

NHH07. Boy Wives of the Aranda

In this session:

Darwin had to postulate sexual selection, and to argue it must be as strong as natural selection, if he was to be able to explain anomalies such as the peacock's tail. That sexual selection works among humans is undoubted, but how it operated thousands of years ago to make us the people we are today we do not know. What is clear is that by the time our remote ancestors came out of Africa 80-90 kya, they were physically the same as us. The only evidence — and that is pretty controversial — we have of homosexual activities before the Last Glacial Maximum ("Last Ice Age") comes from three men buried together near Dolní Vestonice, near Brno in the Czech Republic.

The Pre-History of Homosexuality I

If we think at all about how our remote ancestors went about sex, we probably think of either a lumbering galoot clubbing a woman senseless and dragging her away to his cave, or a bit closer to home, Fred and Wilma Flintstone living lives painfully like ours. Truth is, we



have no idea really how early *Homo sapiens* made love, or even if it was love they made. It would seem, judging by the shape of the many European *Venus* figurines dating from before the "Last Ice Age"¹ that "fat was beautiful", and we know that our remote ancestors liked to decorate their clothes and possibly their bodies.

The Venus de Willendorf, circa 28 kya²

The Year Dot³

Millions of years ago some chimpanzee-like ancestors of ours started walking on their hind legs. The upshot of this was that the upright stance hid the female genitals from view while at the same time the buttocks grew

¹ Actually the "Last Glacial Maximum"...We are still in the Ice Age!

² <http://correodelasculturas.wordpress.com/2009/05/15/vigencia-del-arte-prehistorico/venus-of-willendorf/>

³ For much of this section I am indebted to Timothy Taylor: "*The Prehistory of Sex: Four Million Years of Human Sexual Culture*", Fourth Estate, London 1996, Pp 4 ff.

larger. Breasts developed in females, body hair started to disappear, especially in females, while what had been, in earlier species, a very large clitoris grew smaller. Among males, the tiny penis of earlier models thankfully grew larger...

While simply standing up hid the female genitalia, the other changes are difficult to explain as a response to some external challenge — for example, to prolonged drought or other climate change. Darwin himself recognized that many of these changes in early man made no sense in terms of survival of the fittest and he postulated “sexual selection”, a process he argued had as much influence upon evolution as environmental pressures. This is the process of mate selection which has resulted in the peacock’s glorious but otherwise useless tail which, in simple survival terms might even be a liability. However, it turns the female on and she selects the male she considers to have the best tail.....

When females started to walk upright, not only was the focus of attention shifted from buttocks and estrous labia to breasts but it also changed the shape of the pelvis and birth canal so that childbirth became more painful and dangerous. This too does not make sense in terms of simple Darwinian selection but walking upright freed the hands to make and use tools, although the tools used by the earliest humans, which were undoubtedly made from grasses and wood and other perishable materials, have not survived.⁴

By the time our ancestors came out of Africa they were physically indistinguishable from us. There have been many mutations and variations since then, of course, but for those of us of European ancestry, we are no different from our remote ancestors who entered Europe ~ 45–40 KYA. This was a reasonably warm period when

⁴ Somewhere along the evolutionary trail, our ancestors’ brain size started to grow larger, reaching its present size about 150,000 years ago. Neanderthal actually ended up with a larger brain than ours although there is no evidence his species was any smarter. While there seems to have been no environmental reason why our brains should have enlarged, many scientists suggest that it did so in order to accommodate the growth of culture, including language. It might also have been triggered by our move to upright stance: standing up we could see much more with our binocular vision. Possibly this too demanded more computing power. However, standing upright meant that our noses were further from the ground and so we could not depend on scent as much as four-legged animals do when hunting. There is a theory that humans domesticated dogs whose million-fold sense of smell compensated us for our loss of smell while our vision far outstripped that of our best friends.

there was sufficient game and other resources to sustain them in their hunting, fishing and gathering lifestyle.

