiles.

Archaeologists have found three different types of wooden dishes that were carved from pieces of timber adzed from the side of the tree. The first type of wooden dish (called from the Pitjantjatjara tribe in central Australia *piti*) was a larger deep one used for carrying water. The second type (*kanilypa*) was small and flatter and it was used for winnowing seeds. The last type (*wira*) was sharpened at one end in order to use it as a digging tool to shovel earth from a hole.

Aboriginal people also used sharpened rocks as tools. Large flat rocks were used as base grindstones for grinding seeds, tobacco, ochre and paints. Smaller rounded stones were used as pestles. Stones flakes removed from a larger piece by percussion were used for a variety of purposes according to their size and shape. This included use as a spear point, knives and adzes. Bones were used as awls, needles and fishhooks. Animal sinews were used as fibres to attach parts of weapons.

Aboriginal people also employed a wide range of skills in exploiting resources. There is evidence that they used fire to assist the regrowth of plants. Although most food was consumed soon after collection,

there is also evidence of food being preserved and stored for later consumption, depending on the regions and the seasons.

The knowledge of poisonous plants was used in hunting and fishing. Barks and leaves of various plants were immersed in water holes to stupefy fish. Large nets were used to trap fish or to net birds such as ducks. But the most important skill exercised in the search for food was tracking. From childhood, all members of the society were taught to read the signs in the ground.

3.4 Trades

Exchanges that took place between Aboriginal tribes were significant socially as much as economically. There were exchanges within and between local groups. Within local groups, people who collected foods were obliged to share with others. Distribution of some foods, such as kangaroo meat, was determined by relationship. Certain kin or affinal relations had the right to specific portions.

When people of several groups met for ceremonies or to settle disputes, exchanges took place as they brought with them items from differing environments. Shells and pearls were sent from the Northwest and Northeast coast of the continent to South Australia. In return, skins were sent north. Boomerangs made in the Northern Territory and in Central Australia were traded extensively all around the continent. The Narcotic commonly known as *pituri* was made in south Queensland and traded with South Australian tribes.

These and other exchanges of objects between groups in Aboriginal societies were not motivated by a desire to accumulate wealth. While some items passed to areas where they did not exist, much of the exchange was of items, which were generally available. The motivation was not therefore basically economic but social as the exchanges cemented the links between people and groups.

Part 4: Social Organization

4 Introduction

As well as adapting to the diversity of the physical environment, humans adapt also to the social environments. This kind of adaptation takes place in groups where individuals interact with one another. Structures are developed which guide in this interaction. Without these patterns social life will be chaotic. As a baby grows it becomes conscious of this social environment and learns his rights and his obligations.

Societies vary in the emphasis placed on individual or social identity of a person. In white culture, there is an emphasis on the individual and on his/her rights as a person. In Aboriginal societies there is a greater emphasis on social identity and the obligations placed on individuals to conform to the expectations of others.

Traditional Aboriginal people lived in relatively small groups, called clans (or local groups). The larger social unit known as a tribe (language group) was made up of a number of clans. There is also a third smaller group known as family, where the children grew up, learning their relationships with the other members of the tribe.

4.1 Tribes

The term tribe usually describes groups of people who are related genealogically, live in a given area and share common customs and beliefs. Professor Elkin, in his book *“The Australian Aborigines: How to understand them”*, defined a tribe as a “number of people who occupied a definite tract of country, who recognized a common relationship and had a common speech (spoke the same language, or dialects of the same).”

Before 1788, there were between 500 and 700 tribes throughout the continent who spoke between 200 to 300 different languages.

There were no boundaries between tribes and people moved frequently between the groups. The main things that distinguished the groups were language and social customs.

4.2 Clans

Anthropologists agreed that the clan was the most important group in Aboriginal societies in political, economical and social life. A clan was a family group basically made up of a grandfather and his wife or wives, his sons and their wife or wives and their children.

