



BOOK CHAPTER IN RISTAMPA

THE CULTURE OF AUSTRALIAN DESERT ABORIGENES

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Abstract

This paper deals with sacred and secular aspects of the culture of desert Aborigines. Basic tenets and structures within the culture are identified. Reference is made particularly to Aboriginal history and prehistory, the desert environment and ecology, family, kinship and inter-group relationships, tribal law, health concepts and to totemic dreamings which provide continuity for present-day people with their ancestral past.

Introduction

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Firstly may I express my pleasure at being able to attend this Congress and to share with you and participate in its deliberations. I thank the Umbrian Authorities, the Congress sponsors and especially my friend Dr. Goffredo Bartocci for the invitation to attend. It is, indeed a great honour that I am able to present this paper in the presence of such distinguished participants and to meet Professor Frighi and meet again Professor Rovera.

I have been asked by Dr. Bartocci to speak about the culture of Australian Aborigines — a subject which is probably unfamiliar to many of you. I apologise, therefore, if some of the notions seem unclear or strange for this is, indeed, a very different culture to most others. I would be happy to attempt to clarify any points later if I can.

Aboriginal, History and Prehistory

Aboriginal people inhabited the whole of the Australian continent and Tasmania but nowhere else in the world in recent times. The Aborigines are a separate racial group of modern man. They arrived in Australia between 40 and 60 thousand years ago from or through South East Asia in one or more land and sea migrations probably when ocean levels were low. The oldest carbon datings indicate occupancy over 30,000 years ago and it is now widely believed that the first arrivals were closer to 50,000 years ago. The Australian continent has either been continuously settled since then or resettled at different times and possibly by peoples with different physical characteristics. There appears to have been relatively little contact between Aboriginal Australians and other cultures in recent prehistoric times. Modern Polynesians did not ever settle in Australia as far as is known. Contact certainly occurred with Melanesians from New Guinea and with “Macassans” who came regularly by boat to fish the Northern waters of Australia and to boil beche-de-mer at coastal camps. There were brief and sporadic contacts with European explorers and sealers prior to Cook’s visit in 1778 which was followed by massive colonization. Thus, because of their relative isolation and for so long Aborigines may well have the oldest and least changed culture in the world today with origins and continuity to long before the cave culture at Lascaux.

A General Outline of Aboriginal Society

The Aboriginal population prior to white settlement has been estimated at not more than 50,000 persons. The whole of the continent was occupied. The people operated a hunting and food gathering economy and moved more or less within specific tribal territory determined by traditional and economic factors. Clothes were generally not worn but in colder regions in winter animal skin wraps were utilized. There appear to have been few food taboos. The diet included a wide variety of animals and plants and the people were skilled hunters and gatherers.

No animal husbandry was practiced and food was, for the most part, cooked and eaten without preservation or storage. Seed was extensively harvested and milled. No crops were sown or cultivated, unlike in New Guinea, and alcohol was unknown. No pottery was made. Tools were of stone, wood and of woven materials. There was an extensive religious art culture. The people possessed and carried with them in their travels only essential belongings. A useful summary of Aboriginal economy has been provided by Dingle (1988). There were several hundred languages of basically similar structure but some, apparently, as different as English and Hindi. Dwellings were flimsy and temporary in most regions. In a few localities with stable and continuing food supplies, regular continuous habitation in more robust dwellings probably occurred. After use the land reverted rapidly and without scarring. Burning-off with fire was practised regularly and widely, and no doubt, brought about significant environmental change. There is debate about the extent to which the Aborigines contributed to the extinction of diprotodon and other megamammals about 20,000 years ago.

Social organization was exceedingly complex and was without caste or class though older men, almost certainly, achieved and enjoyed higher status. Male and female roles were markedly different. Otherwise, there was little vocational specialization. Language groups were recognized, named and identified with specific territories. While intergroup conflicts certainly occurred, these were generally settled by posturing, skirmishes and small-scale killings rather than by war or by massacre.

Extensive trade routes existed throughout the continent. The society was cashless and

individuals had few non-essential possessions. Communities have been generally patrilocal and polygynous. A relative abundance of food, even in desert regions, allowed the men, at least, much time for religious activity.

