

Review Article

Belonging to the Emperor: An Australian Perspective on the Encyclopedia of Religion

Encyclopedias are dangerous things. Whilst promising us an 'all-round' education (*enkuklios paideia*), they surreptitiously lay claim to the right to define the world. I can think of no better proof of this than a Chinese encyclopedia's classification of the animal kingdom as reported by Jorge Luis Borges. The categories were: a) Belonging to the Emperor, b) embalmed, c) tame, d) suckling pigs, e) sirens, f) fabulous, g) stray dogs, h) included in the present classification, i) innumerable, j) drawn with a fine camelhair brush k) *et cetera*, l) having just broken the water pitcher, m) that from a long way off look like flies.

Foucault cites this in *The Order of Things* as evincing the radical demarcation between forms of discourse and so slides towards the cliché of the inscrutable Oriental mind (1970:xv). But has he missed the point? This fantastic and humorous parade of a taxonomy is chillingly juxtaposed with that one class of reality which makes deliberate mockery of all would-be contenders in the battle to bind truth -

Belonging to the Emperor.

Yes, encyclopedias are dangerous things.

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The Encyclopedia of Religion is no exception. My concern here is not, however, with the broader issue of the imperialist context in which our discipline emerged, or with the enduring impact of colonialist thought. Rather I will confine myself to observing one manifestation of it in *ER* - the entries on "Australian Religions", by which the Encyclopedia means "Austra-

lian Aboriginal Religions".

As we might expect, the religious traditions of the first Australians are well represented in the Encyclopedia. After all, editor-in-chief Mircea Eliade's only other monograph than *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* to remain within the bounds of one culture was *Australian Religions: An Introduction*. The Aboriginal articles would themselves constitute an average size book (I believe Macmillan is mooting this possibility) and occupy about one per cent of the total eight million words. There is thus no sin of quantitative omission here, and a glance at the synoptic outline of religions included (vol 16:97) indicates the intention of a very thorough sweep of the globe's entire religious heritage.

My concern is not, therefore, that Aborigines have been ignored, but rather with what it means for them to be included. At best their status is h) included in the present classification. At worst, they become yet another k) *et cetera*. Eliade's vision was grand. A prospectus to the work under review opens with his words: "Perhaps for the first time in history we recognise today not only the unity of human races but also the spiritual values and cultural significance of their religious creation" (Macmillan: 1985). Most of me applauds but a faint cynical voice asks: "On whose terms are we united?"; "Under whose definition of significance and value are the world's religious creations acknowledged?" I am beginning to listen to that cynical voice.

A slight diversion will make my point

clear. One major aim of the Encyclopedia is to be a 'who's who' of religious history; of "popes, priests, prophets, saints, scientists, founders and reformers" (*ibid*:35). There are no Aboriginal entries of this kind in *ER* but Macmillan are currently producing a *Who's Who of Religion* in which Aborigines are to be included. Omitting them in such a work would not only initiate cries of 'racism' but detract from claims to scholarly completeness. I thus had the dubious privilege of writing the entries for traditions which are deliberately structured in a manner negating the significance of distinctive personalities (not to mention 'tall poppies') in religious life. The only Aboriginal people who could sensibly be included were those working within Western religious structures and thus to some extent conceding White Australian understanding of the role of the individual in history. In other words, *the process of inclusion totally undermined the possibility of an accurate representation of Aboriginal religions.*

Although less conspicuous, precisely the same problem is present in the *ER*. Encyclopedias of necessity radiate towards the prominent and celebrated. Aboriginal cultures did not value such things. Until the colonial advent they were localised and introspective, cherishing the significance of beliefs and practices belonging to a small group of people, often only a handful. They were not meant to be either shared or appropriated let alone catalogued in a world-embracing compendium for all those wishing an 'all-round education' in Religious Studies.

More concisely, Aboriginal knowledge is locative and pluralistic; an encyclopedia begins with the assumption that knowledge is a universal thing. Without delving into the interdependence of epistemological and political structures I

think it should be apparent why I maintain all good encyclopedias belong to emperors.

