

1 | Aboriginal history

1.1 Pre-Contact 1788 History

Non-Aboriginal academics, namely anthropologists, archaeologists, and historians calculate that Aboriginal society has inhabited mainland Australia for over 40,000 years. However, Aboriginal concepts of their history regarding habitation of Australia are immeasurable and are linked to a variety of national Dreamtime creation lores. The most familiar of these concepts is the Rainbow Serpent.

The Aboriginal population prior to 1788 is estimated by academics to have been between 500,000 and a million people although recent estimates range from 300,000 to 3,000,000 (Commonwealth of Australia 1989). What is certain is that the impact of colonisation took a heavy toll.

During the 1940's Norman B Tindale (an American ethnographer), produced a historical map showing over 600 Aboriginal land and language owning groups before colonisation. The basic social unit within Aboriginal society was close knit, productive extended families, whose day to day living was defined by a set of complex social laws, customs and beliefs all of which differed from one group to another according to their creation ethic or Dreaming.

Within these parameters each member of the family had responsibilities and roles to others and themselves. Lines of communication and social activity were determined by an intricate set of kinship laws based on gender and age. Responsibility for education, child rearing and

discipline lay with all adults as a group, with some members having more significant roles than others. For example, there were specific teachers with skills in hunting, gathering, motherhood and manhood. The survival and strength of Aboriginal society lay in group dynamics rather than the dynamics of individualism as found in most western cultures. There were no kings, queens, presidents, prime ministers or chieftains in Aboriginal society.



Aboriginal creation or Dreamtime concepts signify that nature and culture were formed at

the same time by totemic spirits or ancestors who, in the Dreaming, came from the sky, underground and sea and formed the earth, rivers, valleys, hills, rocks and inlets, and established their existence. These areas are classified by Aboriginal people as secret and sacred sites which are simultaneously linked to totems. The totemic spirits or ancestors were believed to have had animal and plant as well as human qualities and are prototypes of the various natural species.

Traditionally religion, culture, law, society, economy and the land are inextricably linked and Aboriginal people today see issues holistically. Land is often said to be the essence of Aboriginal spirituality.

Family groups or clans were either patriarchal or matriarchal and individual membership or “belonging to” were determined by these factors. Men and women could not marry into the same clan and each clan’s area contains a number of sites of spiritual and sacred significance. Clans and particular individuals had responsibility for these places. They had to care for these sites, keep unauthorised visitors away and perform a range of ceremonies. One such ritual brings back the ancestral beings or powers which, when released, renew the land and all life in it.

Elders, both men and women, who had been through the initiation process and learned the sacred knowledge were the ones who jointly made decisions for the welfare of the secret and sacred sites and the ceremonies linked to them and each clan. Those responsible for the ceremonies were accountable to the whole clan for their correct performance at the right place and time as negligence could cause great harm or bring “bad luck” to their people.

It might take 30 - 40 years for a man or woman to work through a full series of initiations, during which they would go through the bora ring a number of times. As women have their own ceremonies, there is distinctly men’s business and women’s business.

1.2 Contact History

The history of white contact with Aboriginals has been one of European invasion, genocide, theft of land, rape, torture, removal of children from parents, destruction of livelihood and severe impact on culture, law, religion, society and government.

The colonisation of Australia in 1788 and onwards was based on the false premise of *Terra Nullius or empty land*. Yet in Captain Cook’s and many other explorer’s records and diaries there are numerous confirmations of sightings of Aboriginal people and in fact Cook’s diaries record him actually stepping onto mainland Australia in North Queensland and bartering with Aboriginal people.

So, during a period of undeclared war, non-Aboriginal claims to land nearly always overrode the Aboriginals’ right to life.² Aboriginal people were seen as a “doomed” race, destined to disappear in the face of the superior white civilisation.³ This “doomed” race concept was part of the “smooth the dying pillow” philosophy. Massacres, poisoning of flour and waterholes and the banishment of Aboriginal people from traditional sources of food and water were used by pastoralists and others to ‘disperse’ Aboriginal groups.

² Rowley C. D., *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*, Vol. 1, (p.154) Aboriginal Policy and Practice, ANU Press, Canberra, 1970.

³ Loos, N., *Aboriginal-European Relations in North Queensland 1861-1897*. (p.456) Ph.D. Thesis, James Cook University, Townsville, 1976.

Then followed a period of isolation and protection as the government realised that Aboriginal people were not going to die out as a race and decided that they needed to be both isolated and ‘protected’ from white society. This was the “out of sight out of mind” solution.

In the late 1890s, Aboriginal people were used as a cheap labour pool, being employed as station hands or crewmen for fishing and pearling boats. Child labour, sexual exploitation of Aboriginal women by non-Aboriginal men, disease, drunkenness and drug addiction led to the Queensland Government policy and practice of *forced relocation* of the majority of Aboriginal groups and families from their traditional lands onto foreign lands where government reserves and or church run missions were established. In addition, many Aboriginal family groups were split up and sent to different reserves. Fantome Island off Palm Island is infamous for being a place of punishment where Aboriginal people who dared to ‘defy’ government authority were sent.

