Anthropology 212

Book Report - Spring 96

The Mardudjara Aborigines

The case study I selected focuses on a nomadic group of aborigines called the Mardudjara, who live in the Western Desert of Australia. The book, written by Robert Tonkinson (University of Oregon), attempts to give the reader a general outline of what makes up the Mardudjara culture and belief system. Several main themes unfold throughout the book, including the paramount significance of their beliefs about the “dreamtime” spirits, their extensive ability to adapt to one of the harshest environments on earth, and the value of tradition in maintaining their religious beliefs, and social/kinship classification system.

The methods that Mr. Tonkinson employed were not unlike that of Balikci, Chagnon, or Bledsoe. He gathered his information largely through observation, and was also provided a great additional wealth of information through his many informants. There was little to no statistical analysis (with the exception of the complex graphs used to describe various kin relationships) of the data he collected in the field.

This book was interesting to read in the same way that Chagnon’s book was; i.e. it read more like a story than a dry statistical report. The descriptive data in the book was obtained and presented in one of two ways.

Because Tonkinson was obviously not the first ethnographer to study the people of Australia’s Western Desert, a lot of his initial statistical data comes paraphrased or quoted
statistics that would make sense to those with extensive experience in the field of anthropology. It seems more important to him that the reader gets a good feel for the social situation in which these people live. And, as previously stated, most of the descriptive data in the book is woven into the narrative so well that the reader is not aware that “data” is being presented.

The Mardudjara Aborigines: Living the Dream in Australia’s Desert focuses on three main issues of Mardudjara life: the adaptations that they have made in a most marginal environment, their kinship relations and social categories, and the overriding importance of religion in daily life.

Other than the frozen tundra on which the Netsilik reside, the Western Desert is perhaps the most harsh of all the earth’s habitats. The primary effect that the environment has upon the social structure of the Mardudjara is that it prevents a social unit any larger than about 15-20 members. In the unforgivingly arid desert climate, the amount of rainfall is practically the sole determinant of the locations of camps. Thus, groups must be kept small to ensure mobility and flexibility. Each small group, consisting mostly immediate kin, are all part of a larger estate-group that more or less owns several valuable water holes and sacred sites. Because of unpredictable levels of rainfall, the Mardudjara are constantly migrating from site to site. However, in contrast to the Netsilik, they do not migrate in an annual, predictable pattern. This irregular migratory pattern is also in contrast to the reasons behind Yanomamo village migration, who will translocate their village a short distance if the environmental resources near the village are sufficiently drained (a micro-move), or a great distance if there is impending conflict from a neighboring village (a macro-move).
The Mardu, as well as the Netsilik, are experts at exploiting alternate resources if the most desirable resource is unavailable. However, in terms of technological advancement, the Netsilik are far superior. Mardu technology is relatively simple, with all tools being crafted from readily available and abundant resources, mostly rock and wood. The diet of the Mardu consists of various grasses, seed-cakes, small game such as lizards and fish, and larger game such as the sacred emu. When an emu or larger game animal is killed, the allocation of the meat in the kinship group is very similar to the way in which a Netsilik hunter divides the meat from a caribou or seal kill, each cut of meat having a specific person to receive it.

To discuss the details of Mardu kinship system in any sort of comparative detail to those presented in the other texts would be practically impossible given the length limits of this report. So I will simply say that like the Yanomamo and the Netsilik, every person that a Mardu comes in contact with are classified and known by a particular kin term, and most interaction is modeled on an ideal set of behaviors that characterized the kin relationship involved (Tonkinson, 43). The boundaries of the social universe of the Mardu are very similar to that of the Yanomamo in that both groups recognize people who are “kin”, those who are “strangers”, and “distant people”, or people never encountered who are thought to have many non-human characteristics.

One topic that can be discussed without delving too deeply into the mire of kinship terminology is the issue of incest. The Mardu allow initiated males to marry anyone that fits the kinship classification of “spouse”, including both first and second cross cousins. Any marriage or sexual contact with anyone that you cannot call “spouse” is considered incestuous, and is severely punished. Officially, the Yanomamo take a similar
stance on incest as do the Mardudjara, but the Yanomamo have a greater tendency to bend
marriage rules to suit your wants and increase the number of potential brides, or even to
bend them to adjust for some situation that has already occurred. This system directly
contrasts the practices of the Netsilik, who have a “particularly Netsilik preference for
marrying relatives, and a resulting high degree of inbreeding,” (Balikci, 94,95) This results
in initial confusion for the ethnographer trying to study the rules for kinship classification in
Netsilik and Yanomamo societies, because two people can be related to each other in
several seemingly contradictory ways.

Religious/ceremonial activities and the concept of “dreamtime” are of paramount
importance in Mardudjara life. “Dreamtime” refers to the creative epoch, far older than
their oldest ancestors, in which Australia was transformed from a featureless plain, into the
living breathing environment in which they live today. They attribute specific landforms to
the activities of various of their dreamtime spirit beings. Dreamtime is the source of all of
their ritualistic observances, and it conveys to them the concept of yulubirdi, or, “the law”.
Among a vast multitude of things, the law dictates the roles of men and women in society,
and sets up the parameters for male initiation/circumcision/subincision.

When a boy reaches the rough equivalent of 12 years of age, it is time for him to
begin his long journey into the world of men. The Mardudjara have an extensive and
detailed initiation ritual which involves the removal and subsequent digestion of the boy’s
own foreskin. After the wound is healed, the subincision ritual is performed, whereby the
ventral surface of the penis is split, and then is opened along most of its length to expose
the urethra, which does not heal closed. The Mardudjara do this in order to simulate the
the sacred emu, which has a similar groove in the head of its penis.
from another's case study. Most of this type of data involved either the environment in which the Mardudjara live or comparisons of various aspects of the Mardudjara to other similar aboriginal groups. It is important to note here that the Mardudjara are only one sub group of aborigines living in the western desert. There are many other bands living in the Western Desert, and the occurrence of great annual feasts between these several groups is the highlight of the Mardudjara's social calendar.

Other data such as that involving male initiation, kinship terminology, spiritual beliefs and practices, and dietary information specific to the Mardudjara was presented in a very narrative and personal manner. Tonkinson begins with a very statistical and pragmatic account of the demanding conditions the Mardudjara cope with on a daily basis, including data on rainfall and temperature variations, and then leads into how these factors have shaped their various subsistence activities. Following that is a very detailed discussion of the complex system of kinship classification used by the Mardudjara. Very little of the descriptive data presented in the book was presented in such a way such that the reader is consciously aware that he is digesting descriptive data. For instance, in the chapter dealing with male initiation, Tonkinson takes the reader inside the ceremony and describes the actual procedure as it is performed rather than providing a second hand account of the prerequisites of the initiated and the responsibilities thereof.

As to the integration of the data with relevance to the central goals of the ethnography, Tonkinson's book fairs very well. Containing only 138 pages of text, the goal of the ethnography is simply to provide the reader with a general overview of the adaptations, beliefs, practices, and disposition of the Mardudjara people. The reason Tonkinson is so effective is that he does not attempt to bury the reader in demographical
that Tonkinson's book was extremely well researched and written, and did have an impact of reinforcing my views about human behavior.