

THE ABORIGINES
OF AUSTRALIA:
THEIR ETHNIC POSITION
AND RELATIONS.

BY

JOHN FRASER, B.A., LL.D., F.R.S. (N.S.W.)

New South Wales.

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THE ABORIGINES OF AUSTRALIA : THEIR ETHNIC POSITION AND RELATIONS. By JOHN FRASER, B.A., LL.D., F.R.S. of New South Wales.

THE aborigines of Australia present a wide and interesting field for ethnographical study. The field is as yet to a large extent unexamined and unexplored ; for, although there are some books specially written about our aborigines, their customs and language, and although many of our older colonists can tell much about their habits, yet the subject has scarcely attained to the dignity of a scientific study. I purpose to-night to confine myself to a single department of this subject,—the position and relation which our aborigines hold to the rest of mankind ; and to take my arguments only from what I may be permitted to call the common religiousness of nations. And as I am a colonist on a visit to this country, and have not here opportunities and facilities for a complete treatment of my theme, I shall ask your permission to refer to and quote a portion of my past labours in this field, as published in vol. xvi. of the Journal of the Transactions of the Royal Society of New South Wales.

I have said that I mean to build my argument on the religious ideas and ceremonies which exist among our Australian aborigines, and the resemblance of these to similar institutions found among nations and tribes elsewhere. Now, of all the definitions which have been thought of as distinguishing man from the rest of creation, the one that describes him as the "religious animal" is perhaps the best. Some will say that man is the mechanical, the social, the omnivorous, and so on. The philologist will tell us that etymology declares him to be the "thinker." I grant that the power of consecutive thought is a noble gift to man, but I am ready to deny that it is his noblest possession. The religious instinct, however debasing the forms which it now assumes, seems to me a diviner gift; for, while it stimulates, it also chastens and regulates the force and direction of thought, and lays hold of and moulds man's inner nature in a way which mere intellect can never approach. I am further prepared to deny that religiousness is a thing of man's own invention, that mere thinking will ever lead a man to acts of worship, or that the progress and development of thought alone will bring him to more enlightened forms of worship. The tendency, as registered by history and observation, is all in the other direction,—towards degradation, not towards elevation; and if man were solely mental and emotional, his attitude in viewing the vastness, the energy and the multitude of the objects of nature around and above him would be one of awe and fear, not of worship. I therefore believe the manifestations of the religious sentiment among uncivilised nations such as the Australian aborigines, to be like ruins of an edifice, which neither they nor their ancestors ever built, but yet its very stones may tell something of its origin. Now, since man does not invent religious beliefs and practices for himself, we may justly argue that the presence of the same or similar ceremonies in nations at present widely separated in place indicates a common origin. The traditions of a great deluge, so similar everywhere, the folk-lore stories among so many nations, all tell the same tale,—a common origin. And, further, it is not an unreasonable thing to say that, as the human race was long ago split up into four great divisions, which we now call the Aryan, the Shemite, the Turanian, and the Hamite or Ethiopian, and which became antagonistic and locally distinct, so the primitive religion, with its beliefs and practices, would tend in four diverging directions, each portion, however, being homogeneous in itself, although retaining some features of resemblance to its brethren. Now, in speaking to you about our aborigines, I

have to do with the Ethiopian or black race, and if I can show you that the Australian beliefs are closely like those of the black race in other parts of the world, and yet in some respects similar to those of all mankind, I think I can then, without presumption, ask you to agree with me in saying that Lenormant and others must be wrong when they cut off the Australians from the record in the tenth chapter of Genesis, and thus from all connection with the sons of Noah.

My present task, therefore, is to show that the black tribes of Australia are connected with the rest of mankind, and especially with the black race in Africa. But, before I attempt to do so, you may consider it my duty to establish an antecedent probability, or, at least, possibility, that the blacks of Africa and the blacks of Australia are akin; this will carry me back to some of the earliest periods of human history.

