

EDN: LCWKTX

УДК 930.85: 259.6: 398 (=1.94–81)

An Anthropological Perspective on Australian Aboriginals as the Dreamtime Descendants

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Received 20.01.2025, received in revised form 17.02.2025, accepted 28.03.2025

Abstract. The article touches upon one of the enigmatic anthropological and cultural phenomena which is defined by a concept “DREAMTIME”. Sacred rituals of Australian Aboriginals keep going along with itineraries and actions of their predecessors who had created majestic landscapes, endemic species, tropical plants and atmospheric phenomena. They still chant magic songs, mimicking their first ancestors who had repeatedly sung magic spells through which they were creating the world. The paper outlines observance of the historical roots of their religious mentality which defined the structure and mythological picture of Australian Aboriginals. Transdisciplinary approach to an interpretative study of the past and present of one of the prehistoric population groups shed light on their way of life, hunting and collecting routine, and their non-stoppable roaming from Africa to Australia during “a quick breakthrough” of 10 000 years.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginals, Dreamtime, anthropology, mythological consciousness, Indigenous languages and cultures.

Research area: Social Structure, Social Institutions and Processes; Theoretical, Applied and Comparative Linguistics; Theory and History of Culture and Art.

Citation: Grishaeva E. B. An Anthropological Perspective on Australian Aboriginals as the Dreamtime Descendants. In: *J. Sib. Fed. Univ. Humanit. soc. sci.*, 2025, 18(4), 795–803. EDN: LCWKTX



Антропологический взгляд на австралийское коренное население как наследников эпохи Сновидений

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Аннотация. Статья посвящена рассмотрению одного из загадочных антропологических и культурных феноменов, которое принято определять понятием «ВРЕМЯ СНОВ». Священные ритуалы австралийских аборигенов до настоящего времени повторяют маршруты и действия их предков, создавших величественные ландшафты, эндемичные виды животных и растений, тропическую растительность и атмосферные явления. Они до сих пор пропевают песни, подражая своим предкам, произносившим магические заклинания, посредством которых творился мир. В работе рассматриваются исторические корни их религиозного сознания, определяющие мифологическое мировосприятие коренного населения Австралии. Трансдисциплинарный подход к интерпретации прошлого и настоящего одной из доисторических групп населения проливает свет на их образ жизни, охотничье-собирательскую деятельность и непрерывные миграции из Африки в Австралию в ходе «стремительного прорыва», продолжавшегося 10 000 лет.

Ключевые слова: австралийские аборигены, Время Снов, антропология, мифологическое сознание, языки и культуры коренных народов.

Научная специальность: 5.4.4. Социальная структура, социальные институты и процессы; 5.9.8. Теоретическая, прикладная и сравнительно-сопоставительная лингвистика; 5.10.1. Теория и история культуры, искусства.

Цитирование: Гришаева Е. Б. Антропологический взгляд на австралийское коренное население как наследников эпохи Сновидений. *Журн. Сиб. федер. ун-та. Гуманитарные науки*, 2025, 18(4), 795–803. EDN: LCWKTX

Introduction

Australia (from Latin *australis* – southern) is the driest continent located in the Southern hemisphere, the only country in the world that occupies an entire continent. The country stretches for three thousand kilometers from north to south and almost four thousand kilometers from west to east. As Vsevolod Ovchinnikov once wrote on the pages of his travel notes, “Australia resembles a dried autumn leaf, along the edge of which a green stripe stretches from the east and south” (Ovchinnikov, 1990: 22).

The first British flotilla under the command of Captain Phillip entered Sydney’s Bot-

any Bay on January 26, 1788. The area around Botany Bay was given the title of the best harbor in the world, where a huge number of British ships could simultaneously raise their sails. It is known that this toponym was established thanks to Captain Cook, who gave names to many geographical landmarks. When J. Cook approached the east coast of Australia in 1778, Botany Bay amazed him with the diversity and beauty of the vegetation on its shores. A penal settlement was found here, later named Sydney (in honor of Thomas Townshend, the first Viscount Sydney, who held the post of Secretary of the British Empire in 1784–1789).

