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Indigenous Australian Culture

Watch the series "First Australians", online at:
1 Traditional Life

The Aranda people of Central Australia believe that sometime in the distant past, sleeping superhuman beings, who were at the one time human and animal, spontaneously broke through the surface of a lifeless and cold earth. As they did so, the sun began to shine, the winds blew and the rains came. These great ancestors then freed the humans and breathed life into them and into the land around them. They performed marvels, great creative deeds and composed stories and ceremonies to lay down guidelines of behaviour. Then, weary from their efforts, they returned to the rocks, trees and waterholes or to the sky. Similarly the people of Arnhem Land believe that their life began when the Djanggawul sisters and their brother came across the sea from the north bearing their sacred mat and dilly-bag from which all life was produced.

Prehistorians prefer to believe that the Aborigines came to Australia from South East Asia. If this is true, then it is fairly certain that they came by design and not by chance. It is unlikely that castaways from the Asian mainland, even had they reached Australia alive, would be in sufficient numbers to found a thriving population here. This view means that the Aborigines were among the world’s first successful sea-voyagers.

We can only guess at why they came. Perhaps famine, warfare, curiosity, or sea-level changes drove them to Australia. It is most likely that they came when the sea levels were lowest and more land exposed than now. These levels, up to 200 metres below present levels, were experienced 20,000, 60,000 and 120,000 years ago. The Aboriginal adventurers still had to cross straits in their island-hopping, and still had to navigate across about 100 kilometres of water to reach Australia.

How long ago did this great migration occur? Recent radio-carbon dating has revealed human remains about 30,000 years old at Lake Mungo in southern New South Wales and up to 45,000 years old at Keilor near Melbourne. Even if the Keilor find is the oldest that will be made (and this is extremely unlikely as the Aborigines came from the north) their first arrival in Australia must be more than 50,000 years ago.
and had never become agriculturists and settled in permanent residences. Partly the environment shaped their economic life: before European seeds and domestic animals were brought to Australia, there were few suitable plants or animals to raise and a reasonably hostile climate in which to do it. Yet basically the Aborigines preferred their semi-nomadic life. Some groups in Cape York and elsewhere knew how to cultivate yams, but rarely bothered to do so. They chose to move systematically across the land, coming to nature’s garden rather than setting out their own plots. This seems intelligent, given that most Aborigines could find their food in five hours each day and we in 1981 have not reached the 35 hour week.

The Aborigines were extremely efficient hunters and gatherers. The men hunted for the larger game or marine creatures such as turtle or crocodile because these required stamina and speed. Despite their skills at tracking and stalking, the men sometimes failed to catch their difficult quarry so the tribe depended more on the women’s food supplies. Aided by their digging sticks and bush skills, the women never failed to bring in yams, fruits, vegetables, small animals or seeds for bread-making. Even the children collected fruits and small game. All made their contribution to the family’s food and thus men, women and children were partners in ensuring survival. The day’s food collecting began early, was usually broken by several rest periods, and ended when the separate male and female foraging parties collected together for the night’s camp.

All Aboriginal groups had an intimate knowledge of their surroundings, but perhaps most admirable were the desert people, where the quest for food and water was most difficult. As T.G.H. Strehlow who grew up with the Aranda people knew: ‘each local group in the Western Desert had to know all the habitats of the food plants, all the habitats of the game animals, and all the locations of even the smallest rockholes and temporary waters in its own territory in order to survive.’ During severe droughts the Bindibu people could find and catch frogs which stored water in their bodies from deep beneath the ground. The Walbiri of the Western Desert were familiar with 103 different species of flora and 138 species of fauna, all of which were used for food, medicinal, technological or ceremonial purposes. Everything of value was kept—animal sinews for binding weapons, bones for implements, feathers for ceremonial use.

For most of the year the Aborigines lived and moved in small groups of several families within their own part of the tribal territory. At intervals, perhaps once a year, all the people of a tribal group, numbering perhaps 500 or more, would collect together for social, ceremonial or trade purposes. During this time, hunting might be on a co-operative basis in the form of large-scale fish or animal drives. Tribal membership was based on birth in the tribal territory, speaking the same dialect and holding the same religious ideas. Loyalty to the tribe was strong despite
The essence of this relationship was the opposite of the kind and

case. Understanding the relationship between the two is critical to

The approach needs to be both broad and specific.

