

THE MARDUDJARA ABORIGINES

LIVING THE
DREAM IN
AUSTRALIA'S
DESERT

ROBERT TONKINSON

THE MARDUDJARA
ABORIGINES

*Living the Dream
in Australia's Desert*

By

ROBERT TONKINSON

University of Oregon



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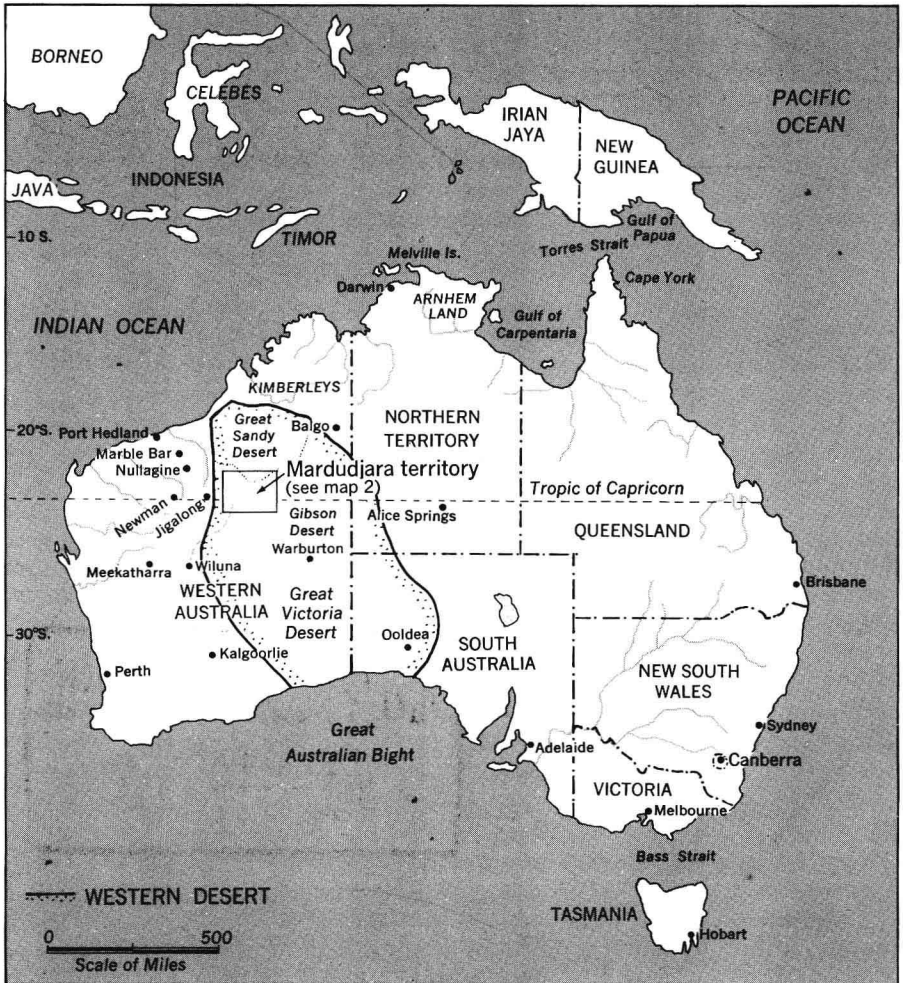
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CASE STUDIES IN
CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY

GENERAL EDITORS
George and Louise Spindler
STANFORD UNIVERSITY

THE MARDUDJARA ABORIGINES

Living the Dream in Australia's Desert



Map 1: Australia. The approximate boundaries of the Western Desert are indicated by the dotted areas surrounded by the heavy gray line.

Foreword

About the Series

These case studies in cultural anthropology are designed to bring to students, in beginning and intermediate courses in the social sciences, insights into the richness and complexity of human life as it is lived in different ways and in different places. They are written by men and women who have lived in the societies they write about and who are professionally trained as observers and interpreters of human behavior. The authors are also teachers, and in writing their books they have kept the students who will read them foremost in their minds. It is our belief that when an understanding of ways of life very different from one's own is gained, abstractions and generalizations about social structure, cultural values, subsistence techniques, and the other universal categories of human social behavior become meaningful.

