

FRAZER (71)

~~DARLEY,~~
~~ARMADALE.~~

University
Melbourne
Sept 13. 1911.

My dear Frazer,

It is so long since I have written that I owe you many & most sincere apologies for my silence. About four months ago - just before I left Melbourne for the north of Australia - I found amongst my papers an unfinished letter to you which I thought had been sent.

It was written to thank you for the copy of your great work on "Totemism & Exogamy" and, when going through my papers before leaving Melbourne I was very sorry to find that by some mischance I had not sent it.

During the past few years I have been simply head over ears in work connected with the University & other bodies and have had no chance whatever of doing anything in the way of research.

The death of Howitt & Fison was a severe blow because they

were the only ones in Victoria
who really understood ethnology.

I am sorry to say that my son
after Howard's death my old
colleague + comrade J. J. Gillen became
very ill. He has been attacked
by some obscure form of disease that
the medical men do not understand.
It has left him helpless - he cannot
walk + when he got into this
state I felt much like giving up
anthropology work altogether which
was why I wanted to go that it
was impossible for me to go out to
the west as at that time I did
not care to go out unless he could
come with me.

However this year the Commonwealth
Government of Australia agreed to send
a small party up to the Northern
Territory to make preliminary
investigation + I went as leader
of this.

It was delightful to be once
more amongst the natives + though
our time was very limited I

was able to secure some valuable
information.

We went to Darwin + from
there across to Melville Island. Then
we returned to Darwin and travelled
south about two hundred miles + then
across the continent to the Gulf of
Carpentaria.

The principal things that I found
were that amongst all the tribes
the idea of reincarnation is universal
+ so also is the idea that sexual
connection has nothing, if necessary, to
do with procreation. The latter fact
is interesting because in many tribes
that this belief extends amongst all
the tribes extending from south to
north across the centre of Australia.

I did not find in any of these
northern tribes anything like 'Intichiuma'
ceremonies nor could I find any
restrictions in regard to eating the bodies
of animal or plant. The absence of
'Intichiuma' ceremonies is doubtless to
be associated with the fact that the
tribes in the far north live under
conditions very different from those of
the central area. They never suffer
from drought or lack of food supply.

This seems to show that the
'Intichiuma' ceremonies are a special

development of tribes that live in parts such as Central Australia where the food supply is precarious.

It is one of the most difficult things that you come across when working amongst Australian tribes - to discover the relationship between a man & his totem. Unless I had known a good deal about other tribes it would have been impossible for me even to find out that the Northern Territory tribes had any totemic system at all & it needs much further work before we are in a position to say anything very definite in regard to such matters.

I found that even the men who had been living amongst them for twenty or thirty years & were supposed to know all about them knew practically nothing.

In one or two tribes along the Roper River I came across a very curious totemic system. A man must marry a woman of a particular totem but the children belong to a different totem from that of either their father or mother. For example a rain man must marry a "paddy-melon" (species of small kangaroo) woman and their children are Euro (a kangaroo). A porcupine man marries a lizard woman and their children are bats. In these tribes each 'class' has certain totems

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associated with it. I much wish that I could have been able to study this system in greater detail than was possible because it is quite different from anything that I had met with before. In these tribes the natives were quite clear upon the point that the spirit children know the right lubra into whom they must go.

In all of the tribes I found that the women + children believe that the sound of the bull-roarer is the voice of a great spirit that comes to take away the boy when they are initiated, + also that the boy are told during the initiation ceremony when they are shown the chewinga for the first time that the noise is not the voice of a spirit but is made by the chewinga. The latter having been used by one of the mythic ancestors of the tribe.

I could find no trace of anything like a belief in a supreme being + with, of course, differences in detail, the beliefs of these northern

toke that inhabits Melville Island.

This toke is practically uncontaminated & I want to be able to study it as completely as possible. I can do this because there is one white man there who has the complete confidence of the natives. He is a great buffalo hunter & has promised me to give me a month or two of his time during the summer months when he cannot hunt buffaloes.

It will not be altogether pleasant owing to climatic conditions but it is the only chance that I have of doing this work unless I do it now it will never be done.

Most fortunately our University Council contains men who are fully realized of the fact that work of this kind is important so that I think that I will be able to get away.

The Commonwealth Government paid all the expenses of our last trip & I think that it will repay my ordinary expenses & I go with again but if it does not I shall go & pay for myself.

What I really want in a year to spend amongst the tokes, & I have an idea of applying for leave of absence in order to do this. However

trips are closely similar to those of the central toke.

Our time was so short that I thought it advisable to concentrate my work on certain points of fundamental importance & therefore do little except study the organization, class, color system, & place system & initiatory rites. Very much remains to be done & if it is to be done at all it must be done immediately.

The Commonwealth Government is about to undertake measures for the settlement of the Northern Territory which means that the aborigines will very rapidly become 'civilized' - that is will lose all their old customs & beliefs.

I am hoping to be able to get away with this summer during our long vacation. It is a very bad time of the year in that part of the world - dark heat with mosquito & malaria but it is my only chance & so I am asking the University Council to grant me leave of absence as I must have to investigate one particular

This at present is merely an idea but I will write to you later about it.

For seven years I have been kept very busy with routine work as President of the Professional Board and an feeling that if I am to do any ethnologic work in the field I must get away from this kind of work or it will be too late. My one regret is that Jellen cannot come with me.

These expeditions also mean that I cannot get home to England & staying out here, there is a great tendency to become 'fossilized' unless we can come in contact personally with workers in Europe. When the University grants me leave of absence to go to the northern Territory this is instead of granting me leave of absence to go to England. However much as I would like to come home it is more important to do the work out here.

I was very much interested a day or two ago when Professor Tucker whose name you may know as a classical scholar - he is an old fellow of Johns & Professor of Classics in our University - asked me if I knew anything of a belief amongst savages of a sexual connection not of necessity being associated with procreation. When I asked him why he told me that he had been studying the ancient myths & had

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been much struck with the fact that certain of these - such as those dealing with the birth of children after women had bathed in water reputed to be haunted by evil gods could only be explained on the theory that the ancient belief - not amongst the Greeks but amongst their ancestors - was that these waters were the home of spirit children who went into the women when they bathed. This was only one instance.

He had not read our work & told me that he fully expected me to say that it was quite impossible that any such idea could exist at the present day but that he was quite convinced after his study of the ancient myths that the latter pointed back to a time when the belief of procreation not being associated with sexual intercourse was prevalent.

I told him of our results amongst the Central Australian tribes

which entirely got in with the
conclusion at which he has quite
independently arrived and was quite
is reading your "Islands of Japan".

I am thinking of writing a paper
for the Anthropological Institute on this
question. Long & Short write of this
belief & it was inspired by the accounts
& the paper simply a "prelude". Long quotes
our old friend Huxley as one who studied
the Australian natives in their primitive
state.

As a matter of fact all of
Huxley's work in Victoria was done amongst
natives who had long been civilized &
had lost their old beliefs. The only
wild natives that he met were those
in the center & amongst these he saw
nothing whatever of their sacred ceremonies
in fact he knew nothing of the existence
of such things because at that time he
had not met Fison & had never
seriously studied them. It is

not to be wondered at that Huxley
did not come across this belief. Also
he was chiefly interested in the
evolutionary question.

I ought to be starting off just
about the time that you receive this
as I hope to leave Melbourne on
Wed. 1st for Darwin. If possible I
shall stay up there till about the
beginning of February but it will be
horribly hot & damp.

With kindest regards & most
sincere apologies for my long absence
Yours very sincerely

W. Baldwin Spencer.