

STUDY 2

COMMUNITY LIFE AND ENVIRONMENT AT TIME OF COLONISATION

Psalm 19 The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament shows His handiwork. Day unto day utters speech, and night unto night reveals knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line has gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world. In them He has set a tabernacle for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, and rejoices like a strong man to run its race. Its rising is from one end of heaven, and its circuit to the other end; and there is nothing hidden from its heat. The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold; Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them Your servant is warned, and in keeping them there is great reward. Who can understand his errors? Cleanse me from secret faults. Keep back Your servant also from presumptuous sins; Let them not have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and I shall be innocent of great transgression. Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart Be acceptable in Your sight, O LORD, my strength and my redeemer.

ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY LIFE AT COLONISATION.

White Australia has difficulty in accepting the value of Aboriginal culture because of the negative stereotypes which have formed our understandings. We have come to know far more of what, to Europeans, is the dark side of the culture, than the light, or positive side. We have never appreciated the degree to which Aboriginal people have understood patience, quietness, long-suffering, tolerance, contentment, close community life and respect for elders. We have not appreciated that they excelled in artistic and musical skill¹, sound teaching methods, and that their affinity with creation was not dualistic. As well as these things, most (if not all) traditional Aboriginal cultures understood the principle of the shedding of blood for atonement and the concept of the “kins-man redeemer”; some one who would substitute themselves for punishment (a *Ngangkila* in Pitjantjatjara).

ABORIGINAL LIFE AND THE ENVIRONMENT AT COLONISATION

Not all Aboriginal people lived in ‘wurlies’. In 1981, a field survey uncovered approximately 146 stone ‘houses’ in one paddock by Lake Condah in South West Victoria. The dwellings were as stable as necessary for the people to stay in an area while the food supply was good. The people utilized clothing made from skins and finely woven mats for warmth when needed. They planned ahead, sometimes months in advance, to store water and food for inter tribal gatherings, such as fresh water muscles, eels, cycad nuts, moths. They devised fish traps, elaborate water channels and controlled water courses².

The climate of pre-colonial Australia, was similar to that of today and the people were subjected to the same extremes in the form of rain, drought, wind, cold and heat without the building materials, heating, cooling techniques or clothing which technology has made available to the West. Although the climate differed greatly from one area of the continent to another, a large percentage of the continent was prone to droughts and when water-holes dried up across vast

¹In traditional Aboriginal singing the melody, rhythm, text, form, location, setting and the ritual status of the observer all determine the message and meaning of the song. By changing the combination and/or altering the pitch and/or intensity of any or all of the constituent parts the performers influence the message conveyed.

² Josephine Flood. *Archeology of the Dreamtime*. 1995, 205

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stretches of land, some groups turned to their neighbours for assistance and temporary assimilation and if the drought was prolonged their identity would be absorbed by the host group.³

The fact that the people understood their environment so well meant that they were able to maintain their viability as distinct groups. Their ingenuity in finding water in the desert is an example of this. An elder member of Walmarrjarri tribe of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia explained that in the old days his people died because of inter-group fighting, then, after white people came, they died because of illness and fighting, but it was never due to drought. During times of severe water shortage his people had access to wells which their ancestors had dug so that they could walk down into the ground and get water.⁴

Josephine Flood states;

Not only did Aboriginal men and women living a traditional life have more leisure than is available for the average farmer or office worker, but they also generally ate better. The diet of those groups whose economy has been recorded in detail emerges as more balanced, varied and nutritious than that of many white people. The Anbara (of Arnhem Land) have an average intake of about 2400 kilocalories a day, of which 40 to 50 per cent comes from the flesh of fish, shellfish, crustaceans, and about fifty species of land animals and birds. Since the recommended energy intake for adults is about 2000 kilocalories, the Anbara are feeding well.⁵

This is confirmed by James Cook's observations in 1770,

They are far happier than we Europeans; being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but with the necessary conveniences they are happy in not knowing the use of them...they live in a tranquillity which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition; the earth and sea of their own accord furnish them with all things necessary to life; they covet not magnificent houses, household stuff &c; they sleep as sound in a small hovel or even in the open as the king in his palace on a bed of down.⁶

Around Olde in 1941, the Berndts listed 18 varieties of mammals and marsupials; 19 birds; 11 reptiles; 8 insects; 6 water roots; 17 varieties of seed; 3 vegetables; 10 fruits and berries; 4 other plants and fungi, as well as a variety of eggs. They spoke of these as easily obtained and a conservative estimate.⁷ For the Walbiri people of central Australia, Meggitt lists 81 species of fauna and 30 species of flora which comprise their diet⁸ In this desert environment archaeologist, Josephine Flood, estimated that the food quest occupied less than six or seven hours of work a day for a woman.⁹ in an area where the average annual rainfall is between 25 mm and 127 mm and the ground temperature ranges between 0 and 71 degrees Celsius.

