Australian Aborigines

History

The aboriginal people of Australia are estimated to have arrived from Southeast Asia sometime between 125,000 and 40,000 years ago. (University, 2004). Asian and Oceanic mariners and traders were in contact with the indigenous people of Australia before the Europeans ever had contact. Initial European contact took place in March of 1606 by a Dutch explorer named Willem Janszoon. Over the next two centuries various other European explorers made contact with a variety of indigenous populations. In 1770, a British explorer, Captain James Cook, claimed Australia for the English crown, and the continent was first used as a penal colony. Half of the first Europeans to settle Australia were convicts. Between 1788 and 1868 with the end of penal transport, over 160,000 convicts were brought to Australia. In 1901 the Commonwealth of Australia was established (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.)

Geography and Climate

Australia is the smallest continent in the world, covering 7,686,850 sq. km and comprising an area slightly smaller than the United States, with the East and Southeastern coasts being the most densely populated. The Southwest region of the country has a mild climate, warm to hot dry summers with cool and wet winters, also known as a Mediterranean climate (Csa/Csb in Koppen Climate Classification.) The Northern Coastal region is classified as a tropical monsoon and savanna climate, an area categorized by the existence of a rainy season followed later by a dry season (Girhard 2009) The Central and Western region of the country is arid, making up most of the Australia’s land mass. Of the over 7,000,000+ sq. km of land, only 6% of that is arable, or land that is suitable for crop production (Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs). Due to the small amounts of suitable farmland on the continent, land that is not suited for agriculture is still being used for agriculture. This as well as the overuse of suitable farmland has lead to many environmental issues. These issues vary from soil erosion due to over grazing to urbanization, industrial development, and poor farming practices. Because of these recent issues geographers have been looking to the Aboriginal people for answers, because they have lasted on the continent for tens of thousands of years. Geographer Lesley Head (1993:482) offers that the "re-evaluation of these environments and their inhabitants has profound implications for contemporary land management, encompassing conservation and land rights issues."

Language

Prior to European contact it is estimated that Australian Aborigines spoke over 250 to over 500 different languages and dialects. Due to European migration and influence over the past 250 years many of these languages are on the verge of disappearing. According to the National Indigenous Language Survey conducted in 2004, of the 145 Indigenous languages still spoken 110 of these are critically endangered, (Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) A variety of governments within Australia have put into place agencies whose mission is to protect the languages of the aboriginals. For example, in the territory New South Wales (NSW), the government has established a Department of Aboriginal Affairs which was put into place to revive and preserve the language and cultural history. In recent years the NSW government established the New South Wales Aboriginal Languages Research and Resource Centre. The Centre’s role is to "support the recording, retention and understanding of Aboriginal languages" (Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs) as well as maintaining indigenous languages in aboriginal schools and communities. Many words from Indigenous languages have been incorporated into modern Australian English, like the names of places and animals. For example, Australia’s Capital city, Canberra, comes from an indigenous word for 'meeting place.'

Social Organization
The social organization of the aboriginal society would be seen rather liberal (odd word choice. Do you mean open, unstructured, less hierarchical?) by contemporary standards. With regard to gender roles, the society is egalitarian, with separate roles divided up between the men and women. Women take care of both food collection as well as taking care of the women’s health and pregnancy. The women have complete control over the birthing process, for it is acceptable to both keep the pregnancy a secret from the man and also even terminate the pregnancy altogether (Cowlishaw 1982.) The man does not have a say in these decisions. As the children are being raised they are mostly undisciplined and left to their own devices. For example, “Older boys, before they reach puberty, seem prone to develop tantrums when crossed, and may even resort to throwing spears at their mother (Cowlishaw 1982.)” Another aspect of their culture is known as the generosity aspect, which often leads to the indulgence of children. The generosity aspect basically says that claiming ownership over something implies selfishness. This leads to child indulgence because if an adult spends all day making bread, if the child demands it the adult will feel obligated to give it away (Cowlishaw, 1982.) Furthermore, the men rely on the women for a majority of their nutritional supply. This is because the women take care of the harvesting of local edible plants, fishing, as well as the capture of small game.

Fig. 2. Traditional Aboriginal dance http://www.theage.com.au/ffximage/2006/07/19/svABORIGINES_wideweb__470x338,0.jpg

Subsistence

As a hunter-gatherer society, aborigines depended upon wild foods such as vegetables, roots, honey, insects collected by women and fish and game by men. Most of the Australian continent is an arid climate, causing its native people to follow the availability of water from season to season in a semi-nomadic manner. When water is scarce, roots and certain species of frogs can be utilized as stores of water (Burridge1973). Hunting tools that were used included spears (used in conjunction with a spear thrower for more force and accuracy), throwing sticks and boomerangs. The boomerang that returns to its thrower was used only in demonstrations of skill and not in actual hunting (Burridge1973).

