

RESEARCH ARTICLE



ABORIGINAL MYTH, LITERATURE AND ORAL TRADITION IN 19TH CENTURY

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ABSTRACT

Australian aborigines, native people of Australia who probably arrived from someplace in Asia more than 40,000 years ago. In 2001 the population of aborigines and Torres Straits Islanders was 366,429, 1.9% of the Australian population as a whole. Aboriginal literature itself in the nineteenth century existed primarily in the course of unwritten tradition and contains stories, myths, and legends passed along verbally from generation to generation. Additionally, there exists evidence of works by Aborigines written as far back as 1796 in a range of genres, including essays, letters, poems, journalism, as well as traditional stories rendered on paper. The vast majority of these compositions, however, have not yet been extensively studied by linguists or literary scholars. In contrast, recent anthropological studies have begun to uncover some of the richness of traditional Aboriginal oral literature and have initiated the process of recording, classifying, and analyzing the native Australian oral tradition. In the discipline of literary studies, Aboriginal writing is usually considered to be a recent phenomenon. It is thought to have begun tentatively with David Unaipon's *Native Legends* (1929) and then to have lapsed for thirty-five years before being inaugurated in its modern form in 1964 with the publication of Oodgeroo Noonuccal's (Kath Walker's) first book of poetry, *We are Going*. Research scholars argues that expanding western historical sensibilities to include an Aboriginal point of view of the engagement between whites and blacks in Australia could well benefit a future understanding of Aboriginal history, culture, and literature. What I want to propose is that Aboriginal people began using the technologies of alphabetic writing and print far earlier than the dominant literary historical narrative would suggest.

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INTRODUCTION

The Fourth World, a phrase employed to describe indigenous minorities throughout the earth. Fourth World nations can consist of those excluded from society like the Aboriginal tribes in South America or Australia. These tribes are entirely self sufficient, but they do not participate in the global economy. From a global standpoint, these tribes are considered to be Fourth World nations, but they are

able to function free from any assistance from others.

The word 'aborigine' refers to an indigenous person of any country. Aboriginal Australians, also referred to as aboriginal people, are people who are indigenous to most of the Australian continent and Australian population as a whole.

Australian literature is the written or literary work produced in the area or by the people of

the Commonwealth of Australia and its preceding colonies. During its early western history, Australia was a collection of British colonies, therefore, its literary tradition begins with and is linked to the broader tradition of English literature in the nineteenth century and the development of an Australian literature written by European visitors and settlers, the Aborigine became a common feature of the mostly romantic or semi-autobiographical fiction of the period, and frequently appeared in personal reminiscences and verse as well. Charles Rowcroft's novel *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) is generally indicative of literary projections of Aborigines and was intended for popular consumption in England. Works by and about the Aborigine, a collective term for the groups in Australia, form a significant element in nineteenth-century Australian literature. The study of many such works, however, is still a relatively recent phenomenon, as contemporary scholars increasingly look to expand modern perceptions of history, literature to include those of native cultures, and aboriginal myth, and oral tradition in Nineteenth-Century.

ABORIGINAL LITERATURE IN 19TH CENTURY

Aboriginal literature itself in the nineteenth century existed primarily in the form of oral tradition and contains tales, myths, and legends passed along verbally from generation to generation. Charles Rowcroft's novel *Tales of the Colonies* (1843) is generally indicative of literary projections of Aborigines and was intended for popular consumption in England. It features the tropes of the Aborigine as a flawless tracker or a treacherous murderer, as well as the already well-worn motif of the lost white child who falls into the hands of bushrangers and blacks. W. A. Cawthorne presented a decidedly more tranquil and impartial portrayal of relations between whites and Aborigines in his *The Kangaroo Islanders: A Story of Australia before Colonization* (written in 1823; published in 1926). While violence does figure into the tale—its Captain Meredith is slain by Aborigines—Cawthorne's novel features sympathetic and well-rounded portrayals of Aborigine women and describes elements of Aboriginal mythology within its narrative framework. A portion of James Tucker's *The Adventures of Ralph Rashleigh* (written between