The people's apparent 'communion' with the land was dealt a fatal blow by colonization. The environment changed dramatically and permanently. Fences that were erected, either restricted or prevented access to traditional land and/or water holes. The introduced animals often polluted the

³M.J. Meggitt. Desert People, 1975. 24, 27, 38. Swaine, T. Aboriginal Australia and Christian Missions p. 279. Also, the Wailpi, Kuyani, Jaldiaura and Piladapa, became known as the Adnyamathanha, or Hills people.

⁴A.T. Magarey, 1895. 'Aborigines' Water-Quest in Arid Australia' Art' in Australian Association For The Advancement of Science. Vol vi. Edited by John Shirley. Brisbane. Magarey shows how adept the Aboriginal people were to living in the harsh conditions of the Australian Outback. In relation to arid Australia, the author lists eleven trees which are a ready supply of water. Trees, animals and birds which are known as water finders, collecting dew with a grass sponge, man made rock holes, dams and wells, water carrying techniques.

⁵Josephine Flood, Archeology of the Dreamtime. 1995. 266. see also Bain Attwood, In The Age Of Mabo, 1996, 63. quoting M. Sahlins. Stone Age Economics.

⁶Rienits, Rex and Thea. 1968. The Voyage Of Captain Cook. Paul Hamlyn. London. p. 66.

⁷Berndt. The World of the First Australians, 1992, 109.

⁸M.J. Meggitt. Desert People, 1975, 7-15.

⁹Josephine Flood. Archeology of the Dreamtime. 1995. 265.

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water supplies. The addition of sheep, cattle, rabbits¹⁰, water buffalo, camels, donkeys, horses, foxes, cats, dogs and sparrows as well as land-clearing and the European concept of property ownership, caused extreme hardship and deprivation for Aboriginal people. Introduced plants such as Salvation Jane, Bathurst Burr, Prickly Pear, St John's Wort, Onion Weed, Skeleton Weed, Box Thorn, Cape Weed, Cape Tulip, Lantana, Water Hyacinth, Blackberries, changed the appearance of the country-side, and destroyed natural vegetation - and therefore the food source - of the Aboriginal people. Significant ecological deterioration was recorded by settlers in 1851 after only twenty years of farming. Explorer and natural scientist, Strzelecki, spoke with prophetic insight circa-1845 that the flocks and axes, by destroying the forests and undergrowth, were actually making the climate hotter and dryer.¹¹

Within one hundred years of European settlement, the destruction of traditional lands and the breakdown of the established inter- and intra- tribal relationships meant the disintegration of the cultures as cohesive entities. This occurred at a faster pace than the founding of official European settlements and resulted in demoralised Aboriginal communities called 'black's camps' or 'fringe camps' being present prior to, or developing with, the towns. These camps were normally one or two kilometres from town and often close to the rubbish dump affording the Aboriginal people an ample supply of building materials for wurlies (called wiltjas by the Pitjantjatjara people) and discarded furniture and clothing but it also increased the negative stereotyping by the white population.

ABORIGINAL HEALTH AT COLONISATION

Goerge Worgan, a medical practitioner from the first fleet noted that the Aborigines 'seemingly enjoyed uninterrupted health and live to a great age'.¹² Food and water were in ample supply even in the harshest of desert conditions.

Pastor Hoff of the Lutheran Mission at Koonibba speaks of the tribal peoples as a community loving people...they are good natured, kind, carefree and always ready to share.¹³

R. M. Williams spent many years travelling with the people of the western desert and he wrote in his autobiography that the desert people lived in a state of mental contentment¹⁴.