The country's public began to think about the fate of its Indigenous population 200 years after Australia's Foundation Day. Researchers at the University of Sydney received a sensational response to their received data which showed that when Captain Cook arrived at Sydney Cove in 1788, "there might have been a total Aboriginal population of about 750 000, and not 300 000, as it was commonly believed (Rickard, 2017: 5). There were approximately 700 Aboriginal groups or tribes in Australia (Dixon; Moore; Ramson; Thomas, 2006: 2). Every tribe lived on its own territory, had the particular political system, spoke its own language and created legends, myths and fairy tales. According to researcher P. White, the amount of Indigenous population was deliberately underestimated by the Australian authorities in order to downplay the responsibility of white settlers for the fact that with their arrival the number of Aboriginals decreased fivefold. According to data for 2022, Aboriginals make up 3,2 % of Australia's population, currently their number is estimated at approximately 813 thousand people.

As far as language and culture are closely interconnected, the Australian language borrowed from Indigenous languages about 450 words. Thus, researchers R. M. W. Dixon, B. Moore, W.S. Ramson and M. Thomas distinguish several categories, such as *flora and fauna, housing and tools*. A separate category includes combined words and expressions that are the result of expanding authentic meanings used to designate objects, ideas and events associated with the local population, their cultural traditions, rituals and the way of life. That is why Australians internalized such concepts and lexical units from Aboriginal languages as *dreamtime, walkabout, outstation* (Dixon, Moore, Ramson and Thomas, 2006).

It is clear that Indigenous languages are a powerful tool of a unique culture, with a large vocabulary and original grammatical constructions. The apparent simplicity of life of the Aboriginal population, gathering and hunting contrast with the complex way of life, their social and religious life, and the richness of their unique languages. These properties help the local population to convey subtle shades

of meaning in any aspect of cultural life, from myths to detailed and precise descriptions of natural phenomena and landscape zones.

Theoretical Framework

As it was mentioned earlier, the foci points of our research deal with multi-faceted aspects of life of Indigenous groups in Australia. It is a well-known fact that topical area "Language and Society" appears to gradually encounter new interpretations under ever changing political, economic and social conditions. Controversial policy, language planning circumstances, ethnocultural and linguistic discourse on the local and national levels come along with transdisciplinary investigations. That is why one of the topics concerns widely the scope of Aboriginals' habitat and living conditions.

Decision-making in political and cultural domains can be successful if they match spontaneous expectations of the majority of population. In other words, group interests, connected with power and hierarchical subordination, distribution, resource and benefit allocation, prestige and influence, domination of one group over another in the sphere of access to culture, information and education motivate decision-making processes in the country in question.

Statement of the Problem

Along the broad continuum, the research literature shows a link not only between language and culture but also between language and identity. National Language policy in Australia was adopted in 1987. Indigenous languages were placed among other groups of languages forming a rich palette. Unique ethnic profile of the Australian society, as well as its linguistic diversity, created traumatic controversies in the field of the Australian nation self-identification and ambiguous attitude to Indigenous languages and cultures. The paper also investigates factors that had led to extermination and a complete death of the majority of Aboriginal languages. Currently, sociologists of language and political circles support language vitality and Indigenous cultures via multiple channels. Therefore, this study aims at multi-component and heterogeneous character of cultural policy of Australia translating it

into a set of objectives: to reveal and reflect a controversial social attitude of white Australian population towards Indigenous culture, languages and people.

Methods

We use in this paper sociocultural approaches grounded on anthropology and sociology of language. Researches of this type as a rule never use experimental methods. Sociocultural and sociolinguistic researches mostly speculate on an ecological perspective of language use and a relevant culture development because they are aimed to investigate changes in the learnt processes over a protracted period of time in a specifically induced context. As far as our research has got a longitudinal character (we examine Aboriginal languages and cultures in a diachronic perspective), it is accompanied by a number of sociopolitical contexts and other extralinguistic factors. Due to this, our sociocultural research is developmental and depends on our opportunity to examine and “create linkage between macro-level phenomena and micro-level practices”, i.e., “analyze policy documents and media reports” (Surtee; Duff, 2022: 60). “Findings from sociocultural studies are often reported as case studies to provide sufficient contextualization and depth. Cases in sociocultural research are interpretative – they focus on a phenomenon as it occurs in a specific context” (Surtee; Duff, 2022: 61).

