

MAN AND THE LAND AMONG AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

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The Australian Aborigines have a special and very strong relationship to the land. This is based on their system of beliefs which influences every aspect of their lives. Their Law, based on their beliefs, has enabled them to preserve an ecological balance in their environment. The same environment is threatened today by pollution less than 200 years after European settlers arrived. The native land of the Aborigines has been taken away from them by force without regard to their rights, and this has practically taken away the basis of their culture. Only during the last decade has there been a growing public concern for the civil rights of the Aborigines.

The physical environment is to the Aborigines the "concrete proof of the absolute truth" of their myths. Each tribe may have its own distinctive part of a myth - but all tribes are part of the great myth of "Dreamtime." The emphasis is on continuity; being in this world today is for the Aborigine only a stage in the long process from past to future. The Dreamtime myth explains how things came into existence.

The knowledge of Dreamtime events is held by initiated men and passed on in songs and stories. Tonkinson writes about the Jigalong Mob: "Religious beliefs and activities validate the truths embedded in the Law and constitute the most potent integrating force in the community that has evolved at the settlement." What he says about that particular community of Aborigines at the fringe of the Great Sandy Desert holds true for all Aboriginal groups. Various rituals and ceremonies maintain a harmonious relation between man, nature and the spiritual realm.

Annual meetings hold important ritual commitments for an Aborigine. To get to a meeting extensive travel is involved during which rockholes and native water wells provide drinking water along the way. Animals and plants were collected as needed for food. There was no problem as compared with today's "trespassing," since the tribal land was there for all to use and live on. No fences were erected - they came later in accordance with the Roman Law's treatment of land as private property. When Aborigines were made British subjects it was completely overlooked that they had a Law of their own.

The interest of the Aborigines lay in access to tribal grounds, to food and water, while European settlers wanted undisturbed possession for themselves and their livestock. The complexities of the Aborigines' existence were so different from that of the settlers that they saw the Aborigines as a nuisance to be kept off the land. This prevented the Aborigines from moving through the territories to which they were attached by their beliefs. This situation has led to a whole set of problems in Australia today solutions to which have yet to be found.

When R.M. Berndt asked whether Aboriginal socio-cultural life can find a place within the context of our technologically oriented society he opened up the ever-important question of the treatment of land. The Aborigines had no concept of land as a material commodity or as private property, they only occupied it. It provided them with all they needed to survive. Land was a reservoir for food and it also gave them all the necessary psychologically important feelings of security, and most of all sustenance for their spiritual life.

The first step towards real progress or civilization means that there must be an association of peoples who have equal rights. The economic, psychological, and spiritual importance of land is as vital to the Aborigines today as it was centuries ago. Their culture cannot survive unless their basic rights are taken into consideration.