The good health that the people enjoyed was subject to the weather and the subsequent availability of water and daily food while open-air living, plenty of sun and frequent moving helped to avoid the circumstances which precipitate disease. The following diseases were probably experienced by Aboriginal people prior to colonisation, leprosy,¹⁵ rickets, trachoma, yaws¹⁶, salmonella¹⁷, gum diseases, tinea, tetanus, problems associated with various intestinal parasites

¹⁰Geoffrey Blainey, A land Half Won, 1992, 307ff. Twenty-four rabbits and five hares were introduced formally and with intent west of Geelong in 1859, but other importations occurred in SA and Victoria prior to this. Less than twenty years later they were in plague proportions along the River Murray in SA. By 1909 (50 years later) they were in plague proportions on the Nullabor Plains of South Australia. The End of Loneliness. History of Denial Bay Lutheran Church, 1996, 16.

¹¹Geoffrey Blainey, A land Half Won, 1992, 305f.

¹²John Harris. One Blood. 1995, 41.

¹³ Hoff. Rev C. 1926. Koonibba, 8.

¹⁴ Sherry Saggors and Dennis Gray, Aboriginal Health and Society: The Traditional and Contemporary Aboriginal Struggle for Better Health, 1991, 59

¹⁵Berndt, RM and CM. The World of the First Australians, 1992, 15-16. Leprosy was probably present.

¹⁶A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians. 1969, 71. Yaws seems to be an endemic form of syphilis spread by lack of hygiene, not by sexual relations...Yaws does occasionally cause more serious bone damage.

¹⁷Rob Linn. Frail, Flesh and Blood, 1993, 5. Salmonella infection rates, for example, are quoted as high as ninety percent in snakes, sixty three percent in lizards, forty percent in marsupials, and six percent in birds ; all of these creatures were part of the diet of the people.

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and worms as well as famine¹⁸ (diet was literally on a 'catch and carry' basis where supply controlled the demand), sickness due to poor hygiene, Parkinson's disease, dementia, and mental illness were present among the peoples (lung diseases, skin diseases, smallpox, venereal diseases. Diseases spread by flies and mosquitoes and diseases related to alcohol abuse can be added to the list, with many new ones added immediately after European settlement). There was little chance of recovery from injuries caused by conflict and misadventure due to snake bite, shark or alligator attack. In times of great community stress the severely aged, injured or sick would be left behind to die alone simply because there was no alternative.

It was thought that pregnancy was the result of spirit-beings visiting a woman as much as sexual activity.¹⁹ A woman was not owned by her husband for him to do with as he pleased (tribal retribution would result if he treated her unfairly).²⁰ Infanticide (via exposure²¹) was not a normal means of population control²² but the infant mortality rate was very high. However it is obvious that children born with serious defects had little or no chance of survival.

There is little evidence of cannibalism among Aboriginal people although some traditional groups ate the kidney fat of an enemy as part of a victor's ritual to ward off reprisal attacks, and some tribes cut the body fat from a deceased person and distributed it among the relatives in a prescribed manner to be eaten to assist in the mourning process.

Superstition and fear were characteristics of traditional life. They were a constant cause of stress, and rarely, if ever, pleasant modes of control.

ANCIENT TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL RELIGION

Most (traditional) religious systems on the Australian continent have no eschatology or salvation belief, no paradise or state of ultimate happiness, defined as being free of the inconsistencies, injustices and unhappy condition of mortality (as evident from the beliefs about death as the ultimate end with the concomitant feature of second burial), then the description of the Aboriginal religious system as static and immutable, allowing for no change or development, whether collectively or individually, towards a peaceful millennium of the equality of all people, may seem to have a certain validity. It also seems logical that if there is no paradise and no hell, no reward and no punishment, and if humanity is but a re-incarnation of dreaming heroes ...that under these precepts the universe with its existing features does not require any effort of people to become better or more God-like.²³

¹⁸Rob Linn. Frail, Flesh and Blood, 1993, 1 - 19.

¹⁹Greg Mead, A Royal Omission, 1995. This was the traditional belief which caused the resistance to the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission. The arguments put forward were based on a belief that fertility was linked to spirit beings and totemic sites. Ellis and Tur. 'The Song Is The Message'. Cultures In Collision, 1975, 30-35. Pitjantjatjara women took for granted a detailed knowledge of anatomy which few untrained white women would have. The anatomical names showed an understanding of the process of conception. 'There was unanimity regarding the association between copulation and conception but division of opinion as to how the babies life began'.

²⁰Isobel White, 'Aboriginal Women's Status'. Social Change in Australia, 1974, 210. Women are partners rather than pawns or chattels of the men, but that their status is everywhere that of junior partner. See also Faye Gale, Woman's Role In Aboriginal Society, 1970.