The exact number of clans that comprised a tribe cannot be said precisely, as this varied depending on the environmental and social conditions. The clans that formed a tribe were those who believed in the same Dreamtime creation stories, spoke the same language and celebrated the same customs such as initiation rites. Different clans came along together at times of initiation, warfare or celebration.

Most of the clans were patrilineal, patrilocal and exogamous. These terms refer to descent, residence and marriage and their opposites are matrilineal, matrilocal and endogamous.

Descent refers to the relationship between a person and his/her ancestors to the rights and privileges that are inherited from these ancestors. When it is patrilineal, the person inherits titles, properties and other rights from the father; while when it is matrilineal, the person inherits them from the mother.

Residence refers to the place where the couple lives after the marriage. In modern societies, the couple usually lives in a separate dwelling from their parents. This is known as neolocal residence.

In traditional societies it was assumed that the couple would live in closer proximity to one or both sets of parents and to share closer economic and social ties with them.

If they were expected to reside with the husband's group the choice was patrilocal, while if they were expected to live in the proximity of the wife's group, the choice was matrilocal.

Talking about marriages, a group is defined endogamous when a person of this group is required to marry someone who belongs to the same group. If a person is required to marry someone who belonged to a different group the groups are exogamous.

4.3 Families

Aboriginal Australians were social beings who basically lived in clans, but essentially in a family or kinship group who were 1) of the same bloodline and 2) were related to other people through totems. Their social groupings meant that the relationships of Aboriginal people were far more extensive than our own method of identifying people as mother, father, brother, sister and cousins (etc).

Aboriginal relationships are difficult to understand. For example, the family was usually comprised of father's father and often his brother or brothers who was / were also known as father's father; his wife or wives; a father and perhaps his brothers who were also considered to be an Aboriginal male child's father.

Each family group had a headman or Elder who was the leader of the unit. He decided when to move camp and settled disputes. As a child grew up in the family, he/she learnt his/her rights and obligations. The relationship (kinship) between one person and another determined these rights and obligations.

In time, if they showed themselves responsible and willing to learn, young men/women would be introduced formally to the full "encyclopaedia" of spiritual knowledge. They learnt the cycle of songs relating to the acts of creation and they were also shown the places where the Ancestral Creative Beings performed these acts. They learnt to be familiar with paintings, dances and everything that was related to each ritual performance cycle. It took thirty to forty years for a person to work through the full series of spiritual initiations. As they were learning, they could take part, with authority, in the councils of the seniors' members of the clan. As inheritors of the ritual traditions, they had the obligation to see that those traditions were preserved. In time, they passed this knowledge and responsibilities to their children (oral tradition).

4.4 Marriages

Every tribe in Australia was divided into a number of small social groups, but for marriage purposes, into two main groups sometimes called marriage moieties. Let's call them A and B. People from group A could not marry people from the same group. In other words they married people from group B. However each marriage moiety was subdivided into a number of smaller divisions. Let's call them A1, A2,

A3, A4 and B1, B2, B3 and B4. Again, people who belonged to the same moiety or sub-section could not marry each other.

The Aborigines identified these groups by totemic names based on Dreamtime creation beliefs. For example one group may have been “Black Swan” people, another “Blue Tongued Lizard” people or “Blue Gum Tree” people. The totemic system itself meant that people from one group could not marry people from the same group. For example “Black Swan” people did not intermarry, but may have married “Speckled Duck” people based on a Dreamtime story that told them that these 'creatures' had a relationship with each other. An important aspect of the totemic system was that each person in a bloodline relationship had a different totem. This had the effect of preventing the marriage of fathers and their daughters, mothers and their sons, sisters and their brothers.

Marriage arrangements were made when children were very young and even before they were born. This meant that a girl was promised to a male at an early age and married him (through a handing-over ceremony), when she was about 11 or 12 years of age, when she reached puberty.