The Chaldæan tablets recently deciphered speak of a dark race as existing in the plains of Babylonia from the earliest times, and along with it a light-coloured race.* This dark race I take to be the Kushites; they seem to have been the first occupiers of these regions, and had become so powerful that their empire reached from the Mediterranean to the Ganges, and from the Indian Ocean northwards to the plateau of Ararat. Other races, however, came down upon them from Central Asia, and, like a wedge, split them in two. Hence the position of this race is, in Genesis x., indicated ethnically by the names of Cush, and Mizraim, and Phut, and Canaan, which, geographically, are the countries we call Ethiopia, and Egypt, and Nubia, and Palestine. Their dominion had thus been thrown much to the west of their original seats, and had lodged itself in Africa, now their stronghold; but the other half of their old empire existed still, although much broken, for the later Greek tradition, in the *Odyssey* i., 23, 24, speaks of an eastern as well as a western nation of Ethiopians. Leaving the western Kushites to increase and multiply, and spread themselves into Central Africa, let us follow the fortunes of their eastern brethren. They are the pure Hamites of the dispersion, and long occupied the northern shores of the Persian Gulf and the plains of India. Meanwhile, a composite empire, called on the inscriptions the *Kiprat Arbat*, "the four quarters," had formed itself in Lower Babylonia. This Chaldæan monarchy—the first of the five great monarchies of ancient history—was overthrown by

* Even Cyrus, the conqueror of Babylon, found them there, for, on a cylinder, he speaks of "the black-headed race" as conquered and governed by him.

an irruption of Arab (Shemite) tribes about 1500 B.C. And now, as I think, a second wave of population began to move towards the shores of Australia, for these Arabs were pure monotheists, and in their religious zeal must have dashed to pieces the polytheistic and sensual fabric which the Babylonian conquests had upreared. Those portions of the Chaldæo-Babylonian people that were unable to escape from the dominion of the Arabs, were absorbed in the new empire. But the rupture of the Babylonian state and the proscription of its worship must have been so complete as to drive forth from their native seats many thousands of the people of the "four quarters or zones" and force them westwards into Africa or eastwards through the mountain passes into the table land of the Punjâb and thence into the Gangetic plains. Here, I imagine, were already located the earlier and purer Hamites, but finding them to be guilty of a skin not exactly coloured like their own, and not understanding their language, these later Kushites of mixed extraction regarded them as enemies and drove them forth into the mountains of the Deccan, where to this hour the Dravidians, and Kolarians, whom I consider their representatives, are black-skinned and savage races. Ere long these Babylonian Kushites were themselves displaced and ejected from the Ganges valley by a fair-skinned race, the Aryans, another and the last ethnic stream of invaders from the north-west. These Aryans, in religion and habits irreconcilably opposed to the earlier races of India, waged on them a relentless war. Hemmed up in the triangle of Southern India, the Hamites could escape only by sea; the later Kushites, on the other hand, could not seek safety in the mountains of the Deccan, as these were already occupied; they must, therefore, have been pushed down the Ganges into Further India and the Malayan peninsula; thence to pass at a later time into Borneo and the Sunda Islands and Papua, and afterwards across the sea of Timor into Australia, or eastwards into Melanesia, driven onwards now by the Turanian tribes which had come down from Central Asia into China and the peninsula and the islands of the East Indies.

Many known facts favour the view which I have thus taken of the successive waves of population which flowed over Indian soil towards Australia. I will mention two or three of these: (1) Ethnologists recognise two pre-Aryan races in India. The earlier had not attained to the use of metals, and had only polished flint axes and implements of stone; the later had no written records, and made grave-mounds over their dead. The Vedas call them "noseless," "gross feeders on

flesh," "raw eaters," "not sacrificing," "without gods," "without rites." All this suits our aborigines; for they use stone axes; in several districts they make grave-mounds; the typical natives are "noseless," for they have very flat and depressed noses as contrasted with the straight and prominent noses of the Vedic Aryans; they have no gods and no religious rites such as the Vedas demand. (2) The Kolarian and Dravidian languages have inclusive and exclusive forms for the plural of the first person. So also have many of the languages of Melanesia and Polynesia. (3) The aborigines in the south and west of Australia use the same words for I, thou, we, you, as the natives of the Madras coasts of India.

