

## *Introduction*

Sit with dignity and talk with composure!  
No small talk! Elaborate on this:  
What means more to you: The silly splinter that went in?  
Or the spirit from heaven – which you really are –  
To wait in the waterhole?<sup>1</sup>

Rarely are the verses of the first Australians so austere. Rarely are they more urgent. Just for a moment the full-bodied complexities of myth are cast aside and with a slap of reprimand and a Zen-like interrogation we find ourselves facing a choice of being. Are we determined by life's pains (and pleasures) or rather by some eternal abiding spirit?

We relax – too soon. For all its intensity, the question seemed rhetorical, but just as we attempt a nod at the expected answer, the real paradox emerges. Is the spirit from above? Does it wait in the waterhole? Or is it left dangling somewhere between Heaven and Earth?

Only the foolhardy attempt to resolve paradoxes. My task is merely to ask what it means to create one. Like Piruwarna, although with a less poetic air, I am going to pose questions of Aboriginal ontology – about what they 'really are'. Like him, I am concerned with the relationship between the stuff of being and the cosmos as a whole. And, like him, I will stress antinomy.

Put in its briefest possible form, this book is about the historical coexistence of two spiritual principles in Australian Aboriginal Law. On the one hand there is the 'waterhole': a site-based life potential co-joined with specific human beings. This is immanent and radically pluralistic. On the other hand there is a continuum which can lead to 'Heaven': non-locative powers which, in their most extreme form, are relegated to a distant and unknown place. Here is a tendency towards social and spatial transcendence,

potentially pan-Aboriginal, and at times flirting dangerously with monistic ideals.

My thesis, quite simply, is that the latter principle has emerged, in varying degrees, as Aboriginal people sought to accommodate outsiders and make a place for strangers.

Already I have identified two of my main players. *Ontos* and *Chronos*, Being in Time. Both are enigmatic, both invite obscuritaniist reflections, yet I cannot but echo Heidegger's insistence upon 'Time as the horizon of the understanding of Being'.<sup>2</sup> Which leaves me running headlong into a dilemma.

Central to my whole argument is the position that Aborigines themselves do not, or at least once did not, understand their being in terms of time, but of place and space. Surely, therefore, it might be said that to insist upon the vantage of time and history undermines, or at best ignores, the Aboriginal notion of being-in-the-world. We could, of course, seek to give priority to one stance, but which one? If we evoke Bergson's rhapsodic phrase: 'time is but the ghost of space haunting the reflective consciousness',<sup>3</sup> we must then deal with Heidegger's dismissal and inversion of this stance: 'the "atemporal" . . . are also "temporal" with respect to Being'.<sup>4</sup>

Whilst it would satisfy neither of my philosophers, I see no need to adjudicate on the 'true' nature of existence. I am not concerned with what might most infelicitously be called ontological ontology (the very being of being) but with hermeneutic ontology (the interpretation of being). Indeed, it seems that this is as far as we can ever aspire if we accept Gadamer's important observation that 'language is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all'.<sup>5</sup>

When I say, therefore, that time is the horizon of the understanding of being, I am alluding to the central place of temporality in the Western mind. If nothing else, it is an indispensable component of our horizon of understanding. What, then, is to happen to this horizon when it encounters one that almost exclusively proclaims place?

For most of the history of the study of Aboriginal traditions, the scholarly solution has been 'objectivity'. Since Aborigines themselves had not nurtured the possibility of locating their being in time, they were deemed a 'timeless' people. For researchers to assert otherwise would have been for them to have allowed their own ontological heritage to contaminate those they studied. The condemnation

reserved for those who did so was 'subjectivity', which has so aptly been called 'the prejudice against prejudice itself'.<sup>6</sup>

The price of object-ivity - of the intended absolute separation of the 'I and Thou' - has only recently become apparent. The divide between history and its self-imposed positivistic offspring, anthropology, can be viewed in this context. What initially distinguished the two fields of investigation was that the content of history alone was within our own ontological horizon. Bruce Trigger came close to this point whilst at the same time highlighting its political face: 'The original differentiation between history and anthropology was the product of colonialism and ethnocentrism. Anthropology was initiated as the study of peoples who were alleged to lack history.'<sup>7</sup> We can call this 'racism', 'ethnocentrism', or whatever, but beneath all this is the less laden realisation that while we have shared the world with Aboriginal people we have mostly failed to share our understanding of our being in the world. We have been unable to spare our time.

