

Broome, Richard. Aboriginal Australians: Black Responses to White Dominance 1788-1994.

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To Margaret

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 Djanggal sisters and their brother came across the sea from the north bearing their sacred mat and dilly-bag from which all life was produced.

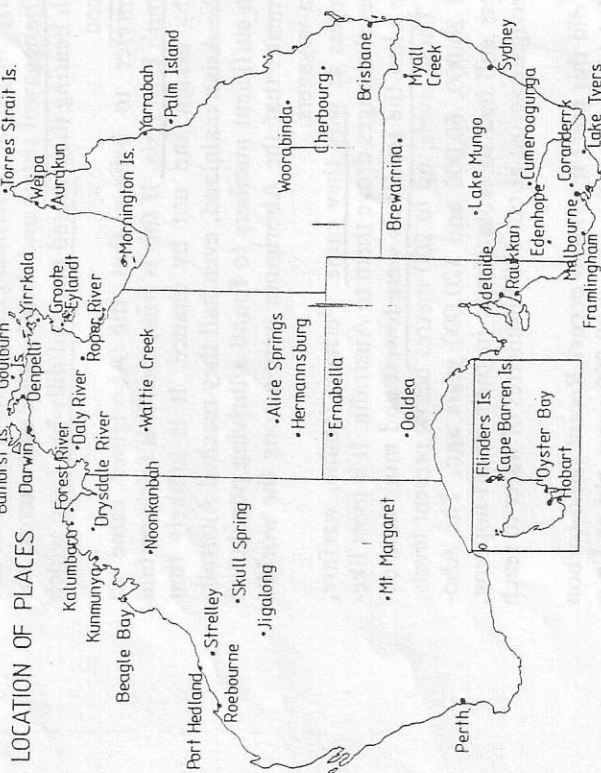
Prehistorians prefer to believe that the Aborigines came to Australia from South East Asia. If this is true, then it is fairly certain that they came by design and not by chance. It is unlikely that castaways from the Asian mainland, even had they reached Australia alive, would be in sufficient numbers 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 existed 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 at least. But how much earlier is the intriguing question. Charcoal found at Lake George near Canberra has been dated at 100,000 years. Is this evidence of human habitation or simply of ancient fires caused by lightning? It is certain that the Aborigines have been here for more than 50,000 years and it may in the future be found to be anything up to 120,000 years.¹ There is no doubt that they were the original inhabitants of a previously silent continent.

The Aborigines were probably then a coastal people, who gradually moved down the coastline and then, over many years, into the hinterland by way of the lakes and rivers. In a great human drama, they had to adapt to new food supplies and climates, and make the necessary technological and cultural changes. Over this long period of time, the face of Australia was altered by sea level movements, volcanoes and by climatic changes which dried up the centre of the continent. To all these the Aborigines had to adapt. Yet Aboriginal people also helped to change the land, especially by their use of fire for warmth and illumination, for cooking, and for hunting. Thus for over 50,000 years or 2000 generations, the Aborigines continually changed and perfected their hunter-gatherer lifestyle.



Before examining this lifestyle² it must be stressed very strongly indeed that the following comments can only be broad generalisations. Firstly, it is impossible to convey briefly the subtleties of a highly complex and changing society. Secondly, what we know about traditional Aboriginal society is somewhat speculative. Most of our information comes from Europeans who observed it in a process of change. Thirdly, there were approximately 300,000 Aborigines living in 1788 when the Europeans arrived, divided into over 500 tribes, each with their own distinct territory, history, dialect and culture. Thus there were over 500 variations on the single Aboriginal theme.

Simply by looking at one aspect of Aboriginal culture — for example technology — we can see the sameness and diversity of the various groups. They were all hunters and gatherers using the same basic tools of stone core hammers, knives, scrapers and axe-heads which were all carefully flaked, chipped or ground into shape; they all had wooden items such as spears, digging sticks and vessels. Yet Aborigines lived in diverse ecologies, ranging from the seashore to woodland, river banks and desert. The coastal people used fish bone to tip their weapons while the desert people relied on stone edged weapons. Some groups had boomerangs, canoes, woven bags, nets and fishing lines. Others did not. The Tasmanians had a small but adequate tool-kit of 12 items, others had up to 30 implements. Climate largely shaped these diversities although occasional outside contacts also stimulated change. The people of Arnhem Land learned how to make sea-going dug-out canoes from the Macassan trepang fishermen. They were also given cloth, iron, glass and pottery by these seasonal visitors in return for their help in collecting trepang (sea-slug).

