



The Australian Journal of **INDIGENOUS EDUCATION**

This article was originally published in printed form. The journal began in 1973 and was titled *The Aboriginal Child at School*. In 1996 the journal was transformed to an internationally peer-reviewed publication and renamed *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*.

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THE BIRRIPAI OF THE MANNING

An Aboriginal Studies Unit for Secondary Schools

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Acknowledgement

Our thanks is due to the past and present Aborigines of the Manning with special gratitude to those now resident in Taree and Purfleet. Great courtesy and understanding, as well as much time and effort, was generously provided during the course of the research and was greatly appreciated by the team. We also wish to thank the non-Aboriginal members of the Community. Their help was given with equal courtesy and understanding.

The alternative spelling of Birripai are Birpai, Bripi, Birrapee, and Birippi.

University of Newcastle
1989

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CURRICULUM OUTLINE

Rationale

These units were devised to assist Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in the Manning and elsewhere to gain a fuller understanding of their cultural heritage. Culture contact inevitably led to culture conflict and to racial prejudice. This is non-productive for all Australians. Ignorance fuels prejudice. This unit aims to offer information which is intended to create greater understanding about the Aboriginal Australians who now live in what was once the traditional homeland of the Birripai.

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Aim

The aim of this unit is to provide better understanding of the cultural heritage of the Birripai and the conditions which led to culture conflict, and from this to develop an understanding of the outcomes of this conflict and how it affects Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians today.

Objectives

To develop understanding of:

1. traditional Aboriginal society and culture;
2. transitional Aboriginal society and culture;
3. culture during the protectionist period; and
4. contemporary Aboriginal society of the Manning and its culture.

INTRODUCTION

These units are designed to offer:

1. Teaching notes; and
2. Student notes.

The teaching notes have a brief conceptual outline with associated generalisations to brief the teacher.

The student notes have information provided, including extracts from primary sources, to enable the students to research the area and answer the questions provided through local history study.

The unit is not designed as a definitive study of the local Aboriginal community but offers catalyst units from which school based units can be developed.

RESOURCE

Cook, T. (1982). Guideline for teaching Aboriginal Studies. Sydney: N.S.W. Department of Education

TEACHING NOTES 1

THE BIRRIPAI OF THE MANNING RIVER
IN TRADITIONAL TIMES

FOCUS QUESTION: Who were the traditional Birripai?

CONCEPTS

Habitation	population
Geological time	tribal language group
territory	clan
subsistence population	band/local group/family group
totems	ceremonies
spiritual responsibility	sacred
life cycle	secret
Dreaming	trade
seasons	exchange
initiation	food
elder	protein
	carbohydrate
tribal disputes	law
ritualistic warfare	Aboriginal lore
	rules
	penalties
subsistence	life expectancy
marriage	
taboos	
culture	
generation	
niche	
resource	

GENERALISATIONS

Traditional Aborigines

- Aborigines had a subsistence economy which utilised but did not deplete the environment significantly.
- Aboriginal "culture" was diverse and consisted of many cultures and languages.
- Aborigines lived in tribal language groups with established territories over which they foraged.
- Aborigines lived in local groups called bands which consisted of men and children from a common clan as well as their wives who came from another clan.
- Local groups were extended families.
- Aborigines were spiritually responsible for the land through their totemic system which was tied to the ancestral creation period or Dreaming.
- The life cycle was central to the ceremonial, religious and spiritual life of the Aborigines.
- Ceremonies were both for religious and communication purposes, as well as being festivals to share cultural experiences.
- Ceremonies could be sacred and some of these were secret and some tribal members were excluded.
- Initiation into "manhood" was an important stage for a young man.
- Tribal disputes were solved through ritualistic warfare.
- Aboriginal society had many laws, rules and penalties in its strict society.
- Taboos were ways in which Aborigines could protect their environment and their culture.
- Aboriginal culture was very stable and could trace its heritage over 200 generations.

RESOURCES

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QUESTIONS

1. Were the Aborigines nomadic over the whole of Australia?
2. Do you believe the Aborigines had a simple culture? Explain why.
3. What was the difference between a clan and a local band? Use your own family to describe the difference. What band do you belong to? What clan does your mother belong to? What clan do you belong to? Draw your family tree to help you.
4. Using the map of the Birripai territory shade in the tribal-language group territory.
5. Write a brief essay on your understanding of what a day in the life of a Birripai might entail.

