PREFACE

The present study of Australian Aboriginal religion is to some extent restricted in scope. The Institute of Religious Iconography approached me in October 1969 to write on this topic for inclusion in a series of fascicles to be published under the title of the Iconography of Religions. The Australian Aboriginal material had to fit into that pattern, at least to some extent, although the editors have been so kind as to permit a high degree of flexibility. One thing, though, was laid down initially and remained relatively firm. This was the focus on specific geographic areas. Expediency, and the logical sequence of the development of the material, naturally widened the range to cover most of the Australian continent—but even so, there are notable exceptions.

This is an introductory study: it covers only a fraction of the material available. Moreover, it concentrates on published data. Although a large amount of unpublished material has been collected over the years by myself and other Australianists, for obvious reasons this has not been included. It could well be that, when these data have been published, the more general statements I have made here will require modification or expansion. That aside, no overall study on Australian Aboriginal religion exists up to the present. Because of this, it has been necessary to approach the subject in the way I have done: it was an essential prerequisite before subsequent analysis could be made.

The material presented here is to some extent uneven. This is particularly the case in regard to South-Eastern Australia and Queensland. The reasons are twofold. One is that we are dealing with earlier published material which was neither systematically gathered nor especially detailed, and—additionally—is now subject to re-evaluation against 'live' data. Secondly, in regard to Queensland, and with specific reference to Cape York, I do not have first-hand 'control' over that area since I have not personally carried out field research there. The main body of this study is focused on North and Central Australia. There the situation is different: in addition to earlier reports, we are considering material which has been collected and assembled through the processes of professional research within recent years. It is also, to some extent, 'live' (that is, it is still relevant to living Aborigines) and can be anthropologically 'controlled' as I have varying first-hand experience with most of the socio-cultural areas dealt with.

Nevertheless, even within the Northern and Central areas, I have had to be selective. The material considered here is, initially, ethnographic and is presented in a summarized form. Within any one socio-cultural area, a vast amount of religious data is available; a large corpus of mythology and many hundreds of sacred songs which are dense with meaning and require contentual analysis, and ritual activity which is highly complex. Especially significant is the realm of symbolism, which is barely touched upon here. My approach has been to provide, in summary, a breakdown of major trends or emphases. Methodologically, this takes shape in the framework of the Aboriginal life cycle, examined as a mediating influence between man and his deities, and as part of the religious system. This approach has been determined by the nature of the material and by the general...
concept of what is called, in Aboriginal Australia, the Dreaming. It is determined also by what are regarded as primary foci in Aboriginal religion, which permeate the major religious manifestations. In other words, the way of treating the data is influenced by the religious concerns of Aboriginal man in the traditional scene.

Within that frame, theoretical problems are articulated, and become basic issues which may be explored more deeply within the total range of Aboriginal religion. Obviously there are further, more general and not specifically Aboriginal religious implications which could not be spelt out in this context.

A further practical problem has had to be faced. In the present climate of Aboriginal opinion, traditionally-oriented people in certain areas have been fluctuating in their views on the traditionally blurred boundaries between the secret-sacred, the ordinarily sacred and the mundane. Some are in favour of hardening or tightening these boundaries, and even extending them to enclose material that was formerly open and public. This is primarily a reaction against Australian-European intrusion, and an endeavour to sustain a religious way of life which is increasingly coming under pressure, not only from outside but also from within—from members of a younger generation who have been seduced by the attractions of ‘something different’. In other regions, including north-eastern Arnhem Land, there is a contrary trend: several aspects of the secret-sacred (by no means all) have been more widely diffused socially in an attempt to expand active interest and wider participation in religious affairs.

Anthropologists are concerned with doing justice to the material available and presenting it in a fairly objective way, while at the same time adhering as far as possible to local Aboriginal attitudes in this respect. In this study, the material is assembled in such a way that it is designed not to do violence to Aboriginal views on matters of religious secrecy. For instance, it does not provide detailed descriptive accounts of ritual action, and it does not give indigenous textual sources. There is also the question of graphic illustration. The present fascicles cover a wide range of photographs of religious significance. It has therefore proved necessary to be selective. Many of the most secret-sacred aspects which could have been illustrated have been deliberately withheld, although the aspects to which they refer are noted, in summarized form, in the main text. Aboriginal societies were, traditionally, religious societies. If we are to achieve an anthropologically balanced view of Aboriginal life, the realm of the secret-sacred vis-à-vis religion in a broad sense cannot be sidetracked. While local opinion can be prejudiced in this respect, our major concern rests on understanding the total life situation of these people and, in doing so, presenting that view for future generations. Aboriginal life will not be harmed by the airing of such knowledge. On the contrary, it is more likely to be enhanced by a wider appreciation of its basic religious tenets. The factors destroying present-day Aboriginal religion are very much wider than scientific examination of it. This is not the place to discuss these; but they have to do with the very nature of alien impact, including governmental policies, which are specifically designed to adapt people of Aboriginal descent to the wider Australian society as rapidly as possible.

These fascicles belong to a series under the title of the Iconography of Religions. My approach to this has been as a social anthropologist. My primary concern has to do with the overall patterning of the various belief systems and concepts, and their expression in action: a focus on the themes which are held in common, along with variations on these.
I have preferred to see the iconographic dimension in socio-cultural perspective. I have, right through this study, referred to material representations and to symbols—but I have not viewed them in isolation from their context. In the illustrations attached to these fascicles, this pattern is maintained and they are seen in ritual terms or as part of their cultural background. To aid the reader who is primarily interested in iconography, a short section has been added to each Chapter covering the range of such material relevant to the areas dealt with.

Originally, the editors of the Iconography of Religions allowed me two fascicles, limited to a specific word-space. However, in the overall plan I had been following in my writing, its size in final rough draft was approximately twice that. After discussion with the editors, they very kindly permitted me to have four fascicles. To achieve conformity of size between the fascicles, it was necessary to change my own sequence of Chapters. Initially, following the Introduction, the sequence extended through North and Central Australia (including the western and eastern ‘prongs’ of the Desert) into the South-Eastern region, followed by the North-Eastern, and ending with a Conclusion. In the amended format, the South-Eastern and North-Eastern regions are followed by Northern and Central Australia, with the Northern area being divided into two sections. It has been necessary to have the Central Australian material follow the Northern because of the presence (in the empirical data, as in the analysis) of a ‘transitional’ area. More importantly, however, my initial logical sequence is retained in the Conclusion, and the reasons for this are set out clearly there.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to the many contemporary anthropologists and others who have contributed to an understanding of Aboriginal religion in their own research areas. I hope that I have done justice to their material, and that my interpretation of it, against my own particular framework and my own understanding of the total situation, has provided a deeper appreciation of basic issues—both empirically and theoretically. The preliminary nature of this study will undoubtedly raise a number of contentious matters upon which argument could take place. In that respect, I see this as a positive benefit.

Secondly, my acknowledgement naturally goes to the very many Aborigines who have contributed to my first-hand knowledge and appreciation of their own particular religious perspectives. And lastly, but by no means least, I am deeply indebted to my wife, Dr. Catherine Berndt, who has patiently read through my manuscript draft and who has discussed this material with me in the light of her own research findings. This work was commenced toward the end of 1970, but constant interruptions and University commitments delayed its completion.

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