The Desert Environment

This paper deals mainly with the culture and people of West-Central Australia. This region is really semidesert and not desert proper. The annual rainfall varies between 125 and 250 mm with total annual rain falling during a few thunderstorms. There are no permanent rivers. Water tracks after rain from one area to another in otherwise dry waterways and then evaporates or soaks into the ground. Aboriginal people have extensive knowledge of where and how to find water. The terrain is generally flat or undulating with low hills, rocky outcrops, sandhills, cliffs and escarpments, in some areas, created by ancient seas. Prevailing winds blow for most of the year. Low shrubs of the acacia, grevillea and hakea species are plentiful as are grassy plains and spinifex.

Kangaroos, wallabies, smaller marsupials, snakes and lizards are plentiful as are many varieties of bird and insect. The native dog or dingo, derived from the Asian wolf, has been in Australia for about 10,000 years and now there are rabbits and feral cats as well. To complete the list, cattle now graze this country around bores which tap subterranean water reserves. Mining for gold and other minerals has occurred from time to time. Temperatures range from zero at night in winter to 45deg Celsius or higher in summer.

The Desert People

A number of different language groups occupy specific tracts of this country. I will not bother you with their names except for two — The Aranda around Alice Springs and

The Walbiri to their north west. The cultures and social organization of desert peoples are essentially similar though there are, of course, many differences in detail. They have all occupied their respective countries for a very long time and they identify strongly with their country. Their numbers have been constant, it is believed, until 200 years ago when the population fell dramatically because of dispossession, disease and massacres in the early and not-so-remote past. Populations have now stabilized and are increasing mainly on government supported settlements in the desert. The last nomads moved out of the desert to the Warburton Ranges settlement some 30 years ago. None have returned to the desert for more than brief periods.

The Desert Religion — The Essence of the Culture

I attempt here to present an overview of Central Australian religion. This is based mainly on the anthropological writings of TGH Strehlow, particularly ‘Personal Monototemism in a polytotemic community’, and Stanner’s “religion totemism and symbolism”. The religion is central to desert Aborigines and to any real understanding of Aboriginal cosmology and culture. It has been and still is greatly misunderstood by many Australians. Much of the anthropological material is, however, difficult to follow. In general religious mythology is imprecise. This allows much regional variations, divergence and scope for change over time.

A representative view, that of the Aranda, is that only the earth and the sky have been eternal. The earth was originally a flat featureless plain devoid of life. The sun and moon had not yet emerged from the earth. Embryonic life essences had existed within the earth. Life began with the emergence of the original ancestors, supernatural beings, who moved about the earth creating its shape and features, carrying out ceremonies of various sort and eventually reentering the earth at the end of this creative period. Along their tracks and within the ground at special places were left deposits of their germinal essence. Their progeny became the generations of animals, plants and mankind that followed. A kangaroo ancestor, for example, was both kangaroo and man and the progenitor of the kangaroo totem, all kangaroos and all people of that totem. And so was commenced a cycle of life for all living things with all having within and all having

been derived from totem ancestors.

Human conceptions and, therefore, all people are created by the entry of ancestral germinal essence from the earth such that a newborn is, in part, a reincarnation of that specific ancestor. The role of copulation is minimized by Aborigines thought they seem to have no doubt about its relevance for conception. Consequently, a person possesses at least two spirit or soul components, one of the parental line and the other of a conception-totem ancestor. At the natural conclusion of life the human spirit or “ghost” remains in the vicinity of its dwelling for a number of weeks and then dissipates for all time. Conception spirit, however, promptly returns to its place of origin and may later achieve reincarnation through another conception. The Totemic ancestors, though having super-human powers, were, themselves, by no means exemplary beings. Some were ‘culture heroes’ but others behaved in dishonest, disgraceful and otherwise wrongly ways. Some killed and some were killed. They lived, reproduced and returned to the earth. However, their collective behaviour modelled proper and improper conduct and provided a codex of behaviour. This is often called, by Aboriginal people, the “law”.

Men participate in this religion largely by reenacting the myths of the ancestors. Ritual cycles are numerous and comprehensive. They are sacred and many are secret. Their purpose is either revelatory or to ensure life maintenance and species increase.