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Let's turn to specifics. Omitting articles referring to Aborigines in some broader context (e.g. K-P. Koepfing, "Amnesia"; C. Riviere, "Soul: Concepts in Primitive Religions"; R.M. Moyle, "Music and Religion in Australia and Oceania"), there are twenty entries on their beliefs and practices. Nearly half of these, and well over half the total words, were written by Ronald and Catherine Berndt. While the entries are, of course, scattered throughout the 16 volumes, they appear as the shattered fragments of a grand plan. The piecing together I offer is my own, but the obvious logic and conspicuous distribution of authors convinces me that this closely approximates the conceptual base of the whole.

A. History of Study

*- "Australian Religions: History of Study" K. Maddock (vol 1:566-570)
- "A.W. Howitt", K. Maddock (vol. 6:473-474)

B. Overview and Regional Studies

*- "Australian Religions: An Overview" R.M. Berndt (vol. 1:529-547)
- "Walbiri Religion" M.J. Meggitt (vol. 15:323-327)
- "Mardudjara Religion" R. Tonkinson (vol. 9:196-201)
- "Ungarinyin Religion" K-P. Koepfing (vol. 15:134-138)
- "Ngukurr Religion" J. Bern (vol. 10:420-424)

C. Myth and Ritual

* - "Australian Religions: Mythic Themes" C.H. Berndt (vol. 1:547-562)
- "Dreaming, The" R.M. Berndt (vol. 4: 479-481)
- "Rainbow Snake" C.H. Berndt (vol. 12:205-208)
- "Gadjeri" R.M. Berndt (vol. 5:461-463)
- "Djanggawul" R.M. Berndt (vol. 4:382-383)
- "Wawalag" C.H. Berndt (vol. 15:358-361)

- "Yulunggul snake" C.H. Berndt (vol. 15:541-543)

- "Muramura Darana" R.M. Berndt (vol. 10:157-159)

- "All-Father" K. Maddock (vol. 1:212-213)

D. Iconography

- "Australian Aboriginal Iconography" H. Morphy (vol. 7:14-17)

- "Tjurungas" J.E. Stanton (vol. 14:539-542)

- "Wandjina" I.M. Crawford (vol. 15:329-331)

E. Modern Movements

* - "Australian Religions: Modern Movements" S. Wild (vol. 1:562-566)

The principal articles, marked with an asterisk, are located under the general heading "Australian Religions", while each of the remaining supporting articles stands separately. One can easily appreciate the effort being made here to somehow balance generalities and specifics, but between the false universalities, and realistic but highly circumscribed references unlikely to be consulted, lies a vast and unbridged gulf. (Perhaps the few references to traditions moving towards a pan-Aboriginal base are both legitimate and conspicuous, but for reasons noted below, *ER* falls down here as well). I do not for a moment deny that there has been an honest striving to make this Encyclopedia work for Australia, but, despite the best intentions, we can see why it was doomed to fail.

The apparent plan for marrying broad statements with discrete examples is discernible throughout. Thus an overview of Australian religions is matched by four regional studies from the Central Desert, Western Desert, Arnhem Land and the Kimberley (Cape York, the southeast, Tasmania and Lake Eyre are not represented here. Nor are the Torres Strait Islands and as the heading is "Australian" rather than "Aboriginal" religions, this must be noted as an omission). Again a general entry on myth is accompanied by references to various

Ancestral Beings, mostly from Arnhem Land (*Yulunggul*, *Wawalag* and *Djanggawul*), but also from Lake Eyre (*Muramura Darana*) and the south-east (All-Father). The introduction to "Australian Aboriginal Iconography", weighted towards Arnhem Land, is joined by a Desert-based discussion of *tjurunga* and an instance of Kimberley art (*wandjina*). All of these topics of course have their place in Aboriginal Studies, but in this Encyclopedia they become irrelevant *et ceteras*, although perhaps they fight back by softly mocking the project as a whole. Be honest. Were you really planning to rush off and look up "Muramura Darana"? Had you even heard of the town of Ngukurr? ("Ngukurr Religion" is a town rather than a 'tribe' based article). What about the Mardudjara? No? Well, that's o.k. because they don't exist anyway. Why the Walbiri when other closely related Desert people such as the Aranda and Pitjantjatjara are as well, if not better, known? What's so special about the Ungarinyin? Is *Gadjeri* really the only ritual worthy of an entry? ('Bora' and 'Intichiuma' would have been entries more likely to be consulted). Are *Tjurungas* and *Wandjina* all there is to iconography? The questions go on.