Having thus shown from history and from the migration of nations that the aborigines of Australia, as to their remote descent, *may* be the brothers of the negroes in Africa, I now proceed to my proper theme, a comparison of the religious ceremonies and beliefs on both continents. We cannot expect to find set modes of worship or a formulated creed such as the possession of sacred books might secure, but we shall rather seek for analogies in the experiences and practices of their social and tribal life, for it is there that ancestral beliefs often stamp themselves permanently; a custom is there maintained from age to age, while those who practise it know not what it means or whence it came.

At present I confine myself to one tribal custom; our black fellows have a ceremony called the Bora, through which the young men pass when admitted into the tribe. This Bora exists everywhere throughout Australia, and is carried out everywhere much in the same fashion. I therefore conclude that it belongs to the whole race, and is an essential attribute of its existence. Now, if I may trust the accuracy of Hurd's *Rites and Ceremonies*, the negroes of Upper Guinea had, seventy years ago—long before ethnography became a science—certain religious mysteries singularly like those of the Bora, and I suppose they have them still.* These, like the Bora, are ceremonies of

* From W. Winwood Reade's book on *Savage Africa* (London: Smith, Elder, & Co.) I learn that similar ceremonies still exist in Equatorial Africa. He says: "Before they are permitted to wear clothes, marry, and rank in society as men and women, the young have to be initiated into certain mysteries. I received some information on this head from Moongilomba, after he had made me promise that I would not put it in my book. He told me that he was taken into a Fetich-house, stripped, severely flogged, and plastered with goat-dung, this ceremony, like those of Masonry, being conducted to the sound of music. Afterwards there came from behind a kind of screen or shrine uncouth and terrible sounds, such as he had never heard before. These, he was told, emanated from a spirit called Ukuk. He afterwards brought to me the instrument with which the fetich-man makes this

initiation, and not only bring a youth to a knowledge of his country's gods, but qualify him to commune with spirits and to hold civil power and authority in the state; all the uninitiated are to him a "profanum vulgus," who, on the least transgression of orders, are hurried away into the woods, there to be destroyed by the evil spirits which the magical power of the initiated can command and control. As an assembly of this kind is convened but four or five times in a century, and occupies a period of five years, only a small portion of the male population can acquire the qualification necessary for power in the state. The king issues, when he pleases, an order for the holding of this assembly. The preparations are committed to the care of those old men that are known to be best acquainted with the mysteries. These choose suitable places in the woods, and make ready there every appliance which can produce surprise, awe, and chilling fear on the minds of the novices. All women, children, and strangers are warned from the spot during the ceremonies, and the novice believes that, if he reveals any of the secrets of the grove, the spirits, knowing his faithlessness and profanity, will in some way or other bring destruction upon him. The country for some three or four miles around is sacred and inviolable, and the evil spirits will carry off those who intrude.

The essential idea prominent in the negro ceremony of initiation is that of death and a new birth, a regeneration. Hence the catechumen before he proceeds to the groves gives away all his property and effects, as if about to die to the

noise. It is a whistle made of hollowed mangrove-wood, about two inches in length, and covered at one end with a scrap of bat's wing. For a period of five days after initiation the novice wears an apron of dried palm-leaves, which I have frequently seen. The initiation of the girls is performed by elderly females, who call themselves Ngembi. They go into the forest, clear a space, sweep the ground carefully, come back to the town, and build a sacred hut, which no male may enter. They return to the clearing in the forest, taking with them the Igonji, or novice. It is necessary that she should have never been to that place before, and that she fast during the whole of the ceremony, which lasts three days. All this time a fire is kept burning in the wood. From morning to night, and from night to morning, a Ngembi sits beside it and feeds it, singing, with a cracked voice, 'The fire will never die out.' The third night is passed in the sacred hut; the Igonji is rubbed with black, red, and white paints, and, as the men beat drums outside, she cries, 'Okanda, yo, yo, yo,' which reminds one of the Evohe of the ancient Bacchantes. The ceremonies performed in the hut and in the wood are kept secret from the men, and I can say but little about them. . . . During the novitiate which succeeds initiation the girls are taught religious dances; the men are instructed in the science of fetich. It is then that they are told that there are certain kinds of food which are forbidden to their clan. One clan may not eat crocodile, nor another hippopotamus, nor a third buffalo."