All Aboriginal communities were semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers which meant that each tribe foraged for food across its own defined territory. This might be as vast as 100,000 square kilometres in the desert regions or as small as 500 square kilometres in fertile coastal areas. It was not an aimless search but one directed by an intimate knowledge of the land and the seasons. For instance Lazarus Lamilami recalled that his people, the Maung of Goulburn Island, would go to various places to gather turtles, bandicoots, goannas, geese, wild honey or yams depending on the season. They knew that when the peewee birds returned after the wet season, the water lily roots were ready to eat; when a brown scum came on the sea young sharks could be caught off the beach.³ The tribes around the southern alps in Victoria knew exactly when to climb the mountains to eat the Bogong moth. Those around southern Queensland knew precisely when the Bunya nut feasting could begin.

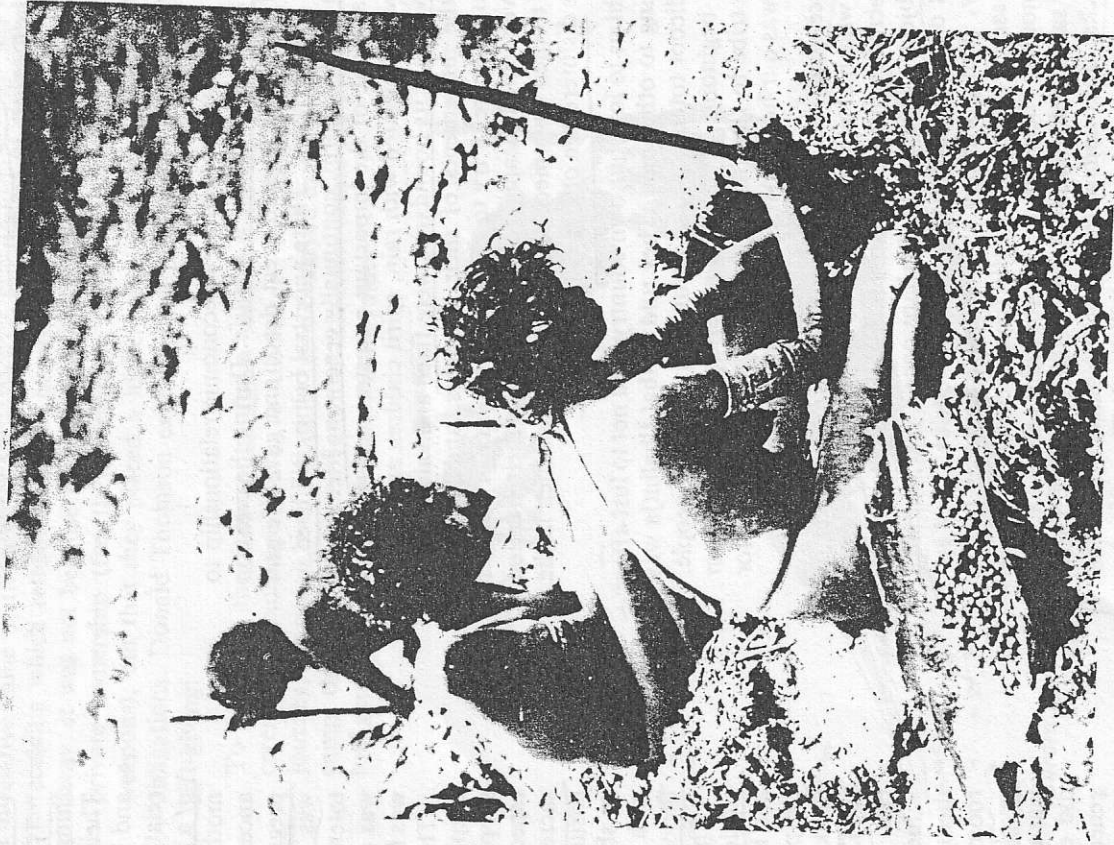
The first Europeans wondered why the Aborigines remained

nomads and had never become agriculturalists 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 collected 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.'⁴ 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



Women digging at Matarauwaitiji, Arnhem Land
D. Thomson collection, National Museum of Victoria

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 looseness of tribal unity, but above all, the individual's loyalty was to his family and his local country.

The Aboriginal people's deep love of their local territory is expressed in a song from the Oenpelli region:

Come with me to the point and we'll look at the country,
We'll look across at the rocks,
Look, rain is coming!
It falls on my sweetheart.

This love reflected a spiritual as well as an economic relationship to the land: the land not only gave life, it was life. During the creation time, the ancestral heroes performed great deeds and gave life and form to the tribe's local territory. These ancestral beings still lived in the local country in spiritual form, continually generating life. Across the north of Australia one of the important ancestors was the Rainbow Snake which was associated with rain, spirit children and fertility. Each tribe believed that its boundaries were fixed and validated by the stories about the movements of their ancestors, and therefore there was no reason to desire or try to possess the country of another group: it would have seemed meaningless to them since their creation stories only related to their own piece of territory. Aranda men in the 1930s explained this disinterest in other land:

Our fathers taught us to love our own country, and not to lust after the lands belonging to other men. They told us that Ilbalintja was the greatest bandicoot totemic centre amongst the Aranda people, and that, in the beginning, bandicoot ancestors had come from every part of the tribe to Ilbalintja alone and had stayed there forever: so pleasing was our home to them.

