

Ritual torture in Aboriginal culture

Aboriginal culture, which the anthropologists are so keen to revive, is so brutal that Aboriginal youth have deserted the old ways in droves. It can best be compared to the ritual torture and cannibalism of the Aztecs, as suggested by the following selections from writings on the "Aboriginal tradition" by well-known anthropologists.

White Man's Dreaming: Killalpaninna Mission 1866-1915, by Christine Stevens.

On the penalty for betraying "secrets":

"Death was the penalty for betrayal of such [tribal] secrets. . . . Anyone attempting to disclose such information was seized and a sharp pointing-stick, previously soaked in fluids from a human corpse, was forced into the anal sphincter to produce blood-poisoning without an external wound."

On the initiation of young boys:

"As the novice youth passed into the ritual state of death, blood was collected in a wooden bowl from the arm veins of initiated men and passed around for all, including the initiants, to sip. Blood was also smeared on the bodies of the boys, symbolic of both death and revival, before the nasal

septum was pierced and tooth evulsion (knocking teeth out) took place. . . .

"Scalps [were] opened by a sharp stick and bitten by the old men until blood flowed profusely. Blood was again spurted over the youths before they were taken back to the main camp and 'sung-in' by the men and women."

The World of the First Australians, by R.M. and C. Berndt, 1985.

"A boy's foreskin was sometimes handed to the parents of his betrothed, who would pass it to the man who cut the daughter's hymen to be briefly placed in her vulva to establish a sympathetic union between them."

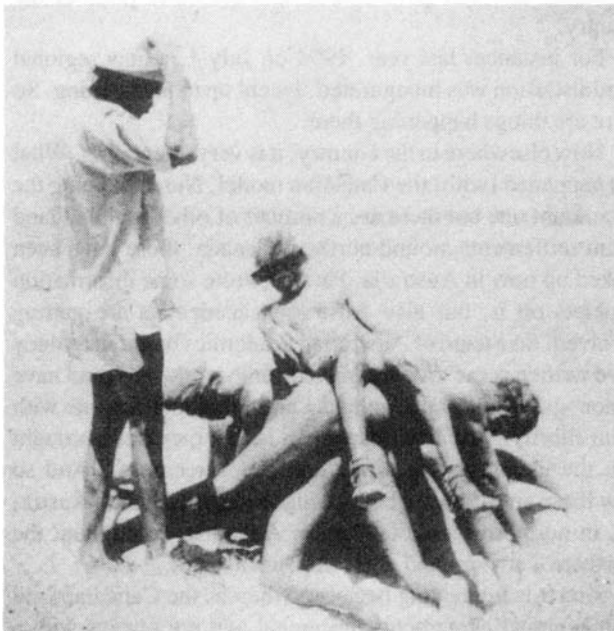
Australian Aboriginal Religion, by R.M. Berndt, 1974.

"At this important second ceremony all youths underwent subincision (an incision made to the urethra from underneath the penis which was allowed to heal but whose scab was regularly knocked off for blood-letting in prescribed rituals and ceremonies). . . .

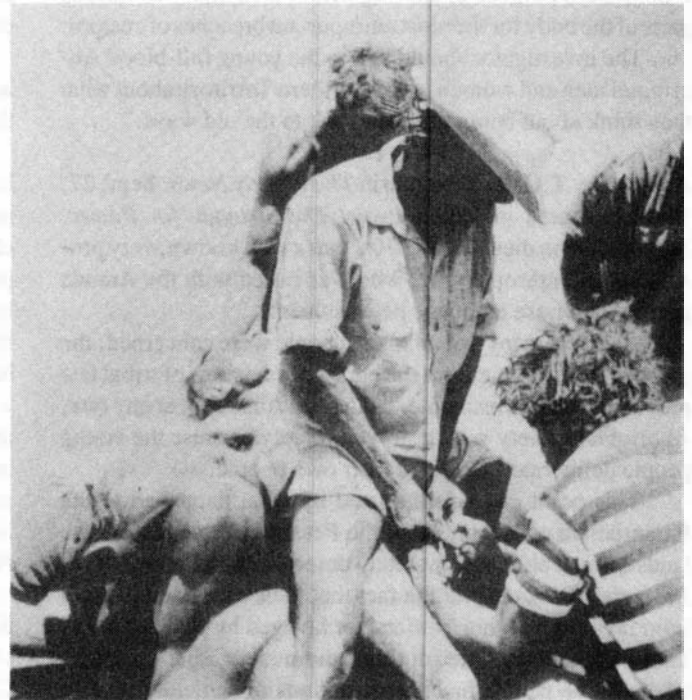
"Full initiants spurted blood from their penis incisures over the youths to the accompaniment of ritual singing and dancing."

