# Australian Aboriginal Peoples

Presented by

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# Leadership and Social Control

- As westerners' the concept of leadership is normal. We naturally accept the idea of a President, Prime Minister, Chancellor, Chairman, King and Queen or Supreme Leader. But Aboriginal people had no chiefs or other centralized institutions of social or political control. In various measures, Aboriginal societies exhibited both hierarchical and egalitarian tendencies, but they are classless. Equality was valued, despite women being in a lower position.

- However, there is evidence in some areas, such as northeast Arnhem Land, Bathurst and Melville islands, western Cape York Peninsula, and among the Aranda of central Australia, that strong leaders akin to the Melanesian "Big Man" existed and their preeminence in ritual matters carried over into the secular domain.

# Leadership and Social Control Cont.

- Everywhere, age and sex were the major criteria in differentiating status and roles, and it was in the religious arena that the greatest differentiation occurred.
- Traditionally, Women were excluded from the core of men's secret-sacred ritual activities, and areas of privilege were further defined by graded acceptance of youths and adult men as they passed through rites of learning.
- Essentially, however, Aboriginal societies were "open": there were no social barriers to prevent a man from becoming a leader in religious matters by his own efforts. Both men and women acquired prestige through knowledge of ritual performance and expertise in directing or performing ritual.
- In Great Sandy Desert rituals, for example, leadership roles were situationally determined—that is, the personnel changed as the ritual being performed changed such that most senior men adopted such roles at some stage in the protracted ritual proceedings.
- Although desert women were far less differentiated, they did have a ritual status hierarchy. In religious affairs everywhere, women took orders from, rather than gave orders to, initiated men.

# Leadership and Social Control Cont.

- Traditionally, most dissension arose over women, religious matters, and death. Some women fought with husbands, eloped, and engaged in unsanctioned extramarital liaisons.
- Such behavior could mean serious fighting involving relatives of the parties concerned. Infringement of sacred law was less direct in its social repercussions but was nevertheless regarded as the most serious of all.
- In many cases an ordinary or accidental death had wide ramifications, particularly if they were accompanied by accusations of sorcery. An inquest was held, and, through divination, a supposed "murderer" was found, against whom punitive measures might or might not be taken.

# Leadership and Social Control Cont.

- The maintenance of law and order was quite narrowly localized. Authority was limited and qualified by kinship claims. Precedents were sought in order to guide or influence actions resulting from a breach, and all societies followed approved procedures for maintaining the peace. There were no judicial bodies as such, though on the lower Murray River a formal council, or tendi, of clan headmen and elders did arbitrate disagreements between adjacent groups. Generally, simple informal meetings of elders and men of importance dealt with grievances and other matters. There was also settlement by ordeal—the most outstanding example of this sort being the Makarrata (magarada, or maneiag) of Arnhem Land. During a ritualized meeting, the accused ran the gauntlet of his accusers, who threw spears at him; a wounded thigh was taken as proof of guilt.
- Although it is inaccurate to speak of a gerontocracy in Aboriginal Australia, men of importance were easily distinguished. They were usually elders who had this status not necessarily because of their age or gray hair but because of their religious position and personal energy.