STUDENT NOTES 1

THE BIRRIPAI OF THE MANNING RIVER IN TRADITIONAL TIMES

The Birripai of the Manning River (see Map 1) and their ancestors have inhabited the continent of Australia for 40-50,000 years or more. They are an ancient people in an ancient continent.

When Europeans came to Australia there were 300,000 or more Aborigines in 600 or more tribal-language groups. Each group spoke a different language or dialect (a related language or language derived from another). It was something like a continent inhabited by 600 small nations which the Europeans chose to call "tribes".

Each of these tribes (more appropriately called "tribal-language group") consisted of between approximately 500-1500 individuals. All spoke the same or similar dialect and could communicate with the tribal-language group next to them. The area of land they covered varied depending on whether they lived on the coast or in the interior. However, the numbers were always somewhere between 500-1500 for each tribal territory; some being a little smaller than those figures, some a little larger.

The Birripai were not a large group, consisting of some 400-600 members that ranged from the mouth of the Manning mostly on the south side, down to the Wollumba River, inland to Gloucester and up the Bulga Plateau.

If they were like most other Aboriginal tribal-language groups, the Birripai would have been divided into family groups of "bands" of perhaps 25 to 50 individuals, the male members of which would trace their heritage back to a common ancestor. These men would form the band "clan". Their children would also belong to this clan but the wives would belong to a neighbouring clan. The wives would come from other clans but belong to the clan band they married into. A clan and a band (or local group of individuals in a family) were similar but not all members of a band belonging to the same clan.

This arrangement ensured the band and tribe were genetically strong because of the diversity of the genes coming into the band, as well as ensuring good relations

with neighbouring bands. The wives still had clan responsibility with their clan, even though they had joined another band. Their clan, and its religious obligations never changed.

A Birripai was born into a clan which might consist of one or more bands. Families, or local groups, or extended family groups, other names used for band, often split into smaller family groups when they got too large. A clan was responsible, through its bands (or local group or families), for the land upon which it ranged. Each member had a totem (or spiritual symbol) which was located in the clan's territory. It might be a rock, an animal or a piece of vegetation. The totem was given at birth, after near the birthplace, or related to the occurrence. It was a way of identifying with the land and of ensuring responsibility for it. The clan had spiritual responsibility for the land.

A Birripai band ranged over a territory of perhaps 400 square kilometres. With perhaps 15 or so bands, this gives a total language-tribal group range of some 6000 square kilometres. This area was approximately 100 kilometres north to south and some 60 kilometres east to west, centring on the Manning. The figures must, of course, be approximate figures, but they also help us to understand the territory of a tribal-language group and how it was organised.

A clan would have responsibility for a particular piece of territory or territories and local place within them which would be sacred and sometimes secret. These special spiritual places had to do with creation beings from the Dreaming or creation period, and ceremonies were conducted near them to ensure the land and the people remained fertile and that the life-cycle would continue.

Often ceremonies called corroborees were conducted at which the bands would gather, especially if seasonal food allowed a large gathering to occur. Objects were traded and brides exchanged and a festival took place. Trade and exchange took place at other times as well.

Sometimes special ceremonies took place at "bora rings". These ceremonies were where the young men were initiated into "manhood", a very important stage in life.

There were many ceremonies through life before one could become an "elder". Women took an important place in the ceremonies and had much power in everyday life. It was the women, for example, who provided most of the food, not the men, and they controlled camp life to a great extent.

The men hunted and provided protein. However, "kills" were irregular and the carbohydrate in the form of berries and tubers provided by the women were important to existence. The camp moved often within the territory to ensure game was close. The seasonal cycle was followed so that when the mullet were running the clans would share territory and gather on the beaches south of the Manning. This was a time of feasting and festivity, and of course much trade and exchange.

Trade occurred between as well as within tribes. Special arrangements were made for "couriers" to travel safely through neighbouring territory. The Birripai knew of the Kamilaroi from over the ranges and traded with them, for example.