world, and on the completion of his novitiate, when he returns to his kindred, he pretends to forget all his past life and to know neither father nor mother, nor relations nor former friends,—his is a new life; his whole aspect is that of a new man, for he now carries on his head a cap made of the bark of a tree, he is adorned with feathers, and as a badge of his new rank he wears a collar of leopards' teeth round his neck. During the five years of his training the probationer is attended by some old and experienced devotees who act as his instructors; they teach him the ritual of their religion, various songs and pieces of poetry, mostly in praise of their chief god, and, in particular, he learns from them a dance of a frenzied kind. While this course of education is proceeding, the king frequently visits the groves and examines the candidates. When their training is sufficiently advanced, they receive each a new name, and, as a token of their regeneration, several long wounds, which afterwards become permanent scars, are made on their neck and shoulders. They are now conducted to some retired place at a distance where women may attend them. Here, their religious education being already complete, they are instructed in those principles of morals and politics which will make them useful as members of the state, and fit to act as judges in civil and criminal causes. This done, they leave the groves and their tutors, and, with their new badges of perfection upon them, they exhibit their magical powers in public by means of a stick driven into the ground, with a bundle of reeds at its top, or they repair to the public assembly, and join in the solemn dances of the wise men or in the duties of civic rulers.

The aboriginal races of India also have observances similar to those of the African negroes; for I learn from a lecture delivered last year in this hall that, among some of the Dravidian tribes of Central India, "persons desiring to enter the priesthood are required to retire for some days to the jungle and commune in solitude with the deity. Before they are confirmed in their office, they are expected to perform some marvellous act as evidence of their having acquired superhuman power." In another tribe, the novice "retires to the jungle, and there remains alone and without clothing for eight days, during which time he performs certain purificatory rites. On the eighth day he returns and enters upon the discharge of his duties."*

So far the negroes of Upper Guinea. I now turn to Australia; and there, when a boy approaches the age of puberty, a feeling of restless anticipation spreads over his

* *Transactions Victoria Institute*, vol. xix., pp. 103, 104.

mind, for he knows that his opening manhood has brought him to the threshold of ceremonies of mysterious import, through which he is to be formally received into the tribe and thereby to acquire the dignity of a man. The rites of initiation are important, numerous, and prolonged; and, as his admission does not concern himself or his family merely, but the whole tribe, these observances call together large assemblages, and are the occasion of general rejoicing.

This assembly,—the most solemn and unique in the tribal life,—is called the Bora. The whole proceedings are essentially the same everywhere in their general features and teachings, but the details vary among the different tribes. Therefore, instead of a separate narrative for each tribe, I will endeavour to present to you a full view of the Bora, taking one tribal mode as the basis of my description, but introducing from the other tribes such features as appear to me needed to complete the significance of the ceremonies.

The chiefs of the tribes know that some boys are ready for initiation; they accordingly summon their “marbull,” or public messenger, and bid him inform the sections of the tribe that a Bora will be held at a certain time and place, the time being near full moon, and the place being usually a well-known Bora ground; they also send him away to invite the neighbouring tribes to attend; this invitation is readily accepted, for, although the tribes may be at variance with each other, universal brotherhood prevails among the blacks at such a time as this. The day appointed for the gathering is, perhaps, a week or two distant, and the intervening time is filled with busy preparations by the leading men of the novice’s tribe. They select a suitable piece of ground, near water, if possible, and level for convenience in sitting or lying on; they then form and clear of all timber, and in most cases even of every blade of grass, two circular enclosures, a larger and a smaller, about a quarter of a mile from each other, with a straight track connecting them*; the trees that grow around the smaller circle they carve at about the height of a man, often much higher, with curious emblematical devices and figures; the circuit of each ring is defined by a slight mound of earth laid around, and in the centre of the larger one they fix a short pole with a bunch of emu feathers on the top of it. Everything is now ready for the rites of initiation, and there is a large concourse; the men stand by with their bodies painted in stripes of colour, chiefly red and white; the women,

* In the Bora grounds which I have examined this path leads due east and west by the compass.