Until the 1960s, Aborigines were almost totally non-existent in history. Strictly speaking, there is no need to qualify this with 'European history' for, as Urry quite rightly maintains, history itself is a construction of the past which was alien to Aboriginal thought.<sup>8</sup> Historians simply kept aloof from Aboriginal people, content 'to leave the study of the Aborigines to anthropologists, and then to ignore the anthropologists'<sup>9</sup> - and rightly so, as the anthropologists, in turn, had themselves ignored history. In his famous Boyer lectures, W.E.H. Stanner dubbed this almost perfectly formed shun 'the great Australian silence'. This, he said, was the story of things we have unconsciously 'resolved not to discuss with [Aborigines] or treat with them about; the story in short, of the unacknowledged relation between two racial groups within a single field of life'.<sup>10</sup>

Much has changed since the 1960s. That decade opened with the publication of a collection significantly entitled *Aborigines Now*,<sup>11</sup> and the processes of change and the dynamics of history in Aboriginal society have ever-increasingly become the focus of scholarly attention. We now even require a journal of *Aboriginal History*. Yet, despite this thriving new industry, little has been uncovered about the fundamental changes to Aboriginal people's ontology. This is more than a neglected topic; it is a neglected world.

We have managed to be true to our own ontologic field of view, rooted as it is in time and history, but we have yet to turn this into

an encounter with the Aboriginal understanding of being. We have, in short, largely failed to begin to achieve what Gadamer so evocatively described as a genuine ‘fusion of horizons’.<sup>12</sup> Historical understanding demands not only that we be faithful to our own temporality but also that we recognise the fundamental otherness of those others who transform our history and hence our very being. As Peter Winch once said, ‘seriously to study another way of life is necessarily to seek to extend our own – not simply to bring the other way within the already existing boundaries of our own’.<sup>13</sup> That Aboriginal and European world-horizons differ is therefore not a quandary but a promise that understanding itself is possible. There is indeed a tension between our being and theirs, but ‘the hermeneutic task consists not in covering up this tension by attempting naïve assimilation but rather in developing it consciously’.<sup>14</sup>

A dominant theme of this book is that Australian Aborigines have themselves been engaged in a hermeneutic process in their encounter with outsiders. That this interpretative tradition has been cast in spatial rather than temporal terms would be disconcerting to most European hermeneuts. Husserl himself had his thinking shaken by his brief encounter with Aboriginal thought, and Merleau-Ponty added the question: is it actually ‘possible for us, who live in certain historical traditions, to conceive of the historical possibility of . . . societies . . . in which our concept of history is simply absent?’<sup>15</sup> Husserl at least had no doubt that it was indeed of the ‘highest importance’ to ‘feel our way into’ this historical possibility. For such people ‘this is the basis of the world which is no mere representation but rather the world that actually is *for it*’. Husserl also amplified that this was not merely a lack of historicity but positively ‘a humanity whose life is enclosed in a vital . . . tradition’.<sup>16</sup> I would but add that the essence of that tradition is place and that the Aboriginal interpretation of changes to their life-world has been cast in terms of space rather than history (see chapter 1).

This work reciprocates by offering a history of that interpretative process. It explores the ‘historical possibility’ of a hermeneutics of ubeyty. One might call this a hermeneutics of hermeneutics, but less pretentiously it is an attempt to view the Aboriginal understanding of others from the vantage of our own historical horizon. I call this ‘a History of Australian Aboriginal being’.

Some readers may feel that my subtitle is presumptuous. After all, current evidence indicates that people in northern Australia were

recording their 'view of nature' in art at least 60,000 years ago, and hence Australia can perhaps boast the oldest directly dated hint of ontological reflection in the world.<sup>17</sup> The period of human occupation of Australia, furthermore, feasibly goes back twice as many years as this.<sup>18</sup> Surely, it might be argued, a proper 'history of being' must do justice to those remarkably remote origins. My reply is firmly negative. Firstly, I would respond once again with Urry that 'history' is not an Aboriginal concept and that 'a history of Aborigines can therefore only begin with the establishment of white settlement in Australia'.<sup>19</sup> This at first might seem a *post hoc* semantic rationalisation, but my second point reveals otherwise: the more important fact is that everything we know of Aboriginal ontology has been recorded in a historical setting, and that history has then been denied.