Special significance was given to the creation and resting places of the great ancestors who had moved across the tribal territory in the formative period. Sacred events were related to each site and here were hidden the sacred objects of the group. Perhaps once a year, the sites might be visited but only by the initiated men of the tribe. They approached cautiously, giving warning shouts and assurances to the spirits and took the sacred objects reverently from their hiding places to use in secret ceremonies. Therefore, as the Aborigines moved across their landscape they saw a richly symbolic and religious world. These were not simply rocks, trees and waterholes, but places which the great ancestors had created and where they still lived. The ancestors were the rocks, trees and waterholes, into which they had formed themselves after the creative period.

The essence of this religious belief was the oneness of the land and

all that moved upon it. It was a view of the world in which humans and the natural species were all part of the same ongoing life force. In the Dreamtime when the great ancestors had roamed the earth, they were human, animal and bird at one and the same time: all natural things were in a unity. The ancestors still existed in the here and now. Their life-creating powers were as great as before. The natural species and humans all derived from this life force and thus had an intimate relationship to each other. Each Aborigine did not have, but was part of a personal totem. This was determined by the place where his or her mother was impregnated by a spirit child released by the particular ancestor of that place. Thus, if a woman first realised that she was pregnant when near the site of the goanna, that would mean her child was intimately connected with the goanna and was of the goanna totem. That child thereafter was seen to be at one with goannas, and it was as logical for other Aborigines to call that person a goanna as it was for them to use the child's own personal name.

This view of the world was the religion of a hunter-gatherer people deeply interested in the forces of fertility which ensured their food supply and thus survival. Each adult after initiation, and men especially, had to perform increase ceremonies every year at the sacred site of his or her totem to enable the life force to be released to ensure an ongoing supply of the particular natural species of which he or she was a part. In this way, the Aborigines comforted themselves with the knowledge that these rituals helped the great spirits maintain the creation of life.

Thus the lives of the Aborigines were shaped by their Dreamtime stories which were both an explanation of how the world came to be, and how people must conduct their behaviour and social relations. All the people were deeply religious. Although we can never know, it was unlikely there were any atheists in Aboriginal society. The existence of the Dreamtime meant that the Aborigine followed tradition above all else. There was change in Aboriginal society, but continuity was valued above change. People did things in the way their parents did them, in the way the great ancestors had laid down. There was little room to question the order of things and certainly no thought of revolution. Thus Aboriginal society was stable over long periods and was rarely disrupted by struggles for wealth or power. When trouble did erupt in the camp, even to the point of violence and death, it generally centred on domestic disputes, not political matters. Conflict was minimised by an intricate kinship system which was the Aborigines' gift to solving the perennial problem of human relations. But then they had had over 50,000 years to devise a solution to the difficulties of intimate, small group living.

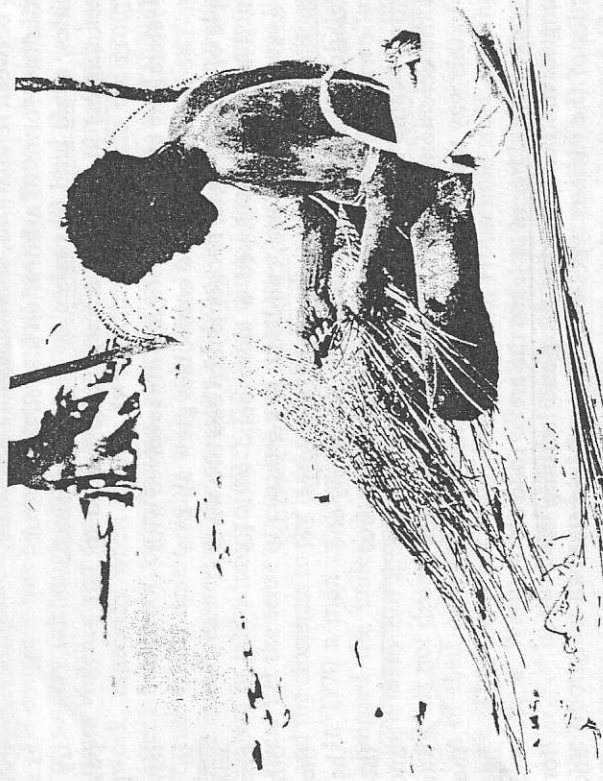
The basis of the kinship system was that the Aborigines regarded their whole group as a family. Thus the terms for family members, such as mother, father, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, were extended to everyone in the tribe. Everyone was well aware of who their blood mother and father were, but they 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 kinfolk 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 — kinfolk 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 watched 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 gerri, the goods themselves, that he values.⁶