About the Author

Bob Tonkinson is a West Australian who received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Western Australia and his Ph.D. in Anthropology from the University of British Columbia. He is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Oregon, and is currently holding a Senior Research Fellowship at the Australian National University (1977–1979). He has done extensive field research in the Western Desert of Australia and in the New Hebrides, and his publications include a monograph, *Maat Village; A Relocated Community in the New Hebrides* (1968), and a book, *The Jigalong Mob* (1974). He is at present an active member of the executive board of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania and is serving on the National Humanities Faculty. His anthropological area interests are Aboriginal Australia and Oceania; his subject interests include religion, social organization and change, and film. He and his wife, Dr. Myrna Ewart Tonkinson, who is also a social anthropologist, will be spending much of 1978 doing further research in the Australian Desert.

About the Book

This case study about the Mardudjara, a people of the great western desert of Australia, rivals the best of science fiction in interest. Some forty thousand years ago adventurous migrants from the mainland of Asia found their way into the subcontinent. Others came later, but the largest portion probably came early. For thousands of years these people have elaborated their culture less disturbed by out-

siders and outside influences than in any other land mass of comparable size. What they created, the adaptations they made to the different ecological circumstances afforded by Australia, with its thousands of miles of seacoast, its tropical areas, and its vast deserts and semi-arid zones, can be described with accuracy in some instances. These can be so described because some of the peoples survived the first stages of the terrible onslaught of the western world with their ancient cultures intact. In the case of the Mardudjara, the ancient adaptations continued in relatively unchanged form, with the people living free in the open desert, pursuing a hunting and gathering existence into the mid-sixties, when they were studied in that state by Dr. Tonkinson.

This study is the result of both his fieldwork with the surviving nomadic groups and his work with the peoples who had come in from the desert and settled around places where they could enjoy some of the benefits of an industry- and agriculture-based economy. Though these groups work for wages, wear clothing, want health and welfare benefits, and are increasingly literate and aware of the larger world, they try hard to keep the "Law," given to their ancestors in the Dreamtime by the beings who made their geography and gave them their original rituals, rules of conduct, and beliefs. It is rare in anthropological experience that one fieldworker should study the people both in their native habitat, with their traditional culture substantially intact, and under circumstances so radically changed, away from their natal territory and living under the direct influence of western culture.

The culture of the Mardudjara, like all aboriginal Australian cultures in some degree, is characterized by an outstandingly simple technology and material culture and an equally outstandingly complex religious and cosmological system. This fact immediately challenges everyday assumptions about the nature of civilization and its complexities. It is a beginning lesson in anthropology. It should change the reader's conception about the nature of complexities in his or her own society and challenge assumptions about the nature of human life, human thinking, and "progress."

Of particular interest to students of anthropology will be the analysis of how rituals and beliefs change in a seemingly unchanging society. Anthropological as well as lay conceptions concerning aboriginal societies in Australia have tended toward the notion of the static, timeless culture. In contrast, the Mardudjara, and probably most other aboriginal cultures, welcomed change—so long as it fit the predetermined forms of permanence. There is no notion of progress in aboriginal cultures, but there is change. Readers with some background in anthropology will find Tonkinson's analysis of the reality of everyday life and its tensions and conflicts, in his chapter on living the dream, particularly interesting. For all readers, the analysis of ritual and religion, of kinship and social structure, will prove informative and challenging. This case study will stand out in the series both because it is about a most interesting people and set of circumstances and because it is written in a perceptive, sophisticated, but engaging manner.