Marriage by capture also took place as did elopement, but these were offences against tribal lore / law and the perpetrators were punished. It is also a fact that in Aboriginal society, it was not unusual for a man to have more than one wife. However while this gives the impression that their society was chauvinistic and that women were chattels, men and women were taught (through the examples of relevant Dreamtime stories), about an interdependent relationship in which husband and wives were loved and respected.

Marriage itself took place during those times when tribes people from various clans, bands, family groups, sub-tribes met for ceremonial purposes. The ritual was probably a handing-over ceremony but took place at particular places. Places such as the Shoalhaven region Coolangatta Mountain were a traditional marriage place or site.

They would have been significant because particular ancestors married there (according to a Dreamtime story or stories), and because of the tradition of thousands of couples 'marrying' there over eons of time.

Part 5: Political Organisation

5 Introduction

Politics is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “the science in art of Government”. Since ancient Greeks and Romans, modern democratic societies had distinguished the three different powers (legislative, executive and judicial) into three different levels. Usually, legislative power is prerogative of the parliament, executive of the government and judicial of the magistracy.

Earlier explorers argued that Aboriginal societies did not have a clear and discernable structure of government and law. This concept is

now discarded because anthropologists, after many studies on traditional Aboriginal political issues, had argued that they had a complex system of politics.

Before introducing Aboriginal government, it would be useful to write a small introduction on different government systems. The first division would be into state and stateless government. A state government is when the nation has centralised structures and modern forms of legislation. On the other hand, stateless societies are less highly developed institutions and have less specialization. Stateless societies are divided in Chiefdoms and Acephalous. In chiefdoms there are visible leaders (e.g. king) and the title is usually inherited by birth.

In Acephalous societies there are not visible leaders and the power may be in the hand of councils. Aboriginal societies were Acephalous stateless societies.

5.1 Government and Egalitarianism

Anthropologists, who lived and studied Aboriginal societies, noticed that the stories, songs and rituals of The Dreaming provided the plan for living and it was the responsibility of the clan to ensure that the status quo was preserved. Government is therefore confined to interaction based on two factors, kinship and locality.

Older people in family groups were responsible for the conduct of affairs and the behaviours associated with relationship dictated much of the daily life. The power of the older people was confined to the areas in which they had spiritual rights and responsibilities.

Anthropologists use the word Egalitarianism to describe Aboriginal societies' government. Lee Sacket, an anthropologist who observed the Wiluna tribe in Western Australia wrote: "...One aspect of the traditional beliefs system is the notion that there should be no bosses. All humans are equal in that they are all less than the Ancestors of the Dreamtime whose edicts they have to follow. Humans cannot make or change the law...". Egalitarian political systems usually allow that there is some distinction based on sex and ages. Despite the supposed equality of all, men have authority on women and older people have authority over younger people.

In Aboriginal societies, there were leaders known as Elders. People asked them for advice and generally obeyed when they issued orders. The Elders were considered to be wise in knowledge of the Dreamtime and of the law and the lores of the tribe. An Elder was usually a male but grey hair and old age were not the only criteria to be an Elder. In fact some elderly people were not considered to be Elders. When a number of bloodline families lived together it was likely that the Elder of the group was the person considered by the members to be the wisest of the older people. In large groups, which may have been comprised of several hundred people, a number of Elders met to

make decisions on behalf of the group. This has become known as an Elder's Council.

Such councils met for the purpose of conducting initiation, marriage and burial ceremonies in traditional Aboriginal society, females were not considered to be Elders. However, older females often acted as midwives and as authorities on other matters relevant to their gender.

5.2 Law

Aboriginal societies had a wide range of codes that guide people in their conduct. Aboriginal societies did not develop a writing system, therefore everything (including laws) was passed on in social life as oral traditions and people were constantly reminded of their obligations. The Elders were the main repositories of that knowledge. Offences against the law were punished in various ways. It was expected that certain people would make decisions and carry out punishment.

Based on the fact that the Great Ancestors Creative Beings made the law in the Dreamtime, law was not seen as something separated from the wider religious traditions.