The earliest people to enter Europe from the east were what is termed today the Aurignacian, a term referring to a fine flint-knapping technology which they had developed, the remains of which tell us all we know about them. When they entered Europe they gradually displaced the Neanderthals, driving the last of them into westernmost Iberia where the last of their species died ~29 KYA.

It is about this time that we begin to get our first glimpses of human sexuality. Perhaps the best-known representation of a human figure is the so-called Venus of Willendorf, a diminutive figurine of a very fat woman, carved in Oolitic limestone probably about 28,000 years ago. Now held in the Naturhistorisches Museum, Vienna, this little lady is only 4.4 inches (11.1 cm) tall. However, she raises more questions than the Mona Lisa: for example, why is she so fat? The nomadic hunter/fisher/gatherer lifestyle of her day would have made it pretty near impossible for her to grow obese unless there were women who were held in such high regard (for example, priestesses or some kind of ruler) who were not only fed the best of



everything but perhaps carried rather than walking under their own steam. This and other "Venus" figurines found throughout Europe beg the question: "Was fat beautiful in the eyes of our remote ancestors?" If so, then interestingly, all the representations we have of men show them to be thin.

La Dame de Brassempouy⁵, the oldest representation of a human face in Europe.

Archaeologists have recently switched their attention from the figure to the rather bobbly protrusions on the head of the Venus de Willendorf which they now think represented some kind of headdress. Similarly, a headdress was worn by another "Venus"

⁵ www.panoramio.com/photo/20531872

figurine, the so-called "La Dame à la capuche" or "La Dame de Brassempouy". La Dame is the first representation of a human face in the whole of prehistory. It has been argued that these headdresses were woven and therefore not only demonstrate that weaving was one of the skills these ancient people possessed, it also suggests some kind of social organization, perhaps tribal.

As for pre-historic homosexuality, the only evidence we have from that pre-Ice-Age time comes from a small valley in Moravia in the modern Czech Republic, now called Dolní Vestonice, near Brno. In that valley a community of perhaps no more than 100 Cro-Magnon people managed to live what seems to have been a relatively sophisticated life-style for several thousand years.

In 1986, archeologists discovered three skeletons buried together in a common grave some 28,000 years ago. The skeletons were of three people, all young — about 18-20 years old when they died — the outer ones both healthy, robust young men while the one in the middle had not been so lucky in his lifetime. Although the sex of this skeleton was hard to determine — initially, assumed to be female although some pathologists considered it to be "inter-sex" — the consensus now seems to be that he was indeed male, but badly deformed by some congenital disability causing his thigh bone to fuse to his hip and thus making it difficult for him to walk. He would have been in serious pain in his lifetime....

All three bodies had been buried after rigor mortis had relaxed, leaving them pliable enough to be carefully arranged in the grave. The disabled young man in the centre was buried first, then the one on the right was laid down on top of him, face down, with their arms entwined. For some reason or other, this man was looking away from the middle youth. He was also wearing a necklace of wolf teeth, evidence that even so long ago, people adorned themselves although, of course, this could have had some magical intent.

The disabled youth in the centre was buried looking at the one to his right, the man with the wolf-teeth necklace; his forehead was covered with red ochre and he wore a necklace of Artic fox teeth. Between his legs or perhaps in his anus had been placed a red ochre statuette — or maybe a dildo of which many examples have been found in the valley.

When the young man on the left was placed in the grave, he was still alive. He might have been wearing a mask — or, at least, his face had been painted with red ochre — and he wore a necklace of human teeth. A stake had been driven through his groin and he had been left to die. Later, his body had been re-arranged so that he appeared to be looking at the crotch of the youth in the middle and his hands were reaching out as though to touch him there.



The grave at Dolní Vestonice

Although this *tableau mort* has been interpreted in many ways⁶, an interesting (but personally, I believe a bit on the wild side) reading by Connell O'Donovan⁷ is that it represents a same-sex relationship gone “horribly wrong”. He suggests that the youth in the centre⁸ and the one to his right were lovers while the one to the left might have seduced, raped or even castrated the middle man (castrated because of the red ochre between his legs). He further surmises that this so humiliated the middle man that he committed suicide and that his lover killed himself from grief. The community was so incensed that they executed the man on the left and after all three were dead, buried them so that their story could be read for evermore....