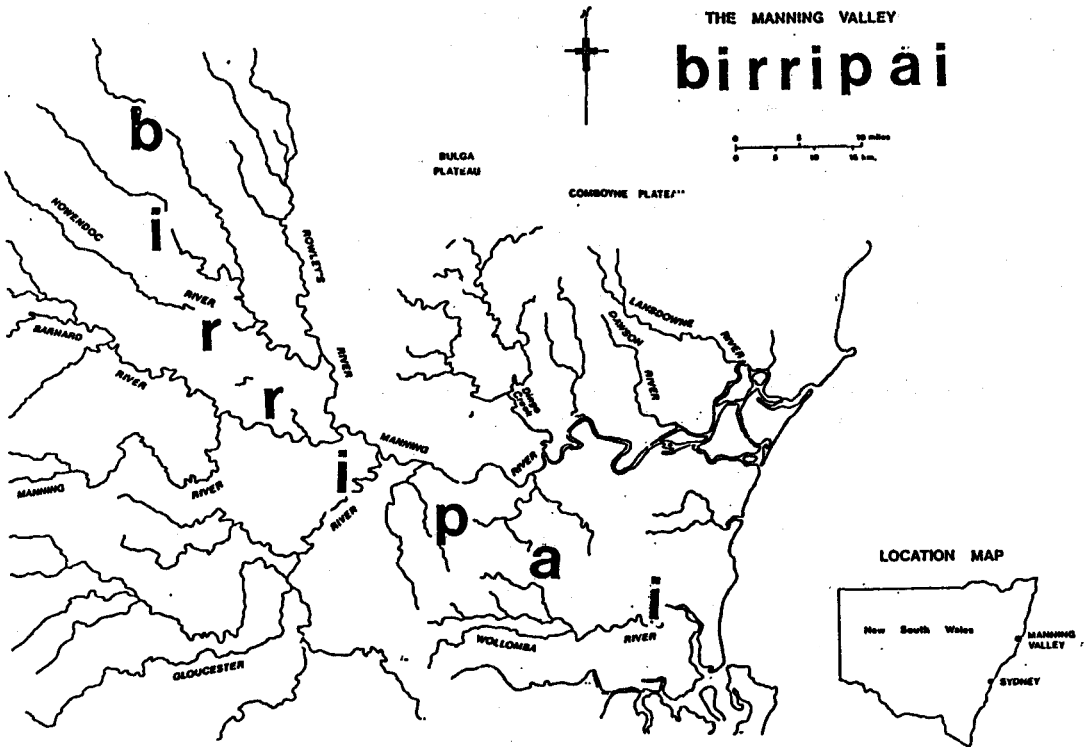
There was territorial and tribal disputes from time to time. These were often solved by ritualistic warfare displays where as many as 300 warriors would oppose each other in lines 50 to 100 metres apart and throw spears. This might continue for a whole day with little injury. This process often worked off the bad feeling and led to better relations with little death compared to the outright warfare as practised commonly by the Europeans during, for example, the Napoleonic wars.

There was strict law and order in what is known as Aboriginal "lore". Rules were strict and penalties harsh. Although the Birripai lived in a lush environment they still needed to protect their environment because they were subsistence based - they lived off the land. Many of their rules related to the land, territory, sacred and secret places, marriage, taboos and spiritual ritual.

Birripai men would have perhaps more than one wife and from the age of 14 or so a young woman would bear

children. She might have as many as 20 children but only a few would survive. Life was harsh and life expectancy was much lower than for contemporary people, being perhaps 35-40 with only a few living to what is now termed old age.

The Birripai knew and understood every aspect of their environment and developed a unique culture, which they passed on from generation to generation, in order to live on and be sustained by it. The developed ways of utilising every niche of the environment and although there is evidence they "farmed" the bush, burnt it and utilised its resources, they did so in such a way that a seasonal and life cycle was maintained without causing irrevocable damage to the environment.



TEACHING NOTES 2
THE BIRRIPAI OF THE MANNING
SINCE EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

FOCUS QUESTION: How has European settlement affected
Aboriginal culture and society?

CONCEPTS:

Culture	accommodation of lifestyle
Aborigine	atrocitiy
European	disease
culture contact	lifestyle catastrophe
culture conflict	fringe dweller
defence of territory	dependency
	black camps
settlements	bushcraft
hygiene	alcoholism
illness	dependency
	racism
protectionism	tribal friction
assimilation	communal disruption
integration	resettlement
multiculturalism	reserve
separate development	manager
	welfare
cultural de-spelling	loss of language
disadvantagement	cultural "genocide"
poverty	
folk culture	
racial tension	
identity	
survival	

GENERALISATIONS

- Aborigines have been dispossessed of the land.
- Government policies and cultural disintegration cost the Aborigines their languages in many parts of the continent.
- Aborigines were dispossessed of their traditional culture.
- Sedentary lifestyles caused health problems for Aborigines.
- Protectionism destroyed the autonomy of the Aboriginal way of life.
- Racism occurs in Australia.
- Resettlement caused community friction for Aborigines.
- Aborigines are a disadvantaged group.
- Identity is a central concept in contemporary Aboriginal Australia.