Discussion

The first evidence of Aboriginal settlements in Australia goes back 40000 years. Each Aboriginal tribe lived on its own territory, everyone was equal and was governed by a council of Elders. The tribes communicated with each other in everyday life, folk art and ritual observance. They were divided by natural borders: mountains and barren.

So-called “local groups” enjoyed greater importance than tribes. They united related families in the male line. Boys born in the group remained in it, and girls left it, marrying representatives of other local groups, while remaining members of the clan, the land of which was inhabited by the spirits of ancestors.

Aboriginals avoided incest, which could lead to the degeneration of the clan. It is interesting that the father’s brothers were not called uncles, but fathers. All the mother’s sisters were mothers. The mother’s brothers were called uncles, and the father’s sisters were aunts. There was no a concept of cousins in the European sense. They were considered to be siblings. Norms and customs accepted in the group were subject to mandatory execution.

Collective work, housekeeping and common rules obligatory for all members were the signs of local groups. According to rules, food was distributed, and special attention was paid to elderly members of the group and children. The family was the main division of the local group. Depending on age, gender and family ties, everyone had their own duties.

Aboriginal languages are not related to any other language family. Researchers are amazed by the richness of the vocabulary and the abundance of semantic meanings of words, most of which relate to the natural world. Sign language became a means of intertribal communication. These are multiple signals produced by fingers, facial expressions and body movements. This language was used for negotiations or exchanging secret information, as well as for signal communication during hunting. Smoke signals were used, for example, to communicate the location of a camp or to notify of the approach of strangers.

Australian Aboriginals – the Indigenous people of Australia, sometimes called “Australian Bushmen”, are linguistically and racially isolated from other peoples of the world. They created one of the oldest cultures in the world. Traditionally, the Aboriginals respect the older generation, whom they obey unconditionally. From birth, a child in the tribe is surrounded by love and care. Aboriginals carried babies in cradles made of tree bark or food troughs. The baby was assigned a guardian, usually the mother’s brother, who taught the boy, who had entered the period of initiation, the secret traditions of the tribe, and a suitable groom was found for the girl. In early childhood, the younger generation had unlimited freedom. Parents maintained close contact, played with them, learned songs and

dances. Boys were taught military and hunting skills, small spears and balls were thrown, animal tracks were drawn, and knots in the form of figures were tied on their fingers. Children were taught to recognize the sounds and voices made by birds and animals. Parents did not lecture. Children recognized life from personal experience. At the age of 13–16, boys were prepared for initiation – a rite of passage. They were taken to special camps. This was the end of childhood. He had to endure painful operations and trials by fire, scarring (cuts on the body) and knocking out a front tooth. But the main thing in the rite was the recognition of maturity. The young man was ready to absorb the secret knowledge, beliefs and legends of his tribe. The youth received knowledge of how the world was created, how it is preserved, and how life continues.

The person undergoing the ritual was a passive being. A new human personality was born from dead matter. The initiate was laid on his back, with his arms crossed on his chest. The piercing of the youth with a spear, his swallowing and regurgitation by some mythical creature (the Rainbow Serpent Ungud, for example) was imitated. It was believed that, being inside this creature, the initiate did not perish, but was reborn physically and spiritually. Ritual “death” is a transformation of a person. And the blood that flows during the operation is a symbol of life and resurrection.

The place where the ritual took place symbolized the road connecting the earth with the sky. During the initiation process, teenagers received knowledge about churingas (tablets or stones with a picture, considered the embodiment of the totem) and sacred places on the land belonging to the tribe. In this way, young people were introduced to the supernatural world and esoteric knowledge and religious rituals of the tribe.

Some scholars believe that monotheism was once the first religion of Indigenous people. They believed in one God, the creator, but each tribe had its own name for the God. A feature of religion is the connection of its belief system with the land, with a specific area where the local group lived. This is expressed in the relationship of mythology and cult with

sanctuaries, totem sites located on the territories belonging to the group.