In Aboriginal societies, the status quo (sacred balance) had to be preserved. If the actions of individuals or groups disturbed the balance of life there must be a corresponding action to rectify this and to restore the balance.

The group, to which an offender belonged, was seen as responsible for his/her behaviour and the group as a whole was punished for the offence.

5.3 Types of Offences

Offences in Aboriginal societies fluctuated from sacrilege to unauthorised murder, from incest and adultery to neglect of the kinship obligations. These are three examples of offences:

- Offence against the lives of others. While the killing of another person may have been authorised due to breaking the law, unauthorised killing was condemned and followed by enquiries and people also expected a severe punishment.
- Offences against marriage laws. Observation of the exogamous laws would prevent incest. People who did not respect these laws were severely punished. Also offences such as adultery, wife stealing and illicit sexual affairs were condemned.
- Offences against the sacred knowledge. Men who were responsible for preserving the knowledge and ensuring the correct performance of rituals were considered liable for punishment if they did not fulfil these tasks properly. Women and children were forbidden from viewing men's sacred rituals.

The punishment were severe, sometimes men were killed because they shared the sacred knowledge with women.

5.4 Types of Punishment

Punishment varied obviously from offence to offence. The lightest punishment was a verbal admonishment, practiced in cases of minor offences, such as oral abuses against a member of the clan.

Physical punishment was common in cases of breaking sacred or sexual issues and also in cases of physical attack. In these cases a man could be speared in a thigh and a woman could be beaten on the head. If someone was held to be responsible for the death of another person, only the death of this person or of a close relative could restore the balance of the society. Finally, people who feared a punishment of death may have fled to other areas in the hope of escaping vengeance.

5.6 Who inflicted the punishment?

In traditional Aboriginal societies, responsibilities for imposing penalties were spread throughout the three different levels of social organisation.

- In Families: minor matters in the family were obviously prerogative of the family members. Young men were responsible for the behaviour of youths, and youths would train younger boys. Children enjoyed a large amount of freedom but they also learned to respect the areas of life regarded as sacred. When a man entered the stage of manhood or a woman took on the responsibilities of wife, the freedom gave way to strict discipline. For example, if a young man breached the sexual taboos or infringed rituals matters an older brother would be obliged to spear him to show that the family did not approve his behaviour. A husband had the right to beat his wife if she failed in her obligations to him.
- In clans. If a member of a family, for example, injured or offended a person from another family, the injured person or a close relative could retaliate and inflict a similar injury. The incident could involve other people, but would end when it was felt that there was an equal level in the injuries suffered on both sides.
- In tribes. In cases of serious offences such as killing or sacrilege, the Elders decided the punishments and who would carry them out. Men would be chosen to carry out a death sentence on the accused. In the western desert, for example, a man accused of murder was taken hunting by other men and, when he was ahead of the group, spears were thrown at him. In most regions there were special ritual combats in which parties who had a serious disagreement could line up and fight each other.

Part 6: Aboriginal languages

6 Introduction

Every culture is dependent on transmission or communication. All human societies have developed spoken languages that are adequate to express the life experiences of people and reflect the cultures of the group.

Before the time of colonization of the continent, it is estimated that there were approximately 270 different languages. If we consider the dialect variations within these language groups, the number is expanded to approximately 600. Although there was a great variety in languages throughout Australia, linguists believe that all of them can be traced to a single source. This great language family is confined to Australia and some of the Torres Strait Islands.

6.1 Structures in Aboriginal languages

Because of the wide range of Aboriginal languages, I would introduce you, as an example, aspects of the language of the Pitjantjatjara tribe, who live near the border between South Australia and Northern Territory.

Pitjantjatjara language has part of speech commonly found in other languages, such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, pronouns and adverbs. However, they do not have all the parts of speech present in the modern languages, for example definite and indefinite articles.

However, examining the nouns in Aboriginal languages, we find that they recognize the distinction between proper nouns (name of people and places) and common nouns.