Resources

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STUDENT NOTES 2

THE BIRRIPAI OF THE MANNING SINCE EUROPEAN SETTLEMENT

The Birripai first saw Europeans in the early part of the 19th century. They were escaped convicts from the prison settlement of Port Macquarie and explorers from Sydney. They would have been amazed by these "white men" seeing them perhaps as returned spirit people. They would have been in all likelihood friendly, then unsure as sacred and secret grounds were traversed, food indiscriminately taken, and warnings not heeded. Inevitably culture contact led to culture conflict.

Later, in the 1820s, groups of Europeans camped on the Manning looking for Cedar, settled as employees on the Australian Agricultural Company's holding on the Southern side of the River, or established private land grants on their own. An inevitable outcome was that "shepherds", those minding the cattle, met the warriors, out hunting. Both would have been wary, scared and defensive. It was inevitable that spearings and shootings occurred although these events were rarely documented.

This in turn caused mistrust of tribal Birripai by Europeans and Europeans by Birripai. However, this was not always the case. The Birripai also befriended the Europeans and accommodated their lifestyle. Nevertheless, there were atrocities committed and Aborigines were shot and in some cases poisoned, and reprisals were taken against Europeans, from early period onwards. The Birripai held out the hand of peace. Many worked harmoniously with the cedar-getters in particular. They gathered near the European settlements and worked for the Europeans in order to get the things they saw as being advantageous, for example, steel axes.

One great catastrophe was to hit the Birripai and it came in the form of disease. Smallpox and other diseases decimated the population, being passed on through tribes from the south. The Birripai had no natural defence from such diseases as they had no previous contact with them. The population fell dramatically. Whole families were halved, social relations disrupted, and lifestyles destroyed. Within a very short number of years, the Birripai

were becoming fringe dwellers in the 'black camps' around the European towns which had successfully competed with them for the best land near levees and crossing places. The Birripai became dependent in many ways on the Europeans. They were also introduced to alcohol and this would ravish their population. For the men in particular, who were losing their primary roles, it would be devastating.

The Birripai struggled on through the 19th Century on the Manning. Now living in settled camps, hygiene became a problem. In tribal days, they simply moved on when an area was overloaded with waste materials. Examples are the many middens of shells surrounding old camp sites which were seasonally inhabited. Although the Europeans had learned over 4000 years to deal with sedentary village hygiene, the Aborigines, of course, had not. The Aboriginal hygiene system was related to frequent movement. European illnesses became a problem.

Many Birripai though, became respected and admired during this period for the bushcraft, horsemanship and athleticism. Sadly, with the advent of alcohol to their lifestyle, many were lampooned. The basis for future racism was being established.

Europeans became aware, towards the end of the 19th century that the Aborigines seemed to be "dying out". The Aborigines Protection Board was established in the early 1880s, although the Act did not come into full operation until 1909. The purpose of this Board was to protect the Aborigines. It often had the reverse effect and the outcomes of its policies, although perhaps well-intentioned, were disastrous once again for the Aborigines.

They were gathered together on reserves. Often different tribes brought unwillingly together caused friction and communal dispute. Managers and schools were provided, Missionaries ran the schools but these were later taken over by the managers in the 1930s who had no training as teachers. They could not hunt or gather food, which was provided by the government in the form of refined flour and sugar, salt, tea and salted meat. Some housing, blankets and clothes were provided as well. The men, in many cases, lost their role completely and alcohol became an even more major problem for them, especially in periods of high unemployment.