who are permitted to be present at the opening ceremony only, are lying on the ground all round the larger ring with their faces covered. The boy, painted red all over (I speak of only one, but there are several boys initiated at once), is brought forward and made to lie down in the middle of it, and covered with an opossum rug. Such of the old men as have been appointed masters of the ceremonies now begin to throw him into a state of fear and awe by sounding an instrument called *tirricoty*, similar to what an English boy calls a "bull roarer." This same "bull roarer" is found in Central Africa, and is there also used as a sacred instrument. In Australia the men use it on all occasions when they wish to frighten the women and boys, who cower with fear whenever they hear it. It is made of a piece of thin wood or bark; it is about nine inches long, and is sometimes shaped and marked like a fish. The roaring sound is supposed to be the voice of a dreaded evil spirit who prowls about the black fellows' camp, especially at night, and carries off, tears and devours those he can seize. When the performers think that the "boombat" (so they call the novice) has been sufficiently impressed, *tirricoty* ceases to speak; they then raise the boy from the ground and set him in the ring, so that his face is turned towards the cleared track which leads to the circle of imagery; then an old man comes forward, breathes strongly in his face, and makes him cast his eyes upon the ground, for in this humble attitude he must continue for some days.

Two other old men next take the boy by the arms and lead him along the track, and set him in the middle of the other enclosure. As soon as this is done, the women rise from their prostrate position and begin to dance and sing. The Murring tribe, on our S.E. coast, place along this track or path figures moulded in earth of various animals (the *totems*), and one of Daramulum, a spirit god whom they fear. Before each of these figures the devotees have a dance, and a "Koradjie" (that is, doctor or medicine man) brings up out of his inside by his mouth, the "jo-e-a" or magic of the *totem* before which he stands; for the porcupine he shows stuff like chalk, for the kangaroo stuff like glass, and so on. Meanwhile the boy has been sitting in the smaller circle with downcast eyes; he is told to rise, and is led in succession to each of the carved trees around it, and is made to look up for a moment at the carvings on them, and while he does so the old men raise a shout.* When he has come to know all the

* A fire is kept constantly burning in the centre of this ring; with this compare the Vestal fire at Rome. The boy is made to lie within the ring prone

carvings sufficiently, the men give him a new name, which *must not* be revealed to the uninitiated, and they hand to him a little bag containing one or more small stones of crystal quartz; this bag he will always carry about his person, and the stones must not be shown to the uninitiated on pain of death. This concludes the first part of the performance.

The "boombat" is next conveyed, blindfolded, to a large camp at a distance of several miles, no woman being near, and food is given to him, which he eats still with his eyes cast down; here they keep him for eight or ten days, and teach him their tribal lore by showing him their dances and their songs; these he learns, especially one song of which I can tell nothing further than that it is important for the boy to know it. These songs, they say, were given them by Baiamai, the great Creator. At night, during this period, the "boombat" is set by himself in secluded and darksome places, and all around the men make hideous noises, at which he must not betray the least sign of fear. At some part of the ceremony a sacred wand is shown him; of this Ridley says:—"This old man, Billy, told me, as a great favour, what other blacks had withheld as a mystery too sacred to be disclosed to a white man, that "dhurumbulum," a stick or wand, is exhibited at the Bora, and that the sight of it inspires the initiated with manhood. This sacred wand was the gift of Baiamai. The ground on which the Bora is celebrated is Baiamai's ground. Billy believes the Bora will be kept up always all over the country; such was the command of Baiamai."

Another conspicuous part of the inner Bora customs is the knocking out of one of the upper front teeth of the "boombat." The tooth is then conveyed from one sub-tribe to another until it has made the circuit of the whole tribe; on its return it is given to the owner or kept by the head man. It is said that an ancient shield (*cf.* the sacred Ancilia of Rome,) handed down from past ages, and regarded as almost equal to Daramulum himself, accompanied the tooth. This tooth-breaking, however, is not practised by some of the larger tribes; but instead of it there is circumcision, cutting of the hair, &c.

on the ground for weeks, it may be, getting only a very little food and water now and then. When he wishes to go outside, the old men *carry* him over the circle-mound. With this compare the sacredness of the *pomerium* circuit of ancient Rome. One black boy told me that when he was initiated, he joined the Bora in the month of August, and did not get away till about Christmas. When the blacks in charge of the sacred circle at last bade him rise from his recumbent position, he said he was so weak that he staggered and fell.