There is also another distinction between nouns which end in a consonant and those ending in a vowel. This distinction is necessary because of the different suffix that the noun assumes in a sentence if it is used as a subject or as an object.

Examining Pitjantjatjara verbs, we find distinction between intransitive and transitive verbs, between irregulars and regulars. There is also an elaborate structuring of verbs into classes and tenses. There are four verb conjugations and each verb has approximately fifteen forms to indicate the tense.

Finally, pronouns provide us further evidence of the complex structure of Aboriginal languages. Instead of using singular and plural as modern languages, in Pitjantjatjara there is also dual form.

6.2 Vocabulary

It is difficult to estimate the number of words in an Aboriginal language. The languages are subject to changes. When a person dies, for example, words that are the same or similar to the person's name, are replaced by reviving old words or introducing words from another dialect.

There are also different usages of terms. For example, men use their own words during sacred rituals. There is also a special vocabulary for mothers when their sons are undergoing the processes to manhood.

While Aboriginal languages lack some of the abstract terminology of European languages, they are rich in ritual vocabulary and words, which express their understanding of the spirit world. The range of vocabulary also reflects their intimate knowledge of physical and social environment. For example, in desert areas, the languages have various words for different types of sand.

6.3 Gesture Language

Aboriginal people had developed an elaborate system of precise communication by means of hand signals, called gesture language. The reasons why Aboriginal people had developed such a “language” are because of some problems that could incur in the economical, social or spiritual sphere. For example, a man hunting could not speak to another man as the animal would hear and move away. In the social sphere, there were prohibitions about the interactions of some people according to their relationship, so a man could not speak to his mother-in-law. Finally, in the spiritual sphere, some ritual occasions also required that some people could not speak. Silence was enforced on people if a relative was undergoing a ritual.

Gestures were capable to conveying a sequence of ideas. They covered a wide range of parts of speech such as nouns, pronouns and verbs and they could be jointed together to form a sentence. This means that, for example, two men hunting could carry a silent conversation at distance without alarming the prey.

Just as there were many different languages and dialects in Australia, so there were differences in gesture languages. Neighbouring groups shared a high percentage of common gestures but this percentage decreased with distance.

Part 7: Aboriginal Art

7 Introduction

What is art? This is a question that people from around the world try to answer and the only conclusion is that art is a human activity. Aboriginal people used the surfaces and implements that were immediately at hand in order to express art.

They made marks with their fingers or hands, or by using materials such as rocks, animal products and plants which were readily available. The marks were made on the ground, on their bodies, on wood and on other objects.

7.1 Aboriginal art and its functions

Aboriginal art is the expression of the Dreamtime stories. In traditional societies, there were no professional artists. It was not a specialised occupation but all members of the society could participate in the production of the symbolic work. However there were some restrictions on the use of symbols. As older men guarded some areas of sacred knowledge they alone could make the marks which symbolised that knowledge. Women had their own designs which expressed their roles in society and their own perceptions of life.

Analysing the functions of Aboriginal art, we could find four main purposes:

- At the highest level, art provided a link between the people and their knowledge coming from past. It was viewed as a means of communication with the Ancestors spirit. The artist sought to enact the power of the Spirit and paintings were a part of a complex system of songs, ceremonies, dances .
- The artist had in mind the fulfilment of a personal desire as well as the benefit of the whole society. Paintings were done for the purposes of transmitting information. For example, a painting was intended to attract the attentions of the other person symbolized in the design.
- Aboriginal artists also used rock shelters to record achievement. In many rock arts around Australia we find scenes of humans and animal tracks with the depiction of the body of the animal in order to record a successful hunt.
- Another function of art was to educate. Rock paintings were visual expressions of the stories and provided another way of imprinting Ancestors stories in the minds of each succeeding generation.