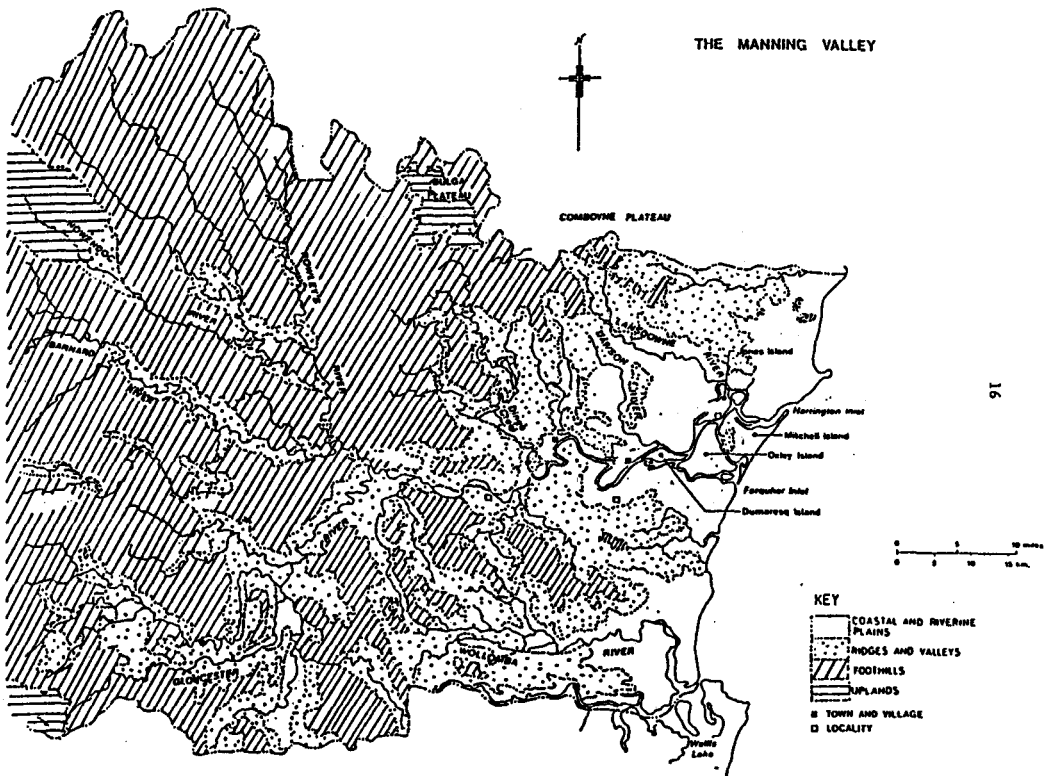
They were instructed by managers not to speak their native languages which largely disappeared very rapidly, virtually in a generation. The same occurred for the Birripai, who, with other tribal groups were established on stations and missions such as Purfleet near Taree. Some remained working on properties. Those on missions and stations were liable to the Aborigines Protection Act 1909, from then on. Certificates of Exemption could be provided for Aborigines to live off the missions and reserves (see Item 1). Children were often taken from their parents and placed in residential homes. This caused much heartache and resentment.

The Aborigines during this period in N.S.W. were not allowed to make decisions for themselves or to take responsibility for their lives and this de-skilled their population and made it completely dependent on the Europeans. This situation existed up until the 1940s when the policy of assimilation became the government's position. Aborigines including the Birripai, would now be assimilated into the local non-Aboriginal population. This policy was replaced in the 1960s with the policy of integration and in the late 1970s with multiculturalism.

The Aborigines were disadvantaged under all three sets of policies. They were frequently sick, generally unemployed and did not receive a good formal education. Only their will remained and a fierce determination to maintain their identity. A folk culture developed around the Aboriginal flag and its colours of red, black and yellow. In the 1970s their leaders showed great determination in gaining real advances for their people. But they were not able to vote as Australians, as example, until 1967.

There is, at times, a high level of racial tension for the Birripai today. They live in and around Taree, Purfleet and the Manning area and are fighting their way back to self-determination which is now the official government policy. They are still a disadvantaged group, but all Australians must understand why, and do something about it. One thing all Australians can do, is understand why things are as they are. We must understand our history.

The Birripai were and are a proud people who contribute to Australian life and culture. They are proud Australians. They have achieved what many anthropologists, politicians and historians thought a century ago was impossible. They have achieved survival. By the year 2000, there will once again be 300,000 or more Aborigines throughout Australia!



TEACHING NOTES 3
THE BIRRIPAI'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

FOCUS QUESTION: How did the spiritual life of the
 Birripai affect their everyday life?

KEY CONCEPTS: • extra-sensory perception
 • meditation
 • faith
 • judgement

GENERALISATION

 Aboriginal people had faith in the power of healers
and in their judgement.

RESOURCE

Elkin, A.P. "Psychic Life of the Aborigines", Mankind,
Vol. 2, No. 3, 1937, pp.49-56. Sydney University
Press for the Anthropological Society of N.S.W.