All these formalities being now completed, the boombat's probation is at an end. They now proceed, all of them together, to some large water-hole, and jumping in, men and boys, they wash off the colouring matter from their bodies, amid much glee, and noise, and merriment, and, when they have come out of the water, they paint themselves white.

Meanwhile, the women, who have been called to resume their attendance, have kindled a large fire not far off, and are lying around it, with their faces covered as at the first; the two old men, who were the original initiators, bring the boy at a run towards the fire, followed by all the others, with voices indeed silent, but making a noise by beating their *boomerangs* together; the men join hands and form a ring round the fire, and one old man runs round the inside of the ring beating a *heelaman* or shield. A woman, usually the boy's own mother, then steps within the ring, and, catching him under the arms, lifts him from the ground once, sets him down, and then retires; everybody, the boy included, now jumps upon the decaying red embers, until the fire is extinguished.

Thus ends the Bora; the youth is now a man, for his initiation and his instruction are over. But, although these are formalities observed in admitting a youth into the tribe, yet in the Bora, as in freemasonry, the novice does not become a full member all at once, but must pass through several grades, and these are obtained by attending a certain number of Boras; here also, as in Africa, restrictions as to food are imposed, which are relaxed from time to time, until at last the youth is permitted to eat anything he may find; thus the process of qualifying for full membership may extend over two or three years. Then he becomes an acknowledged member of the tribe, undertakes all the duties of membership, and has a right to all its privileges.

I have thus finished my description of the Bora ceremonies, and, as a sort of introduction to that description, I gave at the outset a condensed account of similar observances both in Africa and in India.

Now, when I cast my eye over the Bora and its regulated forms, I feel myself constrained to ask, "What does all this mean?" I, for one, cannot believe that the Bora, with all its solemnities (for the rites were sacred, and the initiated were bound not to divulge what they had seen and done), is a meaningless, self-developed thing; still less that the same thing can have developed spontaneously in Australia and in farthest Africa; I prefer to see in it a symbolism covering ancestral beliefs—a symbolism intelligible enough to the

Kushite race at first, but now little understood, but yet superstitiously observed, by their Australian descendants.

Accordingly I now proceed to what I regard as the most important part of this inquiry, for I shall attempt to show that in many respects the Bora corresponds with the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient world. If we can prove that the germ ideas which underlie the Australian Bora as it has always been celebrated among the aborigines are the same as those in many religions of antiquity, and that these same ideas present themselves in ceremonies of similar import among nations now widely separated in place, I think we have established a strong presumption that there is a common source from which all these things have sprung, and that there is a community of origin on which this community of belief is founded.

And here I wish to enlist the sympathy and assistance of this intelligent audience. There are among you many who have a full and accurate knowledge of the religious systems of Africa and India, and who can therefore give valuable aid in tracing analogies sufficient to build up my argument to the dimensions of substantial proof. I ask these gentlemen to assist me, either now by oral remarks, or afterwards in any form which they may prefer. My present theme is a small contribution to an argument for the unity of the human race as to its origin, and while I work in the Australian field, which is as yet little known, I shall gratefully receive any help which may come from fields that have been long explored.

I now offer to you such analogies as my limited knowledge permits me to refer to:—

(A.) In the Bora there are two circles, the one is less sacred, for the women may be present there, although only on the outskirts; in it certain preparatory things are done in order to bring the “boombat’s” mind into a fit state of reverential awe for the reception of the teaching in the other circle,—the *adytum*, the *penetralia*,—where the images of the gods are to be seen; the women and the uninitiated must not approach this inner circle, for it is thrice holy; “*Procul este. profani.*”

(a.) In the earliest religions, the circle is the invariable symbol of the sun—the bright and pure one, from whose presence darkness and every evil thing must flee away. Thus we have the disc as the symbol of the sun-god in Egypt, Chaldæa, Assyria, Persia, India, China. This fact is so well known that it is needless to multiply examples. Those who are within the circle are safe from the powers of evil. The