Frankly, there is something impertinent about these topics that I rather like. They flaunt their unwillingness to fit universal programmes. That they are not the stuff encyclopedias are made of is the fault of our classifications and not their being. When writing for the *Who's Who* I was tempted to produce an entry on "Darby Jampijinpa Ross", a man I was very fond of and who was especially prestigious *within* Walbiri religious life, but totally unsuitable to the editorial aims of the dictionary. The contributors to the *ER* were, in the main, braver than I. There is, however, a slight tendency in some of the

selections to favour, *without acknowledging this fact*, post-contact religious phenomena shifting towards a pan-Aboriginal focus. These entries ("All-Father", "Gadjeri" and "Djanggal") are more at home in an encyclopedia, but before I explain why, let me evaluate the articles as individual entries.

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Using my reconstituted model of the articles as a rough guide, the reader would find Maddock's "Australian Religions: History of Study" opens with fresh promise. What we know of Aboriginal religion, we are warned, is what ethnographers recorded as they followed behind the colonial frontier's 'line of blood' (266). The article thereafter loses a little momentum and diverts into an interesting but arguably tangential discussion of the cult as the proper unit of study of Aboriginal religions. Maddock's just claim that no full study has ever been made of a single cult and that there is an unwarranted tendency to strip myth from its ritual context is, alas, an indictment of the ER itself and its lone entry on an Aboriginal ritual complex. Turning at last to the actual history of study, Maddock is very cursory. He notes three phases of study: the nineteenth century to the 1920s, the 1920s to c.1960, and 1960 onwards, but little information is given. On the first two periods my little book is more detailed (1985) and, lest I be accused of peddling my own wares, on the third phase Morphy is much better than both of us (1988).

Maddock also writes the only article on an Aboriginalist, "A.W. Howitt". I can make no sense at all of its inclusion. Howitt was not even the most gifted ethnographer of his time (W.B. Spencer, C. Strehlow and perhaps R.H. Mathews excelled him), and in the entire history of Aboriginal Studies W.E.H. Stanner is

incontestably the one scholar most worthy of being singled out (see Keen, 1986; Merlan, ND). Should we see this as linked with Maddock's only other article on the "All-Father" as nodding to Eliade's own obsession with High Gods? I am at a loss to produce any other explanation.

Maddock is a sound and often very insightful scholar. Bearing in mind his wise words about researchers following a line of blood we can turn to the second section. I am a great admirer of the works of Meggitt, Tonkinson and Koepping and what they say in their articles has authority. What worries me, however, is what they don't say. Why must anthropologists write disclaimers like "there are no longer any Mardudjara living a nomadic life" (Tonkinson; 328) or "the Ungarinyin ... as a coherent traditional unit, has all but disappeared" (Koepping; 134) and then proceed to write as though colonisation never occurred? This is a double tragedy as Tonkinson and Koepping both have great insight into religious dynamics in the regions to which they refer (eg Tonkinson 1974; Koepping 1988). Meggitt is even worse on this score. He doesn't so much as acknowledge that his research was based on a government station established to forcibly relocate Walbiri people after World War II. Bern's "Ngukurr Religion" shows the way out - why not write of Aboriginal religion as found and not as it is fancied? Here are people of mixed 'tribal' heritage living in the town of Ngukurr and the mission tradition is woven into the picture of these people's religious lives.

