
Drawing on her decades of research on Aboriginal societies, Australian cultural anthropologist Catherine Laudine addresses a popular assumption that Aboriginal societies might have solutions for the current earth crisis that white Australians can successfully adopt. She uses the growing sense of urgency to critique not only this assumption but the history of whites viewing Aboriginal societies in light of western assumptions and agendas. Laudine provides extensive content on the traditional beliefs and concrete practices of Aboriginal societies from the perspective of their epistemology. And she offers systems tools for white Australians to look again and see Aboriginal societies as they are. Finally, she strongly suggests white Australian readers wrestle with their historical experience vis à vis the earth crisis, for it is only out of their doing this hard work that something authentic to their own roots and effective for this current task might emerge.

Laudine argues that Aboriginal societies are solely and fully sacred societies. By this she means a society “where there is a sufficiently cohesive and largely unchallenged set of beliefs such that all peoples in a group share the same worldview and where this worldview highly values as sacred something beyond that needed for economic or political ends.” She uses “sacred” to refer to “ideas and practices that are safeguarded and/or required by long tradition as indefeasible, inviolable, and sacrosanct because they are considered to be of some ultimate good for the humans who hold them dear” (pp. 1, 2). Further, while “sacred may be something that includes the numinous or supernatural, it may also be the institutionalizing of high regard for something more mundane … In such societies the sacred realm is the only realm. The reality described by this cohesive set of beliefs is the only reality that is perceived. All that happens, portends, and is mooted is subsumed under this same lens.” (p. 2).

Laudine critiques the assumptions of modern non-Aboriginal Australian groups who she says know little of the Aborigines’ actual practices. Disenchanted with western science’s progress and their own cultures’ abilities to “solve” the earth crisis, they have elevated Aborigines to the status of experts, romanticizing the potential of their cosmology and metaphysics to solve the larger crisis (p. 9). She then recalls how historically most western researchers similarly viewed Aborigines through their own cultural conditioning and published distorted interpretations of Aboriginal life. Many early accounts show that other westerners considered land “quite explicitly as something that ‘nomadic’ Aborigines had no use of,” a justification for moving onto the land and crowding them out (p. 22). Mary Louise Pratt elaborates, for instance, “how most 19th century writers split the people from the landscape and explorations, then split them from customs and manners (p. 27: Pratt: 1985:126-7), thus significantly avoiding the difficult realities about who owns the country and why it should be rhapsodized as empty of people but full of potential.” Laudine makes the connection between this tendency and the legal Terra Nullius Doctrine that claimed that land was unoccupied if it was not settled according to recognized (white) conventions (p. 17).

Laudine then makes the point that Aborigines’ knowledge of the environment comes out of a different philosophy of mind from that of westerners. As modern cultural anthropologists continually point out, any attempts that westerners make to record observations...
of a given non-western culture will still bear the presuppositions of their own culture of origin. Aboriginal cultural traits cannot be understood through the language and figures of speech and values of western anthropology. Laudine adopts the phrase “Aboriginal nature knowledge” to acknowledge that “a search is being made of Aboriginal knowledge to find aspects of it that relate to what others call ‘nature’” (p. 18). Laudine then elaborates on the additional difficulty of today’s westerners, who also inhabit the dualistic system of thought of their forebears and understand nature as a thing apart, to comprehend Aborigines’ way of thinking. For westerners, “nature is something to be conquered, something from which one seeks shelter, something in opposition to culture” (p. 18). The sacred has little to do with it. For Aborigines, all things coexist in a sacred comprehensive unity, “sacred” having primacy in their worldview. None of the Aboriginal societies has a separate word for “nature” (pp. 18-19). While for secular westerners, there is a landscape, for Aborigines, there is a sign system … something to decipher, learn from and be part of … in reality, a force” (p. 21).

The author then brings in contemporary Aborigines from across the Continent to speak. Some see a return to old ways as vital for the land’s wellbeing; others suggest newer practices such as providing “walks” through the land for Aborigines and westerners alike “so [all will] come to have a feel for their own lands.” One proposes that modern Aboriginal children be given something to care for in nature, so that they can begin to develop a sense of responsibility for the land that was a given in many of their elders (pp. 39-44). As these few examples indicate, unlike westerners many of whom see humans as a toxic threat to wilderness, Aborigines understand that humanity is necessary for conserving the land (p. 133). The land is understood to have consciousness (p. 47). Aborigines are to live there and care for it. They know the land where they have been forcibly removed is lonely because there is no one to look after it (p. 44). Laudine observes that the pain Aborigines feel at not being able to care for land is seldom acknowledged (p. 137).

She notes how in the arena of Aboriginal land rights, cooperation is now occurring between Aborigines and Australian governmental agencies (pp. 45-47), and how some agencies are inviting Aborigine elders to share their knowledge of pre-invasion conservation practices. At the same time, another type of Aboriginal society is emerging, one more in keeping with modernity: some societies are reserving the right to act in their economic interests, which are not necessarily in the interests of the land (p. 47). Some exploration of how such Aborigines understand their relationship to the land in doing so would have been helpful here.

In Chapter 7, “Traditional Ways beyond the Ego,” Laudine examines two ways in which Aboriginal people have constructed their world of meaning pervading these practices: totemic relationships and “increase” ceremonies, practices that locate the individual squarely into the belief structure of a given society. Their mythology teaches them that they and their ancestors have arisen from the land [ab-origin] and its unchanging life forces, and all are a part of those life forces and thus of the extended kin (totemic) system specific to their area (p. 101) in a relationship of reciprocal responsibilities (p. 103). Aboriginal “increase” rituals take place as affirmation of belief in continuance of all things as they are, not as a prayer of request (p. 137). In these rituals as those mysterious life forces are repeatedly sung and talked about and personified in myths, the whole Aboriginal reality is continually brought into being. Participants are reportedly incrementally transformed further into their sense of being at one with all things, and responsibility for their survival is reinforced.