# Economic Organization

- The Aboriginal peoples' nomadic way of life was a direct result of a major limitation of the hunter-gatherer economy: the certainty of reduced food volume and ever-greater expenditure of effort to obtain it the longer a group stayed in one place. Aboriginal people had to be intimately acquainted with all the country within their range of movement and possess detailed knowledge of the location, distribution, and characteristics of its water holes, fauna, flora, and climatic conditions. Their ability to read the ground like a map greatly improved their efficiency as hunters. Knowledge of the topography and resources of huge areas of country was also gained through religion (see below), which related closely to their economic life.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- As valuable as secular lore was, it was of a lower order in Aboriginal peoples' worldview than religious knowledge. Aboriginal peoples believed that the Dreaming legacy gave them responsibility for and control over the fertility and reproduction of plants and animals and that it was therefore only through the use of ritual that resources were replenished, and social life could continue. This heavy responsibility was claimed by senior males, though all adults shared in the maintenance of the land and its resources through ritual participation and obedience to the law.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- Before Aboriginal life was transformed as a result of the European invasion, there were two basic patterns of movement. In fertile regions there were well-established camping areas, close to water and having important mythological associations, where people always camped at certain times of the year. Camps were bases from which people made forays into the surrounding bush for food, returning in the late afternoon or spending a few days away. The second pattern involved a much larger territory in arid or desert areas across which Aboriginal peoples moved in small family groups from water hole to water hole along well-defined tracks. The whole camp moved and rarely established bases. Only in good seasons and at sizable permanent waters was it possible for a large number of people to remain for an extended period.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- These two patterns were reflected in domestic arrangements. In the north, people made bark shelters and during the monsoonal rains used caves and stilted huts as protection against flooding, mosquitoes, and sand flies. In the desert, windbreaks—bough shelters or saplings covered with brush or bark—were common. During fine weather, most Aboriginal people preferred to sleep in the open with a windbreak; when it was too cold, dogs helped to provide warmth. Fires were kept burning, and, when moving from one place to another or even when hunting, people carried live fire sticks. Throughout Australia, Aboriginal people generally went naked.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- Outside the arena of religion, material objects were minimal. A useful threefold classification for Aboriginal tools was proposed by the archaeologist Richard A. Gould. Multipurpose tools, such as the digging stick or spear, were lightweight and portable. Appliances, such as large base stones on which food or ochre was ground, were left at a site and used whenever groups were in the vicinity. Instant tools, such as stone pounders or the grass cushions used by women when carrying heavy loads or wooden dishes on their heads, were fashioned as needed from raw materials available close at hand.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- Men carried spears and spear throwers and, in some areas, boomerangs. There were bark canoes and rafts and dugout log canoes, some with pandanus-mat sails. Women's digging sticks could double as fighting weapons. Their large, deep wooden dishes held seeds, vegetables, water—or even babies. In some areas painted bark baskets, plaited pandanus bags, and net bags served the same purposes. Rarer objects were the kangaroo-skin water bags of the arid central areas and the skull drinking vessels of the Coorong in South Australia. Implements included a wide selection of stone tools, wedges, bone needles, bobbins, and sharkskin files.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- Men's networks of obligations were generally wider than those of women. They included payment in meat for ritual knowledge until their achievement of senior status and wisdom earned them roles as directors of ritual and guardians of sacred objects and lore. Food gathered by women was not usually shared throughout the band, whereas large game was always butchered and distributed to all members according to conventions surrounding a man's kinship obligations. In most of Australia, women provided the major proportion of the food consumed—estimated at 60 to 80 percent, depending on area and season. Women were the major child minders, though children often played and foraged in groups and snacked on food they obtained. As girls approached their teens, they were expected to become providers, while boys had few responsibilities until initiation began.

# Economic Organization Cont.

- Exchange and trade were important elements of the Aboriginal economy, but there were no markets, and the promotion of intergroup harmony and alliance was generally the primary goal. Nomadic culture allowed no place for the accumulation of material goods, nor was there any attempt to link status or prestige to the possession of objects. The dominant Aboriginal values were unselfishness and the dutiful discharge of kinship and religious obligations. In gift exchanges, especially, the emphasis centered on the social bond being reinforced rather than on the objects being transferred. Scarce goods passed along defined routes from one group to another in an intricate pattern that crisscrossed the continent. Boomerangs, for example, went in one direction, red ochre in another; pearl shells from the Kimberleys found their way, gradually, to the Great Australian Bight. To exchange red ochre for the pituri (a form of chewing tobacco), Dieri people east of Lake Eyre traveled several hundred miles.

# Values, Beliefs and Religion

- Aboriginal people saw their way of life as already ordained by the creative acts of the Dreaming beings and the blueprint that was their legacy, so their mission was simply to live in agreement with the terms of that legacy. There was thus no notion of progress and no room for competing dogmas or rebellion against the status quo. Everything that now existed was fixed for all time in the mythic past, and all that the living were asked to do, in order to guarantee the continuance of their world, was obey the law of the Dreaming and perform correctly the rituals upon which physical and social reproduction were said to depend. Human creativity was not excluded but was explained away. The Dreaming legacy was not a static deadweight of tradition but was forever being added to and enlivened, despite an ideology that proclaimed non-change and the need only to reproduce existing forms.

