

ABORIGINES

Who are Aborigines?

The word Aborigine is a connection/ concatenation of the Latin words ab (from) and origine (beginning), meaning being there from the beginning or otherwise said "the first" or "earliest known". The word was first used in Italy and Greece to describe people who lived there, natives or old inhabitants and not newcomers, or invaders.

When people talk about Aborigines, they refer to Aboriginal peoples in Canada (indigenous peoples recognized in the Canadian Constitution Act, 1982), Taiwanese Aborigines (the indigenous peoples of Taiwan) and Australian Aborigines, which are the most frequently mentioned and that is why we'll focus on them.

Aborigines are native people/ original inhabitants of Australia, who probably came from somewhere in Asia more than 40 000 years ago. Recent findings in Kakadu Nationalpark show that there might have been human life in Australia for up to 60 000 years ago. When the Europeans came to Australia in the 18th century, they found about 750 000 "primitive" natives, as they called them, who seemed to live there as in the Stone Age.

Aborigines have survived harsh desert conditions and have a detailed knowledge of the plants, animals and water sources available in the country and that is why they have the longest cultural history in the world.

Aborigines were nomads, several small groups who met from time to time in order to maintain traditions and keep cultural and social heritage.

Today lives in Australia only 2 % of Aborigines. That's a little more than 250 000 people and that's three times smaller number than we can trace in the time of European colonialism.

Language

White Australians immigrated to the continent from Britain and other European countries in the late 18th century. At that time, there were 500–600 distinct groups of Aborigines speaking about 200 different languages or dialects .

The Aboriginal people of Australia have developed a language generically known as Aboriginal English, that is a mix-up between English and the Aborigine's own language. In identifying as Aboriginal, people from particular areas of Australia use Aboriginal English terms such as Murris, Nungas, Nyoongas, Kooris or Pallawah. It is through language, both the classical languages and the contemporary, that Aboriginal people maintain Aboriginality, cultural identity as the Indigenous people of Australia.

There is no written Aboriginal language and most of the 600 tribes spoke different dialects and languages. They rarely met except on ceremonial occasions. Today approximately 15% of Aboriginal people speak Aboriginal language as their first language.

Social organisation

The aborigines have an intricate classification system that defines kinship relations and regulates marriages. The tribe called Kariera, for example, is divided into hordes, or local groups of about 30 people, which are divided into four classes, or sections.

Membership in a section determines ritual and territorial claims. In half of the hordes the men are divided among the Karimera and Burung sections; in the other half they are divided among the Palyeri and Banaka sections.

These sections are exogamous, and rules of marriage, descent, and residence determine how these sections interact: Karimera men must marry Palyeri women, and their children are Burung, and so on. Sons live in the same hordes as their fathers, so the composition of hordes alternates every generation. The complex system requires each man to marry a woman from only one of the three possible sections.

Approximately 500 various tribes existed. Each had their own territory, dialect or language. The leadership, consisted of some of the oldest men of the tribe. When the Europeans came, they could not find any unified language, because after the immigration the Aborigines dispersed.

However Aboriginal society is divided into many clans, language groups and communities. In Aboriginal society every person was considered to be equal. No one had authority over anyone else in the sense of ruling them, but they still had their leaders, which weren't elected. There were also people who performed particular roles. For example clever men also known as Koradjis or Doctors as Europeans called them, had or acquired special skills and had a certain amount of power. People listened to him, asked him for advice and generally obeyed when they got orders from their leaders, who were known as Elders. They were considered to be wise when it came to religion, better known as Dreamtime, the law and the lore's of the tribe. An Elder was usually a male, but gray hair and old age were not the only criteria to be an Elders. In fact some elderly people were not considered to be Elders.

In large groups, which may have been comprised of several hundred people, a number of Elders met to make decisions on behalf of the group. This has become known as an Elder's Council, but it wasn't a council in the sense of being a form of government. Instead such councils met for the purpose of conducting initiation, marriage and burial ceremonies. In traditional Aboriginal society females were not considered to be Elders.

Each family group had a headman or Elder who was the leader of the unit. He decided when to move camp and settled disputes.

Religion

Aborigines have the longest continuous cultural history of any group of people on Earth - dating back 65 000 years. They maintain elaborate systems of totemism (the belief that there is a genealogical relationship between people and species of plants or animals). The links between the Aborigines and their ancestors are so called "totems". Every individual has his own own totem. All – men, women, children – are connected with this past and identify with defined part of this earth or with one of its creatures.

The Australian native feels a relation between himself and totemic plants or animals as a symbolic map of the relations between different people. This connection is very important and Aborigines must obey a great deal of rights, duties and prohibitions. An example for the importance of totems is that totem groups determine the relation system and marriage. The totem groups celebrate various ceremonies.

There are people or groups from different tribes which have the same totem and feel therefore related. As a result the Aborigines have a uniform culture, although they speak different languages.

Aborigines say, that on the beginning of time 'beings' created spiritual world, earth and everything, that lives on it. Their spirituality mainly derives from the stories of the Dreaming, while Torres Strait Islander spirituality draws upon the stories of the Tagai.

The Dreaming is a term used by Aborigines to describe the relations and balance between the spiritual, natural and moral elements of the world. Therefore with this expression we usually refer to an individual's or group's beliefs or spirituality. For example, an Indigenous Australian might say that they have Kangaroo Dreaming, or Shark Dreaming, or Honey Ant Dreaming, or any combination of Dreamings **pertinent** to their 'country'.

What is certain is that 'Ancestor Spirits' came to Earth in human and other forms and the land, the plants and animals were given their form as we know them today.