1844 and 1845; published in 1929) considers contact between convicts and Aborigines in the thematic contexts of freedom. The work itself is generally weighed toward narrative romance rather than naturalistic documentation, although critics have remarked on Tucker's more objective sensitivities to the world of the Aborigine. The black native also figures prominently in Charles de Boos's 1867 novel *Fifty Years Ago*. It follows settler George Maxwell's search for vengeance on a group of Aborigines who slaughtered his wife and family. Aborigines appear in numerous other works of fiction by European-born or white Australian writers of the period, with most authors opting to portray them in a sensationalistic or reductive manner. Still, critics have observed that a movement toward increasing verisimilitude became steadily apparent as the nineteenth century passed into the twentieth. In verse, colonial representations of the native Australian have tended, even more than many of those in fiction, to mythologize or romanticize the Aborigine. Charles Harpur and Henry Kendall, the two outstanding Australian lyric poets of the mid-century period, sketched a more confrontational view of the Aborigine and the white, especially in their pastoral, landscape poetry. As critic Ivor Indyk (1993) has observed, these poets generally employ images of Aborigines as symbolic of the threat of nature or of the possibility of violent death in a savage world.

Healy argues that expanding western historical sensibilities to include an Aboriginal point of view of the engagement between whites and blacks in Australia could well benefit a future understanding of Aboriginal history, culture, and literature.

ABORIGINAL MYTHS

Aboriginal myths are entirely from oral tradition as writing was only introduced to most aboriginal cultures from outside after myths were well developed, although recent myth systems, such as the cargo cults, are sometimes associated with interfaces with literate cultures. For religious gatherings and other ritual purposes, or in times of severe drought, they moved a little farther afield—again, within a recognized range. Problems of inter-Aboriginal communication on a larger scale did not arise, because centrifugal perspectives were contained within these traditionally accepted limits.

The emphasis was on the strangeness, the alien quality of whatever lay beyond those limits. From an 'outside' standpoint, now, we can identify a large number of similarities between quite distant Aboriginal communities, in language as well as in other features. From 'inside' standpoints, this would have been not only unthinkable but irrelevant. Their myths and stories, songs and traditions generally asserted their own unique and special identity, as against all others. Only in recent years, with the development of pan-Aboriginality and the sense of a national Aboriginal identity, has this picture been changing.

Aboriginal stories about Cook provide a favourable opportunity to test the relation of myth and history as it occurs in Australia, for both Cook and the botanist Joseph Banks kept detailed journals during the voyage of the *Endeavour*. By setting their entries against episodes in myth, one can form a judgment on whether the 'documentary analogy' (the assimilation of oral traditions to written documents which have come to us unchanged from some past era), has any validity in the Aboriginal case.

Aborigines were allowed to have myths, for myth is one of the great markers of the primitive, but history they had not. True knowledge of the past was knowledge of white Australia and reserved for white Australians.

Grey does not describe Cook's journals as documents or true history but as 'narrative', which he sets alongside Taniwha's 'remembrance', which amazes him with its longevity. He seems to grant each its own integrity and its own truth value.

Over a hundred years later, there is another European evaluation of indigenous peoples' history in Ken Maddock's *Past and Present. The Construction of Aboriginality*. Here Maddock examines six Aboriginal 'myths' of Captain Cook and makes what he calls observations on their historical value. He describes one Aboriginal narrative of Cook as a 'charming tale', another as 'completely anachronistic'. He writes that to believe in these Aboriginal histories would result in 'some totally erroneous pages of history'. We are encouraged to regard these stories as about 'themes and symbols' because 'Judged as history, the myths are inexcusably cavalier.' Maddock's faith in the

epistemology of European history is such that he can 'prove' it is more accurate and more truthful, that it produces superior knowledge.

Governor Grey and Ken Maddock are both, in their own ways, discussing the old problem of myth and history. Each compares the history of the indigenous 'other' around the shared body of white understanding of Cook.

The Sphere of the Sacred: Virtually every part of the Australian continent, including its outlying islands, was owned, occupied or used by Aborigines, and was linked with myths of greater or lesser importance. The major myth-characters created people and other living things, are commemorated in the most sacred ritual activities, arranged the local social and natural environment, and laid down the most important rules of affiliation and behaviour. Traditionally there were many thousands of major and minor figures, each with his or her own story, or stories; each focused on one or more sites, but most moved over varying distances, in a vast intermeshing of tracks (and stories). Myths traditionally located and identified people in time and space, accounting for their past, present and future: where human beings came from, the relation between body and soul (spirit), and the god-given bond between people and land. In their reflection of everyday living, they pose questions and problems without necessarily spelling out answers.

Two Sister-Pairs in Northeastern Arnhem Land: Two important mythical sisters in this region have become well known through being represented in bark paintings and other media available to a wider Australian public.