# Values, Beliefs and Religion Cont.

- This view of the world gave precedence to spiritual powers and explanations over mundane knowledge or human intellect, and it placed everyone squarely under the authority of the law rather than that of other people. Aboriginal people were constantly surrounded by proofs of the existence and power of spiritual forces—the landscape itself was a dominant representation of the Dreaming's reality—and their everyday activities were in large measure a reenactment of those of the creative beings, making religion indivisible from the mundane concerns of daily life. Outside the ritual arena, and notwithstanding the superior rights of men over women and of older men over younger men, people valued their personal autonomy highly and were likely to react with anger and violence to any attempts by others to deny or diminish it.

# Values, Beliefs and Religion Cont.

- Through systems of totemic belief, individuals and groups are linked in many different ways to both the things of nature and the all-powerful beings of the spiritual realm. Totemic beliefs are more highly elaborated among Aboriginal people than among any other people. Totemism has been defined as a representation of the universe seen as a moral and social order, a worldview that regards humanity and nature as one corporate whole, or a set of symbols forming a conventional expression of the value system of a society. Such symbols provided intermediate links, both personal and social, between humans and the mythic beings. Many of the mythic beings in Australia are totemic in the sense of exemplifying in their own persons, or outward forms, the common life force pervading particular species. Others, originating in human or near-human form, at the end of their wanderings entered some physiographic feature, were metamorphosed as hills or rocks, or turned into various creatures or plants.

# Values, Beliefs and Religion Cont.

- Totemism's importance lies in providing individuals and groups with direct and life-sustaining links back to the very beginnings of society itself, the Dreaming, and to the enormous powers emanating from the spiritual realm. Conception totemism connects individuals to particular places and events and provides them with a unique account of their coming into being. It thus underpins individual identity while at the same time linking a person to many others who share similar associations. The plants, animals, or minerals that are selected as totems are not in themselves of religious significance, though in the case of foods a person may choose not to eat his or her totem, considering it to be of the same flesh. What is important is the connections symbolized by totems—the ties that bind people simultaneously to one another, to sites in the physical world, and to the omnipotent spiritual powers on which all worldly life depends.

# Values, Beliefs and Religion Cont.

- Throughout the year, religious activity was often taking place or being planned or discussed, particularly by initiated men. However, the high points were large gatherings, made possible periodically by the local superabundance of a major food resource. These occasions enabled Aboriginal people to conduct their religious life in an atmosphere of heightened excitement and tension. The main ritual roles in most major religious sequences were reserved for initiated men, and much secret-sacred activity excluded all others, but women had important roles in many religious activities. Children also took part in many rituals. In some areas, such as the Great Sandy Desert, women had their own secret-sacred rites and objects. New rituals were always being composed or exchanged with other groups, and this diffusion added a vital dynamic element to religious life.

# Aesthetics

- Sacred ritual provided immense scope for aesthetic expression, especially in dramatic performances with stylized posturing and complicated dance movements. Less intense but sometimes almost as elaborate were the nonsacred ceremonies (corroborees) with dance, mime, and singing designed for entertainment and relaxation. Songs ranged in style from the succinct verses or couplets of central Australia and the Great Sandy Desert, which were made up of three, four, or more words repeated in linked sequences, to the more elaborate songs of northeastern Arnhem Land, which were long verses building up complex word pictures through symbolic allusion and imagery. There was no poetry in terms of spoken verse, but there were chants, some of them outstandingly beautiful.

# Aesthetics Cont.

- The majority of secret-sacred songs comprised mythic cycles, each containing several hundred verses. The wide repertoire of songs on everyday events included the “gossip” songs of western Arnhem Land, composed by songmen with the aid of spirits. Instrumental music in the north was provided by the didjeridu and clapping sticks. In southern and central regions boomerangs or clubs were rhythmically beaten together or pounded on the ground; in southeastern Australia women used skin beating pads. Tunes and rhythms varied greatly from area to area.