Figure 3. Spear heads used in traditional hunting
(http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/aacg/speakingland/story03/03_story.htm)
The idea of "Dreamtime" was the foundation of religious life. The Dreamtime was an ancient era where great superhuman beings traversed the continent creating the natural formations that exist there today (Wolfe 1991: 198). This cosmology includes a belief in a parallel reality known as "The Dreaming." It is here where our souls come from and where they end up after our physical death. The souls of individuals decide to make the journey to our reality for the sake of protecting the world that the beings had created so long ago (Wolfe 1998: 202).
Aboriginal art is highly stylized, decorative and includes a great diversity of styles, materials and techniques. Many of these totemistic paintings are created on the smooth bark of a eucalyptus tree. Totemism is a economic and social tradition that establishes a relationship between people and species of plants and animals. By not eating certain animals people “acquire power with them and identify themselves with (the animal)” (Stanley 1899:877) The color scheme most commonly used is based on earth colors: red, yellow, ocher, white, gypsum, and charcoal are most commonly utilized (Sizer, 1941.) One reason for the diversity in styles is that it “is not one simple belief system, but many systems specific to the hundreds of different tribal groups occurring throughout the continent.” (McCulloch 1999) This tradition, dating back at least 20,000 (very late estimate) years, is in danger of being lost to modernity. They are losing their lands, political, social organizations and many other aspects of their way of life pre-contact. Modern Australians with European backgrounds have no cultural ties to Aboriginal art form and do not appreciate the value in the rock art, and because of this they see no reason to protect it. This causes much of the work to be destroyed because many of the works are painted on rock, and contemporary Australians see more value in mining the rock than protecting the art. Additionally, tourism causes damages to the rock paintings. This is mostly inadvertent, but there are also people who want to leave their mark just as Aboriginals did. (Gale and Jacobs 1987)

Contemporary Issues

Rights

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, a series of protests began to stop the discrimination against aboriginal Australians in numerous aspects of equality, such as rights to fair wages and citizenship status that other Australians were given (reword the previous sentence—very awkward). The movement was sparked by the case of Albert Namatjira, a highly respected aboriginal artist in the 1950s (Gurr 1983). The Australian government decided to award him citizenship, but this “honor” was taken away and he was imprisoned for six months after providing alcohol to his sons and friends, the law being that only citizens of the country could drink alcohol (Gurr 1983). While in prison, Namatjira died, reportedly in part due to the distress over his imprisonment. The 1960s saw the lift of many restrictions of aboriginal rights; they became entitled to the same welfare benefits, were able to drink alcohol in most parts of the country and state restrictions on their voting rights were mostly eliminated (Gurr 1983).

Health

In 1997, a comprehensive report was released concerning the health of Australian aborigines. The life expectancy for aboriginals in the Northern Territory as well as Western and South Australia was 15-20 years lower than the non-indigenous population (Health 2006). In most parts of the country, infants are 2-3 more times likely to die at birth or to be born at a low birth weight (Health, 2006). Smoking is about twice as common amongst aborigines versus other Australians (Health, 2006). While the number of people that consume alcohol is less among aborigines, those who do, drink at more unsafe levels (Health 2006).
Living Situation

Many aboriginals currently reside in urbanized sectors with 27% remaining in various remote settlements scattered across the continent (Yearbook, 2006). Most aborigines have a comparatively low annual income, with many receiving their main source of income through the government. 40% of households did not receive enough income to cover basic needs (Yearbook, 2006). Aborigines are twice as likely to require housing assistance than their non-indigenous counterparts (Yearbook, 2006). While jobs do exist throughout Australia, many aborigines do not attend secondary schooling which would prepare them for the workforce.

Violence

A study done in 2002 by the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 24% of indigenous Australians had been subjected to threats or physical violence in the past twelve months (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006). Over 1/3 of aborigines over the 15 had been formally charged with a crime at some point in their lives (Australian, 2006). Additionally 1 in 5 indigenous Australians over 15 stated that violence was a significant problem in their family or community (Australian, 2006).

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Image Sources

Figure 1: [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Australia-climate-map_MJC01.png](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Australia-climate-map_MJC01.png)

Figure 2: [http://www.theage.com.au/ffximage/2006/07/19/svABORIGINES_wideweb__470x338,0.jpg](http://www.theage.com.au/ffximage/2006/07/19/svABORIGINES_wideweb__470x338,0.jpg)

Figure 3: [http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/aacg/speakingland/story03/03_story.htm](http://www.samuseum.sa.gov.au/aacg/speakingland/story03/03_story.htm)


Figure 5: [http://aphs.worldnomads.com/jonnygo/3648/Picture012.jpg](http://aphs.worldnomads.com/jonnygo/3648/Picture012.jpg)

Figure 6: [http://www.aboriginalartdirectory.com/photos/dreamtime_kullilla_art_image1.jpg](http://www.aboriginalartdirectory.com/photos/dreamtime_kullilla_art_image1.jpg)

Figure 7: [http://www.islamicgarden.com/Aboriginals.jpg](http://www.islamicgarden.com/Aboriginals.jpg)