7.2 Ground drawings

Life in traditional Aboriginal societies was in constant touch with the ground. Aboriginal people liked sitting or lying on the ground in a camp and engaging in the activities of the camp, such as talking and cooking. As Aboriginal mothers liked to tell stories to amuse and instruct their children, grandmothers, aunts and older sisters shared this task seated on ground. The stories were about hunting or gathering as well as spiritual beings. Some of them had an obvious moral purpose, while some of them warn of danger and darkness. Women accompanied the story telling drawing symbolic marks on the ground. Even though each symbol had several meanings, Aboriginal people had a limited range of graphic symbols For example, a vertical straight line meant a person lying or a spear as well as an animal track. Sometimes leaves were used as symbols. The leaves were moved around to denote the action of the story.

7.3 Body paintings

Another form of transitory art was the body painting. Careful and elaborate paintings and decorating were made on the body of the dancers as an integral part of ceremonies. The colours used were red, black, white and yellow, obtained from ochre, various minerals and charcoal. Dancers also had decorations made from seeds, leaves and shells.

The symbols used in body painting were basically the same as the one used in other forms of art. For example, in the desert areas, people painted themselves with lines and circles. Lines represented the track followed by the Ancestors in the stories, while circles represented particular sites related to the stories.

Aboriginal people participating in rituals were not only re-enacting the exploits of the Ancestors Beings of the Dreamtime, but also entering the life and activities of these Beings, taking on the character of the Ancestors in a real way. The body paintings symbolised this transformation of humans into the Ancestors Beings.

7.4 Rock Engravings

Rock engravings are found all around the continent, from the Flinders Ranges in South Australia to the Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, from the Kimberley region in Western Australia to Blue Mountains near Sydney. They are the first form of art that had survived for thousands of years. Aboriginal people attribute the work of engraving to the Ancestors Beings.

Aboriginal people had a variety of techniques used to make these marks. Lines were scratched in the softer rock layers by using sharp stones. Other marks were made over long periods of time by rubbing the rock surface and both geometric and figurative designs were engraved. For example, in the Blue Mountains, the engravings included figures of men and women, spiritual beings, animals and weapons.

7.5 Rock Paintings

The other durable form of Aboriginal art is the rock paintings, which also exist in many parts of Australia. Materials used in paintings were the same as the ones used for body paintings.

The most common designs are stencils of human hands. In the first place, anthropologists argued that hand stencils were a mark of ownership of sites. Nowadays this opinion is changing and anthropologists are trying to find other meanings.

Designs varied from region to region, depending on the Dreaming stories and on the traditions. For example, in Arnhem Land, Aboriginal people drew animals relating to their Sea Dreaming, such as sharks, dugongs and other species. Although most of the rock paintings are related to local Dreaming stories or to every-day life,

some rock art was created as an historical record of people or events. Clear examples are the paintings of Maccassan ships found in Kakadu National Park. Some rock arts were sacred and therefore they were secret. The meanings encoded in these paintings were revealed only when the individual passed through all the ritual stages of life.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays, Aboriginal people are under strong pressure. While on the one hand they are trying to recuperate and to reorganize their culture, on the other hand they have to cope with social reality. This process is difficult and long because during the last two centuries of colonisation they have lost most of their Dreamtime beliefs as well as their languages.

Even though there are still some tribes that live in the traditional way in the Arnhem Land (N.T) and in Central Australia, a high percent of them live within the Western Culture style of life and this is a source of conflict, sufferance and exclusion, as many episodes of racism demonstrate.

The Australian liberal Government also does not provide a clear intention and a positive behaviour toward Reconciliation.

The “White Culture”, which has destroyed in the name of the “superiority of our race” one of the last primitive civilisation on Earth and their way of living in balance with nature, still continues to refuse to recognize its tremendous mistake, perpetuating in many ways the idea that the Christian vision of life as well as the Western scientific understanding are the unique sources of truth.

This perspective or paradigm does not help to recreate social and political space, within which Reconciliation can seriously take place. As a singer said about the river which was pure and clean before colonisation: “*They were no longer able to care for the river. Let’s get together and make the river live again*”. Australian Aboriginal call for walking together, without answer.

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