Burara man weaving a fish trap, Cape Stewart Northern Territory
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 crisscrossed 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 trading system. For instance the coastal people of Arnhem Land traded marine products far inland for stone tools and ochre. Also, it was usual for ceremonies and religious ideas to be gradually exchanged over distances of 1500 kilometres or more.⁷

The Aborigines were thus very practised at inter-relating peacefully with other groups. However, harmony did not always prevail. Tribes beyond immediate neighbours were generally considered strange, inferior and enemies. Even those close to each other could fall out. Disputes were usually over marriage arrangements, adultery, ceremonial difficulties or sorcery. The conflict generally took the form of small surprise raiding parties, although pitched battles sometimes took place. Casualties from these actions usually totalled less than half a dozen, but as Aboriginal tribes usually numbered less than 500, such fights could affect population levels if too frequent.⁸ Some feuds lasted for years or even generations: in Central Australia the Aranda and the Kukatja fought for much of the nineteenth century. The long periods between retaliations, sometimes totalling years, and the existence of ritualised forms of arbitration limited the destructiveness of feuds. Besides, as no land was taken by the victors (since another's land was meaningless in religious terms), feuds tended to cool relatively quickly.

Within the kinship system, the cycle of Aboriginal life revolved with considerable certainty. The Aboriginal child sometimes grew up in a family containing people of various ages, for some men had two wives and children by each. The child developed a close bond with its mother who carried it as she collected food, cuddled it to her body for warmth at night and suckled it at her breast for up to four years. Yet the child had a close relationship with all the adults in the family and with all its kinsfolk in the tribe. The young were not tucked away, but were always in the centre of camp life, amid the work, the social life, the disputes and even the ceremonies where they fell asleep in their mothers' arms. It was in this way that they grew naturally into the life of the tribe.

As soon as it could walk, a child began to learn the art of food collecting through watching its mother gathering food and learning the names and characteristics of the various types of plants and animals. At the age of six, the boys left their mothers to learn male hunting skills from the men, while the girls stayed to learn food gathering skills from their mothers. Such education fitted in naturally with the rhythms of family life and growing up. Games were educational, being linked to life's needs. One involving spear throwing at a moving disc of wood taught vital hunting skills.

Childhood was a serious time, and yet one of great freedom and in-

dulgent treatment by parents. However, childhood was shorter than in our society. As soon as puberty was approached between the ages of 10 and 12, the child was launched into the initiation procedures for adulthood. Here the child would learn its rights and obligations as an adult member of the tribe and begin the long process of learning the oral history, religion and secret knowledge of the tribe. Initiation was thus the commencement of Aboriginal higher education. It was also a test of worthiness and courage because pain was to be endured and new things were to be experienced.

Initiation for the girls was less physically demanding than for the boys. However, it was just as important because it heralded the onset of the girl's fertility which was the source of life and the future existence of the tribe. The girls' ceremonies were less elaborate and drawn out than the boys'. Whereas an adolescent boy would have to spend many years acquiring enough skill and strength to hunt and defend a wife, the adolescent girl was able to assume her crucial functions as food gatherer, sexual partner and bearer of children as soon as she had reached puberty.⁹ Initiation for both sexes marked their entry into adulthood in an open and socially important manner, and it paved the way to marriage and child raising.

The relationship between man and woman in Aboriginal society was not one based on dominance and subservience. Rather it was acted out in terms of a partnership. Men and women saw themselves as interdependent, and this was to be expected in a society which saw everything as belonging to a unity, each element being part of the other. Masculine and feminine ancestral heroes both played a part in the creation period in most Dreamtime stories and this was a guide to the partnership of the sexes in Aboriginal life. In the economic sphere, the men hunted and the women gathered, both produced trade items and implements — each needed the other. The men had more power and authority in political affairs, but this was inevitable given the fact that after marriage women generally lived in the territory of their husbands. The affairs of the group had to be conducted by those who were born in the local territory and this meant the men. The women for their part carried out the equally important function of childbirth and rearing. Also they directed the crucial early education of the children in which the young were taught to survive in the bush and treat the land as friendly and part of themselves. Some of the tribes' most important ceremonies were opened to men only, but this was because the spiritual forces were thought to be too dangerous for the women. However, at many ceremonies the women played a vital and interdependent role. Also, the women had their own ceremonies concerned with fertility which the men could not attend. Thus both

women and men were 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.¹⁰

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. Admittance 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 more 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 practised 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 practised 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 lives. 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..."¹¹ 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?