



INTERPRETING  
ABORIGINAL RELIGION

An Historical Account



TONY SWAIN



AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR  
THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS





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Cusack  
2002

# **INTERPRETING ABORIGINAL RELIGION**

**An Historical Account**

**TONY SWAIN**



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**For  
Dany and Jonathan**





## THE AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATION FOR THE STUDY OF RELIGIONS

**Special Studies in Religions**  
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# Contents

Forward	vii
Preface	ix
CHAPTER ONE	
<b>The Aborigines in European Mythology</b> <b>1606 — c. 1825</b>	1
CHAPTER TWO	
<b>From the Culture of Nature to the Nature</b> <b>of Culture c. 1825 — c. 1870</b>	21
CHAPTER THREE	
<b>The Dream Theory on the Dreaming</b> <b>c. 1880 — 1898</b>	41
CHAPTER FOUR	
<b>The Initiation of Australian Anthropology:</b> <b>An Interlude</b>	61
CHAPTER FIVE	
<b>The Circularity of Unilinear Evolution</b> <b>1898 — c. 1910</b>	75
CHAPTER SIX	
<b>The Transition to the Modern Era</b> <b>c. 1910 onwards</b>	101
End Notes	135
Bibliography	141



Foreword



# Contemporary Psychology

The American Psychological Association is pleased to present this volume, which provides a comprehensive overview of the current state of psychology. The book is divided into several sections, each focusing on a different area of the field. The first section, 'Foundations of Psychology', discusses the historical roots of the discipline and the key figures who have shaped its development. The second section, 'Research Methods', explores the various techniques used to study behavior and the mind, from experimental designs to qualitative approaches. The third section, 'Developmental Psychology', examines how individuals change and grow throughout their lives, from infancy to old age. The fourth section, 'Social Psychology', investigates the ways in which our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are influenced by the presence of other people. The fifth section, 'Clinical Psychology', addresses the assessment and treatment of mental health disorders. The final section, 'Future Directions', looks ahead at emerging trends and challenges in the field. This book is an essential resource for students, researchers, and practitioners alike, offering a clear and concise introduction to the diverse and dynamic world of contemporary psychology.

The American Psychological Association is a non-profit organization dedicated to the advancement of psychology and the promotion of the well-being of the public. We are committed to supporting research, education, and professional development in the field. This volume is part of our ongoing effort to disseminate the latest findings and insights in psychology to a broad audience. We hope that this book will inspire new research and contribute to a better understanding of the human mind and behavior.



# Foreword

As Australia approaches the bicentenary year 1988, questions will be asked — indeed they are already being asked — about the place of the Aboriginal people in the planned celebrations. Increasingly of late white Australia has had to shoulder a huge burden of guilt over long-standing failures to comprehend, and in many cases even to acknowledge the presence of, Aboriginal religion and culture in the land.

Human enterprises, however, are always ambiguous, and the western world's dealings with Aboriginal religion and culture have contained a mixture of elements, most of them negative but some at least intended to be positive. From the time when the Aborigines were first identified as, in effect, living specimens of "stone age man", there were good reasons why western anthropologists in particular should take an interest in them, their works and ways, their languages, cultures and religions. Certainly the tendency for many years was to force whatever could be learned into what we can now see to have been artificial categories, and many mistakes were made. But at least the anthropologists were seldom deliberately exploitative, and were not setting out either to remove the Aboriginal people from their land, to bring their traditions to an end, or to force them into new moulds of belief and behaviour.

In a time when passions run high, a dispassionate look at the actual record of generations of anthropologists in face of Aboriginal religion and culture (in this case inseparable entities) must be regarded as uncommon — for which reason Tony Swain's survey is to be welcomed. When the Department of Religious Studies in the University of Sydney admitted its first students in 1978, the author of these pages was one of them. In 1980 he submitted, as an Honours Thesis, the nucleus, ingeniously entitled "Autopsies on Alcheringa". *Alcheringa* — "the Dreaming" — nothing is more central to Aboriginal religion. But an autopsy demands that the object should be deceased; and it is clear that the great dreams are still dreamed, though often far beyond the conurbations in which most Australians live. That many anthropologists (and others) actually believed themselves to be witnessing the end of what was perhaps the oldest of all human religious traditions, cannot be doubted, on the other hand.

I claim no credit for anything in what follows except perhaps the initial impulse, the suggestion that the task might be undertaken and that it might prove fruitful. But I am more than happy to commend Tony Swain for having brought it to a successful completion, and to congratulate him on his industry and sense of perspective. As the Department's first student to complete his Honours degree in Religious Studies, he occupies a unique place; to have an expanded version of his thesis published is perhaps still more unique.

I recommend *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion* to all those who wish to learn something of the anthropologists' record in investigating Aboriginal religion and culture. Of course most of what follows describes, not Aboriginal religion and culture, but the reactions of the western mind on encountering it — reactions of many kinds. Understanding will be seen to have been elusive. But at least attempts were made. And if the investigation of investigators is an important part of the history of ideas, then there is much in these pages from which we can all learn, in the hope of better days to come.

Sydney

Eric J. Sharpe

# Preface

This book is a history of anthropological and pre-anthropological attitudes towards Australian Aboriginal religion. p'Bitek has written a slim volume on *African Religions in Western Scholarship* and Hultkrantz has produced a series of articles entitled 'North American Indian Religion in the History of Research'. In light of the tremendous impact that the Australian Aborigines have had upon anthropological theory it is somewhat surprising that no one has attempted a comparable work on Aboriginal religion. I hope this book will correct this deficiency.

What value this book has will no doubt lie in its familiarizing students of Aboriginal religion with the early foundations of their subject matter and its methodologies. It is because of this that I have concentrated on those works that are no longer generally read. This constitutes the first five chapters. Conversely, studies published after the first decade of this century (beginning with Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*) are still sources of theoretical inspiration for many scholars. Since this part of the history is relatively well known I have only devoted one chapter to it. While this final chapter is thus by necessity somewhat selective it is hoped that it will prove useful to those requiring a link joining present day studies with their more remote predecessors.

The spelling of Aboriginal words by and large conforms to the way the word was spelt during the particular period under discussion. This principle has also been adopted in the use of words such as 'savage' and 'primitive'. When I omit the inverted commas in the text I am in no way subscribing to these (as they have become) derogatory terms, but rather trying to impart the mood of then current anthropological fashions.



This book would not have been written if it were not for Prof. E.J. Sharpe bringing to my attention the lack of documentation about the history of studying Aboriginal religion. For this and many subsequent valuable suggestions, I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank him for kindly writing the foreword to this book, and to me it seems fitting that he should introduce what is in effect the product of his knowledge and perception.

I am also indebted to Dr. G.W. Trompf who read and made many useful comments about an earlier draft of this book. I am in particular appreciative of his help with sections dealing with pre-evolutionary anthropology, and I suspect that many omissions would have occurred without his constantly pointing me towards fruitful areas for investigation.

My thanks also to Dr. L.R. Hiatt for his kind encouragement with this and other work, and to Margaret Gilet who, with her usual efficiency and forbearance, performed the unenviable task of turning my somewhat disorganised drafts into a manuscript suitable for publishing.

This work was virtually finished by mid 1981 and yet it has taken more than three years to reach its final form. For the many distractions and interruptions supplied by my wife Dany and son Jonathan, I am forever grateful. To them this book is affectionately dedicated.

T.S.