At this point I must mention an omission as glaring as the neglect of the context of research. Half of all Aborigines living a religious life are born female. They are all but invisible in most entries. I won't pursue this issue here, but rather leave the reader with a quotation: "This

is material which must be taken into account in any future attempts to generalize about Aboriginal societies and cultures". The words are Meggitt's. They are printed on the back of Diane Bell's *Daughters of the Dreaming*, a book in which Walpiri women's religious life is studied in depth. Are we not therefore justified in asking why Meggitt, and all the others thus far discussed, virtually ignore half the world?

R.M. Berndt's "An Overview" at least mentions that women have a discrete yet complementary religious domain (532) and C.H. Berndt has something to say of the presentation of women in "Mythic Themes". Neither discuss change, but this is because their principal articles are followed by Wild's "Modern Movements". I don't want to dwell on the Berndts' substantial contributions. The "Overview" is a solid (though a little stodgy) piece providing a concise and informed survey of common themes and regional variations. This is also the approach of the introduction to "Mythic Themes", a useful contribution despite its uni-dimensional Malinowskian view of the function of myth. R.M. Berndt's "The Dreaming" unfortunately fails to match the flair and insight of Stanner's famous article of the same title published decades earlier (and conspicuous by its absence in Berndt's bibliography). The remainder of their contributions all belong to the "worthy but dull" category with the authors being asked once more to summarise things they have said with far greater enthusiasm in the past.

Skipping over the articles on iconography (Morphy's is good, the other two get bogged down in bland description), we come to Stephen Wild's entry on new religious movements. To this point the self-styled "resource that will be used time and again for many decades to come"

(Macmillan:1985) already in the main feels decades dated. "Modern Movements" was the opportunity to say something fresh, but Wild's article comes as a disappointment. It is not well informed and sets up simplistic dichotomies between White Christianity and Aboriginal traditions to help explain the *alleged* lack of new religious developments. Even his case study based on his own field research lacks insight. Wild has a fine reputation as an ethnomusicologist, but when I read "Local Christians experimented with adaptations of Walbiri ritual form to Christian content and earned themselves mission sponsored trips to southern cities to display their minimally syncretic creations" (565), I was convinced that he was not in his element here.

In general, the Aboriginal entries in *ER* fail to come to grips with history. Maddock's statement about the significance of the colonial line of blood is not heeded, and Wild's contribution fails precisely because Aboriginal studies generally has failed here.

The articles on Aboriginal Religions neglect to acknowledge history and time, and this together with the Encyclopedia's universalistic perspective on significance and space, combine to make a formidable team. I will now all too briefly try to show how they converge in the syndrome of the Emperor.

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First, a quotation. Peter Clarke writes:

There has been very little in the way of either modern syncretistic movements or of fusion resulting from the contact between Australian Aboriginal religion and Christianity. One of the reasons for this... is the vast difference between this religion and Christianity. Nor have there been... any Pan-Aboriginal religious movements (1988:125)

I think this is totally misinformed and Clarke even finds himself questioning his sources. But surely it must be true? After all, he read it in an encyclopedia.

The reality is that not only has there been a constant pressure placed on Aborigines to form continent-wide movements but as Maddock briefly notes, scholarship - the type of scholarship represented in the Encyclopedia - has heavily contributed to the ever-growing necessity for Aborigines to adopt the institutional structures of the broader Australian polity (566). As a work of exceptional authority the *Encyclopedia of Religion* will have an impact beyond the academic domain and it must thus stand accountable.

Since the eighteenth century there have been intense pressures threatening to break down the intimate enclosures demarcating the many Aboriginal religions from one another. Clarke asks if "Gadjeri" was not pan-Aboriginal seeing it had spread over many tens of thousands of square miles, and in this he is quite correct. It is, according to north coast Aborigines, a post-Indonesian-contact cult in inception and has taken on forms which are unambiguously anti-White and millennial. The 'All-Father' cult was also of this kind, although this is rarely acknowledged (see Swain, 1990). As I have said, entries like "Gadjeri" and "All-Father" (and "Djanggal" or at least 'All-Mother' belongs in this class too) refer to phenomena having a broad social base which makes them conspicuous enough to belong comfortably in an encyclopedia. But it is essential that these be placed in historical context as movements subsequent to alien pressures. Indeed, the most basic response to culture contact in Australia has been the ever broadening social composition of cults, so that today there are indeed movements including Aborigines from right across the conti-

nent (see Bos, 1986).

