

# ON ABORIGINAL RELIGION

By

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# Introduction

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The six articles that form this Monograph are intended to be a contribution towards a general re-examination of Australian Aboriginal religion. That larger task will require the efforts of many scholars. The usefulness of the present work may be increased if I make as clear as I can the viewpoint for which it was written.

The history of the study of primitive, in particular, Aboriginal religion suggested that I should observe certain conditions. In the first place, it seemed advisable to concentrate on a region since there have been few really intensive studies of regional cults, and a better perspective on the continent as a whole can be attained only in that way. Secondly, I thought I should take Aboriginal religion as significant in its own right and make it the primary subject of study, rather than study it, as was done so often in the past, mainly to discover the extent to which it expressed or reflected facts and preoccupations of the social order. That is, study it *as* religion and not as a mirror of something else. It seemed desirable, thirdly, to avoid entanglement with any particular definition or theory of religion and, lastly, to resist any temptation to draw from the single instance any conclusions about all religion. Anyone familiar with the literature on the subject will agree that a good case can be made for such limitations.

Many general statements about the Aborigines rest on a narrow basis of exiguous facts, sometimes on no factual basis at all. That is especially true of statements about their religious life. More intensive regional study cannot alone correct the misunderstandings. A certain reformulation of the whole inquiry is also necessary. For example, it used to be supposed that the Aborigines had nothing worthy of the

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name of religion. When that viewpoint became modified there was a tendency to assume that the facts could be exhausted by a study of totemism, magic and ritual. Sociologism and psychologism then further confused the issue. They supposed, by and large, that in a scientific study religion must be the dependent variable: the true aim of inquiry was to discover the effect *in* religion of some set of social or psychic variables. The second condition of my work was thus an effort to correct what I believe to be three mistakes: that of theistic-philosophical narrowness; the wrongful identification with totemism, magic and ritual; and the disrespect involved in giving religious facts less importance in inquiry than they actually have in Aboriginal life. Whether the third condition is a practicable one is open to argument. It seems to me that most anthropologists know well enough, for working purposes, what they and their professional associates mean by 'religion.' Slips apart, I have tried to use the word indicatively, for the content of a devotional life. Beyond that, if pressed by the definition-minded to say what I 'really mean' by 'religion,' I would be inclined to point to the facts of Murinbata culture and say: 'That kind of belief and conduct.' It seems to me that definitions of religion—that is, of all religions in all places and at all times—are doubtfully a matter for anthropology at all. No doubt it will one day contribute some of the adequate predicates which philosophers of religion will generalise. But if it is to do so it will certainly have to stop treating religion as the dependent variable of study. As to the last condition, the disinclination to draw from the study any conclusions about religion-in-general, I think I need only say that, like most anthropological studies, the present work deals with some only of the facts of a total culture, examines them partially, and leaves most of its conclusions in suspense.

Anthropology, as an academic discipline, is plainly in transition. I have made as clear as I can the theoretical conceptions that now seem to me important. As far as possible, I have separated the three things—fact, viewpoint and interpretation—which must be separated if others are to use my work. The main theoretical interest seems to me to stem from the changed 'frame of reference.' The general idea of studying

human affairs as a dynamic or developmental structure of operations, exemplified in transactions about things of value, has a higher utility and a greater potential than the idea of a persisting structure of enduring relations between persons in role-positions. It forces an analyst to study the historical dimension or, if that cannot be done for lack of evidence, to explain stability, not to assume it. It requires him to develop concepts to apply to the ways in which persons 'work' or 'operate' on other persons, or on things, even on themselves, to obtain valued objects of life. That step alone, if persisted in, would transform anthropology from what it has often seemed to be—a dialogue over abstract nouns—into so to speak a conjugation of verbs. Many younger anthropologists are weary of 'function,' 'process,' 'institution,' 'status,' 'role,' 'position' and other such abstractions. An 'operational' anthropology would substitute a study of real relations—giving, taking, sharing, loving, bewitching, fighting, initiating—and make human sense of their cultural varieties. A direct effect would be a growing awareness that no human social relation can be studied effectively unless it is conceptualised as, at the least, a tetrad: A to B concerning O in respect of Z. The so-called 'dyadic' and 'triadic' relations, A to B, or A to B and C, or some other combination, with no object of life, or situation, or value stipulated, are too virtualistic for profitable study. Hence, the theoretical importance of the relations of association in which classes of persons transact the business of life. It is essentially the emptiness of 'interaction' as distinct from the concreteness of 'transaction' that has made anthropology so often seem abstract and unlikelike. On the other hand, the operational-transactional approach requires that social reality be followed closely; if models are used they must be models of or after reality—'perceptual' models of identifiable real processes, such as initiation. By such means it is easier to find in what respect the processes are 'integrative' and what it is they integrate. The initiations here examined are good examples of processes with integrative functions, and also with structures of such a kind that they allow comparisons between things that at first seemed incomparable. It is an essential purpose of anthropology to make such comparisons and the fact that they can be made in the field of religion,

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and between religion and the secular field, is an interesting illustration of the value of making a few simple changes in analytical procedure.

It is plainly a mistake to allow inquiry to be ruled by the philosophical notion that religious or metaphysical objects do not exist. They *do* exist for many peoples under study, and the facts of study are what they are because of that. To ignore it is to manipulate the facts illegitimately, in the interest of what may be called philosophical evangelism. If the facts are such, then they must be studied as such.

To deal with many-variable relations in terms of too few variables is also mistaken. It can lead only to stilted artificiality, which has been the fate of the conversion of what, at the least, are tetrads into dyads and triads. My present opinion is that anthropology will not be able to make any serious claim to being a theoretical as well as a realistic discipline until it has found a way to analyse the functional relationships between six variables—(1) operational roles, (2) operations, (3) situations, (4) objects of life, (5) ends, and (6) values. That is obviously a formidable task. In these papers I have taken a restricted field of religious transactions and shown something of the play between (1), (2), (3) and (4). That amounts only to a small expansion and redistribution of conventional emphases of study.

The interest of the transaction concept is that it is a transective concept. That is, it can be used so to speak to cut through the analytic categories 'political,' 'economic,' 'religious,' and etc. Where 'interaction' merely straddles, 'transaction' makes a section. It 'says' several things, which are logically connectable, about any transaction in all fields of life, whether 'religious' or 'economic' or 'political.' Since all things must be studied, at least in the first place, through their structure, it enables one to compare the distinctive structures of operations exemplified in all kinds of transactions in all fields of social life. That seems to me one of the primary objects of anthropology. It does not appear possible of attainment by conventional concepts and existing analytical procedures. The religious transactions are of course the hardest to study, which is why I began with them. They turned out to have an extremely interesting structure, distributed far more widely than I had thought possible.