

Aboriginal Paintings

FROM AUSTRALIA

Charles P. Mountford

Charles. P. Mountford

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RECORDS
OF THE AMERICAN-AUSTRALIAN
SCIENTIFIC EXPEDITION TO
ARNHEM LAND

1

Art, Myth and Symbolism

by

CHARLES P. MOUNTFORD



MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY PRESS

PREFACE

WHAT HISTORY will come in time to know as the 1948 Arnhem Land Expedition has recently concluded.

It was my privilege to have been associated with the expedition from the inception of the idea in 1945 to the return of the scientists from the remoteness of Arnhem Land on 17 November last, after nine months of intensive research.

The formation of a joint Australian-American expedition to Arnhem Land was suggested to me by Mr Charles P. Mountford, a valued senior officer of my Department. Recognizing the important contribution to scientific knowledge that could be made by the joint endeavours of distinguished American and Australian scientists operating in one of the least known parts of the earth's surface, I endorsed the plan which Mr Mountford and his American associates have now translated into an accomplished fact. It was the largest expedition in Australian history dealing with medical, nutritional, ethnological and natural history research.

Years must elapse before the findings of the scientists are finally proven and collated but I now express the hope that eventually the work of the expedition in its various fields of research will be published for the enrichment of scientific knowledge the world over.

The Australian poet, Bernard O'Dowd, described this continent of ours as 'Last sea-thing dredged by sailor Time from Space'. It is my hope that the Arnhem Land Expedition will be but one of many in which scientists of the United States and Australia will co-operate to uncover more secrets from this island continent.

ARTHUR A. CALWELL
Minister of State for Information

Canberra, A.C.T.
December 1948

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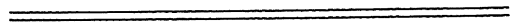
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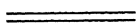
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AYERS ROCK



*Its People, Their Beliefs
and Their Art*



Charles P. Mountford

O.B.E., M.A. (Adel.), Dip. Anthropol. (Cantab.)



ANGUS AND ROBERTSON

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THE PITJANDJARA AND THEIR LANDS

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THE CONCEPTION BELIEFS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

by

Charles P. Mountford

THE CONCEPTION BELIEFS OF THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

Charles P. Mountford, O.B.E., Dip. Anthrop. (Cantab.),
M.A. (Adel.), D.Litt. (Melb)

INTRODUCTION.

The subject of the conception beliefs of the Australian aborigines has not, to any extent attracted the attention of the Australian ethnologists, particularly those who lived in the southern parts of the continent during the early days of settlement.

This lack of interest was most unfortunate because the present day aboriginal groups, having been in contact with our dominant civilisation all their lives, are now almost totally ignorant of their old beliefs.

For the first, and still the most detailed record of the conception beliefs of our native peoples, we owe a considerable debt of gratitude to the early ethnologists, Spencer and Gillen in their "Native Tribes of Central Australia" 1899, and their second book "The Arunta",⁽¹⁾ written in 1927 in which they checked the information

(1) The tribal name, Aranda, will be used in this paper instead of the older name, Arunta.

they had gathered almost thirty years earlier. In the latter book they stated "There can be no doubt as to the general correctness and the wide distribution of the native theory of conception as originally described by us"

We also owe a considerable debt to Dr. Ashley Montagu who made a remarkably complete survey, "Coming into Being among the Australian Aborigines" based on the literature on that subject from the earliest record of H.O. Smith (1879, p.88), "The Nimbalba Tribe of the Far North at Mt. Freeling", until the publication of his own book in 1937.

Since that time a number of ethnologists have added to our knowledge of the subject: M.J. Meggitt, 1962; R. and C. Berndt, 1943, 1970; C.P. Mountford and A. Harvey 1946; Mountford, 1948, 1956, 1963; J. Goodale, 1971; and R. Tonkinson, 1965.

In 1966, p. 76, Dr. Edmund Leach states that "It is not a legitimate inference to assert that the aborigines were ignorant of the connection between copulation and conception".

Later in his 1966 Henry Myers Lecture of the Royal Anthropological Institute, Leach reiterates the same thesis in a confused address entitled "Virgin

Birth" the introduction of which consists of little else but

- (a) derogatory remarks about those ethnologists who did not agree with him:
- (b) a slight survey of the dogma of virgin birth associated with Christian religion:
- (c) critical comments about Malinowski's account (1927) of the ignorance of physical paternity among the Trobriand Islanders, and those of Australians, dealing with similar beliefs among the aborigines, all of which, according to Leach are incorrect; and
- (d) a considerable number of his own opinions unsupported by any confirmatory evidence.

In his summary, Leach does not make a single reference to the subject of his address "Virgin Birth", only critical remarks about his contemporaries.

Earlier in the lecture, Leach, when referring to the Australian ethnologists states, p.41 "what seems interesting to me is not so much the ignorance of the aborigines, but the naivette (childishness) of the ethnologists". Leach's remark was totally foolish because, since Smith's first record in literature about aboriginal conception beliefs, about ninety-five years ago, until the present day, twenty-five overseas and Australian ethnologists -

many of them with international reputations - have agreed, independently that, except in the northern Cape York area, the aborigines were, at the time of their investigation, unaware of the true facts of physical paternity.

Since Leach's statements made in 1961 and 1966 have been adequately discussed and strongly criticised by Professor Melford Spiro, (1968, p.243), Dr. Phyllis Kaberry (1968, p.416), and other competent ethnologists, nothing will be gained by further discussion of the matter.

But these papers and the heated controversy that followed them, made it obvious to the author that the time was long overdue for the writing of a simple, factual, non-contentious survey of the subject of aboriginal non-physical paternity and maternity, the distribution of the various forms and differing beliefs, the first contribution to the subject since Dr. Ashley Montagu's outstanding survey, almost forty years ago.

THE CONCEPTION BELIEFS.

This present day survey has revealed that our knowledge of the conception beliefs of the Australian aborigines can be roughly divided into five areas:

- (1) The southern and south-eastern parts of the continent, where there is an almost complete lack of records of the conception beliefs of now extinct aborigines;
- (2) A central but wide-spread area, where the spirit-child, unaided, chooses its own mother;
- (3) An area mainly along the northern coasts, where the spirit child is either directed to its future mother by her husband, or is contained in the food he has given her;
- (4) Aboriginal groups, who in a confused way, are aware of the European facts of conception, yet still adhere to their old beliefs, and
- (5) in a well-defined area in the top of Cape York where, according to Thompson (1933, p.60), the aborigines have accepted the true facts of conception. Yet certain aspects of his research in this area suggest that a number of his statements are not entirely satisfactory.

It will be well to bear in mind that ~~the~~ aborigines of to-day would not necessarily agree with the quotations in this paper which were made to various ethnologists many years ago.

It is unlikely that we would find any aborigines in 1973 who have not been influenced to a greater or lesser extent, by our conception beliefs, although not necessarily accepting them.

There can be little doubt, however, that before long, these indigenous beliefs will be replaced by those of the Europeans, and all knowledge of these interesting, but archaic beliefs in aboriginal conception will be forgotten.

There is little doubt, however, that this primitive concept of non-physical paternity - almost entirely sealed off in Australia until comparative recent times - would have been universally accepted by the more ancient peoples, such as the men of the paleolithic era.

NOMADS OF THE AUSTRALIAN DESERT

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RIGBY

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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THE RAINBOW-SERPENT MYTHS OF AUSTRALIA

by

C.P. Mountford

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THE TIWI
their Art, Myth and
Ceremony



CHARLES P. MOUNTFORD

with 64 plates, 2 in colour
15 line drawings and a map



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WINBARAKU

AND

THE MYTH OF JARAPIRI

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