

AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES AND THE DEFINITION OF PLACE

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INTRODUCTION

The essence of place lies in the quality of being somewhere specific, knowing that you are 'here' rather than 'there'. Those architects who have been interested in the concept of place – for example Aldo Van Eyck and Charles Moore – stress the separation of *inside* from outside. Enclosure becomes a very important aspect of place-making which also seems, in some way, to be related to the concept of territory. For these architects, as for many cultures and civilisations throughout history, the establishment of place and the taking possession of it is accomplished by means of building structures and boundaries and personalizing the resulting places in some way.

There is one culture at least – that of the Australian aborigines – in which the building of structures and boundaries is so unimportant that it becomes interesting to discover whether they have any concept of place at all – and if they do, how they define it. This would throw light on the essence of place and the range of means available for defining it. While other peoples – Tierra del Fuego Indians and Bushmen for example – build no major dwellings they do build cult buildings; aborigines do not. Therefore a survey of the ethnographic literature on aborigines with this particular question in mind should be enlightening.

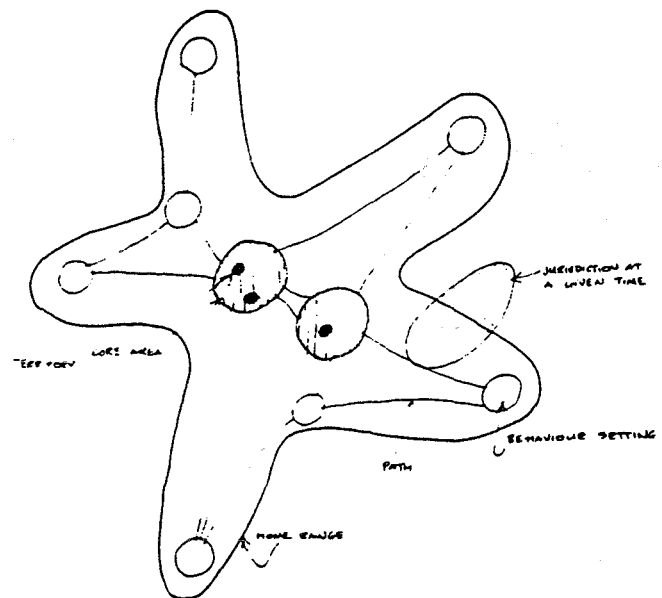
I have previously suggested¹ that socio-cultural and symbolic factors dominate the organisation of dwelling space, and have also suggested that this is the case for cities.² A case study of the Pueblo and Navajo Indians³ illustrated this point in more detail. The present case study of the Australian aborigines extends the generality of the hypothesis that shelter is only one function of architecture and that other, and more important, functions are the symbolic, place-defining and socio-cultural—to any environment in which people live, whether built or not built.

HUNTERS AND GATHERERS

Aborigines are hunters and gatherers. As such they share certain general characteristics with that larger group.⁴ Such people generally live in small groups and move about a great deal. As a result they collect little property and tend to be egalitarian. Their movement is not unrestricted however,⁵ but confined to specific areas. It is the area within which this movement occurs rather than permanent settlements which defines territory.

Group members share food as well as other possessions, and among aborigines articles have been traced through 134 persons.⁶ This sharing creates friendship and social values are more important than economic ones. A web of different reciprocal bonds is expressed through laws, myths, song and ritual, binding people together.⁷ This cultural elaboration becomes possible because obtaining food takes remarkably little time. Hunters and gatherers have much leisure time which is used for games and ritual; they are also remarkably well fed, contrary to general opinion.⁸

Hunters do not store food but *regard the environment as a storehouse*. While each local group is associated with a geographic range there is considerable visiting among groups which do not maintain exclusive rights to resources but have flexible arrange-



Diagrammatic representation of home range, core area, territory and jurisdictions derived from ethnology.

ments. At the same time most groups have a home base or camp.

This generalised description of the way in which hunters and gatherers (including aborigines) use space can be expressed in terms of a set of concepts derived from animal studies.

Home range The usual limit of regular movements and activities, which can be defined as a set of behavioural settings and linking paths.

Core areas Those areas within the home range which are most used and most commonly inhabited.

Territory A particular area which is *owned* and *defended* – whether physically or through rules or symbols which identify the area of an individual or group from others.

Jurisdiction 'Ownership' of a territory for a limited time only, and by some agreed rules.

Among animals the size of home range and core areas and their coincidence, and the times and duration of jurisdiction depend on the natural conditions (climate, rainfall, resources) on the one hand and the animal species on the other. In the case of hunters also the same physical factors play a role as do the values and life-style of the group.

THE AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINES

The social organisation of aboriginal Australia is very complex indeed, as are the legends, myths and art. The contrast of these with material culture is striking and provides another example of the general theme that symbolic elaboration occurs before material elaboration. The application of Western values based on material culture resulted in the evaluation of aborigines as particularly primitive and 'brutish'.

There is some controversy in the literature regarding the validity of generalising for the whole continent. Worms,⁹ Birket-Smith,¹⁰ Meggitt,¹¹ Hiatt,¹² Baldwin Spencer¹³ among others discuss this issue. With regard to the symbolic representations of place it does seem possible to generalise, to accept that in spite of variations in some aspects of aboriginal culture, such as art,¹⁴ certain features are sufficiently uniform for us to speak generally of 'aboriginal Australia'.¹⁵

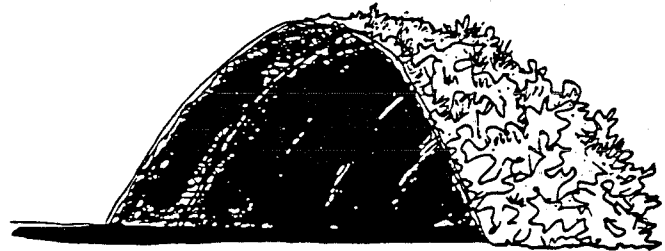
ABORIGINAL SHELTER

It is generally thought that aborigines only had windbreaks but this is an oversimplification.¹⁶ In fact aborigines had a considerable variety of dwellings although simple shelters were most common, at least in Central Australia.

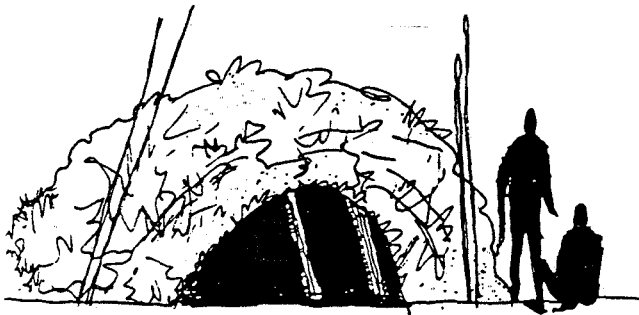
Descriptions can be found of even more elaborate houses such as permanent huts plastered with clay over sods (Hutt River); beehive shaped log huts 4 ft. high, 9 ft. diameter (Hanover Bay); log houses 16 ft. long with recesses in walls for implements, entrance 3 ft. high and floor carpeted with seaweed. At Careening Bay there were dwellings with two stone walls 3 ft. high with saplings carrying bark and grass thatch.¹⁷ This house, as well as houses with circular stone walls at White Lake with a central



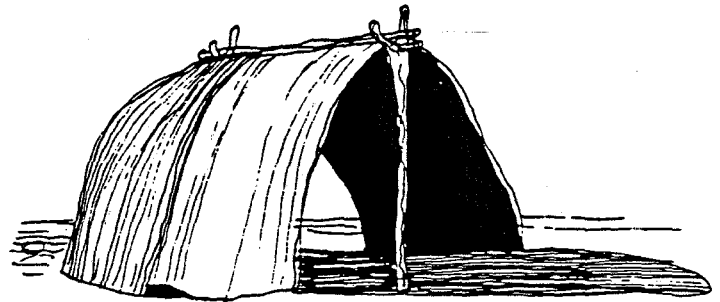
Windbreak shelter, Argonga (Dr. Stephen Bochner) Central Australia.