⁶ Timothy Taylor has several scenarios, but these were written before the youth in the middle was determined to be male. See Taylor, op. cit., pp 112-113.

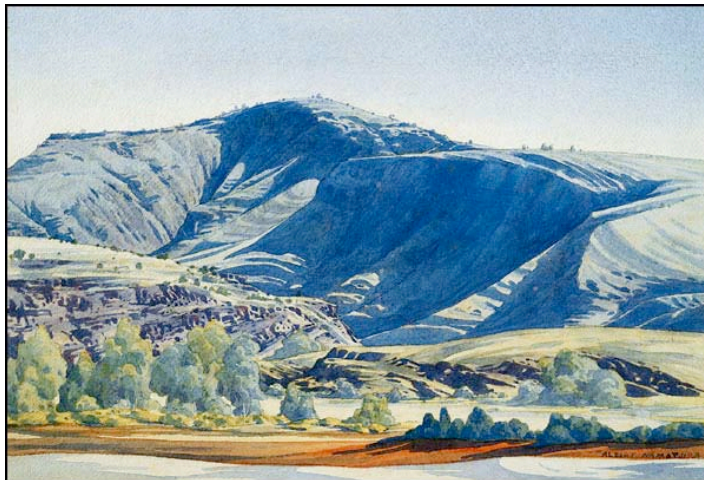
⁷ <http://home.earthlink.net/~ekerilaz/dolni.html>

⁸ O'Donovan (Ibid). suggests that the necklace of fox teeth this man was wearing symbolises his passive homosexuality. He writes: “*the fox has a long association in Europe with passive homosexuals because of its anthropomorphic wiliness, beguiling "smile", and liminal character who is neither fully wild nor fully domesticated.*”

An Aranda⁹ Interlude

Fat or thin, we tend not to flesh out the lives of our ancient ancestors but to consider them almost in the abstract, wraiths that wandered the inter-glacial landscape, spearing mammoths and most importantly, passing on their genes to us. To demonstrate that hunter/fisher/gatherers who have left very few artefacts to posterity and whose level of technology was low by our standards, we need look no further than some of the Australian aboriginal people whose physical lives were similarly low-tech but who demonstrably had an immensely rich cultural life.

But first, I must warn that I do not intend to use the example of the Aranda to extrapolate to our remote European ancestors back in hunter/gather/fisher times before the Last Ice Age. You cannot extrapolate from one culture to another because each is its own unique adaptation to its particular environment.



*Albert Namatjira:
Mt Hermannsburg Finke River
c.1946-51 (watercolour over
pencil on paper in the
collection of the National
Gallery of Australia*

At the time Australia became one nation — 1901 — there were probably about 2,000 Aranda people living in

a huge territory in and south of the Flinders Ranges. They were one of the largest groups of Aboriginals then in existence. However, by the time Old Parliament House finally opened for business, a matter of less than 30 years, their numbers had fallen to just 300 or 400.¹⁰

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* identifies the Aranda as an

.... Aboriginal tribe that originally occupied a region of 25,000 square miles (65,000 square km) in central Australia, along the

⁹ There are many variations on this name including: A'randa, Aranta, Arunda, Arunta, Arranda, Arinta etc. The "Arunta" form seems to be based on a mis-hearing by the early anthropologist, Sir Baldwin Spencer.

¹⁰ Spencer and Gillen 1927

upper Finke River and its tributaries. The Aranda were divided into five subtribes, which were marked by differences in dialect. In common with other Aborigines, the Aranda were greatly reduced in number during the first 70 years of contact with whites, but by the late 20th century they showed signs of holding their own and even of increasing in number. In 1982 the Aranda people at Hermannsburg in the Northern Territory were given freehold title to their land.