None of the religions believed in a supreme God, but each of them had a spiritual being that was revered above all else, such as Bayami in the legends of southeastern Australian Aboriginals, or Wandjina – images of these creatures can be seen in caves in the northwest of the continent. Each language had its own term for the period of creation of the world, meaning “*the beginning of everything*”, these names were translated into European languages as “*the time of the ancestors*”, “*the period of creation*”, but most often as “*the great time of dreams*”. This is the period when the earth was flat, but the spiritual beings, the heroes-creators, awakened from sleep, laid the foundation for a new life. Thus, legends about the spirits of ancestors formed the basis of the social structure of the Australian Aboriginals as moral norms and laws.

It is known that most religions are oriented towards the future – the time that comes after death. Aboriginal beliefs call for a return to the *Dreamtime*. The sacred past is not gone forever, and although the creator beings who lived in that period will never repeat their actions in the present or future, their impact on the world will always be felt. The mythological past lives in the present and is part of the future. The spirits of the dead are still alive today, but they exist in other forms and in other places. They will live as long as people honor them, follow their instructions, and adhere to the laws they established. In this way, an inseparable connection is established between religious life and virtually all areas of everyday life for the indigenous population of Australia.

Anthropologist R.D. McCart wrote: “To the initiated Aboriginal, religion explains the origin of life itself, the customs of the tribe, the sources of food and useful things, it explains the mysterious world that went beyond his scientific and general knowledge” (Karamenov, 2017). For Aboriginals, the *Dreamtime* is a period when the earth acquired its true form. Legends describing the “*Dreamtime*” are the oldest oral narratives of pan-Australian mythology. The ancestors came to the continent, and among them were kangaroo men, emu

men, fig men, bird women. According to legends, the footprints of these creatures and the results of their actions turned into trees, hills, ponds, caves and other elements of the Australian landscape. An important place is occupied by totem sites belonging to local groups. These groups are the descendants of the ancestors – mythical creatures. Thus, a person can point to the rock that the fig-man has turned into and say that it is his grandfather. Songs are composed about the life, work and travels of the ancestors. The routes of supernatural beings in Australia are called “*song trails*” because, according to the beliefs of the aborigines, “*in the Dreaming Time the land was not there until the Ancestors sang it*” (Chatwin, 2007).

Bruce Chatwin, the English writer, who tried to understand the religious worldview of the Australian Aboriginal by meeting several elders from the tribal groups of Central Australia, wrote in his book *Song Paths*: “*Aboriginal creation myths tell of legendary totem beings who wandered across the continent in the Dreamtime, singing the names of everything they encountered – birds, animals, plants, rocks, springs – and through this singing the world came into being*” (Chatwin, 2007). The Ancestral Paths, along which the Australian Aboriginals perform sacred rituals and, like their mythological heroes, sing the names of characteristic features of the landscape, “*cover the whole of Australia and are known to Europeans as “Dream Routes” or “Song Paths”. The Aboriginals themselves call these roads “Ancestral Footprints” or “The Path of the Law”*” (Chatwin, 2007). And they learned about the world through mythological, or, as it is also called, magical, primitive, and archaic thinking.

But according to the religious beliefs of the Australian Aboriginals, “*the most barren and monotonous landscape can become a ‘home’ for a tribe when there is a belief that it was ‘created’, or, more accurately, transformed, by supernatural beings. By giving the land form, supernatural beings simultaneously make it ‘sacred’. The current landscape is the result of their work*” (Eliade, 1998: 89).

The entire reality of life in the understanding of indigenous people of Australia is imbued

with spirituality. The Aboriginals believe that the spirits of totem plants, animals, waterfalls and rocks live in each of them. With the end of a person’s earthly life, the spirit leaves the body and returns to its previous spiritual existence. Through the spiritual, the Aboriginal is connected with the world of nature, with all members of his community, deceased ancestors and future descendants. Beliefs help them steadfastly endure difficult life circumstances and believe that they will not be left without the help of their ancestors.

The *dreamtime*, according to the Australian Aboriginals, still exists beyond the visible world and, through appropriate magical rites, one can reach it or communicate with the spirits that live there.