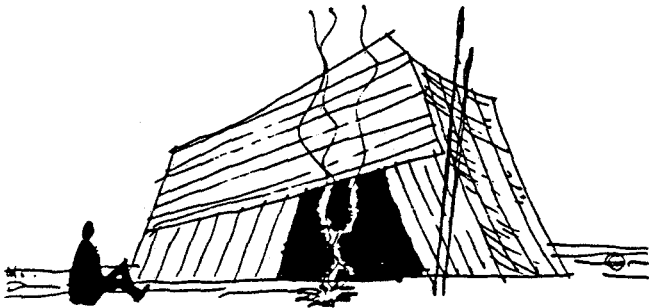
Semicircular shade, 5-6 ft. diameter. Mulga branches arched over; leaf cover; floor scooped out to a depth of 3"-4". Central Australia based on Gould; Thomas.



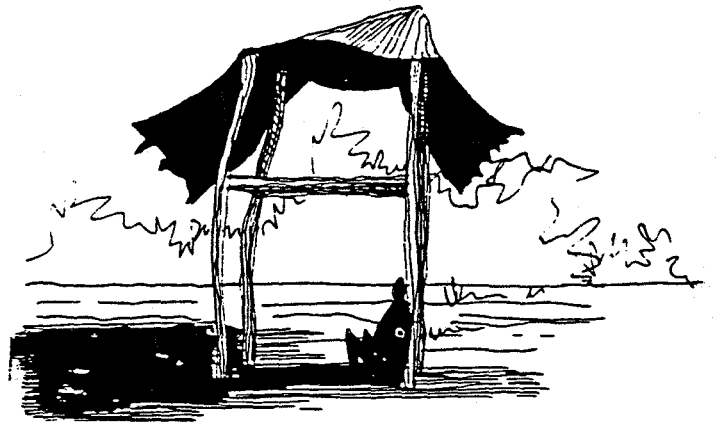
pola shaped wood frame hut with branch and leaf cover. Some of these are up to 15 ft. diameter. Victoria and Queensland. After Thomas; Baldwin-encier.



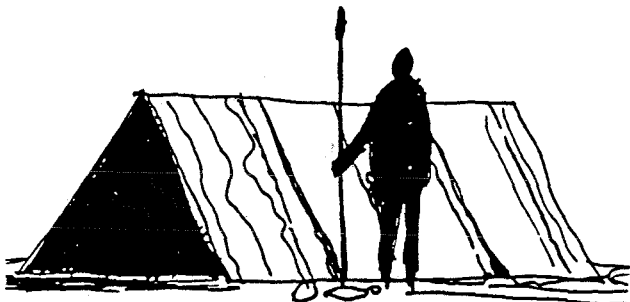
Hut of saplings and sheets of bark. (Australian Museum).



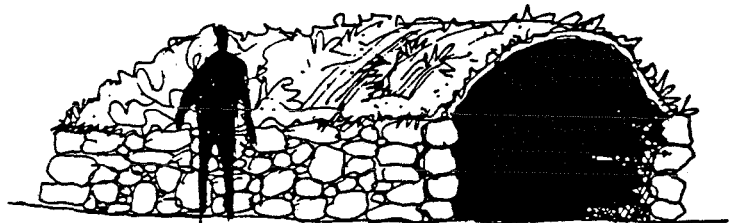
bark hut Central Australia. After Baldwin Spencer.



Two-storey hut, at Lynd River. Pole framework, bark floor and roof. After Thomas.



Hut of bent sheets of bark, (bent while fresh), 10-11 ft. long and 4-5 ft. wide. Victoria and Queensland. After Thomas. The open side is turned away from the wind.



House at Careening Bay. Two stone walls, 3 ft. high sapling roof thatched with bark and grass. After verbal description in Thomas.

upright carrying roof members covered with bark and grass coated with clay, and with a smoke hole, could have been influenced by Malay or Indonesian examples.¹⁸

At Lynd River there were two storey huts, while on Bathurst Island were found very large huts, some with windows, and descriptions exist of a wide variety of other dwellings.¹⁹ The general point, however, is that aborigines had a much greater variety of dwelling types, and often much more substantial, than is commonly thought. At the same time their dwellings were less important than in most other cultures.

If we accept that dwellings have two functions.

(1) physical shelter and

(2) the provision of symbolic space and definition of space, then the Australian aboriginal dwelling seems to fulfil mostly the shelter function although even this is minimal in spite of the often extreme climate. There seems no indication that dwellings fill any symbolic function. Whatever their nature, *dwellings do not seem to have much symbolic meaning or rules on layout and use*, other than the fact that each shelter or dwelling is for one family and outsiders do not enter without invitation – there are strong feelings of personal space and kinship avoidances. The residential unit, ideally, comprises a composite family of a man, several wives, unmarried daughters and uncircumcised sons.²⁰

It is true that the hypothesis that aboriginal dwellings are devoid of symbolic meaning has not been demonstrated directly. The circumstantial evidence, however, is very strong and this may be the only evidence we shall ever have on the subject. As soon as we look at camps, for example, we find that they are arranged along well understood principles and rules differing in different tribes, but quite definite.²¹ For example, when several tribes met, huts were grouped by tribes, the spacing between groups of huts being several times greater than between the huts within the group. The arrangement of camps according to phratries and classes reflected and helped to implement ceremonial rules regulating access of various classes to each other. All areas of Australia had specific, complex rules for positioning huts in the camp and while to the outsider the camp may give an impression of disorder there is a structure, such as a division into two parts reflecting kinship, (possibly emphasised by a natural feature such as a creek or hill) or the provision of special bachelors' and spinsters' camps.²²

At large gatherings in Central Australia, to which some tribes travelled as far as 200 miles, the various camps were arranged so as to indicate roughly the locality of the owner – those from the south camping in the south, those from the north in the north. While camps were as impermanent as huts, the camp was laid out according to definite ceremonial rules.²³ Even a tribe as primitive as the *Kurna* arranged their camp so that huts were in certain directions and at certain distances from each other according to the relationships of the occupiers. The *Arunda* camp had eight groups of huts corresponding to the eight subsections into which the tribe was divided. Two neighbouring groups provided communal meeting centres for men and women respectively, restricted to the opposite sex, which could only be visited if approached from certain directions.

Camp divisions are still symbolic in this sense even today. For example, people in multi-tribal camps group according to the direction from which they come.²⁴ Within the camp fires seem to be more important than huts. Fires are built and kept going on nights when temperatures are 100°F and no cooking is done – it keeps spirits away.²⁵ Often, wherever an aboriginal will squat, he will build a small fire even though the main fire is close by, and this in the heat of the day, with no cooking to be done.²⁶

These characteristics of the camps provide the first clue to the use of space by aborigines and helps clarify how socio-cultural and symbolic environmental functions are fulfilled. There does seem to be a set of places, but they are not in the dwelling. Some symbolic value and social and ritual rules seem to attach to the camp and the fire. The symbolism of place seems more related to the site and directions, i.e. to the *land* rather than the dwelling. In fact this will be the problem which will concern us for the remainder of this essay.

THE LAND

The physical environment of Australia is quite varied. Although most of it is arid, there are wet areas in the north and reasonably watered ones in the east and south east. There are forests, jungles, plains, mountains and deserts. Over much of the country, particularly its arid portions, there are common features – red rock and soil, purple hills, gums with grey-green foliage and white or light coloured trunks, scrub, waterholes, parrots and a number of unique animals and plants.

There are two questions which need to be considered.

1. How do the aborigines use this land?
2. How do the aborigines see this land?

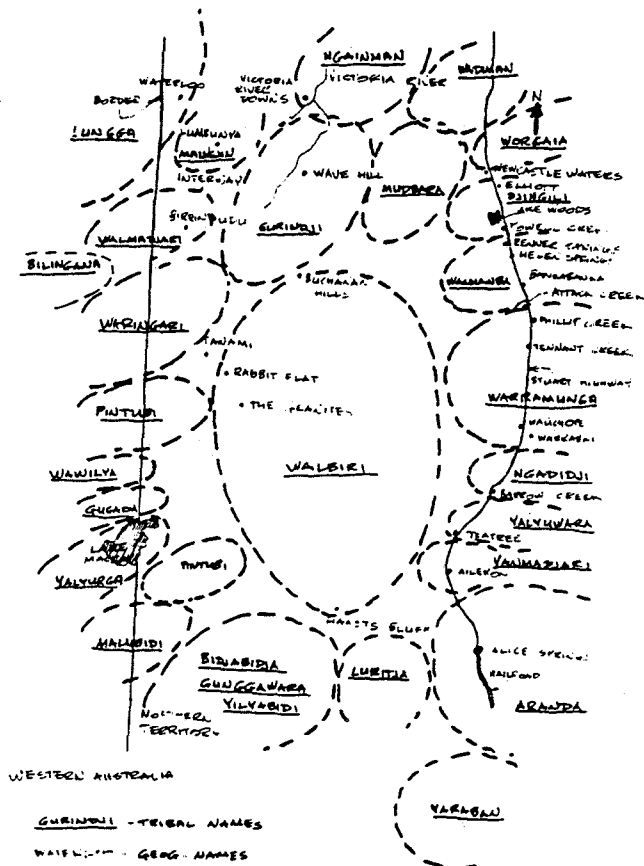
HOW DO THE ABORIGINES USE THIS LAND?