What the Encyclopedia does therefore is neglect the dynamics of history, allow the few entries on pan-Aboriginal developments to stand as though unchanging traditions and then let the rest, no more than minute examples of locative traditions, fall into the obscurity that is an inevitable consequence of being placed in a work designed to illuminate those things in religious history which are prominent, conspicuous and hence likely to be consulted.

Encyclopedias say: *we will acknowledge things only insofar as they have conquered enough minds to be universally noted.* On those occasions when the Australian data fits in *ER*, it is because of the Aboriginal responses to the conquest or, in the Indonesian case, the *threat* of conquest. The majority, which is the rest, face two options: become a trivialised *et cetera* or be left out altogether. The latter is perhaps the more honest solution, except in the world of encyclopedic thought where omission is equated with insignificance or nonexistence.

My criticism in the last instance is not aimed at individuals or editors but at encyclopedias and all they assume about knowledge. What Aboriginal religions demand is, I suspect, what so much of the ignored majority of the world's religious heritage needs if it is ever to be appreciated. A work devoted to those people who neither tried nor succeeded in changing the world. Not "the basic reference book for religious studies" (Eliade in Macmillan, 1985) but a collage, without centre or hierarchy, of beliefs and practices destined to uphold the few rather than conquer the many. No vast panorama of the globe's religious history, but unexpected and intimate glimpses like the lovingly concealed snatch of a view to be discovered in a Japanese garden. We would

have to learn to read of things we did not already half understand and to value answers to questions we did not know enough to ask. But maybe there are others like myself who would happily forgo yet another discussion on the wisdom of the Buddha for the opportunity to learn of the faith which sustained his wife when she woke to find herself alone with their newborn son. I would like to see entries like "Yasodhara" and "Darby Jampijinpa Ross" stand without appearing absurdly small. I would like to see the category "(1) having just broken the water pitcher" not being reduced by the looming presence of all that belongs to the emperor.

Borges, of course, knew this. Who else could tell of a delinquent reprint of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, in which just one copy of vol XLVI contained an extra four pages on the land of Uqbar. This rogue entry in a work that was "(as is natural) a bit boring" (1981:28) opened a new world which in turn transformed all that was. Given Borges' love of hiding the seam between the imaginary and the real, it would be unproductive to ask whether he also fabricated the Chinese encyclopedia from which I quoted at the outset of this review. Fiction, after all, can be truer than fact.

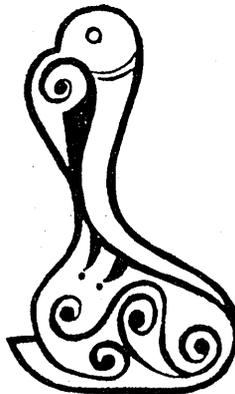
In "The Wall and the Books", Borges speaks again of emperors, asking why Shih Huang-ti (just like the sections on

Aborigines in *ER*) burned the records of time and built vast artificial boundaries in space? He juxtaposes the truths of empires with those things worth knowing in themselves for their inherent value and beauty, and then, in an act of epistemological grace, allows the emperor himself into the latter class:

The tenacious wall which at this moment, and at all moments, casts its system of shadows over lands I shall never see, is the shadow of a Caesar who ordered the most reverent of nations to burn its past; it is plausible that this idea moves us in itself, aside from the conjectures it allows... Generalising from the preceding case, we could infer that all forms have their virtue in themselves and not in any conjectural 'content'... Music, states of happiness, mythology, faces belaboured by time, certain twilights and certain places try to tell us something, or have said something we should have missed, or are about to say something. This imminence of a revelation which does not occur is, perhaps, the aesthetic phenomenon. (ibid: 223)

and it is perhaps also that life in the study of religions, sacrificed in our homage to empires of knowledge.

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