It's time to focus on the core.

We'll cross at the point on the map.

In a short time from the Central Region.

The approach needs a clear, local, and specific.

In the long term, the local community.

The loss of control over local matters.

Agricultural Assistance.
The basis of the kinship system was that the Aborigines regarded their whole group as a family. Thus the terms for family members, such as mother, father, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, were extended to everyone in the tribe. Everyone was well aware of who their blood mother and father were, but they called other people by these names as well. For instance, your mother’s sisters would also be your mothers, and your father’s brothers would also be your fathers. There were exact (and to Europeans, extremely complicated) rules governing whom you would call what. Aboriginal children had little trouble with the rules because they grew up learning and using them daily.

It is more important to grasp the purpose of the kinship system. Basically it enabled the Aborigines to work out exactly where they stood in relation to any other member of the tribe, or even outsiders. It provided a mental map of social relationships and thus behaviour. Each individual would know how to act towards every other person, because specific codes of behaviour were demanded of every kinship relationship. A man had to be accountable for the behaviour of all his ‘sisters’ in the tribe. An uncle had to teach his nephews the art of hunting and guide them through initiation. A mother-in-law and son-in-law did not speak to each other. Kinship also determined whom you could and could not marry. Its importance was that potential conflicts were controlled, obligations fulfilled and each individual was securely related to the group. No one in Aboriginal society was alone, for kinsfolk were there to help in time of sickness, food shortage or domestic strife. Even when sorcery was practised on someone—the great fear of an Aborigine’s life—kinsfolk might be able to help. Of course the system was not perfect, for some people disregarded duties and responsibilities, but in general the weight of public opinion obliged people to obey the rules most of the time. A neglectful husband or wife would be pulled into line by kin if they went too far. In this way human relations were more secure, ordered and stable.

An important aspect of the kinship system was the obligation to give to and receive gifts from certain kinsfolk. For instance a man had to give gifts to the uncle who initiated him into the secret life, and to the parents of his future bride. Thus gift giving led to an enormous amount of industry in Aboriginal society. In moments of apparent idleness, Aboriginal men and women worked something with their hands—a basket, dish or fish net, a spear, axe-head or cutting edge—casually yet continuously as they sat. While they were out hunting they searched for feathers, resins, bones, clay pigments or suitable stones and wood. Yet it is essential to realise that their economic activity was not for personal profit or economic gain. The important thing was not the economic value of the gift given, or the relative value of the gifts in an exchange, but the act of giving and receiving which reinforced social bonds. If Aborigines gave things away, it was not because they did not value things or the rights of private ownership (for they personally owned all their tools and weapons), but that they placed a higher value on fulfilling kinship obligations. Donald Thomson explained the meaning of a person’s gift-giving:

To him it is the preparation for a visit to relatives within the ceremonial exchange cycle to discharge his obligations, the journey, the ritual, the formalities to be observed in arriving at the camp, the niceties of behaviour and etiquette, rather than the actual geri, the goods themselves, that he values.6

![Burara man weaving a fish trap, Cape Stewart North Territory](https://example.com/burara-man-weaving-fish-trap)

D. Thomson collection, National Museum of Victoria

The exchange of gifts within the tribe and other needs stimulated exchange on an inter-tribal basis. The Australian continent was criss-crossed by intricate and specialised trade routes along which goods were passed. Shells from the Gulf of Carpentaria reached southern Australia. Pituri (native tobacco), axe-heads and flints were regularly carried distances of up to 800 kilometres. Each local region had its
Traditional Life

Cultural norms and roles are deeply ingrained in traditional societies, shaping the daily lives of individuals and families. These norms and roles are often passed down through generations, influencing everything from family structures to social interactions. The concept of ' Roles' is central to understanding traditional life, as it defines the expectations and responsibilities of individuals based on their gender, age, or social status.

Socialization is a key component of traditional life, where children are taught the norms and values of their society from an early age. This process helps them understand their place in the community and prepares them for their future roles. Traditional education systems, though limited, emphasize social and cultural values, preparing individuals for their roles in society.

Gender roles are another significant aspect of traditional life. Men and women often have distinct responsibilities based on their roles in the family and community. For example, in many traditional societies, women are responsible for domestic duties and child-rearing, while men are expected to provide for the family.

