

ABORIGINAL CULTURE

LOCATION

The Aboriginals live throughout Australia, but especially in the province of Queensland. At the moment there are about 300,000 Aboriginals, which is 1.5% of the total population of Australia.

HISTORY

It is uncertain how the first Aboriginals arrived in Australia. It is clear however that the Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for at least 40,000 years. Until the late 1700's the Aboriginals lived a fairly traditional life. At that time there were about 500 -700 tribes in Australia.

Though the Dutch and Spanish visited Australia in the early 1600's it was not until 1788 that white immigrants began to colonize Australia. The Aboriginals tried to protest this colonization but the Europeans drove them from their lands or killed them. Many thousands of (especially male) Aboriginals were killed in this way. Others died because of the diseases that the Europeans brought with them.

Starting in the late 1830's the remaining Aboriginals were moved into reserves and missions that were created especially for them. The white Australians were in charge of these places. Here, the Aboriginals were forbidden to teach their children their own language and customs.

By the 1890's the white Australians were convinced that the Aboriginals would soon be extinct. This belief was based on the Darwinist ideas that the more primitive peoples such as the Aboriginals would vanish as part of the natural course of evolution. The culture of the Aboriginals was not considered worth respecting or saving by the colonists.

In the 1920's many missionaries tried to convert the Aboriginals to Christianity. At this time many of them were living in extreme poverty in ghettos or on the outskirts of towns. Thousands of children were taken by force from their parents and put into institutions to raise them as "good Christians". Because of this many Aboriginals felt that they belonged nowhere. They did not understand or like white Australian society, but they had forgotten their own culture. This generation of children is now called "the stolen generation".

In 1951 an official assimilation policy came into effect which stated that the Aboriginals had to become like all the other Australians. The Aboriginals protested against this attack on their culture and their lifestyle. At this time native peoples around the world started to organize themselves and demand respect. Twenty years after the assimilation policy the Aboriginal protests led to a government decision that Aboriginals would have a right to some of the land that was taken from them in the past. This battle for rights and to get land back continues at this moment.

Today there are about 300 Aboriginal tribes throughout Australia. In many places they are trying to rediscover their culture and to understand once more who they are.

RELIGION

Traditional Aboriginal societies share the idea that the earth and humans were created in a distant past. This time is called "the Dreaming" or "the Dreamtime". People can come into contact with the origins of creation when they dream. Many Aboriginal rituals connect the everyday world of the present to the mysterious Dreamtime of the past. After a person dies the person's soul returns to the Dreamtime, where it can also be found before birth.

Aboriginals are very attached to the land they live on, because they believe that the land was created by their ancestors in the Dreamtime. Every tree, rock, animal, mountain, etc. is believed to have been created in the Dreamtime. Because of this Aboriginal tribes in the past respected each others territories and rarely invaded. They were fearful that they would only find hostile spirits there.

SOCIETY, ECONOMY AND POLITICS

Traditionally Aboriginals lived in groups of large extended families. The leaders of these extended families were called Elders, who were usually men. They were old and considered to have the most experience and to be the wisest in the tribe. It was also believed they understood the Dreamtime well.

Inland Aboriginals hunted for their food. Some tribes lived in the desert, and some in the mountains or in forests. This meant that many different types of animals were hunted, such as kangaroos, ducks, parrots, snakes and lizards. Boomerangs and spears were favorite hunting tools. Women often collected berries and other food. Aboriginals who lived near the coast were skilled fishermen. They used both spears and fish traps to catch fish. There is some evidence that the Aboriginals used agriculture (30,000 years ago) long before the Egyptians started to (19,000 years ago). Stones were used to grind grass seeds and other foods.

Though women are treated fairly equally in Aboriginal society, it is only a handful of men who are allowed to have secret religious knowledge about the Dreamtime. However, women have always played an important role in the economy of Aboriginal tribes. Women were the most important providers of food and were not limited to the kitchen or to raising the children as in many native cultures. They were often economically active and independent of their husbands in their work.

Aboriginal law, like most of society, was based on Dreamtime stories. The laws had many regulations about trespassing, food, marriage and what was considered to be a crime. Aboriginal medicine made use of herbs and also magic. This magic was used to cure people of illness, but also to harm them if they broke certain laws.

The Aboriginals still have their own flag, which is different from the Australian flag. It is divided horizontally into two equal halves. The top half is black and the bottom half is red. There is a yellow circle in the middle. The black represents the Aboriginal people. The red represents the earth and the yellow the sun.

Unfortunately, due to the loss of their culture, many Aboriginals are now living in poverty. Many of them are dependent on the Australian government and alcoholism is a large problem. New movements among the Aboriginals themselves to feel proud of their culture and history is slowly improving their situation.

CULTURE

Australia is a huge country and this has led to the development of many Aboriginal languages. Though English is now the official language of Australia, the Aboriginals speak almost 500 different traditional languages.

Dreamtime stories are expressed in many ways. These stories contain many lessons about life. They are presented in chants, songs, paintings, costumes, dances and plays. Originally, the Aboriginal culture is an oral one, with stories being passed from one generation to the next by word of mouth. Today such stories are also presented in written form. One can still find ancient Dreamtime stories on Aboriginal rock art throughout Australia. Some of these carvings are 45,000 years old.

Aboriginals have always been very fond of games. Games such as wrestling, digging, running, climbing, throwing and ball games were popular. One favorite game was to make a ball from grass, or from fur tied together with vines, and then kicking it around.

The Aboriginals used a small number of instruments in their music. They used rattles, clapping sticks and boomerangs as instruments. The most famous of these is the Aboriginal didgeridoo. These are long tubes made of eucalyptus wood that can be blown into from the top. Songs and music were especially used in ceremonies that put people in touch with the Dreamtime.