STUDENT NOTES 3

THE BIRRIPAI'S SPIRITUAL LIFE

The spiritual life of the traditional Aboriginal people of the Manning was very different to the spiritual life of the Europeans when they arrived on the Manning. However, there were things in common: the concept of an after life; of a spiritual world; and a belief that the spiritual world affects the life and conditions in the environment.

There are several concepts which are important to consider in relation to Aboriginal spiritual life. In example 1., the anthropologist A.P. Elkin refers to "recollection" and "meditation" as being two ways in which members of the Kattang tribe experience what might be referred to as extra sensory perception and seeing into the future.

In Example 2, Elkin refers to the notion of "faith" in one's ability to get better as being more important than any treatment. Faith healers today, as well as modern science both believe this concept of faith is important.

Elkin also refers in Example 2 to the concept of judgement in Aboriginal life. Remember that such terms as "medicine-man" are European terms and we should think of them as people of knowledge in their community who were respected. Elkin points out that "medicine men" would "see" who was guilty of murder. Although this may seem a very superstitious way of viewing things, today, there was, as Elkin points out, very likely more evidence to support the judgement than simply the "medicine-man's" vision of who is guilty. It was a way of deciding guilt and right and wrong.

Read the two examples and attempt the activities. Discuss your conclusions. Clearly the Aborigines were interested in good health and law and order. Their ways of doing things were different, or were they?

Although Elkin refers to the Kattang people who lived north of the Birripai, the Birripai may well have had similar or related beliefs.

PSYCHIC LIFE OF THE ABORIGINES

(From "Mankind" Vol.2, No.3, 1937) by A.P. Elkin

Example 1. Fore Knowledge and Involuntary Bodily Movements

The principle is that a person experiences a twitching, an involuntary movement, in some muscle or part of the body. This is usually an indication that some relation of the individual concerned will soon appear or visit.

On the North Coast of New South Wales a twitching in the right shoulder signified a son, in the left shoulder, a daughter, in the elbow, a brother, and, according to some informants, there are other associations; the main point, however, is that if the person who experiences the "warji", as it is termed, pays attention, he will learn who is coming. A ringing in the ear is another form of "warji", or intimation; if this persists, it seems that some relation is dead (Kattang tribe), and if attention be paid, the thought of who it is will come. As one informant said: he paid attention to such a "warji", and the thought of death came and said your Uncle "James" is dead - which proved to be correct.

Whatever be the ultimate explanation of these experiences and interpretations, it is at least clear that the Aborigines practise recollection and meditation, and that by doing so they believe they receive correct information of what is happening at a distance or will happen in the near future.

Example 2. Faith in the Medicine-Man, and Law

The medicine-man, by his actions, sucking and extractions, and so on, gives the patient faith in life and recovery, a faith which must be generated never mind what other practical treatment be given. Moreover, the faith must be absolute. Thus, if a Kattang (North Coast of N.S.W.) medicine-man tells the patient to get up in the morning and go for water, or perform some other task, and the latter does so, he will find himself cured, but if he does not do so, he will never get better. A sick woman hobbled about on

a stick was taken to a sacred "magical" waterhole and thrown in, and her stick was thrown away. She struggled out, and was cured. One informant in this area said that when a person is sick and his totem comes near and makes a noise, the sick person's heart will be strengthened and he will say, "I shall live". This informant maintained that what made the patient better was his faith - himself - and not the medicine-man's treatment...

Medicine-men... have the power of seeing and communing with the spirits of the dead - being seers or mediums. They can also see the spirit-double of the living. Now, one use to which they put either of these powers is to ascertain who caused a death by magic. Thus, in some tribes, the medicine-man may watch the corpse from a distance, for near it he will see the spirit of the "right man", the "murderer". Amongst the Kattang, the blood of the dead man is mixed with leaves and burnt, and the "murderer" can be seen in the smoke committing the crime... In seeing the spirit-doubles of the living... it is probably a matter of directed imagination, for the medicine-man has usually grounds which are reasonable to him, and probably also to tribal authorities, for seeing the spirit of a particular person who thus is denoted as the murderer, condemned thereby to be the object of a revenge expedition.

ACTIVITIES

1. If you were an Aborigine what conclusion would you draw from an episode of twitching in both shoulders?
2. What do you think might be an explanation for the Aborigine's knowledge of the death of a person known to him even though they are not present at the scene?
3. Name a healer from European history who was able to heal the sick by faith.
4. On what grounds might a particular person be seen to be a likely murderer?
5. Give some examples of modern day "alternative healing" methods, which might be compared with Aboriginal healing methods.

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