GEORGE AND LOUISE SPINDLER
General Editors

Stanford, California

Preface

This study describes the traditional culture of some Australian Aboriginal groups living in a remote part of the interior of the continent. It begins with a brief account of the peopling of Australia to provide the reader with some necessary background information about the Aborigines and their culture in time and space. This chapter also introduces the Mardudjara and their desert setting, and concludes with some comments about what it is like to do fieldwork with Aborigines in this part of Australia.

Chapter 1 outlines the religious fundamentals of the Mardudjara worldview, for no proper understanding of their culture is possible without an appreciation of its intellectual foundations. The aim of the second chapter is to convey a feeling for the desert habitat and daily life of these hunters and gatherers as they ingeniously cope with an extremely tough environment. The ways in which they structure their social order are the subject of Chapter 3, which details the complexities of kinship and other categorizations that stand in marked contrast to the uncomplicated material technology of the Mardudjara. Chapter 4 examines the life cycle of the desert people, with particular attention to the long and complicated progression of young males through initiation into full adult status. This subject leads naturally, in Chapter 5, to a detailed consideration of their rich and varied ceremonial life and its inherent dynamism, which allows for excitement and change despite a very strong ideology proclaiming that nothing changes. Chapter 6 contrasts the ideal society, as laid down by the ancestral heroes of the Dreamtime, with the realities of a life in which some conflict is inevitable. To conclude, Chapter 7 presents a brief sketch of the contemporary life of the Mardudjara, who now live in contact with whites and face problems of maintaining their strong traditions under considerably altered social and economic circumstances.

Acknowledgments

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This study is dedicated to the Aborigines of Jigalong, particularly Gogara, who decided in 1963 that I needed help and since then has been a true friend and teacher; my debt to him and to many other members of the Jigalong mob is profound. This book is dedicated also to my wife Myrna, whose sustained support and encouragement made the task of writing seem easy, and who, in her careful reading of the draft, provided invaluable comments and insights derived from her research among the women of Jigalong. To Drs. Kirk Endicott, Richard Gould, Nicolas Peterson, and

George and Louise Spindler, I offer grateful thanks for many helpful and constructive suggestions which together have done much to improve the book.

The fieldwork on which this study is based was financed from a variety of sources: the University of Western Australia, Australian Universities Commission, University of British Columbia, Australian National University, and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. My thanks go to the Western Australian Native Welfare Department (now Department of Aboriginal Affairs), particularly Mr. Frank Gare, who made it possible for me to participate in several desert expeditions. To Professor Ron Berndt, who first interested me in anthropology and Aborigines and gave me a great deal of assistance and encouragement, my gratitude is immense. To my former mentors, Professors Peter Lawrence and Ken Burridge, whose friendship and advice I continue to hold dear, I owe a considerable intellectual debt. To Professor Roger Keesing, many thanks for first suggesting that I write this book.

Besides the Aborigines, many staff members at Jigalong provided assistance, friendship, and hospitality over the years: Trevor and Peggy Levien, David and Gloria Goold, Terry and Lorraine O'Meara, Ernie and Edie Jones, and Graham and Jenny Wilson all assisted in many ways. Joe Criddle, formerly of Wālgun station, has been a colorful host and good friend.

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Canberra, Australia
September 1977

Robert Tonkinson

Contents

Foreword	v
Preface	vii
Introduction: THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES	1
<i>The Original Settlers</i>	1
<i>Variations and Common Themes</i>	2
<i>Western Desert Culture</i>	6
<i>Who are the Mardudjara?</i>	8
<i>Doing Fieldwork in the Desert</i>	10
1. THE SPIRITUAL IMPERATIVE	14
<i>Introduction</i>	14
<i>The Dreamtime</i>	15
<i>Religion and Morality</i>	17
<i>Ensuring Continuity</i>	18
2. SUBSISTENCE IN A MOST MARGINAL HABITAT	20
<i>Ecological Setting</i>	20
<i>The Desert through Explorers' Eyes</i>	24
<i>The Western Desert as a Culture Area</i>	27
<i>Coping with the Desert</i>	28
<i>Conclusion</i>	42
3. THE SOCIAL IMPERATIVE	43
<i>Kinship</i>	43
<i>Local Organization</i>	49
<i>Social Categories</i>	54
4. LIFE CYCLE AND MALE INITIATION	61
<i>Spiritual Preexistence</i>	61
<i>Birth</i>	63
<i>Childhood</i>	64
<i>Male Initiation</i>	67
<i>Marriage</i>	80
<i>Growing Old</i>	82
<i>Death and Its Aftermath</i>	83

