

People of the Dreaming

Archaeologists believe that the Aborigines first came to the Australian continent 40,000-60,000 years ago. In time there came to be about 500 different peoples each with their own language and territory, and each made up of several clans. Today many people think of the Aborigines as nomads living in the desert. In fact most of them lived in semi-permanent communities along the coast, where food was more plentiful. They farmed and irrigated the land, and developed sophisticated husbandry techniques such as extending rivers to improve breeding grounds for eels.

In the inhospitable deserts of the bush interior the Aborigines adapted the harsh environment to their needs. They burned the undergrowth to encourage the growth of green shoots, the favourite food of the game they hunted. And they were experts in finding permanent sources of that most valuable of all commodities – water.

Significance of the land

To have any understanding of Aborigines it is essential to appreciate what land means to them. Land is crucial to the very core of both their spiritual life and their physical survival. Without land they cannot eat; without land their spiritual being has no meaning. Their concept of land is rooted in the Dreamtime, a time long past when the earth was first created. One Aboriginal man explained it thus:

'By Dreaming we mean the belief that long ago these creatures started human society, they made all natural things and put them in a special place. These Dreaming creatures were connected to special places and special roads or tracks or paths. In many places the great creatures changed themselves into sites where their spirits stayed. Aborigines have a special connection with everything that is natural. Aborigines see themselves as part of nature ... All things on earth we see as part human. It is true that people who belong to a particular area are really part of that area and if that area is destroyed they are also destroyed.'

Like so many other indigenous peoples around the world, the Aborigines were devastated by invasion and colonialism. Since the end of the 18th century their land has been taken from them, first for settlement, later for vast cattle ranches and most recently for mining. When Captain Cook landed in 1770 there are thought to have been 300,000-1,000,000 people living in the country. Thousands of Aborigines were wiped out by new diseases brought in by the British colonists. The settlers saw the Aborigines as primitive and massacred thousands more. *'The government must remove the natives: if not they will be hunted down like wild beasts and destroyed,'* said the *Colonial Times* in 1816. As recently as 1926, Aborigines



in the Kimberley region were massacred for killing cattle. Killings, along with the casualties in the Aboriginal wars of resistance, meant that their population plummeted to a low of 60,000 by the year 1900.

The statistics today

- The infant mortality rate for Aborigines is more than three times the national average
- The suicide rate is six times higher for Aborigines than for other Australians
- The proportion of Aborigines imprisoned is 14 times the national average
- Since January 1980 over 130 Aborigines have died in police custody

Since 1900, the population has increased to at least 250,000 (including the Torres Strait Islanders, indigenous people who are ethnically and culturally distinct from Aborigines).

For much of the 20th century, the government pursued a policy of taking small children from their parents and giving them to white families – so that all knowledge of Aboriginal ways would be erased, and their languages would die out.

Fighting back

Aborigines have always resisted the theft of their land, but the modern land rights movement really started in 1966, when the Gurindji people walked off the Wave Hill cattle station in the Northern Territory in protest at their appalling work conditions. This inspired Aborigines around the country, as well as focusing attention on the dismal social conditions of many Aboriginal communities. With a sense of their own identity and self-respect assaulted by two centuries of racism and violence, the Aborigines have suffered from high levels of despair, ill-health and alcoholism. They were not even granted Australian citizenship until 1967. Since then, they have organised themselves into Land Councils to fight for recognition of their rights to their lands. They continue to suffer discrimination and persecution.

Today

Today roughly half of all Aborigines live in towns, often in 'fringe dweller' camps where housing and health conditions are very poor. In an effort to reverse this, the 'outstation' movement has recently encouraged many Aboriginal groups to return to their lands. (Survival has helped fund such projects.) This may involve 'squattng' on land that officially 'belongs' to cattle stations.

In June 1992, the High Court made a historic ruling known as the Mabo case: essentially it recognised 'native title' to land in common law. This meant that large areas of Aboriginal land officially held by the Crown can now, at least in theory, be reclaimed by their Aboriginal owners. (Before the ruling, the principle underlying Australian land rights law was known as 'terra nullius.' This stated that Australia was uninhabited before the British arrived; a device used to dispossess Aboriginal peoples of their land for the last 200 years.) As a result of the case, in January 1994 Parliament passed the Native Title Act. Under this Act, all freehold and residential leases threatened by the Mabo decision were validated and any native title over such lands was extinguished. Vacant state land, however, could be claimed by Aborigines showing a 'close and continuing association' with a particular area. Mining leases did not extinguish native title, which runs alongside the leases until they are renewed or expire. The issue of whether native title could still be claimed on land covered by pastoral leases – the huge cattle ranches which cover much of the Australian outback, and where many Aborigines continue to live – was not resolved. A fund was set up to compensate Aborigines for the loss of native title and to acquire land. Aborigines would have a right to negotiate, but no veto, over development on Native title land. Tribunals would arbitrate in cases of dispute. State governments can override tribunal decisions 'in the state or national interest'.

The Native Title Act did not, unfortunately, resolve what became a bitter public debate between politicians, farmers, miners and Aborigines. The issue became even more controversial when a 1996 legal decision known as 'Wik' clarified what 'native title' meant. In particular, it was clear that native title could still exist on land that was covered by 'pastoral leases' – the huge sheep and cattle ranches which cover much of outback Australia, where many Aborigines continue to live.

These two legal decisions, while still leaving Australia far behind many 'Third World' countries in its recognition of indigenous rights, have been fiercely opposed by the powerful farming and mining industries. As a result, the government is trying to undermine the Aborigines' legal victories to such an extent as to render them almost meaningless.

The Prime Minister, John Howard, has proposed a new piece of legislation called the Native Title Amendment Bill. Crucially, this will make native title on pastoral leases worthless, and would leave many Aborigines unable to claim native title in the first place. Together, these measures would leave the huge majority of Aborigines with no rights over their land. Sadly, it seems that justice for Australian Aborigines is as far off as ever.

Background Reading

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