# Aesthetics Cont.

- Oral literature was rich. In addition to sacred mythology there were ordinary stories and tales, either historically true or presumed to be true. Some existed in several versions, depending on the situation in which they were told and the individual background of the storyteller.
- Each cultural area had its own distinctive style of art. Tjurunga (sacred object) art, consisting of incised patterns on flat stones or wooden boards, was representative of a large area of Australia, although centralized in Aranda territory. In central Australia body decoration and elaborate headdresses on ritual occasions, using down, blood, and ochres, were especially striking. Everywhere, sacred ritual provided the incentive for making a large variety of objects—mostly impermanent, because the act of making them was itself one of the appropriate rites. In western Arnhem Land maraiin objects—realistic and stylized carved representations of various natural species—were made. The rangga, or ceremonial poles, of eastern Arnhem Land, many of durable hardwood, bore ochre designs and long pendants of feathered twine. For mortuary rituals the Tiwi made large wooden grave posts, and shaped and decorated receptacles for bones were common in eastern Arnhem Land. Also common were carved wooden figures of mythic beings and contemporary persons; some were used in sacred ritual, others as memorial posts for the dead.

# Aesthetics Cont.

- Paintings in ochre on sheets of bark were indigenous to Arnhem Land, although examples could be found in the Kimberley and in southeastern Australia. They were used mostly on the initiation ground for the instruction of novices. In western Arnhem Land naturalistic patterns showing figures against an open background were the norm; there was also a unique kind of "X-ray" art that depicted the internal organs of animals and human beings. Also widespread were cave and rock paintings or engravings and sand paintings associated with desert rituals. (See also art and architecture, Oceanic.)

# Early Alien Contact

- Aboriginal peoples who lived on the north coast were the only ones to encounter foreign visitors before European settlement. Seagoing Makassarese traders from the Indonesian archipelago began making regular visits to Arnhem Land sometime before the 1700s to harvest bêche-de-mer (sea cucumber, or trepang) for export to China. They had a powerful impact on local art, music, ritual, and material culture. In the northeast, on Cape York Peninsula, Papuan visitors from New Guinea also had an influence; bows and arrows, dugout canoes, masked ritual dancing, and the use of the drum can all be traced to them. Yet these influences did not penetrate into the rest of the continent, the inhabitants of which had no knowledge of non-Aboriginal people and no need to develop cultural mechanisms aimed at withstanding the impact of alien and culturally different peoples.

# The Europeans

- British settlement, dating from 1788, was altogether different. The arrival of carriers of a powerful imperialist culture cost the Aboriginal people their autonomy and the undisputed possession of the continent, and it forced them into constant compromise and change as they struggled to accommodate the newcomers. Initial contacts were often tentative but friendly. Although the Colonial Office in London prescribed the safeguarding of Indigenes' rights and their treatment as British subjects, friction soon developed between the colonists and local Aboriginal peoples. Communication was minimal and the cultural gulf was huge. Once European settlement began to expand inland, it conflicted directly with Aboriginal land tenure and economic activities and entailed the desecration of Aboriginal sacred sites and property. Clashes marked virtually all situations where conflicting interests were pursued, and the Europeans viewed Aboriginal peoples as parasites upon nature, defining their cultures in wholly negative terms.