We have already discussed the general use of land by hunters and gatherers. Aborigines live in groups each of which 'owns' a stretch of land and has as its basic unit the individual family which, in some tribes, has rights over a specific locality. Although authorities differ, tribes seem to vary from 100–1500 people, averaging 500.²⁷ In good areas tribal land may be as small as 50 square miles, in arid areas many hundreds of square miles.²⁸

For example the *Walbiri* have an area of 40,000 square miles. They see themselves as one people who share a common culture and occupy a continuous territory with definite boundaries; they can draw maps of their own location and adjoining tribes.²⁹ Tribal borders are respected. Even friendly tribes do not have the right to enter each other's land at will; outsiders may enter an area uninvited only in an emergency (e.g. when starving) and have to recompense the owners. Strangers can enter through social sponsorship while ceremonial messengers and ritual novices with their guardians can travel more or less freely without the need for sponsors.³⁰ There are thus quite definite, recognised stretches of country and boundaries. These latter are often indistinct but can be fairly exact particularly when they coincide with a natural

feature such as water, sand ridge, a grove of trees etc. These boundaries are fixed by mythology and aborigines can draw maps of their own and adjacent territories with relevant details and special features clearly marked.³¹

Different types of territorial understandings and types of demarcations exist and are related to definite sites.³² They are clearest at totemic sites and other special sites and are less clear between other areas. These culturally defined boundaries do not imply exclusivity or sanctions against trespass. The same objective is achieved by having rules for accommodating people across boundaries.³³ The use of the European term 'boundary' suggests more precision than is the case. Normally identification was sufficient demarcation and the main interest was in the symbolic values of a particular place.



Approximate location of adjoining tribes, according to the Walbiri. Based on Meggitt. Tribal boundaries are notional and have been added for clarity; they indicate clear conceptions of tribal location.

Birth and subsequent residence in a locality occupied by a group and totemically associated with it was most important. There were various ceremonies which helped the conversion of non-members to members. Residence in itself only gave *economic - not ritual - rights* to the immigrant,³⁴ i.e. there was a distinction of the economic and ritual use of land with the latter more important.³⁵ It appears that each group had a ritual and social locus and an area whose main importance was economic. Both together formed the ecological life space.³⁶ The ritual areas had clearer boundaries than the foraging areas: the heartland areas were clear, the others interpenetrated and were more indeterminate.³⁷ There was usually a ritual tie between a clan and its estate, but also an emotional bond with the land itself. The boundaries of areas were demarcated by episodes in the sacred myths and hence were not subject to revision. All myths mention borders, limits beyond which a myth could not be told, nor song sung, nor ceremonies performed. Since boundaries were set down by supernatural beings they could not be questioned.³⁸ Each tribe thus knew the boundaries of the country in which it lived and identified with it.³⁹

It is, in fact, possible to distinguish ten distinct types of areas among aborigines.⁴⁰

1. Distinctive habitats
2. Named places and localities
3. Totem sites
4. Clan estates and ranges
5. Unused, shared and indeterminate zones
6. Regular camping places, including rock shelters and caves
7. Established ceremonial grounds
8. Networks of paths, fords and crossing places over natural obstacles
9. Places distinct from 7 where contiguous groups came together
10. Miscellany of capital sites such as watering places, fish weirs, raw material deposits, tool manufactories etc.

Thus there is a detailed and complex series of places which can be indicated on maps showing the mythological movements of Dreamtime heroes.⁴¹

HOW DO THE ABORIGINES SEE THIS LAND?

Many Europeans have spoken of the uniformity and featurelessness of the Australian landscape. The aborigines, however, see the landscape in a totally different way. Every feature of the landscape is known and has meaning - they then perceive differences which Europeans cannot see. These differences may be in terms of detail⁴² or in terms of a magical or invisible landscape, the symbolic space being even more varied than the perceived physical space.⁴³ As one example, every individual feature of Ayer's Rock is linked to a significant myth and the mythological beings who created it. Every tree, every stain, hole and fissure has meaning.⁴⁴

Thus what to a European is an empty land may be full of noticeable differences to the aborigine and hence rich and complex. Europeans may thus completely misunderstand the nature of the landscape because of their point of view. Messages only become meaningful when received and recognised. Signals and signs

become perceptual or conceptual meaning through symbols.⁴⁵ Symbols thus change the biological and geographical world of signals and signs into a human world of meanings.

It is thus a likely hypothesis that aborigines *humanize* their landscape, that is take possession of it conceptually, through symbols – as we do. But whereas our symbols are material – buildings, cities, fences, and monuments – aboriginal symbols are largely non-material. They use, as I shall show later, natural features, myths, ceremonies and rituals, graphic and plastic symbols – and even monuments. For example, all people have sacred places. Most have then built buildings to stress the sacredness of the site. Aborigines stress this sanctity by returning to these places, by ritual and through mythological explanation of environmental variations.⁴⁶ In fact, of the total range of devices available, aborigines use all except written records, buildings and cities.

THE ABORIGINAL WORLD VIEW

Man may adapt to his environment mentally as well as physically. Through cosmology and cosmogony sets of concepts and categories of thought may be developed through which the world is understood. Categories such as time and space, identity and difference, causality, unity and multiplicity, appearance and reality, matter and spirit are different for people with different world views.

In aboriginal cosmogony the Dreamtime is central. Heroes come to a featureless world and transform themselves into natural phenomena, such as trees and rocks which have sacred meanings associated with the particular heroic figure thus creating the landscape.⁴⁷ The Dreaming, when things are made, is not just in the past but also in the present. 'All space is here, all time is now' – all appears symbolically and becomes operative through ritual.⁴⁸ Thus a sacred site is Dreaming, so are the actors in the ritual and the sacred symbols.

Besides having a different concept of time⁴⁹ aborigines also see space differently. It is not something measured – it is an area whose use is dictated by custom. *Every yard is known – but not its size.* Significantly different is the notion of ownership. Tribal lands are not owned even though groups of people had rights over it. Our concept of property ownership has no relevance to the aborigines' spiritual approach. More important to them is the fact that the people are 'owned' by the country – it knew them and gave them sustenance and life. Every person's spirit had pre-existed in this land in the Dreaming and no other land, no matter how fertile, could be theirs or mean the same. Men were permanently attached to their own country⁵⁰ and wanted to die in it.

This twofold nature of ownership characterizes all secret-sacred objects (*Churinga*) and sites of mythological and ritual significance (Dreamings). For example among the Aranda each individual had a personal stone or wood *churinga* kept in a secret 'storehouse' of the ritual group. The *churinga* is a lifeline to the spirit world and the Dreaming – and people belong to it. The 'storehouse' may be a hole in the ground (where the *churinga* is buried), a hollow tree, a cleft in a rock or a shed of branches. In any case it is concealed

from view and the whole area around it is forbidden to women, children and the uninitiated on pain of death.⁵¹ Thus while the concept of a sacred storehouse resembles that of other cultures, it is not expressed by building, and, rather than being stressed, is hidden.

A similar relationship exists between ritual groups and natural or artificially constructed Dreamings – standing stones, rock masses, waterholes, trees or stone arrangements. These are permanent and symbolic assurances of the presence of the Dreaming which are the very ground of being and keep the world going. The whole world is a single entity the main characteristic of which is reciprocity.⁵²

ABORIGINAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAND

From the discussion so far it is clear that the relationship between individuals and groups with their sacred object and sites, and the country generally, is more one of identification than ownership although there are elements of the latter. Boundaries seem to be important more with relation to totemic sites than food gathering areas and these boundaries are defined symbolically by means of legend, myth and ritual.