This is not of course to suggest that reflection upon the nature of existence was not occurring in the ancient Australian past. Of those reflections, however, we know and can know almost nothing. Prehistorians have provided solid evidence that such contemplation was *occurring*, but even art, the most communicative of all archaeological evidence, cannot self-disclose its *meaning*. It is thus that interpreters of the Aboriginal symbolic past have always weighed the evidence in terms of the ethnographic present (itself a dubious procedure, which would be totally unacceptable were it employed with the so-called 'higher' civilisations). Clegg, for example, has made a most ambitious attempt to disclose those changes in religious beliefs accompanying changes in iconography, but his starting assumption had to be that engravings, some of which were perhaps 5,000 years old, could be understood in terms of nineteenth and twentieth century Aboriginal traditions - 'I assume that Aboriginal religion at the time of the engraving . . . was within the generality of the [ethnographic] model. If that model is false, there is no way of knowing so'. Even if we concede this, the most that can be concluded is that earlier engravings had a different form and therefore quite possibly a different meaning. Clegg concluded, 'I cannot yet see a way to infer from the changes in pictures what changes there were to religion'.<sup>20</sup> If meaning is not synonymous with that of the cultures recorded in ethnography, it remains virtually impenetrable in terms of its ontological significance.

Thus, not only has our ethnography been recorded within a silent historic context, but even our prehistory shares the interpretative

signature of an image of Aboriginal traditions created in a post-colonial context. My resolve is to admit this history in the ongoing creative tradition of Aboriginal being.

This is not the place to examine in detail what has been said about non-Aboriginal impacts on Aboriginal cultures. I will discuss the relevant literature within each of the following chapters. Something must be said here, however, about a continuing heritage of inferred and conjectural pseudo-history in Aboriginal Studies. This is a shadowy doctrine, constantly present since anthropology itself began, but always peripheral to the mainstream positivist thrust of the discipline. J.C. Prichard's *The Natural History of Man* (1843) is among the earliest instance of this kind, presenting a crypto-Biblical picture of the spread of humanity. His tireless debate with those advocating multiple origins for the human species was seemingly silenced by the Herculean arrival of evolutionary theory but, once the tumult subsided, a history-of-kinds persisted in the form of diffusionary theory. Even its most excessive exponents could make some very valid observations. Grafton Elliot Smith once remarked that what ultimately distinguished diffusionists from their opponents was the realisation that human 'conscious activities make the principle of continuity and the historical method which expounds it the chief instrument of achieving a full and true interpretation of the data of *human history*'.<sup>21</sup>

Such sentiments are laudable, and their programmes had much promise. In particular, the German *Kulturkreise* school made a bold attempt to account for regional variation in Australian traditions. Chronicling a diffusionary path, however, is in itself not history, and by unnecessarily setting their research within the framework of an unobservable (and hence at best only reconstructable) past, they succeeded primarily in ensuring that they insulated themselves from the possibility of sound interpretative historiography.

I have no interest in agendas of this kind. I am not concerned with drawing gossamer-like lines of passage across a twilight world but rather with a vigorous tussle with Aboriginal ontology across the very tangible boundary of our historical being.

If, however, we once admit the historical circumstances in which *all* our texts on Aboriginal belief and practice were obtained, we realise there is little need to appeal to the remote past. As I will illustrate in chapters 2 and 4, Melanesian and Indonesian impacts on Aboriginal societies belong to the realm of genuine history.

Indeed, in both cases they possibly have a past which does not much exceed the arrival of Europeans in Australia.

I am, of course, not saying that prior to the eighteenth century nothing changed in Aboriginal societies. What I am suggesting is that a range of interpretations of existence within Aboriginal Australia cannot be separated from the varieties of ways of existing within their world. An explanation which merely appeals to ancient times cannot account for the ongoing significance of beliefs and practices. Diffusionists presenting ethnographic data collected in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as the solidified remains of a once larval flow of 'Old Australian' and 'Boomerang' cultures are engaged in nothing less than a gigantic theoretical fudge.<sup>22</sup> This mangling of the integrity of an era's boundaries is the very antithesis of the historical enterprise.

