

USING WESTERN PHILOSOPHIC CONCEPTS TO ANALYSE TRADITIONAL ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

Innumerable studies of traditional Aboriginal society by archaeologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists, have all come to reductionist conclusions. All implicitly view Aboriginal society as 'primitive' in comparison to other technologically advanced cultures. Similarly, the academic discipline of Philosophy has made no attempt to conduct a metaphysical analysis of Aboriginal thought systems and culture. This malaise is clearly indicated by the fact that in the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, no mention whatsoever is made of Australian Aboriginal religion. The following therefore attempts to briefly explicate Aboriginal philosophy.

Ontology

Aboriginal people throughout Australia believed that the purpose of human life was fulfilled through our consciousness of both the material and spiritual worlds, and our agency in maintaining balance and order in the world. Human beings are seen as an integral part of the ecological system, not above it. Human perception and ritual is therefore seen as a key agent in maintaining balance and order in the real world.

Theology

Aboriginal religion is a unique blend of belief systems and is best described as 'Wandjinism'. Despite there being more than 350 languages, religious tenets were consistent across Australia and Wandjinism can be seen to contain elements of Animism, Pantheism, Ancestralism, Totemism, Humanism and Deism.

The foundational belief of Wandjinism is that the universe was created by a Supreme Being in an act of imagination (the Dreaming). To give permanence to the Dreaming it was broken up into innumerable jigsaw pieces and life was introjected into the Dreaming in the form of Creator Spirits, with each having a piece of the jigsaw. When these Creator Spirits finished their creation work they surrendered their Dreaming and became the landmarks and animals we see today. The only creatures left with full consciousness were human beings, so our role is to protect the living spirit world that surrounds us and is represented by the Land and the Dreaming.

When Wandjina saw that human beings understood their ecological responsibilities, all knowledge that would ever be needed was seeded into the Dreaming, and we have access to it through our own Personal Dreaming. God then retired and takes no ongoing part in the affairs of the real world, but watches. This is why in Aboriginal art Wandjina is always represented with eyes but no mouth. God sees everything, but says nothing.

Epistemology

Unlike other cultures where knowledge has become increasingly specialised, compartmentalised, reductive and decontextualized, Aboriginal knowledge was fully integrated through the totem system. All knowledge was therefore ultimately geared toward serving ecological purposes.

Economy

Through the integration of knowledge to serve ecological purposes, all Aboriginal clans across Australia lived sustainably within their designated water catchment systems. Being part of the ecology, all Aboriginal clans ensured that their population was always matched to the carrying capacity of the land. Their land, food and population management practices therefore guaranteed that they lived in continuous plenty, even in the worst of years. Aboriginal people were therefore not hunter-gatherers as they have most often been described. They were in fact permaculture farmers. Their sustainable economy also meant that there were never any wars of conquest or invasion in Australian history, prior to 1788.

Sociology

All clans occupied a specific water catchment area and the land owned them, not the other way around. Social structure was the same all over Australia and was determined by the totem system. All clans were divided into two halves, most frequently represented by Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. These halves (moieties) were then divided into half again, forming four 'Skin Groups' which were in fact Ritual Lodges. Each one of these four Skin Groups had a special totemic 'class' relationship with each of the other three groups, on the basis of father-child relationship (Spirit) mother-child (Flesh) and husband-wife (Skin).

Skin Group or Ritual Lodge membership was determined by a generational cycle. All children had to be a different Skin Group to either parent, but the same Spirit Class as the Father and the same Flesh Class as the mother. You could not marry into your own Skin Group or that of your mother or father. The most common mistake made by anthropologists is in confusing the concepts of Spirit and Flesh with European ideas of male and female descent. In the generational cycle every individual in the third generation ended up in the same Skin Group as both their father's father and their mother's mother. So it was neither and both at the same time.

Politics

All clans were governed by a system of Eldership based entirely on aptitude and character. There was no right of leadership by inheritance, lineal descent, age seniority, or physical force. There was no separation between Church and State, so all Elders had to be fully competent in both spiritual and secular matters. The roles of male and female Elders were closely prescribed and clearly separated.

Gifted children were identified early and assiduously trained and groomed for designated roles that matched their attributes. Achievement of Elder status was preceded by a long apprenticeship and a slowly increasing but indirect role in decision making. When an Elder retired they appointed a trainee to 'speak with my voice' Each Skin Group was equally represented on the Elders Councils and therefore no individual, group, lodge or family could effectively 'take over'. The political structure is therefore best described as a 'Druidic Meritocracy'.