In terms of perceived environmental distinctions this means that:

a) with respect to the distinction between perceptual and associational aspects⁵³ aborigines attach many associational values to perceived features of the natural environment:

b) considering the distinction between physical and symbolic space⁵⁴ the importance of the latter is greatly elaborated.

Underlying the visible landscape there seemed to be a symbolic landscape which was more real and of which aborigines had a clear notion. This is similar to tribal art generally which expresses 'not aspects of the visible world but rather the invisible forces behind that world'⁵⁵ and also corresponds to Eliade's view that for primitive man the real world is the sacred world – the profane is unreal. Making the world real means making it sacred, and any feature of the landscape may manifest the sacred.⁵⁶

What, therefore, needs to be considered is the relation of this symbolic world to the physical, the relation between symbolic and physical space. Aboriginal religion, mythology and symbolism need to be considered in relation to the physical environment. This can be done in terms of:

- i) the general relationship to the land and attachment to it;
- ii) the concept of the Dreamtime;
- iii) sacred places and totemic sites;
- iv) ceremonies, symbols, signs, monuments.

ii) GENERAL RELATIONSHIP TO THE LAND AND ATTACHMENT TO IT

The land, no matter how arid, is home to the aborigines. They are aware of its problems but derive satisfaction from it difficult for the outsider to grasp '... to appreciate this sense of belonging to the land is to begin to understand the aborigines'.⁵⁷ When shown photographs of buildings, airplanes and cars they are unimpressed but show great interest in scenery, landscape, people and animals.⁵⁸ This close relation to the land is strengthened by

the fact, already discussed, that hunters treat the environment as their storehouse. Aborigines have few tools or objects and rely on 'instant tools', that is they recognise potentially useful objects in the environment. If this object matches a 'mental template' or idea of a tool, for example a spear thrower, a concrete object results.⁵⁹

Aborigines, like all primitive people, were not concerned with dominating their surroundings. Their view of life stressed the oneness between man and the rest of nature. Even their supernatural beings and immortals were not beyond human ken but in their midst and related to the land.⁶⁰ All writers on the subject seem to agree that aborigines were in balance with nature. They saw themselves as a part of nature rather than its antagonists. They cooperated with nature rather than trying to subdue it. There was no sharp line between man and the natural world, its animals and plants. Man did not differ in quality from other species but shared with them the same life essence.

A number of writers report that to keep warm the aboriginal adapted to conditions to the extent of controlling his blood circulation and metabolism. This enabled him to maintain body warmth from a very small fire; rather than building a large fire and sitting far from it the aboriginal built a small one and sat close to it. This lack of conceptual boundaries between the aboriginal and the world was reinforced by the lack of physical barriers such as clothing, houses or walls. While Western man relies on such barriers to keep out nature, reduce differences between seasons and times and defines places by manipulating these barriers, aborigines define places by *knowing* them and their distinctions. This knowledge is perceptual and real as well as associational, mythical and symbolic: these basic attitudes also prevail all over the continent in spite of local differences.

ii) THE CONCEPTS OF DREAMTIME

Every publication dealing with aborigines stresses the central place of Dreamtime. As for most primitive people ritual is central – sacred and profane are intertwined. Religion is an inseparable part of every individual's daily life. Aboriginal religion is nothing less than 'the theme of existence and as such it constitutes one of the most sophisticated and unique religious and philosophical systems known to man'.⁶¹ This religion therefore is essential for an understanding of any aspect of the socio-cultural life of aborigines.⁶² Central to religion, and to all symbolic expression of it, is the Dreamtime.

This concept, existing in almost all aboriginal myths, deals with a period when great heroes and heroines travelled over the land which was flat and featureless – with no mountains, waterholes or living things. All these, as well as fire, laws and so on were created by the heroes whose paths and camping places are described in the myths and form sacred places. Usually the hero dies, turning into natural features which are also sacred.

These myths show how closely aborigines are bound to their surroundings, since every feature is mythically related to their origin. The group is linked to the land through the symbolism of

myth. Myth is a symbolic statement about society and man's place in it and the surrounding universe.⁶³ It is an expression of unobservable realities in terms of observable phenomena.⁶⁴ In the case of the aborigines the features of their land. The first stories children would hear would explain the creation of natural features. The aborigines thus lived in a world dominated by natural features and the myths linking him with these were a central theme in his life. Most aspects of daily and ceremonial life were linked to the Dreamtime creatures and the local topography. Physical features of the environment were personified through the Dreamtime – rocks and trees were living evidence of the Dreamtime heroes.

The ties to these heroes and the land were kept alive by ceremonial, ritual and art.⁶⁵ The whole past history of the tribe was bound up with these ceremonies – and hence the natural features of the landscape as well as ceremonial objects. Often the dead were oriented towards their Dreamtime camping ground.⁶⁶ Thus aboriginal symbolic space is related to the Dreamtime and travel features of heroes rather than compass points. *The mythical landscape is superimposed over the physical landscape and they coincide at natural features.*

iii) SACRED PLACES AND TOTEMIC SITES⁶⁷

Within the tribe or horde⁶⁸ there are ritual groups (clans) associated with natural phenomena or species. The tribe shares a cultural pattern protected by its boundary but clans are more closely related to special sites, identified with their totemic hero and his wanderings. These sacred centres (Dreamings) are more closely defined than the food gathering areas, and the sacred clan territory is very different from the relatively profane tribal area. The main tribal link is language⁶⁹ while the clan has closer links and a common ancestor. The tribal land is available to all members who share its animals and plants. The clan territory is only fully and freely accessible to initiated men who rarely left it except for special occasions. Married women often lived far from their own clan area but maintained spiritual and emotional ties with it. There is thus more sharing and less exclusivity to food producing areas (relatively profane) than to totemic areas (sacred).

The clan area is thus composed of a number of different totem sites linked by paths while the tribal land is a connected whole surrounding these sites.⁷⁰ The relationship of this to the model of space use seems quite clear.

The membership of a clan is explicitly expressed by referring to its totemic ancestors and implicitly to its *totem sites*.⁷¹ Clan membership thus has a spatial component and a *special place*. Even the larger group is often identified spatially – with an area or camping site.

Some tribes have large numbers of clan territories which can be named and mapped⁷² and this has been found in different parts of the country suggesting, once again, that there is some uniformity across Australia.

In these clan areas are a number of sacred sites and in each of these a particularly sacred spot – a life centre of natural phenomena, species or objects to which all clan members are intimately

related. There are also cult lodges to which men belong. Their *churingas* are kept in caves, trees or underground and these sacred lodges have no buildings such as one might find in, say, the Sepik River area of New Guinea.

There is thus a clear distinction between sacred and profane, very much as Eliade suggests, even though there are no visible physical demarcations. For example when *churingas* were kept in caves, those entering to fetch them impressed palm prints near the entrance to establish *rites of passage*⁷³ indicating an awareness of a boundary between sacred and profane. In fact any place where *churingas* are kept becomes sacred, and the *churinga* is shown to initiate as a rite of passage giving rebirth into full membership of the clan. Similarly, ceremonial leaders frequently become such in special caves whereas other people who entered these caves would disappear forever.⁷⁴ There are thus a number of rites of passage related to environmental features.

Some sacred places are specially related to the conception of children.⁷⁵ When a woman conceives in a place where there are prominent features – rocks, boulders, ancient trees – one of the spirit children of the place enters her body and the totem of this place becomes the child's irrespective of the father's or mother's totem. This shows the importance of the place of conception and the individual retains a special relationship to the natural feature and would worry if the tree was to be cut down or the rock mined.⁷⁶

Generally, then, the religious and social unit is defined through its relation to spirit beings and special sites. In fact their territory is defined by the sites claimed, which cannot be entered by others who may enter the food gathering area. The land itself represents the most obvious, most enduring and most visible focus of the group. In fact the complexity of the relationship between all social aspects of the group and various sites grows as one goes further into the subject but enough has been said to show the existence of a set of places of distinct levels of importance.

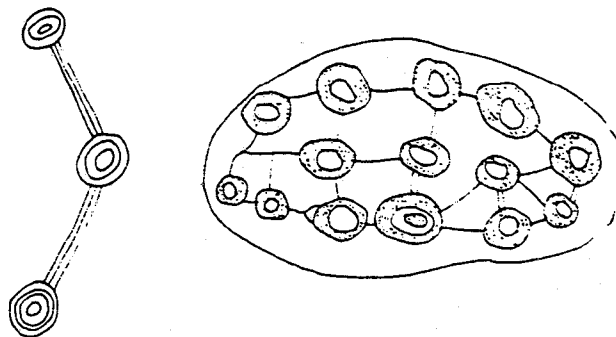
ii) CEREMONIES. SYMBOLS. SIGNS. MONUMENTS

These will be discussed later.