My approach in this work is simply to examine ethnographic texts (along with my own field material) in terms of the historical contexts in which they were collected. I maintain that the array of Aboriginal understandings of existence at any one time reflects an array of ways of being at *that same time*. Our history can therefore begin almost precisely two centuries ago, and as the curtain of history parts, so to speak, there are, beside the Aborigines, three other kinds of actors on the stage. There are Melanesian people at the tip of Australia; there are Indonesians in Arnhem Land; and, of course, there are the recorders of these events who have just arrived from the Western world. I devote a chapter to each of these domains (chapters 2 to 4), before pursuing the continuing historical repercussions of White society on Aboriginal being (chapter 5).

Before attempting to reveal the historical impact of strangers upon Aboriginal ontology, it is essential to have some notion of what constituted the unintruded upon form of their traditions in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early- to mid-twentieth centuries. This is a difficult task, but not impossible. My approach to this had three phases. First, as all the outsiders were from agricultural traditions and came by sea to coastal areas, it follows that the desert interiors of Australia would be the last places to have their old order disturbed. (Thus studies from the Central and Western Deserts written in the second half of this century can sometimes be legitimately said to describe Aborigines having minimal contact with the non-Aboriginal world.) Second, I took this basically desert-derived model and

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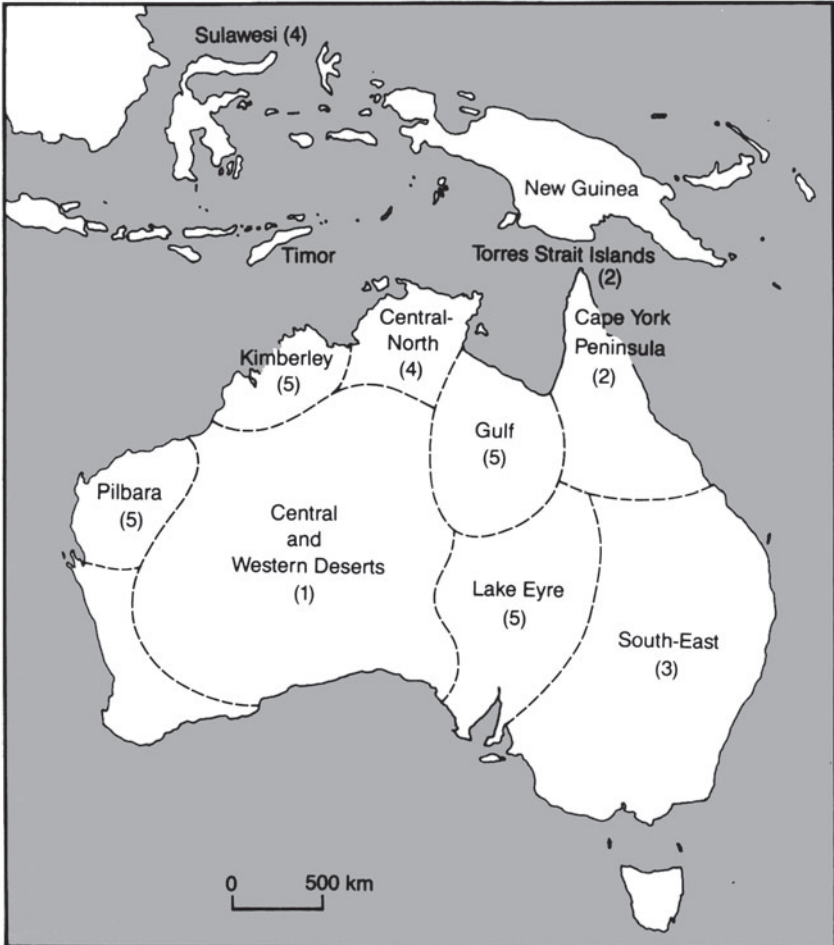
978-0-521-44691-4 - A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being

Tony Swain

Excerpt

[More information](#)

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*A place for strangers*

*Cultural blocs within Aboriginal Australia. A number in brackets indicates the chapter in which a region is discussed in full.*

compared it with the evidence for other regions, such as the Kimberley, Arnhem Land, Cape York and the south-east. These data are presented in the relevant chapters of this book, and for the moment I will only note that in each of these regions the same pattern as is found in the desert can be observed, although accompanied by other, sometimes conflicting and logically posterior traditions. In most cases it is possible to roughly date these variations on an Aboriginal theme. Third, while it should hold no real authority, it



has comforted me (and will no doubt comfort others) to discover that other scholars have argued for very much the same ‘architectonic idea’ (to borrow Stanner’s words)<sup>23</sup> underlying Aboriginal societies continent-wide. This will be detailed in chapter 1.