5. THE RELIGIOUS LIFE	87
<i>The Sexual Division of Ritual Labor</i>	87
<i>Myth, Ritual, and Songline</i>	88
<i>Sites and Paraphernalia</i>	105
<i>Magic and Sorcery</i>	106
<i>Dynamic Elements in the Religious Life</i>	112
6. LIVING THE DREAM	116
<i>The Ideal at the Level of Group and Society</i>	116
<i>The Realities of Group and Society</i>	117
<i>The Ideal at the Level of the Individual</i>	120
<i>The Realities of Individual Behavior</i>	121
7. THE MARDUDJARA TODAY	129
<i>Aboriginal Emigration and the Frontier</i>	129
<i>Change and Continuity</i>	131
<i>Problems in Adaptation</i>	132
<i>Conclusion</i>	137
Glossary	139
References Cited	141
Recommended Reading	145
Films	148

Introduction / The Australian Aborigines

THE ORIGINAL SETTLERS

The full saga of the first discovery and colonization of Australia, which dates from at least 40,000 years ago, will doubtless never be accurately known.¹ Thanks to the continuing efforts of prehistorians, biogeographers and other scientists, however, more and more is being revealed about the physical setting for the island-hopping epic that led eventually to the peopling of the world's largest island continent. It appears that the Australia of the Pleistocene era (Ice Age) was somewhat cooler than now, and certainly much larger because of glaciation's effect in lowering sea levels. The immigrants must have been originally Asian and possessed of seaworthy watercraft of some kind. Despite the lowered sea levels, they had to cross open ocean in several places—deep-water passages of the kind that had once formed barriers to the eastward movement of large Asian carnivores and other fauna and flora. The first settlers must have arrived somewhere on the north coast (or the northwest, since at that time Australia and New Guinea were joined), but their motivations, the routes taken, the accidental or purposeful nature of their voyaging, and the location of their first landfall can only be guessed at.²

Like the rest of humanity in that era, the pioneers were hunters, fisherfolk, and foragers who probably utilized a stone, bone, and shell toolkit and lacked domesticated plants and animals; unlike almost all the rest of humanity, the people now known as the Aborigines were to retain their hunter-gatherer adaptation into modern times. To date, we have no clear knowledge of either the speed or the strategy of their colonization of the new homeland. They may have clung to the marine adaptation they knew best and diffused via the coastal periphery, relying mainly on seafoods and freshwater resources, supplemented by foods hunted and gathered inland, until all the marine frontages were occupied and groups eventually moved inland (Bowdler 1977). Alternatively, unimpeded by either high mountains or savage beasts, they may have adapted to inland subsistence quite early on and then spread through the interior to the far reaches of the continent—which at that time included Tasmania, whose inhabitants were eventually isolated when rising sea levels made it an island about 12,000 years ago (R. Jones 1977).

Either way, all major ecological zones, with the possible exception of the desert, were occupied by at least 20,000 years ago. By this time the giant marsupials and flightless birds of the Pleistocene were long extinct, but there is as yet no clear evidence to suggest whether Aborigines had a hand in this or whether climatic changes caused their disappearance. Desert conditions in the central area predate the arrival of

¹ See Mulvaney (1975) for a recent, comprehensive account of Australian prehistory.

² See, for example, papers by Birdsell and other contributors in Allen, Golson, and Jones (1977).

the first Australians, but Mulvaney (1975) suggests that at times during the Pleistocene regional climatic conditions were more favorable than they are now, so climate, like landform, would not have presented barriers to movement in much of the continent.