A useful summary of the Aranda way of life is given by Martin J Malone¹¹ of the Centre for Social Anthropology and Computing at the University of Kent. Much of what follows is a synopsis of what he wrote.

The climate in that part of Australia is hot and dry with only two seasons a year, a long dry and a short wet season. The topography varies greatly, from the flatlands in the South which are only 20m (70 feet) above sea level to over 1500m (5,000 feet) on the peaks of the McDonnell Ranges. The driest areas, mostly to the south and west, are true desert, although near the Ranges, parts are reasonably well-watered. The game available include kangaroo and emu, wallabies, euros, bandicoots, snakes, frogs and many species of birds. Trees and shrubs in the region supplied timber, gums, herbs and fruits. Their only weapons were spears and boomerangs. Apparently they had dingoes who helped them hunt but they were later replaced by dogs which appear to have been kept only for companionship, not as hunters.

The Aranda, like all Aboriginal people, were nomadic, constantly moving from place to place where they knew they could find food. Usually camps were temporary, little more than a brush shelter, and essentially near a water-hole. These more-or-less circular lean-tos were occupied by a man and his wife or wives, children and often a large number of dogs, but they were used only to provide shade or some protection against rain. In warmer weather, the whole family slept outside. People stayed in the one region while the food supplies lasted; then they walked to another camp site, but always moving within a circumscribed ancestral territory.

¹¹ Martin J. Malone at http://lucy.ukc.ac.uk/EthnoAtlas/Hmar/Cult_dir/Culture.7827

Much of the year, the people hunted and travelled in small groups, sometimes just family, other times maybe two or three families combining, depending on the carrying capacity of the area. Generally speaking, these local bands — or “hordes” as they are sometimes called by anthropologists, “mob” by aboriginals speaking English — would not contain more than 40 people plus their dogs. Their allotted territory was usually no more than about 100 square miles.

There was also a more permanently located central camp where once a year or so the whole “tribe” would gather together and conduct important ceremonies. This larger camp was always set out on the ground to reflect the social organisation of the tribe. Most aboriginal societies were divided into 4 moieties which in turn were then subdivided into two subsections. These divisions were basic to the marriage and kinship system of the tribe. Marriage and even casual sex partners had always to be selected from the appropriate moiety and sub-section because sex with anyone else was theoretically punishable by death. Descent among the Aranda was *patrilineal* (that is, through the father), children taking on the moiety of their father but always of the other sub-section of it. After marriage, wives went to live with their husband’s family band, perhaps only meeting up with their own biological family during the annual ceremonial get-together.

A further division within a tribe was the “totem”, a system which associated the individual with a special plant or animal. These were only partially hereditary, partially chosen as the result of a “dreaming”. The Aranda believed these totems were the souls of Dreamtime or Creation heroes which floated through the air and impregnated women, so leading to a form of reincarnation or spiritual recycling. By and large, the Aranda were not aware of the role of paternity, at least among human beings.

Homosexuality among the Aranda

Unfortunately, because some of the earliest field workers were squeamish about intimate sexual matters, particularly homosexual activities, we have been told that they “knew what went on” but that it was “unfit for publication”. For example, there are several references to homosexuality among the Aranda which, it was said was “universal and life-long”. However it has been difficult to piece together exactly what was meant by this admission.



An Aranda man sits among his sand paintings¹².

As far as I can see (and extrapolating from other tribal areas known to be similar), sex and sex play was pretty much ubiquitous. Infants and young children played sex games, particularly what we call “mothers and fathers” or “house”, with a degree of accuracy which would horrify most Western mothers

even in today’s more liberal climate. For example, not only did little boys and girls build their own play wind-breaks and light fires over which they pretended to cook food, but they also actively rehearsed the sexual acts they saw their parents and other adults perform around the camp fires or in the brush shelters every night. Little girls also frequently played such games together, one pretending to be the “father”, lying on top of the other and using thrusting hip motions. Often too, the “father” would end up poking a stick into the “mother’s” vagina, adding realism by wrapping fibres around the end of it to emulate the *glans penis*. Adults, witnessing such displays, rather than being horrified as we might be, indulgently applauded their sexual precocity, provided — and this was important — that the proper kinship relations, such as brother-sister incest taboos were observed.