The Destruction of Aboriginal Society, by C.D. Rowley.

"The reports of addiction to cannibalism had in fact come from at least one credible witness in Tom Petrie: this is a good example of a cause of cultural aversion. Yet the Aboriginal cannibal, on evidence now known, was a ritual one . . . and



Not-so-noble savages: A ritual "subincision" ceremony is performed on a young Aboriginal man. Young people are fleeing the barbarism of Aboriginal culture.



consumption of the body, or parts of the body, of a man whom Elkin would describe as one of 'high degree,' appears to have been a way of conserving his greatness within the group."

The Australian Aborigines, by A.P. Elkin.

In times of conflict, when the attacking party does not want to fight with the home party, it will "send a number of its women over to the former. If these are willing to settle the matter in dispute without fighting, they have sexual intercourse with the women; if not they send them back untouched."

Elkins also gives an example where wife lending is permissible: "being a mark of friendship or hospitality and in being [sic] practiced between individuals. This is the lending of a wife to a visitor. In such cases kinship rules governing marriage apply." Elkin also describes, of a man's secondary wife, that when a certain ritual action "is received in the affirmative, some of the local group may have intercourse with her."

After describing the initiation of a child, he says, "This is followed by a feast which in Southern Queensland used to be cannibalistic in nature; the body of a person killed in the ceremonial combat was disposed of in this way. In this region cannibalism was a regular feature of burial ritual."

Red over Black, by Geoff McDonald.

"The facts are that the overwhelming majority of Aborigines do not want to keep their 'laws' at all, because they are horrible and are the cause of murder and death by bone pointing and create a constant obligation for spearing each other, if not for the purpose of causing death, then injury to various parts of the body for the most unimportant breaches of custom. . . . The investigator should talk to the young full-blood Aboriginal men and women in the Northern Territory about what they think about being dragged back to the old ways."

Account by T.G.H. Strehlow in *The Weekly News*, Sept. 27, 1978, reprinted in John Grover, *The Struggle for Power*. Strehlow, who died in the 1970s, was a well known, very pro-Aboriginal anthropologist, who was raised with the Aranda people, in whose language he was fluent.

"As far as many young black people were concerned, the prospect of escaping from the harsher provisions of tribal law proved virtually irresistible. In Central Australia, at any rate, Aboriginal society was destroyed largely because the young people deliberately deserted their own people.

"This point can be illustrated by what happened to the Pitjantjatjara communities of the Petermann Ranges, whose lands I found almost completely deserted on my two visits of 1936 and 1939, despite the fact that their homeland had *not* been invaded by white settlers nor ravaged by police parties. They had merely 'drifted out' into the areas of adjacent tribes, where white people had set up stations or settlements. . . . None of these drifters ever returned to their old homelands."

Interview: Peter Jull

Giving Australia the Canada treatment

For over a decade, Peter Jull was the Adviser on the Constitution in the Prime Minister's Department in Ottawa, Canada. He was the research director of the Nunavut Constitutional Forum, which negotiated the establishment of "Nunavut," a new self-governing Aboriginal territory comprising one-fifth of Canada. All emphases are his own.

Q: I had come across one of your papers on the comparison of the Nunavut region in Canada and some sort of Aboriginal autonomy. First of all, as an overview, you had emphasized the question of autonomy as the Inuits have achieved it. How close would you say the Aborigines of Australia are to that kind of position?

Jull: In Torres Strait, it is interesting, it seems that because they are islands and also because Melanesians have less negative racial stereotypes in Australia than Aborigines, both the government and the opposition in Canberra in recent years have been prepared to recognize a sort of special status, if you will, and be more prepared to move toward regional autonomy and self-government than for other parts of the country.

For instance, last year, 1994 on July 1, a new regional administration was inaugurated. I went up to the opening. So there are things happening there.

Now elsewhere in the country, it is very interesting. What has happened [with] the Canadian model, Nunavut being the paramount one but there are a number of other regional land claim settlements around northern Canada, these have been picked up now in Australia. Partly I wrote some information booklets on it, but also Australian academics are getting involved. So a team of Australian academics based in Sydney have written some articles and led some workshops and have a monograph forthcoming and I am doing another one with them shortly. And what happened is that they have brought into the language this term "regional agreement." And so now these are suddenly being sought around outback Australia, in northern parts of Western Australia, throughout the Northern Territory and in North Queensland.

And it is interesting because, whereas the Canadians did their regional agreements piecemeal and not always with a clear big picture, the Australians have just picked up all the Canadian experience, immediately conceptualized it and are using it as a kind of model, and seem to understand its value