

Prehistoric Society

THE ABORIGINES

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PROLOGUE

The Aborigines until 200 years ago lived in the same way that the ancient societies of the world would have lived 4000 years ago. This is why I think they are an example of prehistoric society.

WAY OF LIFE

From the time Aborigines first arrived in Australia until Europeans arrived slightly over 200 years ago, the Aboriginal way of life centered on hunting and gathering practices. Many Aborigines have maintained at least some aspects of their way of life as it was before Europeans arrived, but others have lost most of their cultural heritage.

Within specific environmental regions, Aborigines developed characteristic methods of obtaining and preparing foods and medicines, and they made different kinds of tools, clothing, and shelter. Thus the Aboriginal economy varied from region to region. Aborigines also created extensive networks of trade.

Aborigines generally enjoyed a mixed and abundant diet of plant and animal foods that varied according to time of year and local environmental conditions. They understood the beneficial nutritional and medicinal properties of the natural resources in their surroundings, and, when necessary, developed methods of extracting beneficial substances and eliminating harmful ones. For example, northern Aboriginal groups learned to extract poison from the seeds of cycad plants. The people ground these seeds into flour, from which they made a kind of bread. Their intimate understanding of regional natural resources enabled Aborigines to survive in environments that later European settlers of Australia found extremely harsh and uninhabitable.

The earliest Aboriginal populations, and especially the coastal groups, relied heavily on fish for food. To maximize their catches, they built large and complex systems of

underwater stone-walled traps. They also made broad nets of plant fibers for catching fish and other aquatic animals. In some coastal regions, massive ancient trash heaps composed of discarded shells indicate that certain Aboriginal groups depended on shellfish as a primary food source. Coastal Aborigines also ate a variety of plant foods, including coconuts, yams, and the roots of bulrushes.

Aboriginal groups ate a variety of plant and animal foods. Some common plant foods included acacia seeds, a type of wild tomato, and several types of tubers. Animal foods in the diet of inland Aborigines often included wallabies, ostrich eggs, insects, lizards, snakes, rodents, frogs, and birds.

Many Aboriginal groups used fire to clear large areas of land. These fires would have promoted the growth of grasses and other plants suitable for food, which could have attracted prey for hunting.

About 15,000 years ago, as much of the Australian interior started drying up, Aborigines began using grindstones to mill a variety of seeds, including the grains of wild millet. Among many interior groups, harvesting grain became an established practice. However, Aborigines never practiced full-fledged agriculture—involving the deliberate planting of seeds, fertilizing, and irrigating—probably because they had other adequate food resources and fairly small populations.

Aborigines also used regional natural resources to manufacture many kinds of tools and crafts. To obtain desirable materials for making these items, groups traded with each other over long distances.

Religious Beliefs

The religion of Aborigines centered on stories of their origin. They referred to the time of their origin as Dreamtime or the Dreaming. In Dreamtime, spirits called Dreamings awoke from a long sleep and began wandering through a featureless land. In their wanderings, these spirits created all natural features of the land, animals, and plants, and the people and their culture.

In ceremonies, Aborigines would assume the character of a Dreaming and act out the wanderings of this spirit. The paths that Dreamings followed and specific places they visited had great spiritual significance to Aborigines and also marked the territory of a clan (group of families connected by a common ancestor).

Young Aborigines learned stories of the Dreaming through initiation ceremonies and in gatherings of secret initiation cults. Initiates went through a ritual death, and in this state encountered the Dreaming. Prospective *shamans* (spiritual healers) went through a similar initiation by their peers, who symbolically replaced the body organs of the initiate to give him special powers in his new life.

Aborigines regarded death as an event caused by an angry spirit or a curse from another person.

Aborigines have buried their dead for over 30,000 years, and one archaeological site contains the earliest known evidence of the practice of cremation. In many graves, the corpses were symbolically decorated with pigments, ornaments, or clothing. Some bodies were also buried with tools. These practices grew more elaborate over time, indicating that Aboriginal religious beliefs also evolved over time.

HEALTHCARE & HYGIENE

In the Aboriginal Society it was generally the “Medicine Man/Woman” who was a sort of doctor at the time. This Medicine Man would deal with spiritual ailments and generally when the problem wasn’t recognized the Medicine Man claimed that there was an evil spirit inside the patient. He would sing and chant until the ill person had fallen into a trance. After that he would message the part of the body where the pain was being caused and would ask the spirit to come out. Hereafter the Medicine man would hold up a Quartz Crystal and say that the spirit had been trapped. After the patient woke up he would be told that the spirit had left. After this he would enter a state of elation and relief. Hence he would be cured.

The Medicine Woman on the other hand would use herbs and plants to cure the complaint.

Obvious things like broken bones would be placed together much like today.

However sometimes a process called *Trephening* would be used. This procedure involved holes being made in the skull, often to relieve the patient from severe headaches, bumps and to relieve the patient from an “evil spirit”. There have been evidence that several skulls were even being cured after this and the participants often survived!

EPilogue

When Europeans started to invade the lives of the Aborigines many of these traditions died out and many lived on.