The price of civilization was the gradual reduction in the number of Australian languages (Dixon, 2006: 4). In the 19th and early 20th centuries due to some factors, such as the colonial policy of the white population, expressed in the complete lack of rights of the local population, in the ban on the use of Indigenous languages, the number of Aboriginals declined.

In addition to genocide against Aboriginals, the colonial government grossly violated the rights of local residents by conducting the so called “whitening” policy. In cases of mixed marriages, since 1886, Indigenous Australians with white parents have been forced to assimilate. From about 1909 to 1969, Aboriginal and half-caste children were removed from their families at an early age in many missions and government settlements. They were housed in dormitories for girls and boys, and the language of communication was exclusively English. Children who spoke their native language were subject to severe punishment. They were given a basic education sufficient for work on the farm. Parents were forbidden to communicate with the selected children. English was considered the only way to salvation and survival in the white world. The channels of official language policy were always radio, later television, newspapers, magazines and books. Church services were held exclusively in English. The sad result of colonization was that by 1921, out of the former million indigenous inhabitants, only 60 thousand people remained alive.

Current cultural policy is aimed at taking measures to preserve languages and cultures. These measures include: supporting bilingual educational programs in schools; publishing printed materials: primers, dictionaries, legends and fairy tales, creating television and radio programs, and most importantly – cultivating a sense of pride in one's native language. It is necessary to expand the opportunities for using languages in everyday communication, as a language of intra-family communication.

In 1987, the Australian federal government approved basic principles of the national language policy. National Language Research and Information Center (NLIRC), which, according to its creators, was to play an important role in providing the opportunity to coordinate the volume and content of research and distribute available resources when carrying out activities in the field of language planning. Thus, the place of Indigenous languages was of the directions of national language policy. As Alex Barlow from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies argued, "no decision relating to their language should be made without absolute certainty that Aboriginal people fully support it and that it is the decision that the indigenous population itself would like to make regarding their languages" (Ozolins, 1993: 226–227).

Initially, the idea came from various agencies, namely the Department of Education, the School Commission, the Northern Territory Government, as well as a group of Aboriginal representatives and some linguists. Bilingual programs received full support and approval. Reports from the Indigenous populations contained facts that made it clear that many educational programs had not been fully implemented and remained in a transitional stage. This circumstance prompted Indigenous population to begin establishing their own schools without the participation of government or church support. This situation arose in the Aranda school in the town of Yipirinya. This school was called a "two – way school", the activities of which were under the control of the local population, who enthusiastically accepted the idea of providing comprehensive support for bilingualism. However, programs aimed at introducing bilingualism were quite rare and required sig-

nificant resources in terms of physical development and infrastructure in general. A report by the Northern Territory Government noted that bilingual education was extremely difficult to implement in practice in small language groups and speech communities.

An equally important aspect in this direction is paying attention to the use of Indigenous languages in the media. Since 1967, Aboriginals have achieved equal rights with the white population of the country. In contemporary sociology of language, the idea has become established that the role of language in society can be discussed using key aspects based on an ecological perspective. All languages are part of an integrated system of communication and symbolism created by homo sapiens. As L. Williams argues, "the ecological perspective teaches us to rationally recognize the threat to our common heritage – language" (Williams, 1991: 63). That is why Indigenous population must be guaranteed the right to make decisions on all issues related to the functioning of native languages and their maintenance at all levels.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the fact how current cultural trends in Australia split the nation into two parts. One group celebrates the National Australia Day on the 26th of January, and another one considers this date as a Mourning day.

Since 1994, the holiday has been celebrated annually on January, 26. Australia Day is one of the country's favorite holidays. Celebrating it, Australians recreate the historic landing of the First fleet, hold regattas, processions and parades, and arrange fireworks at night. Everyone rejoices and has fun, except for the Aboriginals, who perceive this European holiday as a day of mourning. It was on January 26, that the Indigenous inhabitants, true owners, lost their rights and stopped living the way they had lived for long forty thousand years. For Indigenous people land was not only a source of existence, but also the center of spiritual life. It was considered public property, and the right of ownership for the Aboriginals was not the right to use it for the purpose of extracting profit, but primarily responsibility for the "ritual ownership" of it, which implied responsibility for everything that grows and lives on this

land. The boundaries of ownership were natural landmarks: mountains, forests, rivers and lakes. Land was not sold, not bought, it could not be given as a gift. The international rules that existed at the time of the early colonization of Australia considered newly discovered lands as no man's land "terra nullius".