MENTAL MAPS

It has been pointed out several times that aborigines are able to map their 'countries', their sacred sites and the tracks of the Dreamtime heroes. In fact the link between the unseen, but very real, mythical world and the physical world is expressed through mental maps. Aborigines have such mental maps which have been studied, but have not been recorded systematically. Some data is, however, available.

Many of the decorations on the few objects which aborigines seem to be a series of watercourses along the track of Dreamtime ancestors. Other landmarks such as sandhills, rocky outcrops and saltlakes may be shown. But not all the watercourses of the region are shown, only those thought to have been created or visited by the particular mythological character concerned. They are, thus, not maps in a practical sense but mental mythological maps – mnemonic devices for recalling sacred traditions.



Designs by the Yiwara which appear to be 'mental maps', or conventionalized mnemonics for sacred places and tracks. After Gould.

Aborigines can make the most exact and complex maps of the journeys of their ancestral figures and they themselves re-enact the journey going in procession from sacred spot to sacred spot, following the divine route. If we remember the processions in tracing the boundaries of Roman (and other) cities, we find a similar way of defining place except that it was expressed concretely by building walls. In fact aboriginal areas where sacred objects are stored became sanctified and animals and people in them were safe – an early form of the city or house of refuge⁷⁸ but without physical construction.

THE DEFINITION OF PLACE

In general terms it appears that aborigines define place through sacred directions, routes of the Dreamtime ancestors and their stopping places which become sacred sites, landscape features and the like. Thus an apparently featureless landscape may become full of meaning and significance, legends and happenings – that is full of places.⁷⁹ The harsh environment is personalised through ritual and myth bringing its natural features into the realm of the familiar and friendly. Aborigines do not move just in a landscape but in a humanised realm saturated with significations.⁸⁰

In this humanised realm physical features have a larger meaning which makes them part of the associational as well as the perceptual world: they exist in symbolic and sacred space as well as in physical space. This agrees with Eliade's view that sacred space is more real than profane space which is amorphous and formless.⁸¹ Ritual orientation enables reference to some fixed points which are in sacred space. Rather than defining sacred space by building aborigines do it in other ways. By making each natural feature significant they obtain the coincidence of the mythical and physical landscape which distinguishes places from each other and establishes a system of special places. As I pointed out before the mythical and physical landscapes coincide at special features. More specifically, a number of ways in which aborigines establish places and distinguish between them can now be listed.

1. Space becomes symbolic through myths of the Dreamtime;

2. aborigines repeat the wanderings of the Dreamtime ancestors and re-enact various events at ceremonial grounds;
3. aborigines use sacred paintings and engravings on rocks or in caves and also construct temporary or permanent monuments including the use of body decoration;
4. they construct ritual and ceremonial sites laid out in a sacred order;
5. places become sacred by having the sacred *churingas* stored in them;
6. camp grounds in general are laid out in terms of symbolism and ritual rules;
7. fires are used to define place.

Some of these have already been discussed – the myths of the Dreamtime, storage of *churingas*, layout of camp grounds and use of fires. The others will now be described.

RE-ENACTMENT OF WANDERINGS AND OTHER EVENTS

Aborigines re-enact the wanderings of ancestor figures, stopping at specified places – trees, rocks, waterholes, special camp grounds. The paths are followed and acts repeated in a prescribed order. These pilgrimages can be described in quite considerable detail,⁸² and the sites and tracks can be mapped.⁸³

The re-enactments are complex; stereotyped ceremonies can be clearly described and the pattern of actor's movement can be drawn.⁸⁴

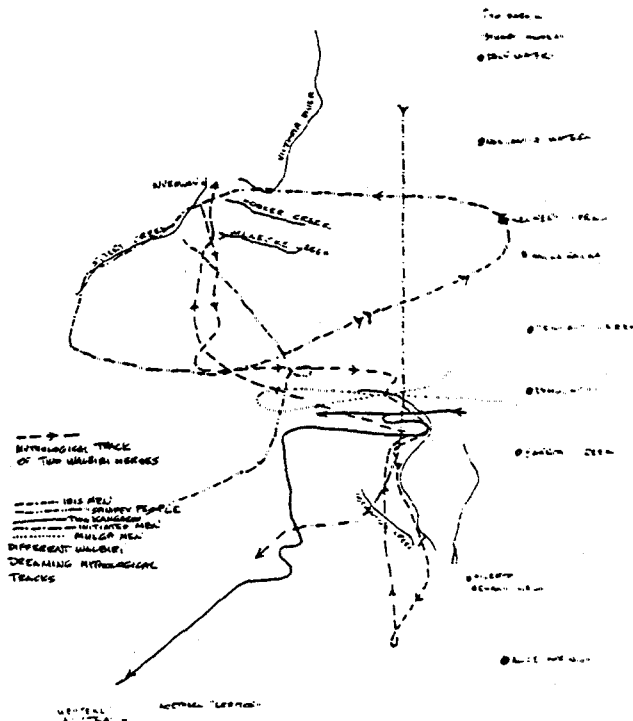
Some of these ceremonies lasted for months and a strict temporal and *geographical* order was laid down.

These trips are intimately related to various features of the landscape. Every prominent and many minor landscape features are significant and become sacred places. Before initiation, novices are taught the routes of these Dreamtime beings which criss-cross the land in all directions. Through the pilgrimages and re-enactments of rites links to the land are set up and the aborigines temporarily re-enter the Dreamtime.

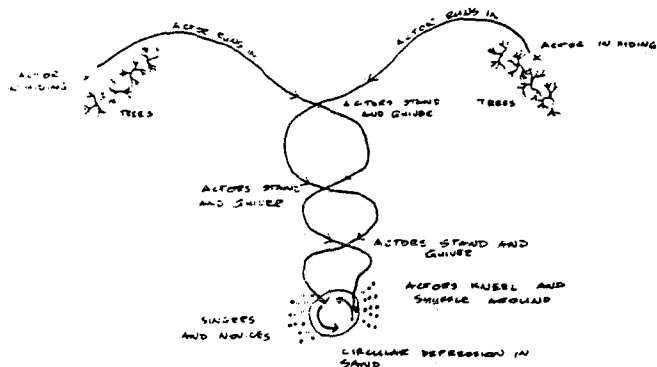
Places are thus defined by sacred myths which are made concrete through re-enactments. Since these re-enactments are of the creative wanderings they, in effect, repeat the cosmogony which fits Eliade's point that the ritual of constructing sacred space is efficacious in the measure in which it reproduces the work of the gods.⁸⁵ The purpose of re-enactment is to show the association between visible object and invisible power – it makes the unseen world visible. The events portrayed are also thought to be in the present as much as at the beginning of things. The time scheme is cyclic and re-enactments re-establish these cycles.

Accepting Eliade's notion that establishing of places involves making the profane sacred, re-enactment rituals do this through words, dance, symbolic objects and body paintings used. Intention precedes physical aspects: in fact, physical means in our terms are not essential. In many cultures much ritual symbolism presents the occult as located in the natural environment and its features – aborigines almost stop with this.

It has been suggested that in general there are nine characteristics of symbols with regard to religion, of which only *one* is the



Sketch map of the mythological tracks of some heroes and Dreamings of the Walbiri. After Meggitt. See also Berndt: Baldwin Spencer.

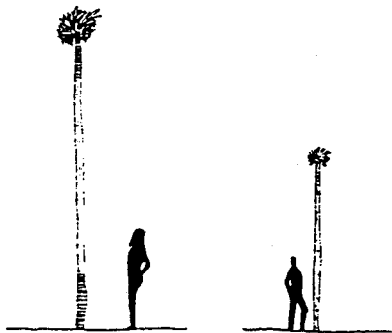


Conventional and stereotyped pattern of actor's movements in Walbiri ceremony. After Meggitt.

artefactual—actually fashioned and made.⁸⁶ Aborigines use all nine—including artefactual. In fact *only buildings are not used in the definition of place*. Their monuments are not buildings and other constructions *added* to the landscape but part of that landscape involving at most a rearrangement or reassembly of some of its elements.⁸⁷ Other cultures create a new physical landscape in keeping with creation myths. Aborigines structure their *existing* physical landscape mentally, mythically and symbolically without building it.

