PREFACE

Fascicle Four concludes this study of Australian Aboriginal religion.

The preceding three Fascicles have looked at Aboriginal religion generally, at its basic concepts and the patterning of its various themes, recognizing that variations are just as significant to an overall understanding of religious phenomena as are more broadly based generalizations. Nevertheless, the latter are quite distinctive to Aboriginal Australia and are significant in the systematic study of comparative religions. The materials over which we have ranged have been spatially wide, extending through south-eastern and north-eastern as well as North Australia. In fact, so far, we have virtually covered three-quarters of the Australian continent. Or, to put it another way, it is probable that we have already accounted for 300 to 350 of the larger social entities that were present in Australia just before first European settlement. Of course, we have not been able to provide a total coverage: we know too little about many of these ‘tribes’ or language units, and too many have become extinct without our learning anything at all about them—or, at most, simply the bare outline of a few socio-cultural facts. Also, this particular study has been introductory, and it has not been possible to explore Aboriginal religion analytically except in a summarized fashion. Large cultural areas have been subsumed under more general outlines and some of the smaller areas have had to be omitted entirely. However, the broader patterning should hold good, and local variations should (from what we know about them) go to support the themes indicated here.

In our discussion of North Australia, which commenced in Fascicle Two and was completed in Fascicle Three, we were dealing with ‘live’ situations where traditional Aboriginal life is still in many respects an on-going reality. In the present Fascicle, the focus is again on living societies and cultures. The region covered is very wide indeed: it encompasses the central part of the Australian continent, which has been loosely termed ‘Desert’—that is, relatively arid country in contrast to many other areas, notably around the coasts and permanent rivers. I have retained this convention, dividing the area conceptually into two prongs, the western and the eastern. The reasons for doing so are noted in the main text. However, on the west, in spite of the northern influences which have been filtered through the southern Kimberleys, the culture is rather more homogeneous, and so is the language—although there is considerable dialectal variation. The eastern Desert prong—with the Walbiri buffer tending to absorb and transmute northern influences—is marked by the dominating presence of the Aranda and immediately adjacent tribal groups. Throughout the Desert, including both the western and eastern prongs, the impact of the outside world has been very uneven indeed. The Aranda and adjacent groups were subjected to intensive contact at an early date, with the establishment of the Alice Springs township nearby, a mission, and pastoral stations encroaching on their tribal lands. Even though socio-cultural alterations have been considerable in their case, Professor T. G. H. Strehlow has been able to continue his work on traditional material right up to the present time. But religious belief and ritual are not ‘live’ in the same sense as they are in some other parts of the Desert.
The approach to this region, in this Fascicle, is the same as for the North: the focus is on the life cycle and its religious significance, on birth, initiation and death and on the mythic-inspired rituals. It was this area of Aboriginal Australia, within the eastern Desert prong, which became prominent in so much of the writing on Aboriginal religion. Through the work of Pastor Carl Strehlow and Sir Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, the world first came to know something of the intricate beliefs and rituals of the Australian Aborigines, as coherent and living systems and not as retrospective accounts. Too often, however, these were taken to apply to the whole of Aboriginal Australia, as the work of Durkheim demonstrates—despite evidence to the contrary, presented earlier by E. M. Curr, Brough Smyth and A. W. Howitt, among others. Nevertheless, the sheer quantity and quality of this material was unique for the period in which it was obtained (in the early part of this century, as far as C. Strehlow, Spencer and Gillen were concerned), and its effects on anthropological thinking have been correspondingly significant.

The final Chapter (Six) of this Fascicle is the concluding one. It spells out the major patterns of Aboriginal religious experience, and provides a general view of the meaning of Aboriginal religion.

As in other Fascicles, the bibliography is appended to the regional part—in this case, Chapter Five on Central Australia: and an additional section on iconography is included.