²¹W.H. Willshire. The Aborigines of Central Australia, 1888, 13. Willshire was the officer in charge of Native Police at Alice Springs during the 1880s. He records the means used for destroying unwanted infants. However his arrogance, intolerance and ignorance of Aboriginal culture make his record of value only because it shows the persecution suffered by the people. Harris. One Blood, 1995, 534. states that the practice was rare but not unknown in Traditional society.

²²As terrible as this practice is, it must be seen in the historical context of the eighteenth century. In England...between 1855 and 1860, in London, out of 3,900 dead children, some 1,120 were found to have been murdered and 940 to have been 'accidentally' smothered. A Middlesex coroner revealed, in 1862, that the police thought no more of finding a dead infant than they did a dead cat. In the following year, the Morning Star claimed that infanticide was 'positively becoming a national institution and the Morning Post believed it to be the commonest of all crimes. Rob Linn. Frail, Flesh and Blood, 1993, 1ff.

²³Swaine, Tony and Rose, Deborah Bird. Ed's 1988. Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions, 1988, 399.

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Traditional Aboriginal religion was expressed in the 'Law' which formed an intricate oversight for life by which individuals knew their place in society. But as the fruit of humanity in rebellion, Aboriginal Law (as indeed all human laws and cultures) is a defence and attack against the true Law of God.²⁴

Traditional Aboriginal culture was unique in many ways,²⁵ not the least in its religious concepts. Stanner said of Aboriginal religion,

"It may not have 'magnified goodness' as Bacon said of Christianity, but it did magnify life".²⁶

The following points can be made:

- 1) There is strong debate as to whether traditional beliefs included a sovereign spirit figure.
- 2) There are many mythological stories which have similar ideas as the biblical narratives, but the differences are also very great and at best only careful parallels can be drawn.
- 3) There are similarities to Gnosticism with the gradual progression of initiates through a series of secrets.
- 4) There are similarities to the occult and 'black magic' with 'spells', 'pointing the bone' and 'singing'.
- 5) Some argue that Animism dominates the whole of Aboriginal religion.²⁷
- 6) Death involves the release of a spirit from the body. This spirit must be appeased to make it go away. Whole families move immediately after a death and the name of the deceased (and anything sounding like it) will not be spoken for fear of the spirit returning to cause trouble (anybody or thing which has a name similar in sound to the deceased is known as 'kumunara' (in the languages of the Western desert area) and this continues for a length of time according to the importance of the deceased).
- 7) Traditional Aboriginal religion did not have an after-life. Death was cessation of existence for the individual. The individual received a 'patri-spirit' and 'matri-spirit', the former returned to its totemic home and the latter simply dissipated immediately after the death.²⁸
- 8) In the area around the Kimberleys 'voodoo effigies' were used.
- 9) Gudatji men (Western desert) were believed to be spirit/human beings with evil powers that could kill in judgement. They wore special sandals and were often known by Europeans as 'Feather Foot'. They were official executioners who enjoyed anonymity.

²⁴Bingham. Relationships: Divine-Human, 1994, 85f. "There is always ontological pressure upon him (*Mankind*) to go the true way of nature so he must devise the law which he would call 'natural' and then distribute that in his ways of culture, religion, ethics and so on, believing he is keeping what is authentic Law."

²⁵A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 149. Abbie states that the Aboriginal language seems to have no clear links with any other that is known.

²⁶Berndt, R.M. and C.H. Aboriginal Man in Australia. 217.

²⁷A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 116. Ian Lindsay. Fire In The Spinifex, 1986, 33. Cf. Nida, E.A. Customs, Culture and Christianity, 1963, 290, n. 3.

²⁸M.J. Meggitt. Desert People, 1975, 207. "when the elder brother presses the lad against the lodge pattern on the string cross, some of the lodge bilirba enters him. As this has already happened to the elder brother, father, father's brother, father's father, etc., all of them share the one lodge dreaming or patri-spirit. They all call the dreaming 'father' and are therefore spiritual 'brothers'. When each lodge member dies, his share of the patrispirit returns to the lodge dreaming-sites to be reincorporated in the generalised lodge-spirit."

