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978-0-521-56619-3 - Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology

L. R. Hiatt

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## *Arguments about Aborigines*

The emergence of anthropology in Britain coincided with the publication of Darwin's book on the origin of species. In the context of inescapable questions about the natural history of our own species, Australian Aborigines were assigned the role of exemplars *par excellence* of beginnings and early human forms. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, European scholars bent on discovering the origins of social institutions began a rush on the Australian material that lasted well into the present century. The Aborigines have consequently featured as a crucial case-study for generations of social theorists, including Tylor, Frazer, Durkheim and Freud.

*Arguments about Aborigines* reviews a range of controversies (some still alive) that played an important role in the formative period of British social anthropology. The chapters cover family life, male/female relationships, conception beliefs, the mother-in-law taboo, various aspects of religion and ritual, political organization, and land rights: all subjects that have been matters of lively international interest and long-running research. Along the way, the study traces changes in Aboriginal circumstances and practices and notes the ways in which these changes affected the scholarly debate.

This elegant book will serve as a valuable introduction to Aboriginal ethnography for students and scholars as well as general readers. It is also a shrewd and stimulating history of some of the great debates of anthropology seen through the prism of Aboriginal studies, to which they so often referred.

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# *Arguments about Aborigines*

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*Australia and the evolution of  
social anthropology*

L.R. HIATT

*Visiting Fellow, Australian National University and Australian Institute of  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies*



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To my teachers

JOHN BARNES *and* MERVYN MEGGITT

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## *Preface*

The essays in this book arose from a course of undergraduate lectures I gave as Visiting Professor of Australian Studies at Harvard University in 1990–1. My students for the most part had only a superficial knowledge of Aboriginal culture, and quite a few enrolled because they were planning a holiday in Australia or had recently been there. For better or worse, I decided to introduce them to the subject not with a catalogue of settled facts but through a history of disputation. In developing the lectures for publication, I have retained both the dialectical mode and the assumption of an audience lacking close familiarity with the issues. In accordance with the friendly mission on which my country had sent me, I gave prominence at Harvard to contributions in Aboriginal Studies made by American scholars, beginning with the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838–42. Although I have removed that particular emphasis from the present work, I have not omitted the contributions nor, I hope, diminished their importance.

The arguments reviewed fall within subject areas that would conventionally be considered essential for an understanding of traditional Aboriginal social life: land, kinship, marriage, politics, gender, religion, initiation, avoidance and conception beliefs. Beyond that, selection from the corpus of available controversies was largely an outcome of my own previous involvement in them. As far as possible I have tried to place ethnographical questions within a wider context, usually theoretical and historical but occasionally political and contemporary as well. In some instances debates arose at a factual level in the context of attempts to use Aborigines as evidence for particular theories; in other cases, disagreements occurred when ethnographers tried to account for agreed facts by recourse to different analytical approaches. Whatever the provenance, the common objective of the essays is to proceed from the earliest recorded observations of some problematic aspect of Aboriginal culture to the fullest account of its form and meaning available from anthropological argumentation.

The emergence of anthropology as a distinct discipline in the middle of the last century coincided with the publication of Charles Darwin's



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book on the origin of species. In the context of inescapable questions about the natural history of our own species, Australian Aborigines were assigned the role of exemplars *par excellence* of beginnings and early forms. Their main qualification for this honour was an astonishingly low level of parasitism on other species: they neither cultivated plants nor domesticated animals for the purposes of eating them. Furthermore, their material possessions were few, they wore no clothes, there were no visible places of worship, and they had no leaders. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century European scholars bent on discovering the origins of social institutions began a rush on the Australian material that lasted well into the present century. From the ore were fashioned some of the most celebrated and influential works in the history of anthropology.

All the arguments in the present collection have their own origins in the evolutionist tradition. Their early development, under the twin auspices of Darwinism and Empire, took place largely within the institutional framework of British social anthropology. To set the stage, I have therefore written a prologue describing a train of events that led to the formation of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland in 1871. Our ancestry is not quite as bad as I had been led to believe. The founding fathers (there were no mothers) certainly regarded themselves as members of a culture at the pinnacle of human progress. Some even believed that the black races constituted an inferior biological species. But others, just as influential, held steadfastly to the doctrines of the unity of man and the equality of all men before the law. Anthropology in Britain was born when the two parties came reluctantly together in a marriage of convenience.

The book is meant to be read from the front to the back. However, the chapters are more or less autonomous, and I have indicated connections in the end-notes for readers who wish to proceed in some other order. Although the arguments in their original form were all very long, I have tried to condense them so that each can be read, like the essays of Montaigne, within an hour.

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Fig. 1 Tribes and places. The map shows tribes and places mentioned in the text. The rendering of tribal names has often changed over the years, and nowadays the following spellings are regarded as phonetically more accurate (old spellings in brackets): Arrernte (Aranda, Arunta); Diyari (Dieri); Gunditjmara (Gournditch-mara); Kariyarra (Kariera); Loritja (Luritja); Mur-rinhpatha (Murinbata); Ngarrindjeri (Narrinyeri); Wunambal (Unambal); Arabanna (Urabunna); Warlpiri (Walbiri); Wik-Mungkana (Wik Monkan).

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