The relatively late arrival of the dingo (a type of wild dog) during the post-Pleistocene era (that is, probably within the past 10,000 years) appears to be linked with the extinction of some native species and raises important questions concerning outside influences reaching Australia in more recent prehistoric times. The dingo must have been brought to Australia because it came in an era when sea levels had risen close to their present levels. Its appearance is paralleled by that of a new material technology, consisting of an array of small, flaked stone tools. These were grafted onto an earlier kit of larger, heavier hand-held cores and flake-scrapers on the mainland. The separation of Tasmania, however, precluded the arrival there of the dingo, and, it appears, the diffusion of the small tools as well as other items of mainland technology, such as the boomerang, spearthrower, shield, axe, and adze. The more recent small tool technology may well have been developed within Australia, but resolution of this question, like so many others, awaits further research in a field that has seen its most rapid development in the past decade or so.

Further excavations and research in Australian prehistory will almost certainly push the time of arrival of the first settlers beyond 50,000 years. From what is already known, however, it is clear that the early Aborigines were subjected over millennia to significant changes in sea level that must have necessitated considerable adaptation, to climatic changes and some floral-faunal extinction, to environmental changes brought about by their extensive use of fire, and to a host of innovations and changes of greater or lesser regional significance. The culture of the early Australians could never have been static, but in most areas stability and continuity probably became the norm many thousands of years before Europeans arrived and the old order was shattered.

The Europeans were not the first foreigners to establish cultural contacts with Aborigines and affect their lives. In northern Australia, Macassan traders (from Celebes in present-day Indonesia) established seasonal camps on the Arnhem Land coast for the gathering and processing of the prized sea slug (trepanng or beche-de-mer), and Papuans made contacts with the Aborigines of Cape York via the Torres Straits islands. These influences from the north had clearly discernible effects on both material and nonmaterial (for example, mythology, songs, and art forms) aspects of the lives of Aborigines in both areas. But this exposure to traders and horticulturalists and their very different behaviors and technologies must have been either too brief or insufficiently impressive to make converts of the coastal Aborigines, whose basic life style and adaptation to their environment remained substantially the same. Also, the effects of such culture contact, for perhaps the same reasons, were little felt in areas away from the coast. As Mulvaney (1975:49) notes, "While ceremonial and material borrowings enriched the Aboriginal life style and gave it a distinctive pattern, as well as increasing seagoing efficiency, they did nothing to alter drastically the Aboriginal economic orientation or social structure." That development had to await the onset of permanent white settlement, dating from 1788 on the southeast coast, where most of the Aborigines soon succumbed to contact influences while their more fortunate brethren in the tropics and the interior went about their lives, unaware of what lay ahead.

VARIATIONS AND COMMON THEMES

Physical As members of the species *Homo sapiens*, Aborigines are as modern as the rest of humanity, but when "racial" classifications were in vogue, the inability of sci-

entists to fit them into the three major subdivisions earned them the separate status of "Australoid." However, physical variations among them are such that there is clearly no single archetype. Recent archeological evidence suggests that there may have been two distinct types in the past (Thorne 1977), but there is no firm evidence to support the theory of Birdsell (1967) who suggested that three physically different peoples entered Australia at different times during the Pleistocene.

Birdsell bases his theory on what he considers to be significant regional variations in Aboriginal physical types. Given the very long period that Aborigines have been in Australia, the marked regional differences in their skin color, hair color and texture, body build, nose shape, cranial profile, and so on are more convincingly accounted for by factors of diet, climate, subgroup genetic isolation, cultural practices, and other ecological and environmental differences (Mulvaney 1975). From his intensive work on Aboriginal genetics, Kirk (1965) concludes that the Aborigines are a genetically distinct group with considerable internal diversity, which could have been attained in about 10,000 years, presuming that the present population stems originally from a genetically homogeneous group. As yet, no final answers are possible concerning the racial homogeneity or heterogeneity of the Aborigines, but despite the physical variation that exists among them, virtually all are recognizable as distinctively Aboriginal.