TEMPORARY AND PERMANENT MONUMENTS

Many descriptions and illustrations exist of ceremonies all showing the great variety, richness and complexity of the temporary 'monuments' used—body decorations, shields, poles, crosses and the like. Various markers may be erected, rocks emphasized by having blood poured on them or special bough huts built in which men spend much time during ceremonials.⁸⁸ During some ceremonials big fires are lit as 'temporary monuments'.



Central Australian sacred poles (*Nartanja*, *Kauana*). After Baldwin Spencer.

The various forms of body decorations are extremely complex involving painting, covering the body with down stuck with blood and so on as well as the use of extremely complex, elaborate and tall head gear.⁸⁹ People so decorated could be seen as 'temporary monuments' claiming a place by making it sacred through linking it with myth.

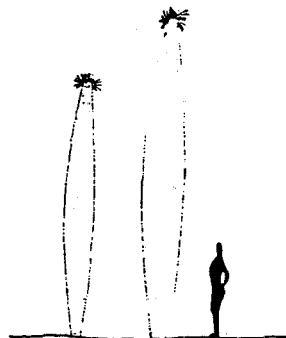
Various types of poles are erected as 'temporary monuments', for example the *Nartunja* poles which are symbols of natural or sacred natural objects.

Another example are the massive *Jelmalandji* poles used in rituals throughout Arnhem land, Roper River, etc.

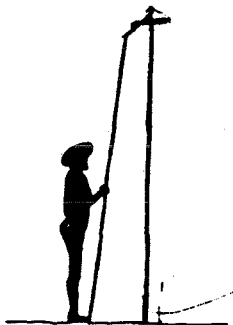
Many other kinds are used and it is interesting to note that Eliade stresses the general importance of the erection and carrying of poles.⁹⁰ Other structures are also carried, for example, frameworks with crosses.⁹¹

More permanent monuments are also used. These include rock paintings, rock piles such as at Pukara described by Gould.

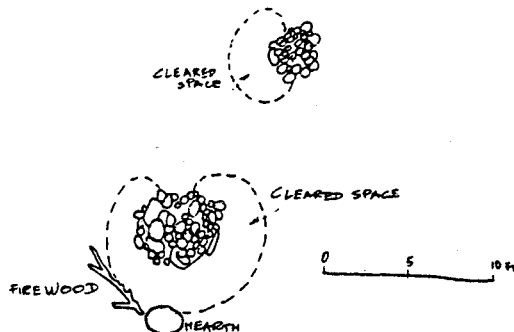
Among the largest and most complex are the rock alignments described by Gould⁹² which are of a quite impressive scale.



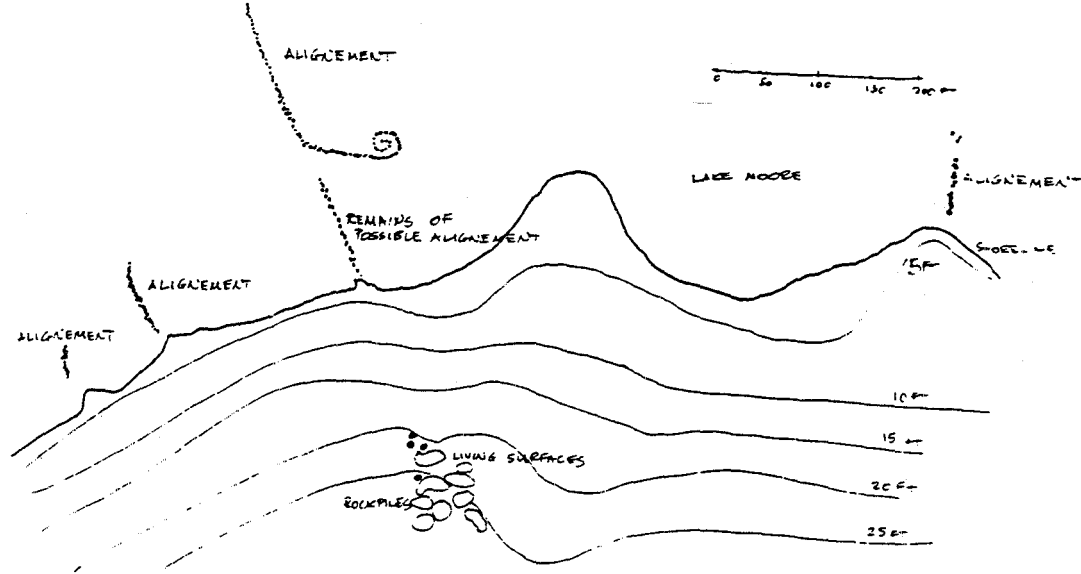
A pair of sacred poles from Arnhem Land (*Jelmalandji*). After Berndt.



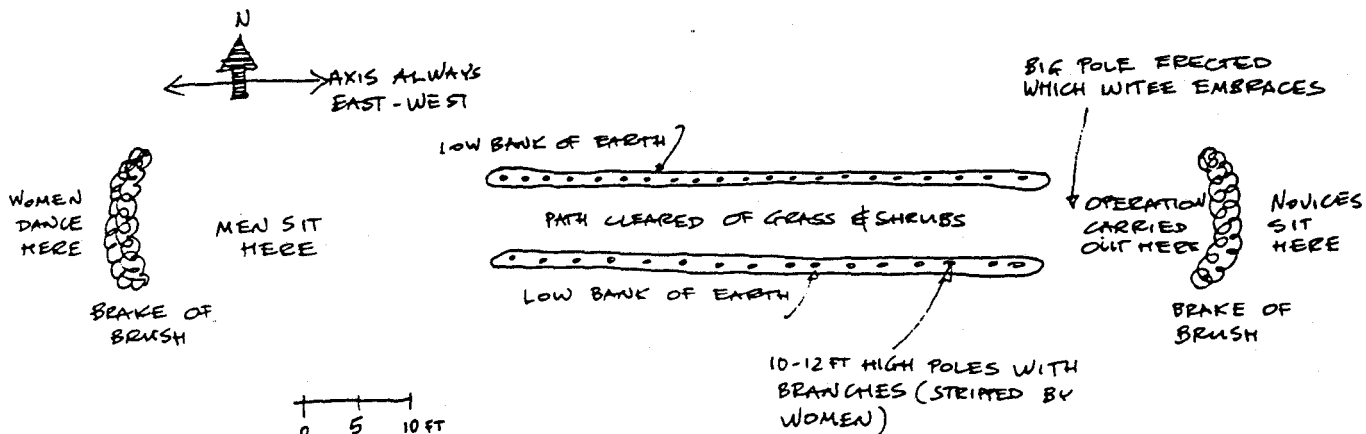
Walbiri string cross. After Meggitt; see also Berndt and Baldwin Spencer.



Plan of two sacred rock piles (*Yiwara* tribe); after Gould.



Series of alignments, including major serpentine alignment, approximately 240 ft. long. After Gould, who illustrated others



Ground for circumcision ceremony, Central Australia. After Baldwin Spencer. See also Meggitt

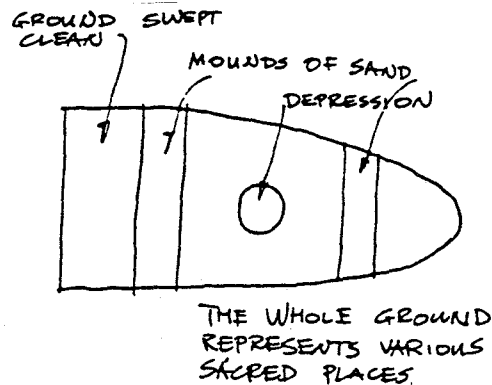
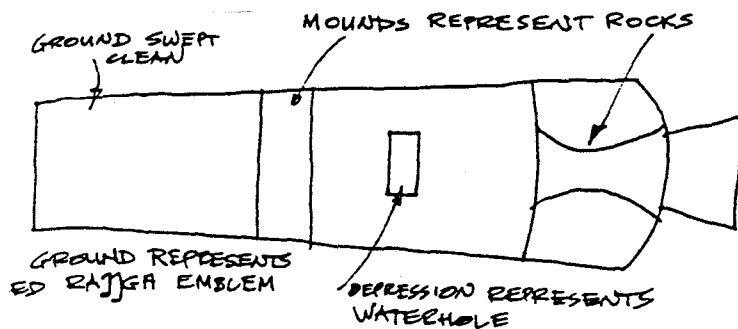
CONSTRUCTION OF RITUAL AND CEREMONIAL SITES LAID OUT IN A SACRED ORDER

The ceremonies of various groups are associated with a particular spot. This may be marked by a prominent natural feature, for example, a great column of sandstone,⁹³ but in most cases rather complex ceremonial grounds are laid out.