# The Europeans

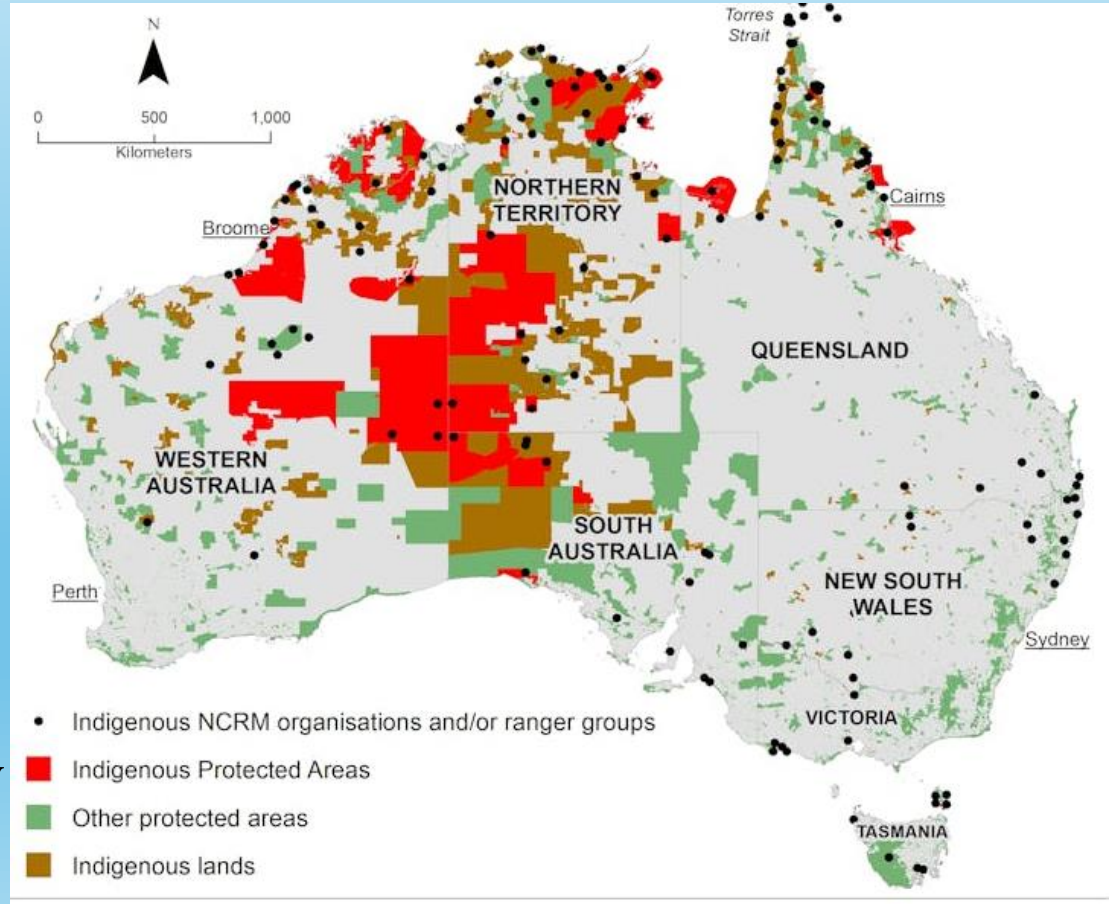
- The frontier was a wild and uncontrolled one for a long period. Aboriginal peoples in some areas used their superior bushcraft to wage prolonged and effective guerrilla campaigns until they were finally overwhelmed by force of arms. In the period of “pacification by force,” up to the 1880s, a large number of Aboriginal people were killed. Others were driven into the bush, remaining in small pockets subject to the “civilizing” influence of missions, or were left to fend for themselves in the fringe settlements of cities and towns; still others remained in camps or pastoral and cattle stations to become the nucleus of a labor force.

# The Europeans

- Introduced diseases exacted a terrible toll and probably killed many more Aboriginal people than did direct conflict. The disappearance of Aboriginal people in southeast Australia was so rapid that the belief arose that all would soon die out. Growing humanitarian concerns and reactions to frontier excesses led the Australian colonies to pass laws, beginning in 1856 in Victoria, concerning the care and protection of Aboriginal peoples. They were put into reserves and given food and clothing to "smooth the dying pillow" as they awaited what the Europeans took to be cultural extinction. These laws offered Aboriginal people no place in the economy or society of the colonists, and in practice they resulted in much greater restriction and control exerted by whites over the lives of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people were kept off their land and were therefore unable to survive by hunting and gathering. Those who survived were drawn—often forcibly, always uncomprehendingly—into wretched poverty on the margins of life in the developing colonies.