In 1982, Eddie Mabo, David Passey and James Ransom, members of the Meriam tribe from Marai Island, brought a case to the High Court of Australia, with the Torres Strait as the defendant. The hope was to establish the true owners of the islands, which the Meriam people had lived on long before Europeans arrived on the continent. The High Court of Australia has dispelled the age-old myth that Australian lands are "no man's land". On 3 June 1992, it issued a decision based on the fact that in the pre-colonial era, the Indigenous inhabitants of Australia owned land under traditional law, which is still in force today. Thus, the court's decision confirmed the right of the inhabitants of the Torres Strait islands to own and use territories in their traditional places of residence. This right was called Native Title (original property rights). So, June 3 became a holiday – *Mabo Day*. Currently, this day is considered a holiday.

Conclusion

Scholars still cannot come to a consensus on the origin of Aboriginals. It is believed that they trace their origins to the Hamitic peoples (Negroid race). The name "Aboriginals" was given to Indigenous inhabitants of the continent by English colonists, and it is quite symbolic: the Latin *ab Origine* translates as "from the beginning". Aboriginals have changed little of the world around them; they are children of nature, considering themselves an inseparable part of it. Currently, Aboriginals live on their ancestral lands – in the reserves of the Northern Territory, as well as in Alice Springs, the only large city in Central Australia. A small number live on the coast, and a very small number live in the state capitals of Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth. One can visit the reservation with special permission from the council of tribal elders.

They were granted citizenship in 1967. They gained the right to freedom of movement

and chose a flag that depicts a yellow circle on two wide horizontal stripes – red and black. This composition symbolizes the black people living on the red land under the bright sun of hope. Among Aboriginals there are movie stars, sports stars, ballet stars, writers, artists, lawyers, historians and politicians. But despite the return of lands and other actions of the authorities, they are the only poor class in a prosperous country with a high living standard. Historically, Aboriginals were scattered over a vast territory, spoke different languages, and roamed from one place to another, which allowed them to survive during periods of drought. The boomerang was a traditional weapon, a projectile capable of flying along an intricate trajectory and returning to the one who threw it. The lower surface of the boomerang is flat, carefully polished, and the upper surface is convex, untreated. Rapid rotation creates a certain aerodynamic effect.

Nowadays, Aboriginals show tourists their skills, starting a fire by friction in a few seconds. They live in huts made of branches, grass and clay. They decorate things, tools and sacred churingas with ornaments, patterns and carvings. They sleep on platforms under which they make fires. The traditional wardrobe of the Aborigines is very meager. In some tribes, representatives of both sexes wear the so-called tassel of modesty or a flat shell. These are symbols indicating the achievement of a certain stage of life. According to existing laws and ritual requirements, property is given to relatives, friends, guests. Items migrate, strengthening family ties and friendship. Since ancient times, the distribution and exchange of products was carried out based on norms and rituals, everything was divided between relatives connected by affinity. Sons-in-law and fathers-in-law received advantages over other relatives. They received the best part of the spoils. This method of distribution spoke of the importance of the family. In this way, not only marital ties were strengthened, but also the ties between communities.

In conclusion, let us pay attention to the concept of a "being sorry" (to regret) which means "making an apology" (to ask for forgiveness), as well as "expressing profound regret".

In English, *sorry* is closer in meaning to the language standard “sorrowful” and is associated with grief and mourning (commemoration). *Sorry business* is a ceremony associated with death; *a sorry camp* is mourning camp; *a sorry cut* – an incision (cut, dissection), which means ritual commemoration. So, *Sorry Day* in Aboriginal

English – it’s a sad day (a “sorrowful day”), another day of remembrance – *Day of Mourning* is an Aboriginal term for Australia Day which has been celebrated since May 26, 1998 (Moore, 2008: 191). For the white population, this day marks an occasion to ask for forgiveness for everything that happened in the past.

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