The reenactments probably provide, for Aborigines, the highest level of human experience and existence. A participant becomes in a ritual as one with the ancestor he represents and again enacts and reveals what happened at the beginning of time. Many of the ritual cycles contain strongly sexual and generative symbolism. The Aranda believed that ancestral beings also occupied the sky and that the sun and moon emerged from the earth to share it. However, it seems that a separation was effected between the earth-dwellers and the sky-dwellers by ancestral impropriety so that the eternal ones of the sky now have little interest in mortals and exert little or no influence upon them.

The routes taken by ancestors in the dreamtime are generally referred to as dreaming tracks and these may remain local or cross extensive areas of the continent. Their locations are precisely known by desert people and education, in aboriginal context, means among other things learning about the travels, tracks and ceremonies of one’s

own dreamings. The ancestor heroes are regarded as being both animal and man. For example, Maala, ancestral kangaroo-rats emerged from the ground near Yuendumu, a desert settlement, lived and then reentered the ground. These maala were the founders of a particular father-son totem lodge whose members must conduct reenactments of their travels. This maintains the continuity of both maala animals and maala men in that area, that is, all who have the maala conception ancestry, and the maala site in their country. This exemplifies well the essentially preservative and increase purpose of Australian totemism.

Space Time and Dreamtime

The English words “dreaming” and “dreamtime” as used by Aborigines are widely misunderstood but fundamental. They are synonymous and refer, not primarily to dreaming as such but to a dimension of existence, present in the beginning but in parallel with all time, past, present and future. MJ Meggitt, who has extensively studied Walbiri cosmology, refers to a noumenal-phenomenal distinction in the thinking of this desert people. Meggitt puts it thus — «The dreamtime is not seen merely as a discrete period of activity that occurred once ... it is also an enduring level of being which continues as noumenal ground that parallels and sustains the ongoing flow of phenomenal existence». It is only when this point is understood that the purpose of religious activity becomes fully apparent. The dreamtime sustains material or phenomenal existence and this is mediated and catalysed by the sacred reenactments of ancestral behaviour. Without them life ceases.

The people describe as dreamtime or a “dreaming” anything that extends into this noumenal space. The sacred boards or Tjurunga — icons or emblems of totem lodges, are thus dreamings. Actual dreaming during sleep facilitates contact with the dreamtime dimension and, therefore, access to the dreamtime in the Aboriginal sense. Much Aboriginal art, rock art, ground drawings, and ceremonial body painting is identified as dreaming. Much but not all of this is secret. Other, including the Maala increase ceremony, is public and accessible to women, children and even to whites who have no

dreamings and are outside this universe. Time is important to desert people mainly in the above context. They distinguish far past, past, present and future — these are of religious and seasonal relevance. They had no day names, numbered years in order to sequence time and clock time has no real meaning. The concept of numbers was not well developed.

Meggitt (1987) has attempted to represent graphically Aboriginal notions of time and space and also dreamtime noumenal space. Though Aborigines certainly do not think about them in this graphic and diagrammatic way, Meggitt's representation is, I think, helpful to those of us who do.

Social organization descent lines and marriage

The social organization of this people is exceedingly complex. Desert people recognize both patrilineal and matrilineal descent lines. Dreamings additional to conception dreamings are associated with patrilineal descent and are imparted to novices during initiation. Matrilineal activities also are generally dominated by men and are concerned with secular matters such as marriage, death, protection and retaliation.

Further organization occurs into patrimoieties and matrimoieties, halfcommunity groupings, each with reciprocating rights and obligations. The patrimoieties and father-son cult lodges deal with and induct novices into the sacred rituals concerned with natural increase and revelation. With regard to marriage, it is preferred that a man, Ego, is given as his wife his mother's brother's daughter's daughter. In other words he marries into his mother's matriline. This is a basic rule which Aborigines believe has always been in existence and was the way of the ancestors.

In the desert an eight subsection system has been superimposed which classifies not only actual kin but all others into specific categories of relatedness. For example, all the women of one subsection will be, by this classification, mothers of Ego, regardless of their age and Ego must treat them with due respect. In this way a man is given or should receive all his wives from the MMBDD subsection. His father-in-law will be a member

of another subsection and all the men of that subsection will be, by this classification, father-in-law also. The subsection system summarizes rules of conduct, reciprocating obligation, provision of wives, circumcision of youth, care of aged, in fact, all important social and ritual behaviour. It specifies cult membership, a patrilineal activity, and who should circumcise, a matrilineal activity. Everyone has a place within this system. Even the Aboriginal dog has a subsection or “skin” as Aborigines call it.