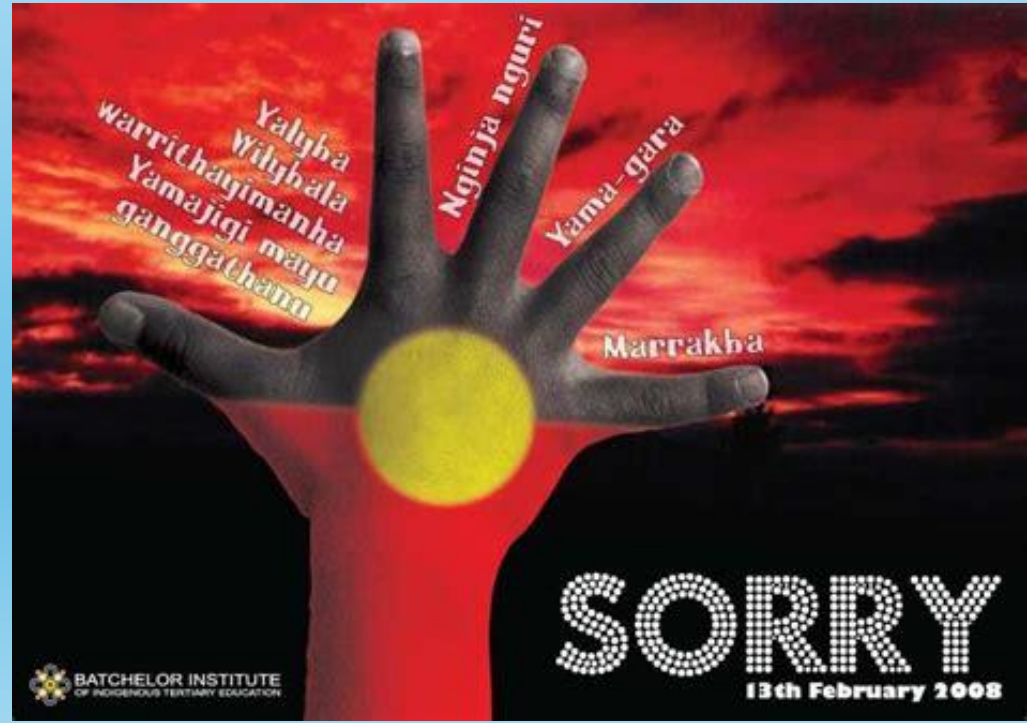
# Aboriginal Reserves

- Reserves were established in the late 1920s and early ’30s to serve as a buffer between Aboriginal peoples and Europeans. But many were attracted to, or forced into, the fringe settlements, where they formed tribally and linguistically mixed communities.
- This created the emergence of a new form of living, structurally linked to the wider Australian society. It was not until the 1960s that the frontier period finally ended, with the move into settlements of the last few nomadic groups from the Great Sandy Desert.
- At the turn of the 21st century there was a strong emphasis on cultural revival, but in the central and northern regions traditional life remained.
- In more remote areas it was still possible for Aboriginal peoples to live approximately in the way they had before European colonization .



# Government Apology

- In the late 20th century, there were growing calls for the Australian government to apologize to Aboriginal people for abuses they had suffered under earlier administrations.
- For decades the government resisted releasing such a statement, but in February 2008 Prime Minister Kevin Rudd issued a formal apology for the past mistreatment of Aboriginal people. In October 2023 the government of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese staged a national referendum on whether the Australian constitution should be altered to formally recognize Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to create an Indigenous body, the "Voice to Parliament," to advise the government on policies that affect them.
- In the vote, some 60 percent of those who participated rejected the proposal, and it failed to gain majority support in all six states. The result was a stunning blow for the country's Indigenous peoples.



# Aboriginal Peoples

I hope you found these facts about the Māori People interesting and informative.

New Zealand Is amazing. I hope you get the opportunity to visit this beautiful and historic country for yourselves.

Thank you for coming!

# Acknowledgement

My seminars are the result of many years of travel experience combined with many hours of research over the internet.

I would like to acknowledge the many sources I have accessed.

These include: Wikipedia.com, Britannica.com, and the various Museum, Park and Government websites.