In summary, traditional life is characterized by a strong sense of community, role-specific expectations, and a deep connection to cultural heritage. These elements shape the daily lives of individuals and contribute to the continuity of cultural practices and traditions.
important to the sacred life. The men formally arranged marriages; sometimes had more than one wife; and old men took young adolescents as their wives. Yet there was always another side to these matters. Informally women had a significant say in marriage arrangements; they often enjoyed the company of the other wives of their husbands; and young brides of old men were married at least to men of influence and often later they found themselves with second husbands much younger than themselves. When a woman became a mother or grew older, she also gained in power and prestige. Indeed, women with strong personalities were never outmatched by men.

Power and authority in Aboriginal society rested largely with the older men, although some women also came to have a say in camp affairs in their later years. Not all were in the body of elders. Admission was restricted to those who had proved to be the most intelligent, diligent and conformist in the long period of learning the secret knowledge of the tribe which lasted until middle age. Thus, Aboriginal society was one governed by those who had consistently proved themselves to be the most wise and dedicated to the continuance of the group and its traditions. There was no leader but a mere egalitarian diffusion of power among perhaps a dozen men.

The power of tradition and kinship rules supported the authority of the elders. A legal system also existed to maintain order. Many tribes practiced a form of settlement by ordeal in which, when tempers were cooled days after the trouble, the injured party (under supervision of the elders), was allowed to throw spears at the alleged offender. Usually only a thigh or flesh wound resulted and then a dance of reconciliation followed to end the affair. In some groups duels would be fought until blood was drawn, or in serious disputes, until a death resulted. Others practiced non-violent ceremonies of reconciliation.

Inevitably old age was followed by death. Aborigines believed that spirits returned to their source—a sacred totem site—to become a part of the eternal stream of the one life force and the Dreaming. Therefore death was a serious business, full of complex ritual concerned with helping the spirit to return to its sacred site and thus allow the life of the tribe to get back to normal. If the person was not thought to have died of natural causes, an inquest had to be held to determine who had worked the sorcery which had killed the person, so that a revenge killing or counter sorcery could be contemplated by the dead person’s kin. A funeral followed, either by cremation, burial or mummification, depending on the traditions of the local group. This was accompanied by intense sorrow from the kinsfolk of the deceased, some of whom would gash their thighs or foreheads in grief until the blood flowed. The deceased’s possessions were often destroyed, his or her shelter burned

and sometimes the whole camp removed from the area. The name of the dead person could not be mentioned and the relatives, especially widows, had to commence food taboos and a period of silence, sometimes for as long as a year.

The 500 separate traditional communities in which the Aborigines lived for over 2000 generations were small scale societies in which everyone knew everyone else. Each group was marked by a strong solidarity based on kinship ties which provided security and intimacy. Each Aboriginal community was held together not by the economic usefulness of the members to each other as in our society, but because all the individuals in the group shared the same world view and meanings about what life should be. These social features, the Aborigines’ intimate relationship with nature, and their non-materialistic philosophy, made it truly an admirable culture.

Of course it was by no means a perfect society. People lived in fear of sorcery (although with means to counteract it), and there were at times violence and death in their midst. Survival was sometimes hard work, especially when digging two or three metres into the ground after a bandicoot, or collecting, grinding and winnowing seed to make bread. Chilly desert nights with only dogs for hot water bottles; cold and rainy weather; or the necessity of diving into southern Australian waters in mid-winter to catch fish were dismal aspects of Aboriginal life. Yet the sense of purpose and certainty given by the religious life and the closeness to the land more than made up for such difficulties.

In 1770 a man of considerable sensitivity, Captain James Cook, glimpsed the underlying nobility of Aboriginal traditional culture which many Europeans since have missed: “They live in a Tranquility which is not disturbed by the inequality of Condition. The Earth and Sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for Life. They covet not Magnificent Houses, Household stuff, etc; they live in a Warm and fine Climate; and enjoy every Wholesome Air . . .”. In this comfortable fashion of non-materialistic affluence, the Aborigines had survived for over 50,000 years within a Dreamtime philosophy that stressed continuity over change. How would these people respond to European invaders in 1788 who brought with them an exaggerated faith in change and development?