The Djanggau (Djanggalawul) sisters, Daughters of the Sun, in some versions with a brother, paddled their bark canoe from the island of Bralgu, the dua moiety land of the dead in the Gulf of Carpentaria, on the path of the rising sun. They brought, among other things, a conical plaited mat, a uterus-symbol, and parakeet-feathers, symbolizing (among other things) the sun's rays. On the mainland they made people and fresh-water springs and wells and trees, and ritual and more mundane rules for the specific groups who were to live in and care for specific, named territories. The sisters, the principal creators, dominated the scene until men stole from

them their control over the most sacred and secret objects, rites and songs. They travelled westward into the sunset, and so out of this region.

The Dieri Myth of the Mura-Mura Darana: Darana was one of the most famous rain-making Mura-mura in the Lake Hope area. This version of his story comes from A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-east Australia* (Macmillan, London, 1904: pp. 798-800). Muramura are the great Dreaming beings of the Dieri people.

Myths and stories have to use the ingredients available to them in their socio-cultural setting—the language, the assumptions, the environment, and all that go on among its human and other inhabitants.

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL ORAL TRADITIONS

Oral traditions include the use of storytelling, song, dance art, craft making, giving instructions and directions. All of these forms of Oral Traditions help to pass on specific cultural practices and values, language and laws, histories and family relationships. Among Aborigines themselves the most important oral genres are those of song and dance, especially in their relationship to ritual.

Nineteenth-century views of the superiority of the white to the black races undoubtedly led to assumptions of the inferiority of Aboriginal culture which prevented all but a few early observers from even conceiving there was anything of interest in Aboriginal oral tradition, let alone trying to record it.

In the period between the 1920s and the 1960s, most recording of Aboriginal oral traditions was carried out by social anthropologists as a by-product of their field research into social structures and religious rites. There were also a few linguists at work and Arthur Capell, who was Reader in Linguistics at Sydney University and for some twenty years, the only teacher of Aboriginal linguistics in an Australian university. However, Strehlow's most important work in this field, *Songs of Central Australia*, was not published until 1971. A number of texts were recorded during this period, particularly in the journal *Oceania* (1930-) and in the *Oceania Monographs and Linguistic Monographs Series*. One must mention particularly the work of the anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt, who produced a substantial number

of texts of Aboriginal oral genres both within anthropological works (e.g., 1942-45, 1951) and separately (R.Berndt 1951, 1952, 1976a and b; C. Berndt 1952-54, 1970). Between them, they have made a highly significant collection of texts, which they are now preparing for systematic analysis.

Aborigines-Present Day: Today the Aborigines are in trouble. Many have left their traditional lifestyle, and have moved to suburbs. There is a 40% unemployment rate in many Aborigines populations, in part because Aborigines are widely discriminated against which causes some people not to hire them. Even the police and government discriminate against aborigines. In many places bars are segregated into different parts for Aborigines or Aborigines aren't served at all. Some progress was made recently when an Aboriginal woman was voted into Australia parliament. But like the similar situation with African Americans in The United States recent history, Australia still has a long way to go before Aborigines have equal rights. The Australian government should give land back to an Aboriginal person who wants to live the way his or her people were before the British arrived.

CONCLUSION

1. Literature in Aboriginal Australia is not qualitatively different from its counterparts elsewhere. The fact that it was orally transmitted did link it more actively and more comprehensively with other media and other manifestations in the sphere of the arts. Also, it relied heavily on memory, with tangible mnemonic aids as a relatively minor consideration.

2. Some writers have suggested that people who traditionally depend on oral transmission show more confidence in handling words, and in their speech patterns, than those brought up in a tradition that concentrated on written materials.

3. They could not have foreseen the current changes in communication and electronic technology, in scale and mobility of populations.

4. They want to contribute to the general pool of Aboriginal literature and Aboriginal culture, but not at the expense of their own local traditions.

5. Their children are being introduced at school to an ever-expanding volume of new material.

6. The environment of myth and story and song that traditionally provided a coherent context of meaning has been sharply eroded. There are more choices, and fewer obligations or incentives to look at traditional interconnections.

7. Some literacy programs, as in northeastern Arnhem Land and the Western Desert, are trying to salvage a few of their own stories in written form for children, with vernacular texts.

8. It is important that the aesthetic value of Aboriginal oral traditions, what one might call their literary conventions, be made apparent to the general public.

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