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- 10) 'The Dreaming' is unique.²⁹ It is almost a personification of the Judaeo-Christian concept of 'Eternity'.³⁰ Pastor Cecil Grant explained that the term 'Dreamtime' is a white man's word. The Wiradjuri term is 'Balanda' and accurately translated means "in (i.e., already there) the beginning" before the 'nurkenbu' or 'creation period'. For the Warlpiri people, in the centre of Australia, the Dreaming was a concept of 'nowness' rather than 'pastness'. "Dreaming is a reality outside of, and qualitatively distinct from, a chronology of succeeding generations of living people".³¹
- 11) The notion of the 'ultimate' for the traditional Aboriginal was the notion of 'the Dreamtime' in the realm of which existed the mythical deities.³²
*'In our present knowledge of Aboriginal religion it would seem out of character to speak of any mythic being...as supreme beings.'*³³
- 12) Religious life was site-based.³⁴
*The totemic beliefs of the people are evidenced in the numerous points/locations of religious significance; a rock, a waterhole, a hilly knoll, a river or a clump of trees may all serve as focus for worship. The totemic site relates to the comings and goings of various spirit-beings who originally adopted human form but later took on the guise of familiar animals. Spirits give rise to all life both plant and animal...on the one hand and all humans on the other; at one time they bound every Aboriginal indissolubly to their own living totemic counterpart and its proper totemic site'*³⁵
- 14) The cultic rituals did not need to be performed in the location of the totem involved. A representative could be appointed to 'sing at a distance'.
- 15) The work of medicine men is almost entirely spiritual.³⁶
- 16) The Cult ceremonies (e.g., Kunapipi), Totemic ceremonies and 'playabout' ceremonies (social corroborees) were all essential parts of Aboriginal community life.³⁷ While it is easy to be horrified at some of the customs of the people (eg the Friendship ceremony, see also Genesis 24:2, 9), it must be remembered that the traditional people were perpetually naked and hence all parts of the body were given equal significance both personally and tribally.
- 17) Initiation ceremonies. For the Walbiri male this began at about age twelve and continued until he reached his highest ritual status by about age thirty and highest social status at age forty to fifty-five). Meggitt points out that circumcision was a ritual death.³⁸

²⁹It is helpful to remember that this term is European and that each tribal group has their own term by which they refer to the basis and source of existence..

³⁰M.J. Meggitt. Desert People, 1975, 364. "The Aborigines identified themselves with nature and saw in the natural order a system with human properties. All around them were the animals and plants, the unalterable stars and the natural features of the scenery that they explained as having been created in some far away time by beings with human characteristics. Only the land itself had not been created; it had always existed. The travels and actions of the anthropomorphic beings who created the Aboriginal world were retained in songs accompanied by rituals, many of which were concerned with ensuring and maintaining the natural order and particularly the fertility of animals and humans. The events of the myths and songs took place at a time usually called the dreamtime."

³¹Swaine, Tony and Rose, Deborah Bird. Ed's 1988. Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions, 1988, 454. R.M.&C.H. Berndt. The World of the First Australians, 1992, 229. A list of twelve different terms used by the respective tribes for the idea of 'the dreaming'.

³² R.M.&C.H. Berndt. The World of the First Australians, 1992, 230,137.

³³ R.M.&C.H. Berndt. The World of the First Australians, 1992, 301ff.

³⁴Swaine, Tony & Rose, Deborah Bird. Ed's 1988. Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions, 1988, 460.

³⁵A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 111.

³⁶A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 138.

³⁷A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 117, 126.

³⁸M.J. Meggitt. Desert People, 1975, 263.

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Circumcision is far more than just a physical token...the operation has deep spiritual significance. The...ceremony leads to a rebirth that is far more than mere convention. The initiate is really reborn into an entirely new life: he finds himself in an esoteric world of secrets hidden from women and children and strangers; he acquires a secret name and talks with fellow initiates in a secret tongue; he learns some of the sacred story of creation and plays his own part in ceremonies for the prosperity of the tribe. In short he is on his way to becoming en rapport with the supernatural, and people on that course are the...priests of the more sophisticated religions.³⁹

Subincision was practised by several central Australian groups covering a large portion of the continent. It is another uniquely Aboriginal practice and its origin and purpose are unknown. Life and religion of the traditional Aboriginal people was a cohesive entity and not compartmentalised such as in western society. However this fact did not protect the people from fear, ignorance, pain and anguish. As a people they were at the mercy of the elements and evil spirits. Their concept of the after-life was similar to reincarnation and it offered little comfort.

³⁹A.A. Abbie. The Original Australians, 1969, 131.