For example, the ground for the initiation circumcision ceremony is placed out of sight of the main camp so women cannot see it and it is quite complex.

For the *Jirinda* ceremony at Yirrkala the ground is swept clear and on it are arranged mounds of sand (representing rocks) and an oblong depression at (a) representing a waterhole. The whole *Bugalub* ground represents a sacred *rajiga* emblem.

Another *Bugalub* is arranged with the sand mounds and depression arranged differently representing a sacred ritual ground used in certain circumcision ceremonies, but also a sacred site in Arnhem land, i.e. a definite geographical location.



Two examples of grounds for sacred ceremonies in Arnhem Land. After Berndt, size not indicated.

CONCLUSION

In the largest sense the making of places is the ordering of the world, the clarification of the differences between places some of which are more significant than others. It is the making visible of a special space – in the case of primitive people sacred space which, according to Eliade constitutes a break in the homogeneity of indifferenced space⁹⁴ and hence a *place*. I have tried to show that without building axes, sacred precincts, buildings or cities aborigines were able to make the world theirs through symbolic means and achieve a stable world consisting of places.

Our discussion of aboriginal place making is also a good illustration of Langer's concept of making visible an Ethnic Domain through the use of symbols. She stresses the importance of the congruence of symbols and whatever they are to mean⁹⁵ By using natural features, the physical structure of landscape becomes congruent with mythical structure and hence humanised. If architecture is the mode of creating virtual space, making visible an ethnic domain and setting up a sphere of influence,⁹⁶ then aborigines create place by giving meaning to sites in terms of their culture – their ethnic domain. They do what architecture does in all the ways described but without the architecture.

Sorokin draws an implicit continuum between groups for whom shared spatial domains become an important symbol vehicle and those where they are not important – for example learned societies⁹⁷ Aborigines are very much in the former category, which helps explain the rapid psychological and cultural breakdown of tribes when their lands and sacred sites were taken away. The link to these places was crucial because their title to the land went back to their very creation.

For the Aranda, all religious rites, art, poetry and drama were based on definite geographical centres. In the old days the complete

ceremonial cycle could only be performed at proper sites and a man could only reach full social standing in his own area. Authority was based upon ties to the land. In Central Australia generally all art, song, myth, dance and so on was linked to the land. When aborigines lost their land they lost all. Losing their land meant more than economic loss – it was cultural and religious disaster.

To Europeans land meant buildings, crops, man-made artefacts, for aborigines it was a spiritual and emotional thing.⁹⁸ Because aborigines did not cultivate land or erect permanent dwellings, that is because they took possession of land in non-material ways rather than in European terms, the latter did not realise that aborigines owned, occupied and used land. They could thus appropriate such land without qualms.

The link can still be seen today, even if only among those aborigines who are not yet detribalized and already psychologically broken, i.e. those who still retain their culture. There are not many of these – in most cases their culture has been totally destroyed.

Among the few remaining groups with tribal culture more or less intact the traditional link to the land and specific places is still strong. The *Pinjandjara* in Central Australia still feel that the loss of their land to miners will lead to a destruction of their religion, culture and the tribe itself.

Starting in May 1970 eleven tribes at Yirrkala in Arnhem land have been pressing a claim for 50 square miles of land. Their case is based on the intense spiritual connection existing between themselves and their land. These close links, they claim, establish title and entitle them on declaration of ownership based on aboriginal law and custom. These aborigines claimed a timeless and inextinguishable relationship to their land much more significant than ownership in 'fee simple' which was the highest right recognized by the white man's system. Areas of land held by different groups

could be accurately defined, they claimed, as could be the individual's rights. Among aborigines there were no disputes about who owned any particular tract, and boundaries were well established, often to within a few yards, and these were described in court.⁹⁹

Aboriginal witnesses testified that the land had been given them by spiritual ancestors and their spiritual link with the land was proved by the churingas. The travels of the Dreamtime ancestors were described and the conflicts with proposed mining development stressed.¹⁰⁰

The major case of this type in Australia receiving most publicity is that of the *Gurindji*. This case has been in progress since April 1967 and has become a *cause célèbre* with political and emotional involvement leading to boycotts, sit-ins, public meetings, direct help and the like. This public involvement is strengthened by the fact that the Australian government refused to accept any traditional aboriginal land rights in 1971.

It is significant that the *Gurindjis*, who claim 500 square miles at Wattie Creek, refuse all offers of land, help and houses elsewhere in the same area. While the purpose of much of the action is to regain economic independence, cultural identity, dignity, confidence and self-respect, it is significant that, once again, the claim is based on the emotional and spiritual ties to a specific area of land - a place.

It thus seems clear that the Australian aborigines were most definitely able to establish a sense of place which was independent of any buildings which they might have constructed. This suggests that in the larger sense the establishment of place is a symbolic process. The use of physical barriers is only one way of achieving this - although, apparently, an essential one in our culture and context.

NOTES

This article was written in April, 1971. A shorter and different version appeared in William J. Mitchell (ed.) *EDRAZ*. University of California. Los Angeles. 1972

- ¹ RAPOPORT, AMOS. *House Form and Culture*. Prentice-Hall, Englewood-Cliffs, NJ. 1969.
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- ³ RAPOPORT, AMOS. 'The Pueblo and the Hogan: A Cross-Cultural comparison of Two Responses to an Environment'. OLIVER, PAUL (ed.). *Shelter and Society*. Barrie & Rockliff, London, 1969
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- ⁵ CARR-SAUNDERS, cited in WYNNE-EDWARDS, V. C., *Animal Dispersion in Relation to Social Behaviour*, Oliver and Boyd, Edinburgh and London, 1962, pp 21; 187
- ⁶ FALKENBERG, JOHANNES. *Kin and Totem* (Group Relations of Australian Aborigines in the Port Keats District). Oslo University Press, Oslo, 1962, p 9
- ⁷ MOUNTFORD, CHARLES P., *Ayers Rock*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1965, p 17
- ⁸ See LEE, R. B. and DE VORE, I., 'Problems in the Study of Hunters and Gatherers' op. cit., pp 11-12 and elsewhere.
- ⁹ WORMS, A. E., 'Religion' in STANNER, W. E. H. and SHEILS, H., (eds). *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1963, p 174.
- ¹⁰ BIRKET-SMITH, K.J., *Primitive Man and his Ways*, Mentor Books, New York, 1963, pp 41, 50
- ¹¹ MEGGITT, M. J., 'Marriage, Classes and Demography in Central Australia' in LEE and DE VORE, op. cit.
- ¹² HIATT, L. R., *Ibid.*, p. 100.