Ecological In a country as large as the continental United States (excluding Alaska), considerable variation in vegetation and climate is inevitable. The range includes monsoon savannah woodland in the north, dense tropical rainforest in the northeast, an arid interior, southern prairies of grassland and mallee (*Eucalypt*) scrub, temperate forest in the southwest and southeast corners and Tasmania, and patches of alpine country in the latter two areas, where the snow cover lasts several months. Adding to the basic difference between seacoasts, riverine areas, and the interior, each major ecological zone has a characteristic range of flora and differing patterns of seasonality. For example, in parts of the north, monsoons create distinct wet and dry seasons, while in the desert the rainfall is irregular and nonseasonal. In the southwest there is a "Mediterranean" climate of hot, dry summers and mild, wet winters. Under trade wind influences, the east coast receives more uniform rainfall, and the island of Tasmania experiences a cooler maritime climate.

Such marked differences are reflected in Aboriginal population densities, extractive activities, and associated regional technologies. The more favorable areas for human exploitation, such as the north and east coasts, the southwest and the riverine areas of the southeast were all characterized in precontact times by much higher population densities (perhaps two to eight square miles per person, as against more than thirty-five square miles per person in parts of the desert), more complex technologies, and a more sedentary society than in the arid interior regions.³ Both rainfall, in its amount and seasonal reliability, and evaporation rates vary greatly throughout the continent, and relatively few rivers flow all year round. In combination these factors are a major determinant of Aboriginal adaptive strategies. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Western Desert area; but over most of the continent, water, or lack of it, looms large in the lives of the Aborigines.

Despite these regional variations, it has not been possible to establish a close correlation between ecological zone and distinctive cultural elements in Australia. The continent is geologically very ancient, with the result that the forces of nature have reduced topographical contrasts and have worn it down for so long that there are very few areas over 2000 feet in altitude. Also, while the number of plant species declines as rainfall decreases, two principal genera, *Eucalypts* ("gums") and *Acacia* ("wattles"),

³There are estimated to have been between 250,000 and 300,000 Aborigines at the time of first European settlement, living in a continent of just under three million square miles.

show remarkable persistence in all regions. Most ecological zones are thus not at all sharply defined, in contrast to North America, for example. When these natural factors are considered along with important cultural considerations (for example, Aboriginal mobility, widespread cultural diffusion, and the exploitation everywhere of several different ecological areas in the course of the food quest), the lack of close fit between ecology and cultural characteristics is understandable. Regardless of climate or richness of marine resources, for example, no Aboriginal group subsists entirely on marine foods, however important a part these play in their diet some of the time (see Meehan 1977).⁴

Linguistic-Cultural Prior to European settlement, there were something like two hundred different, mutually unintelligible languages spoken throughout Australia, each language having a number of distinct dialects.⁵ Aborigines looked upon linguistic differences as a major factor distinguishing themselves from their neighbors. Most

⁴Peterson (1976b) has recently postulated a broad division into culture areas on the basis of drainage basins (except in the case of the Western Desert which lacks coordinated drainage patterns). There are 12 such basins, but Peterson recognizes at least 17 culture areas on the basis of general knowledge of differences in language and culture. To illustrate, he presents evidence from three different regions in Australia. He suggests that since there will be a tendency towards culture area endogamy, validation of his scheme may come in part from biological data on genetic marker distribution. However, a difficulty remains in that culture areas based on drainage basins cut across ecological zones, with the result that there are several different zones within a given drainage area.

⁵I am indebted to Professor Bob Dixon for his assistance with information on Australian languages.



Aborigines were multilingual, being equally at home in several tongues. It was often the case that a child's parents would come from different language groups; a boy might use his mother's language most of the time during his childhood but switch to his father's tongue by puberty.