In general it's hard to understand complicated thoughts, which regulate the ideas of Aborigines about time. Among major part of tribes a belief is spread, that parallel with the idea of now and here exists also Dreamtime which people 'slide' into, when they fall asleep. The "Dreamtime", the mythological past, was the time when spirit ancestors had travelled throughout the land, giving it its physical form, and setting down the rules to be followed by the Aborigines.

Dreamtime is Aboriginal religion and culture. It's that part of Aboriginal culture which explains the origins and culture of the land and its people. It is the story of things that have happened, how the universe came to be, how human beings were created and how the Creator intended for humans to function within the cosmos.

The Uluru (Ayers rock)

Uluru (also known as Ayers Rock) is a large rock formation in central Australia, in the Northern Territory. It is located in Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park. Kata Tjuta National Park is owned and run by the local Aborigines. The Australian government handed ownership of the land back to the Aborigines few years ago.

Ayers Rock (Mount Uluru) is inhabited by dozens of ancestral 'beings' whose activities are recorded at many other sites. At each site, the events that took place can be recounted, whether those events were of significance or whether the ancestral being just rested at a certain place before going on. The Aborigines believe that it is hollow below ground, and that there is an energy source that they call 'Tjukurpa' the Dreamtime.

Land

Each clan grouping occupied a well-defined area of land, their "clan" territory. The land was given to them long ago in the Dreamtime and they had to take care of it, so it could transfer to next generations. The Aborigines did not have agriculture and did not learn how to tame animals. They lived from what nature gave them. They were original hunters and collectors.

In some areas the conditions for plants and animals were so bad, that both men and women had to spend from half to two thirds of each day hunting or foraging the food.

Some Aborigines relied on the dingo as a companion animal, using it to assist with hunting and for warmth on cold nights.

The men hunted animals such as kangaroos, snakes, wombats, goannas and emus and occasionally birds and insects such as honey-ants and witchetty grubs. The women caught smaller animals and picked fruits, honey and seeds. They dug with graving tools for edible roots. The Aborigines had to walk around very much. Therefore they couldn't afford to carry larger items, but only those which they really needed. Those were for example:

- **a spear** - a weapon consisting of a pole with a sharp, usually metal, point at one end, which is either thrown or held in the hand, it was launched by a woomera or spear-thrower
- **a boomerang** - a curved stick that, when thrown in a particular way, comes back to the person who threw it and it is used as both a weapon and a clapping instrument to accompany songs and dances.
- **a wooden shield**
- **a bag**
- **wooden bowls**
- **grindstones**
- **graving tools**
- **their cult objects** (their famous paintings on barks)

Often, the men carried only a spear thrower, spears, and those weapons needed to procure the animals native to his territory. The women carried the rest - babies, household utensils - to leave the men free to use the weapons.

Some Aborigines relied on the dingo as a companion animal, using it to assist with hunting and for warmth on cold nights.

Nowadays they collect from the soil different sorts of roots, berries, bulbs, water lilies... and they catch kangaroos, tortoises, ducks, geese, lizards, fishes and crows. They get different kinds of fish from the sea, especially graylings, salmons, cods and dugongs - large grey mammals, which spend their entire lives in the sea.

From childhood to adulthood

Shortly after the child (boy) could walk, he began to handle small spears, followed his father and the other men, watching while they fished, made tools. Little girls began to follow their mother, helping her and trying to copy what she was doing.

As well as the practical side of life, they began to join in spiritual matters. They were taught the rhythms of dances in preparation for later participation in sacred and non-sacred rituals. Children began to learn songs and stories that embodied knowledge to be passed on from generation to generation.

As child reached puberty, he was on his way to becoming an adult. They marked that transition with special ceremonies. For girls these events were fairly simple, meanwhile boys ceremonies went on several years and included hard training and getting to know the mythology and traditions of the clan he belonged to.

Aboriginal art

Aboriginal art was closely connected with their spiritual life. The proofs for this are special ceremonies, where they painted their bodies with different totemic symbols. They also painted the walls of rock shelters. The most of these drawings/ paintings are conserved in the caves of Uluru. Their pictures are vast illustrations of myths, which derive from 50 000-year-old culture and are unformed pictures of mythologic beings as kangaroos, sea creatures, snakes, witchetty grubs, created during the Dreamtime of creation. These works, mystical and powerful, are filled with the timeless certainty of ancient beliefs and laws that gave social cohesion to these nomadic people.

Bark painting is probably the best known Aboriginal art form, but this could be done only in areas where trees with suitable bark were available, such as Arnhem Land. Pigments were made from rocks, clay and charcoal, a narrow range of colours that produced characteristic red, brown, black and white of Aboriginal art.

Appearance of Aborigines

Their appearance varies within the different tribes. Generally they have a small figure and long thin legs. The skin is brown and they have a small head. Their face is flat and their noses are wide. They have long, black and wavy hair, with bright locks. They are very skinny. They wear traditional tribal garb. The cloaks are made from the skins of opossums, kangaroos, wallabies and other fur bearing animals. They paint their body by making different patterns with white colour.

Music

Aborigines developed unique instruments and folk styles. The didgeridoo is commonly considered the national instrument of Australian Aborigines, which has been claimed to be the world's oldest wind instrument. Didgeridoo is long cylindrical wind instrument - usually 90-150cm in length - originally from Arnhem Land - known as the Yidaki. It's made of wood and often painted with the owner's own totem, it produces a low-pitched, resonant sound.

Aborigines today

The Australian Aboriginal population is for the most part urbanised, but a substantial number live in settlements in what are considered remote areas. The health and economic difficulties.

For example, life expectancy of Aboriginal people is 20 years shorter than the other Australian population. Aboriginal people, particularly youths, are substantially more likely to be imprisoned than the general population, and the rate of suicides in police custody remains quite high. Rates of unemployment, health problems and poverty are likewise higher than the general population; and school retention rate and university attendance is lower.