- ¹³ SPENCER, BALDWIN and GILLEN, F. J., *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1894) Dover, New York, 1968.
- ¹⁴ *Australian Aboriginal Art* (The Louis A. Allen Collection). Exhibition at Robert H. Lowie Museum of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, January 17-August 25, 1969. (Text by Albert B. Elsasser and Vivian Paul)
- ¹⁵ This is also the conclusion of the Berndts. See R. M. and C. H. BERNDT, *The World of the First Australians*, Ure Smith, Sydney, 1964, pp 23-24.
- ¹⁶ I was guilty of just this oversimplification in *House Form and Culture*. (*Ibid.*)
- ¹⁷ THOMAS, N. W., *Natives of Australia*. Archibald Constable, London, 1906, pp. 71-72
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp 71-73; BERNDT, op. cit. p. 20. argues that aborigines did adopt stone houses which they knew from Malaya and Indonesia.
- ¹⁹ THOMAS, op. cit., p. 74; BIRKET-SMITH, op. cit., pp 34-35
- ²⁰ MEGGITT, M. J., *Desert People* (A study of the Walbiri aborigines of Central Australia.), University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1965. (Second Impression).
- ²¹ THOMAS, op. cit., p. 74-75
- ²² MEGGITT, op. cit., pp 75-76
- ²³ BIRKET-SMITH, op. cit., p. 35.
- ²⁴ GOULD, RICHARD A., *Yiwara*, (Foragers of the Australian Desert). Charles Scribners Sons, New York, 1969, p. 173; L. R. HIATT, personal communication.
- ²⁵ GOULD, op. cit., p. 26.
- ²⁶ BOCHNER, DR. STEPHEN, University of New South Wales, personal communication.
- ²⁷ BERNDT, *World of the First Australians*, op. cit., p. 35.
- ²⁸ STANNER and SHEILS, op. cit., p. 174.
- ²⁹ MEGGITT, op. cit., pp. 1: 30-32
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp 44-46.
- ³¹ BERNDT, op. cit., pp. 34-35.
- ³² MEGGITT, op. cit., pp 67-73.
- ³³ HIATT, Pilling, Lee, in LEE and DE VORE, op. cit., p. 157.
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- ³⁵ HIATT, L. R., 'Local Organisation among the Australian Aborigines', *Oceania*, Vol. 32, no. 4, June 1962, pp. 267-286; 'Ownership and Use of Land Among the Australian Aborigines' in LEE and DE VORE, op. cit., pp 99-102
- ³⁶ STANNER, W. E. H., 'Aboriginal Territorial Organisation: Estate, range, domain and regime', *Oceania* Vol. 36, No. 1, September 1965, pp 1-16
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 11. It is interesting that among animals also, home ranges for food gathering may be exclusive or overlapping, cf WYNNE-EDWARDS, op. cit., p. 100.
- ³⁸ STREHLOW, T. G. H., 'Culture, Social structure and environment in Aboriginal Central Australia' in R. M. and C. H. BERNDT (eds), *Aboriginal Man in Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1965
- ³⁹ SPENCER, op. cit., pp 7-8
- ⁴⁰ STANNER, op. cit., p. 13
- ⁴¹ MEGGITT, M. J., 'Gadjari among the Walbiri Aborigines', *Oceania*, Vol. 36, No. 3, March 1966, pp 178; 196
- ⁴² RAPOPORT, AMOS and HAWKES, RON, 'The perception of Urban Complexity', *AIP Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 2, March 1970, p. 107.
- ⁴³ RAPOPORT, AMOS, 'The study of spatial quality', *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, Vol. 4, 4 October 1970, pp 81-95
- ⁴⁴ MOUNTFORD, op. cit., pp 13, 25; 30ff
- ⁴⁵ FRANK, LAWRENCE K., 'The World as communication network' in KEPES, G., (ed.) *Sien Images, Symbol*, George Braziller, New York, 1966, pp 1: 4-5; 8.
- ⁴⁶ FALKENBERG, op. cit., pp 81, 84
- ⁴⁷ EIKIN, A. P., 'Elements of Aboriginal Philosophy', *Oceania*, Vol. 40, no. 2, December 1969, pp 85-98
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 88
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp 91-93; BIRKET-SMITH, op. cit., p. 23; MOUNTFORD, op. cit., p. 24; cf. also ELIADÉ, MIRCEA, *The Sacred and the Profane*, Harper and Row, New York, 1961
- ⁵⁰ FALKENBERG, op. cit., p. 88
- ⁵¹ SPENCER, op. cit., p. 11
- ⁵² BIRKET-SMITH, op. cit., p. 23.
- ⁵³ RAPOPORT, AMOS, 'Symbolism and Environmental Design', *International Journal of Symbolology*, Vol. 1, no. 3, 1969, pp 1-9.
- ⁵⁴ RAPOPORT, AMOS, *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, op. cit.

- ⁵⁵ GOLDWATER, ROBERT. 'Judgements of Primitive Art. 1905-1969'. in BIEBUYCK, D. P. (ed.), *Tradition and Creativity in Tribal Art*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969, p. 32.
- ⁵⁶ ELIADE, MIRCEA, op. cit.
- ⁵⁷ GOULD, op. cit., p. 53.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 73-74.
- ⁵⁹ Ibid, p. 83-84.
- ⁶⁰ STREHLOW in BERNDT, *Aboriginal Man*, op. cit., p. 144.
- ⁶¹ GOULD, op. cit., p. 104.
- ⁶² BERNDT, op. cit., p. xv.
- ⁶³ MIDDLETON, JOHN (ed.), *Myth and Cosmos*, (Readings in Mythology and Symbolism), Natural History Press, Garden City NY, 1961, p. x.
- ⁶⁴ LEACH in Ibid, p. 1.
- ⁶⁵ See FALKENBERG, op. cit., pp. 85-86; MOUNTFORD, op. cit., pp. 17, 25, 197-199.
- ⁶⁶ SPENCER, op. cit., pp. 119, 122, 497.
- ⁶⁷ Most of this discussion is based on FALKENBERG, op. cit., specially pp. 7: 11; 16; 21-22; 114-117; 139; 271.
- ⁶⁸ There is some disagreement in the literature about the presence of tribes, the meaning of horde, and their relationship. All agree, however, that some form of larger grouping exists.
- ⁶⁹ C.f. ELIADE, op. cit.; GOULD, op. cit.; The Ancient Greeks.
- ⁷⁰ For a diagram of this see FALKENBERG, op. cit., p. 21. Note the close resemblance of this to the home range, core area, territory model proposed earlier in this paper.
- ⁷¹ FALKENBERG, op. cit., p. 22.
- ⁷² MOUNTFORD, op. cit., p. 17 and Figure 3.
- ⁷³ HAWKES, JACQUETTA and WOOLLEY, SIR LEONARD, *Prehistory and the Beginnings of Civilisation*. (UNESCO History of Mankind, Vol. 1), Harper and Row, New York, 1963, p. 212.
- ⁷⁴ SPENCER, op. cit., p. 524.
- ⁷⁵ FALKENBERG, op. cit., pp. 48; 234-240; 249.
- ⁷⁶ SPENCER, op. cit., p. 124-126; 132-133.
- ⁷⁷ RYKWERT, JOSEPH, *The Idea of a Town*, G. Van Saane, Hilversum, (nd).
- ⁷⁸ SPENCER, op. cit., p. 133-135.
- ⁷⁹ See for example, PORTEOUS, S. D., *The Psychology of a Primitive People*, Longmans Green, New York, 1931; PINK, OLIVE M., 'Spirit Ancestors in a Northern Aranda Tribe Country', *Oceania*, Vol. 4, no. 2, December 1933, pp. 176-186.
- ⁸⁰ STANNER in BERNDT, *Aboriginal Man*, op. cit., pp. 227-311.
- ⁸¹ ELIADE, op. cit., pp. 20-22.
- ⁸² SPENCER, op. cit., Chapter X.
- ⁸³ MEGGITT, 'Gadjari . . .', op. cit., pp. 178; 196.
- ⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 212.
- ⁸⁵ ELIADE, op. cit., pp. 29; 32.
- ⁸⁶ TURNER, V. W. in HUXLEY, J. (ed.), *A Discussion of Ritualisation in Animals and Man*, (Philosophical transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B, Vol. 251 (Biological Sciences)), 1966, p. 295. See also BOWRA, M. in Ibid., pp. 388; 390-91.
- ⁸⁷ BERNDT, *First Australians*, op. cit., p. 247.
- ⁸⁸ SPENCER, op. cit., p. 191.
- ⁸⁹ For example see BERNDT, *Aboriginal Man*, op. cit.; BALDWIN-SPENCER, op. cit.; in fact any illustrated book on the aborigines.
- ⁹⁰ ELIADE, op. cit., p. 32 ff.
- ⁹¹ SPENCER, op. cit., Figure 57, p. 307; MEGGITT, *Desert People* op. cit., p. 76.
- ⁹² GOULD, op. cit., p. 137. ff.
- ⁹³ SPENCER, op. cit., pp. 118-119.
- ⁹⁴ ELIADE, op. cit., p. 37.
- ⁹⁵ LANGER, SUZANNE, *Feeling and Form*, Charles Scribner Sons, New York, 1953, p. 27.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 91 ff.
- ⁹⁷ SOROKIN, P. A., *Society, Culture and Personality*, Harper, New York, 1947, p. 147.
- ⁹⁸ BERNDT, *First Australians*, op. cit., p. 427.
- ⁹⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 26, 1970.
- ¹⁰⁰ *Sydney Morning Herald*, May 27, 1970.