The numerous government reserves were established under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897*, and the majority of Aboriginal people became wards of the State and had to have work permits to work outside the reserves. Their income was managed by the State. Mixing of the races was controlled and Aboriginal women or men who wished to marry required the permission of the Chief Protector. The *Aboriginals Preservation and Protection Act* replaced the former *Act* in 1939, the Chief Protector becoming the Director of the Department of Native Affairs (DNA).

The next policy era, during the 1950s, was assimilation which is based on a philosophy of making society and different cultural groups the ‘same’ as the dominant group, in this case Anglo-Saxon heritage. The core aim of assimilation is to have the same language, the same religious beliefs etcetera. It was not intended to integrate Aboriginal people nor for them to maintain their own distinct cultures, beliefs and values. ⁴

The *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Act 1965* replaced the *Aborigines Preservation and Protection Act 1939* and the Department of Aboriginal and Islander Affairs (DAIA) was established. It was intended to work itself out of a job with ‘reserves’ being temporary training camps which would serve as springboards for Aboriginal people to be assimilated into the wider community. ⁵

⁴ Queensland, Parliament, *Department of Native Affairs Annual Report*, 1963, Parliamentary Paper 1061, Brisbane 1963/64. .

⁵ Miller, B., *The Aspirations of Aborigines Living at Yarrabah in Relations to Local Management and Human Rights*, 1986, (p.17), Human Rights Commission, Canberra.

It was planned to abolish the reserves eventually. They would become like any other township in Queensland.⁶ In 1971, the first formal recognition that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are actually quite distinct and separate was reflected by the passing of the *Queensland Aborigines Act 1971* and *Queensland Torres Strait Islanders Act 1971* which replaced earlier legislation. Only minimal changes were made to these Acts in 1974, 1975 and 1979 despite human rights infringements and the passage of the federal *Racial Discrimination Act 1975*.

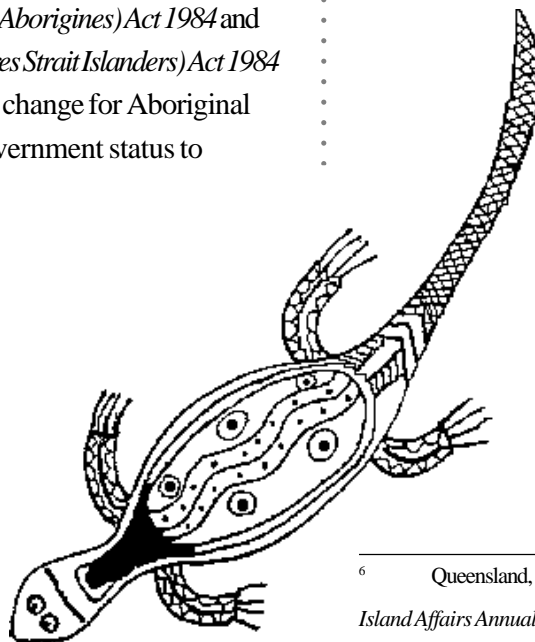
In 1978 the word ‘assimilation’ was dropped in favour of ‘integration’ which was based on a philosophy that it’s O.K. to be ‘*different*’ and it was a precursor for the acceptance of multiculturalism. However, the substance of Queensland Government Aboriginal affairs policy was unchanged.

The *Community Services (Aborigines) Act 1984* and *Community Services (Torres Strait Islanders) Act 1984* were the next legislative change for Aboriginal peoples giving local government status to

former reserves which had received deeds of grant in trust in 1982 under the *Land Act (Aboriginal and Islander Land Grants) Amendment Act 1982 (DOGIT)*

This Act enabled, for the first time, Aboriginal people to have some title to land and a degree of self-management. It is during the 1970s and 1980s that the philosophy of ‘*self management and self determination*’ became a political and economic goal for Aboriginal people to pursue.

Aurukun and Mornington Island had been Presbyterian missions and when the Queensland Government tried to take over control in 1978, they resisted strongly. The Queensland Government abolished their reserve status, made them mainstream local governments under the *Local Government (Aboriginal Lands) Act*, and gave them 50 year leases.



⁶ Queensland, Parliament, *Department of Aboriginal and Island Affairs Annual Report*, 1968, Parliamentary Paper 1102, Brisbane.

Finally, throughout this contact history, it is very important to emphasize the involvement of both Aboriginal men and women in the defence of Australia. Nationally, it is common knowledge within Aboriginal communities of the significant contribution Aboriginal people have made to all campaigns, that is, from World War One (1914-1918) to Vietnam (1959-1975) and including more recent international “incidents” such as the Gulf Wars.

Aboriginal contributions include virtually all levels of the military including commissioned and non-commissioned ranks. There have been Aboriginal pilots; POWs; Red Cross nurses/aides; etc. Many are recipients of a range of military honours and medals. Many died overseas in combat or from combat related injuries after arrival back in Australia.

• However, the knowledge of these war time
• contributions are slowly being acknowledged by
• the wider community. The Australian War
• Memorial has a historical photographic
• collection and display of Aboriginal service men
• and women.

• It is hoped that future projects will reflect those
• efforts of the Australian War Memorial and will
• provide not only an educative avenue to non
• Aboriginal society but more importantly an
• acknowledgment of the contributions to the
• defence of Australia that Aboriginal service men
• and women had and continue to freely give.