Some anthropologists also say this kind of sex-play with the little penis-stick was carried on by adult women as a form of lesbian sex among the eastern and western Aranda, other tribes to their west and north, including the Warramunga to the north of the McDonnell Ranges¹³.

Young boys too played “mothers and fathers” with each other although it might not have been heterosexual intercourse they were mimicking. A younger boy would take the passive role, allowing an

¹² www.wvu.edu/depts/skywise/cosmo.html

¹³ Gays and Lesbian Aboriginal alliance: “Peopling the Empty Mirror: the Prospects for Lesbian and Gay aboriginal History,” in Aldrich, R: *Gay Perspectives II – More Essays in Australian Gay Culture*, Department of Economic History and the Australian Centre for Gay and Lesbian Research, University of Sydney, 1993, pp 39-40

older boy to insert his penis between his thighs and perform intercrural or interfemoral intercourse (“frottage”).

More clearly homosexual is the practice known as “boy brides”. Heterosexually, even though the classificatory kinship system creates a range of potential mates, girls are usually promised to a specified older man when they are still infants or even before birth. When they are still young children they will be sent to live with the man. They might well sleep together and be relatively intimate but coitus does not take place until the girl reaches an appropriate age, usually when the first signs of puberty appear.

However, boys are also often given to older men with whom they serve as intimate servants until they reach the age of initiation. This so-called “boy bride” relationship only ever occurs between an uninitiated male, usually younger than about 14 or so, and an adult man — which means a male who has passed through the initiations ceremonies and has been *subincised*. Sub-incision was practised in only some parts of Aboriginal Australia, mostly in the Centre and in the north to north-western regions.. Some tribes practised



circumcision, some subincision; a few practised both. While circumcision meant the removal of a small section of the prepuce, subincision involved making a slit into the urethra on the under-side of the penis.

A subincised penis¹⁴

Over a man’s lifetime repeated cutting like this for ritual purposes (the blood was used to glue feathers to the body for important ceremonies) resulted in the penis opening out into a kind of erectable flap rather than the usual tubular shape. Some anthropologists argue this was to serve as a contraceptive measure — ejaculation would be from the base of the penis, not from the

¹⁴ <http://wiki.bmezine.com/index.php/Subincision>. Both women and subincised men report subincision increases coital sensation. It is potentially a dangerous operation because of the risk of blood loss and infection.

meatus — but Ashley Montague¹⁵ argues that this would not have been effective because the ejaculation was made with such force that enough would have entered the vagina and that, in any case, the Aranda did not understand the connection between semen and paternity. He concluded that the main reason for subincision was the obtain “male menstrual blood” for ceremonial purposes.

Sexually, the boy-bride relationship usually took the form of masturbation, the boy getting an erection which he then placed in the slit made by the adult man’s subincision; he then closed his hand around both penises and masturbated them until one or both (assuming the boy is old enough) ejaculated. But this was not just a sexual relationship: the boy slept and ate his meals with his mentor and went hunting with him, so this was in effect a master/apprentice relationship.

It was not only the Aranda who had “boy wives”. Mathews¹⁶ in a footnote to his 1907 study of the Aranda wrote:

“Mr. E. T. Hardman, during his travels in the Kimberley district of Western Australia in 1883-4, observed the custom of single men being presented with what he calls “a boy wife”. He says: “There is no doubt they have connexion, but the natives repudiate with horror and disgust the idea of sodomy”.

At puberty, boys were separated from the women and for the next three or four years, they underwent a series of ceremonies as part of their initiation into adult manhood. As well as circumcision and subincision, among the Aranda this usually involved an ordeal by fire, another fairly common ritual practice in that part of Australia.