The system and consequential descent lines is disrupted by so-called “wrong marriages” when a man takes a wife from a different subsection, say, the subsection of his rightful mothers-in-law. Such a marriage is considered highly incestuous and, where possible, is disrupted in favour of an alternative and preferred marriage. Also, the matrimony his rightful wife would be expected to take action against him. This system is modelled on the ideal behaviour of dreamtime ancestors, and yet again, we see the profound influence of presumed ancestral precedents upon the conduct of present-day lives.

Health and illness concepts

There is no concept of disease or of accident in this culture. Individuals who survive the early stages of childhood are expected to remain alive until their lives “finish” naturally in old age. The occurrence of serious illness, accident or premature death is always believed to be deliberately caused. This may be the result of punitive or malicious human sorcery or the actions of territorial or malevolent dreamtime spirits. Human spirit-essence may be stolen or noxious objects projected into the body. The practice of “singing” or “bone pointing” is one way of inflicting harm upon a person. This way be done for essentially malicious reasons but, more likely, as retaliation and carried out by obligated matrikin. It is universally believed that people who are “sung” will become ill or suffer pain and may even die within a few days. Victims usually refuse food and fluid, become lethargic or disturbed and expect to die or remain ill until the causal event has been reversed.

Desert people are quite familiar with mental illness but interpret it entirely in the above

context. Acute seemingly psychotic episodes are expected following serious ceremonial errors or unlawful acts and particularly when individuals are unintentionally exposed to culturally proscribed rituals, dreaming art, or locations. Similarly, actual dreaming can produce marked excitatory or otherwise disturbed states if, in the dreams, prohibited events or trespasses have occurred.

Traditional “doctors” have an important role in the diagnosis and correction of reactions so evoked. They are able to see what others cannot see. The doctors’s skill is facilitated by the residence within his body of yet another spirit entity which, at his request, can be projected upon errands of diagnostics and correction into the body of a sick person. This noumenal entity, lizard-like and called Mobanba by the Walbiri, may travel for long distances, into neighbouring tribal areas if necessary, on errands of a diagnostic nature. Where an illness is deemed to be proper punishment the tribal doctor is unlikely to intervene. Otherwise, he will reinstate stolen spirit if he can or suck or otherwise remove a foreign presence. The traditional doctors, described as men of high degree by the anthropologist Elkin, should not be thought of in terms of the western “witch doctor” stereotype. Rather, they fulfil an honourable, important and one of few specialized roles within Aboriginal society.

The Making of men

This is a matter of great importance to all desert people. As hunters the men have a less effective role in food provision than the women who forage. Men, however, devote much time to ritual increase ceremonies of the many totem animals and edible plants, thereby securing the continuity of food supply. Man making occurs at about puberty. Adolescent boys then commence a period of retreat, intense instruction and revelatory ritual concerning sacred and secret male activities. Initiation includes circumcision and the practice of subincision — the opening of the ventral aspect of the penis. This marks the beginning of manhood and is a prerequisite for marriage and lawful sexual activity. Further instruction occurs for many years as young men advance in their totem lodges and patrimoiety. Later a man may become the ritual leader or “boss” of a lodge

dreaming. Uninitiated men cannot participate and, therefore, have no social role.

Men are of undoubted superior status to women. The society is polygynous and some men may have several wives of varying ages. Children have little status but are reared kindly and permissively and largely by women until initiation. Women do have dreamings and secret ceremonies but even these are usually managed by the men of their patrimony.

Normal and Abnormal Death

Death is truly the end of life in this culture. Suicide, as an overt act, appears to have been unknown. Desert people refer to an elderly person who no longer is capable of participating in ceremonial life as “close up finish”. The death of such a person presents no problem for the community though it is properly honoured. Appropriate public grieving is expected and occurs. Matriline members take responsibility for arrangements.

