

AN ANTHROPOLOGIST'S PERSPECTIVE OF THE KIMBERLEY

Peter Bindon, who spoke to Kimberley Society in May 1996, was at that time Head of the Anthropology Department at the Western Australian Museum. His research activities embrace Aboriginal topics and Mangroves, and Peter spoke of working in beautiful Cone Bay on Oobagooma Station where the mangals are flooded twice daily. He called it a vision of Paradise where the creeks are fringed with weeping *Ficus leucotricha* and the nearby granite outcrops are succeeded by distant dry spinifex plains. Excellent slides transported the audience to Cone Bay and to such places as Pea Hill (Umpampurra) on Noonkanbah Station, Arnhem Land with its low mud flats, mangals, eroded limestone and riverine thickets, gorge areas and boabs in savanna woodlands with the dense grass understorey. Peter also told how plants spread into the Kimberley from Asia, e.g. the grasses, and how Australia's marsupials didn't escape and are therefore unique, while placental mammals were excluded.

The reason the Top End interests anthropologists so deeply is that this is where, in one of the times when the sea level was low enough for people to walk to Australia, the first colonisers would have landed. Australia was the first continent to be colonised from the sea, but were the rafts made by Kimberley Aborigines suitable water craft for the colonists to come to Australia? Now, even though the Kimberley has many drowned river valleys, the ancient coastlines have been lost through numerous changes in the sea floor.

Peter cited N.W.G. McIntosh, Professor of Anatomy, who says the stamp of *Homo erectus* is on our Aboriginal people, which strengthens the view that they arrived 55,000 years ago. There's a good case to show that they arrived in the Kimberley first, spread around the coast, and then inland. All speculation of course. Nonetheless, these people did have edge ground stone axes flaked out of pieces of metamorphic rock 23,000 years ago and the use of this technology has only been dated 9,000 years ago elsewhere in the world.

For the age of Aboriginal art, there are no answers, but Peter argued that some of this art is very close to African art and features extinct animals such as Sthenurus, a kangaroo and a giant moa, a huge python as thick as a human, large komodo dragons and huge wombats. The Wandjina figures have nebula like saints, raindrops for their gowns and no mouths as they are spirits that don't talk. Older figures known as Bradshaws are often underneath these paintings while others depict bees and sugarbag with honey shown in holes in the rock. Peter commented that beeswax was used as a cement and, in showing us many different slides of art forms in different areas, pointed out perspective that often resulted in a creature

having unseen body parts portrayed on the visible side, e.g. two eyes on the same side of the head.

In discussing artefacts, Peter mentioned fish traps and stone arrangements in mud flats. The latter relate to birth and death cycles and occur across the continent. Heaps of stones also mark increase sites, which tie the people close to their religion and their land. The Carr Boyd Ranges are rich in art, grinding stones and brushes, and we heard about glass flaked spear heads, which take 20 minutes to make, found in Hermits Cave. The owners would have carried these spearheads tied up in topknots on top of their heads. In another limestone cave, someone had left a cache of glass, horseshoe nails, and string made from human hair. He offered many more snippets and, after his most interesting talk on an intriguing subject, Peter fielded many questions from the audience and said that plenty more questions remain unanswered.

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