The four subsequent chapters do not constitute any more than my subtitle professes – a movement *towards* a recognition of history in the construction of Aboriginal being. A comprehensive history of the past two centuries, even were it based exclusively on documentary evidence, would be several times larger than the work in hand. It would necessarily cover many topics that I have considered at an introductory level elsewhere.<sup>24</sup> Amongst them is the immense impact of Christian missionary enterprises, and the responses of Aboriginal people within individual, highly variable, mission regimes; the spiritual life of Aboriginal people who have moved toward rural and urban lifestyles; the impact of Black and liberation theologies on post-mission Aboriginal Christianity; the vision of the world captured by contemporary Aboriginal poetry, drama, novels, art and song; and, most importantly, the radical transformations of Aboriginal life and thought which have developed in the wake of the land rights movement.

The four intensive case-study chapters forming the bulk of this book can thus only claim to be the first stage of a far-reaching history. What they cover is essentially the reformation of ontology within entirely Aboriginal forms of expression. This, of course, reflects the fact that I dealt with people who, no matter how disrupted their lifestyle may have been, had managed to retain some autonomy over their own domain, which thus allowed their ceremonial life to continue. This is a genuine line of demarcation separating this study from one examining Aboriginal reinterpretations of introduced forms of worldview communication, be it the church service (even though it incorporates ‘traditional’ ritual elements), the written word, or the stage.<sup>25</sup>

Chapters 2 to 5 consider four different types of intrusions upon Aboriginal worlds. The Melanesian contacts with Aborigines at the tip of Cape York Peninsula were ones in which the respective peoples recognised one another’s land entitlements and forged links through trade and occasional marriages. This is contrasted in the extreme by the invasive arrival of Whites in south-east Australia. Chapter 4 then swings back to the central-north of Australia at much the same time as the European invasion, where a morally regulated and yet

*potentially* land-threatening association with Indonesians was in progress. Finally, my last chapter pursues the presence of Australians of European descent as they spread across pastoral frontiers, forging relationships with Aborigines regulated by rations, wages and labour.

While I consider these four chapters as ‘case-studies’, both they and my first chapter embrace virtually the entire spectrum of writings on ‘traditional’ Aboriginal ceremonial life and belief. I have chosen here to take them as my focus because they have been most neglected in terms of historical analysis; because the data they contain seem to me to be desperately in need of reinterpretation; and, frankly, because they are the most difficult to translate in terms of the new approach to understanding Aboriginal ontology which I am proposing. With this groundwork in place, more recent developments in which Aboriginal people have employed (originally) non-Aboriginal forms of expression will be readily grasped.

There is one final introductory matter to be disposed of: method. Anyone familiar with the hermeneuts whose views I have cited might easily predict my response. Gadamer has produced his brilliant but Gaddish (a ‘Gad’ being the unit of measure of superfluous complexity) critique of the fetishisation of methodology.<sup>26</sup> Somewhat less brilliantly, I have already published reservations about methodology in the study of Aboriginal religious traditions.<sup>27</sup> I will repeat here neither my own nor others’ arguments on this matter. Rather, I will conclude this introduction with an anecdote and a quotation.

Methodology is these days increasingly on the defensive. Instead of a slavish devotion to one methodological position, it has become fashionable to be poly-methodological and to have an impressive ‘toolbox’ of methods. I can boast nothing of this kind, but instead take refuge in the memory of my late neighbour in the country. Tom was an oldtimer who still worked a bullock team and disdained electricity. He had a few tools that experience had taught him worked, but in the bush he travelled lightly. We would fix boundary fences together, and I would inevitably bring with me a comprehensive collection of modern tools. Tom would always take an interest in these (just once or twice he reluctantly conceded their merit), but as I would fumble with technology to solve a problem that a twist of wire or an improvised bush-pole would mend (and mend very well), he would feign impatience: ‘Forget your gadgets and fix the bloody thing.’