¹⁵ The reference here escapes me: I know it was in an early issue of the journal “Oceania” published by the University of Sydney and probably dated in the 1930s which was when Ashley-Montague was in Australia.

¹⁶ Mathews, R. H: Notes on the Aranda Tribe, *J Proc Royal Soc New South Wales* . (1907) 41:146-63

During initiation, the neophytes are subjected to harsh discipline, often to very restrictive food taboos, and to seclusion from the daily life of their community. During this time too they were allowed to witness some ceremonies appropriate to the level of initiation, to



take part in some ritual acts, to visit the sacred *tjurungas*, and frequently, to see the bull-roarers in action.

A bullroarer (Tjuringas cannot be shown here).

Previously they would have only heard these and been told they were the voice of a terrible monster

of which women and children had every need to be afraid.

Men — and women too — did not stop after just one initiation but throughout their lives progressed to higher and higher degrees. Magical powers were often ascribed to those who had reached the highest levels, including the interesting assertion that they could communicate over vast distances by mental telepathy. And of course, at some stage men ceased to be the one being initiated and became the initiators.

Homosexuality elsewhere in Australia

Because so much of the ritual life of aboriginal people was secret, it is difficult to get detailed information about any homosexual practice during initiation ceremonies and other events. One thing is very clear, however, and that is that whatever sexual connections occurred, either homosexual or heterosexual, had to be within the boundaries set by the complex moiety and totem systems. So, for example, within the kinship system of the Aranda, the “boy-brides” and their “husbands” were usually classified as “brother-in-law “ and so potentially husbands to each other’s sisters.

However, there are also suggestions in the anthropological literature which indicate that youths and young men who were not yet married — and in fact, sometimes older men too — engaged in a whole range

of sexual activities together on a more or less casual basis and that this was exempt from the kinship restrictions. It could be that the anthropologists were simply not aware of the kin relations among such men, but it also suggests that attitudes towards sex between men were generally fairly matter-of-fact among tribes of the subincision area and that the kinship restrictions came into play only when a more institutionalized form of relationship, characterized by the term “boy-bride”, came into effect.

Aboriginal cultures in Australia are generally divided into two characteristic kinds, the “Murrayian” (which extends west of a line drawn roughly north-east to south west through the continent) and the Koorie, who occupied the area we live in, in the South-East. The Aranda and others discussed so far were all Murrayian cultures. Although the Aranda were reported to be horrified at the thought of anal intercourse with a boy bride, there are suggestions in the literature that both oral and anal insemination were practiced by various Murrayian tribes. However, because initiation rites were always secret, and because even those anthropologists who were privileged to witness such events were unwilling to speak about what went on, we know little about such matters.

Homosexuality in the South East of Australia

Perhaps because the Aboriginal tribes of the Southeast had been in contact with Europeans for much longer, it has been much harder to find information about homosexuality among the Koories.

However, in his 1904 classic study *Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, AW Howitt¹⁷ gives a detailed eye-witness account of a *Kuringal* or initiation ceremony conducted by the Yuin men from the Manero, Shoalhaven and Braidwood districts. He recorded that after the three boys were “made men”, culminating in the knocking out of a front tooth, a night-long series of pantomimes was enacted by the initiated men for the moral education of the novitiates.

After depicting the rape of a sleeping woman and having been told the penalty was death, another pantomime was carried out which was “still more striking”. Howitt described it thus:

¹⁷ Howitt, A.W. : *Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra 1996. See “Initiation Ceremonies, Eastern Type”, p.549

By itself it seemed to be merely beastliness of behaviour. The pantomimic actions and words left no doubt that this represented the offences for which, it is said, the cities of the plains were destroyed by celestial fire.

The novitiates were then told, most forcibly, that if they did anything like that they would be killed.

I don't know how typical this might have been of traditional Koori cultures of the South-East or, for that matter, if the prohibition against anal sex also extended to other forms of homosexual activity. Certainly, homosexuality is as common among contemporary Koori men as it is in the general Australian population.