Tree platform burials, in former times, were usual. The corporate spirit of the deceased is likely to remain in the vicinity of its dwelling for a few weeks and then to dissipate for ever. That person is then truly finished for all time. Dreaming spirit essence returns to “its own country”, where it awaits, in dormancy, the possibility of reincarnation by conception within yet another woman who camps at that site. And the deceased is not referred to by name again.

Ab abnormal death, that is any unsanctioned death before the natural end of life, initiates a period of sustained, tension filled and noisy grieving which involves the whole community. Autopsy activities are initiated to discover who or whose subsection is responsible. This involves careful enquiry, examination of the ground for signs and reexaminations of the body for clues. The direction of flow of the deceased’s body fluids, for instance, offers important clues to the direction of the country of the culprits. Ultimately, the deceased’s close matrilin reason out who is to blame and why. Retaliation, sooner or later is mandatory.

Nowadays, this usually means a thigh spearing but retaliatory killing still can occur. Thus, another cycle of revenge is initiated. The designated evengers may dress in special attire and assume, to Aboriginal people, terrifying appearances and dreamtime powers — the Kadaitja of the Aranda and the Djanba of the Walbiri are such avengers. The deceased is also truly “finished” since within this culture there is no heaven, no hell, no god and no life after death. Persons who die are finished for ever. Life itself is the ultimate and only experience of being.

Malevolent Spirits

Though this people has no human pantheon it certainly has many wandering and malevolent spirits at large particularly at night. These are invisible except to doctors and to dogs. The frequent dashings away from campfires of the dogs, to bark at the night, amply confirm their existence and malevolent loiterings. Illustrations I have, show some of them as being spider-like or as faces with teeth. They may enter a human, say in a dream, and steal spirit or leave behind bones or other harmful objects. Victims believe they will become ill or die if correction is not effected by a traditional healer.

Modern Change in the Desert

Needless to say colonization has had a profound and largely adverse effect on desert Aborigines. Disease and alcoholism are prevalent. Obesity is increasingly a problem. These once nomadic people now live in large numbers on settlements in the desert. Though, like other Australian Aborigines, they have been ravished by epidemic, alcohol, and violent dispossession of land, the desert people have had, perhaps, more time to adapt to the inevitable changes imposed upon them. They now have permanent water, processed food, motor cars and welfare benefits since jobs are scarce in the desert. Never-the-less, they have been able to maintain the essential structure and tenets of their

culture and many traditional practices. After 200 years of colonization, desert aborigines are beginning to learn how to communicate in the language and manner of these times and to comprehend the imposed and alien politico-legal system. Largely because of this they have been able to mount effective arguments and to succeed in legal actions to retrieve traditional land, dreaming sites and valuable minerals. This is probably their most important and self-enhancing achievement since 1788. The desert culture has been greatly damaged by dispossession of land which has prevented the cyclic transactions between man and dreaming. The consequences of this are to Aborigines sadly and plainly obvious in the degradation of land and the disappearance of many animal species. The culture has been otherwise vulnerable where tribal practices have confronted western laws and customs. Younger people have become more western in some of their behaviour and attitudes and thus have disqualified themselves or been unavailable for traditional instruction and revelation. It is easy then for such people to become alienated from and fearful and suspicious of the powers of the old men, and the old culture.

Probably all the psychiatric disorders of western society occur among desert Aborigines. Certainly, illness such as schizophrenia and major depression occur. Disorders attributed to possession or spirit loss are not uncommon. In such cases it is often difficult to establish whether a primary cultural event has occurred or a physical disorder, with biological determinants, has been interpreted as a boning. Aches, pains and headaches are very common as are anxiety, paranoid and fear states and disorders associated with substance abuse, notably alcohol. At times vast amounts of alcohol are drunk whereupon a desert settlement becomes a place of much violence. Old scores are settled and random aggression is common.

Overall, many adaptations have occurred following European settlement and many more will be necessary for the people of this desert to become a part of the new and imposed cosmos. Now that active and aggressive suppression of the culture is diminishing, largely because of Australian Federal intervention, a major task ahead for desert survivors is to find ways of adapting their culture to the world that engulfed and almost annihilated them. And for us recent immigrants to Australia, there is, I believe, much scope for reflection upon what has happened over the last two centuries.

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