Australian languages all follow a similar typological pattern. They have from four to six nasal consonants (*m* and different varieties of *n*), but no fricatives or sibilants (that is, nothing like the English *f*, *th*, or *s*). Nouns take case inflections, and there are generally several verbal conjugations, much as in Latin and Greek (Dixon 1972). All of the languages, excepting a group in the central north, are closely related genetically, and descend from a single ancestor language that may have been spoken 10,000 or more years ago. It is likely that the more divergent languages of the central north are also related, at a somewhat greater time depth, making a single large Australian family.

Attempts to relate Australian languages to linguistic families outside the continent have been uniformly unsuccessful. Although there are some superficial typological similarities to the Dravidian family of southern India, for instance, it has not been possible to find cognates and systematic formal correspondences that would indicate genetic connection. Australians and their languages have been on the continent for so long that any sister languages they left behind in Asia would likely have changed out of all recognition, and genetic connection could not now be recognized.

Obviously, the persistence of distinctive dialects and mutually unintelligible languages suggests that boundary-maintaining behaviors of some kind have prevented



A man, his two wives, and two of their children en route to a new camping place.

the loss of distinctive group identity. A major cause of this group distinctiveness, which is common throughout Australia, is the existence of very powerful bonds of sentiment that unite every social group to a particular stretch of territory. This land base furnishes most of their material needs and also provides them with much of their distinctive identity, through links of birth, descent, and totemic association. At the same time, however, the Aborigines stress mutuality and interdependence with neighboring groups and others with whom they come into periodic contact. The widespread diffusion of valued objects and the universal importance of ceremonial exchange attest to the great emphasis placed on intergroup contacts.

Aborigines everywhere share the same basic economic strategy, hunting and gathering, and regardless of the particular resources and the technologies that have been developed to exploit them, this mode of adaptation promotes many uniformities. Thus everywhere the band is a basic social grouping, with a sexual division of labor and an emphasis on food sharing that together allow more efficient resource exploitation, a varied diet of meat and vegetable foods, and an equitable distribution of food. Throughout the continent, these strategies make for conservation of effort and the maximizing of leisure time (Peterson 1976). Aborigines everywhere put fire to the same variety of important uses, do their cooking in ashes and sand, employ very few food conservation or storage techniques, and use a variety of similar practices to ensure long-term population stability.

To this partial list may be added countless shared cultural elements that relate less directly to ecological adaptation but are profoundly significant: classificatory kinship, protracted male initiation, a shared conception of a creative period, concern with the separation of body and spirit after death, totemic identity with creative beings and flora and fauna, male chauvinism (including the exclusion of women from major aspects of the religious life), and so on.⁶

Everywhere, there is a wealth of local elaboration and differentiation, a playing up or a playing down of certain of these common cultural elements. But with very few exceptions they are readily discernible as variations on shared themes that signal a unique Aboriginal culture, unmistakable to any observer with at least a modicum of knowledge about it. Many of the component practices and beliefs may well have parallels in small-scale societies outside Australia, but everywhere within the continent the total constellation of traits is distinctively Australian Aboriginal.

WESTERN DESERT CULTURE

The major characteristics and homogeneous features of the Western Desert are discussed in Chapter 2, so the only question to be dealt with here is whether there exist clear differences between this area and the rest of Australia. Genetically the Aborigines of this region appear quite distinct, and the uniqueness of genetic marker patterns indicates a long period of isolation from external inputs (Kirk 1971). Evidence from prehistory suggests climatic and cultural continuities lasting at least 10,000 years. There has undoubtedly been variation in technology, economy, and settlement patterns, but this is overshadowed by compelling evidence for the persistence of both hafted and unhafted tool types, of regularities in living-surface layout, of a similar mixed meat-vegetable diet, and of long-distance transport of valued lithic materials

⁶ There are of course, some notable exceptions, such as the Tiwi of Bathurst and Melville Islands in northern Australia. A study by Goodale (1971:338) shows that ". . . the basic equality of the two sexes as unique individual members of the society is stressed in the culture."