INTRODUCTION

TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL RELIGION AND PSYCHOLOGY

During the summer of 1896-7, several hundred Aranda tribesmen were gathered together for almost four months at Alice Springs in Central Australia. The main sacred totemic cycle performed by them related to the bat, frog and native cat centre of *Imăṇda*., but visitors from other centres contributed additional acts that were their own property. It was the first occasion on which a complete ceremonial cycle was revealed to white men by Central Australian aboriginals; and this revelation was an act of gratitude towards F.J. Gillen, Special Magistrate and Sub-Protector of the Aborigines, Alice Springs, whose efforts had successfully ended a brutal era of police violence in Central Australia. Baldwin Spencer (then Professor of Biology in the University of Melbourne), who had been permitted, as Gillen's friend, to attend this ceremonial festival, became the driving force in the compilation of the famous volume which set down his and Gillen's observations on the religion and the social organization of the Central Australian tribes. This book – called "The Native Tribes of Central Australia" (1899) – first directed world attention on the customs and religious concepts of aboriginal Central Australia.

A few years later the Rev. C. Strehlow, who had arrived among the Western Aranda in 1894 and who continued working among them at Hermannsburg for twentyeight years, began his researches into the myths, songs, and social organization of the Western Aranda, the Kukatja, and the Matuntara tribal groups. The results of his researches were published by the Städtisches Völker-Museum, Frankfurt am Main between 1907 and 1920, under the title "Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien".

Spencer and Gillen's volume was the first book which contained excellent photographs and fine eye-witness descriptions of the secret religious ritual of Central Australia. C. Strehlow's work, however, was the first which gave translations of the myths associated with the ritual, and quoted the sacred songs sung on all ceremonial occasions. Moreover, he succeeded in translating the difficult archaic language found in these songs – a feat never before achieved in Australia. Only a linguist can appreciate the full magnitude of this accomplishment. – a fact that has completely escaped the notice of even such a recent Australian literary historian as H.M. Green, who dismisses C. Strehlow's work almost contemptuously in "A History of Australian Literature"[1]

Ever since the publication of these two works, ethnologists and scholars in comparative religion have concerned themselves with evaluations of the true nature both of aboriginal Australian religion and of the psychology responsible for certain of its features. These judgments have often been surprisingly at variance with one another.

At the lowest point of the evaluation scale comes the early and extreme claim made by Frazer – who relied strongly on Spencer and Gillen – that

> Among the aborigines of Australia, the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information, magic is universally practised, whereas religion in the sense of

> propitiation or conciliation of the higher powers seems to be nearly unknown. Roughly speaking, all men in Australia are magicians, but not one is a priest; everybody fancies he can influence his fellows or the course of nature by sympathetic magic, but nobody dreams of propitiating gods by prayer and sacrifice. (The Golden Bough, abridged edition, p.55)

Certain linguists and other students of "primitive peoples", who were in accord with the evolutionary concepts behind many of the older anthropological descriptions and evaluations, made attacks upon the "pre-logical mentality" found in "primitive societies" (Lévy-Bruhl), sneered at the crude nature of the "primitive languages" (Sommerfelt: "we know . . . that a correlation exists between the thought of inferior societies and the languages of those societies"), and delicately hinted at the inferior intelligence of certain "primitive peoples" (Porteus).

Other scholars were much more favourably impressed with the thought processes of the aboriginal Australians. W. Schmidt found traces of monotheistic beliefs in the Australian religious sphere ("Urmonotheismus"), particularly in south-eastern Australia. His opponent Josef Winthuis, who risked his academic career in order to protest his basic conviction that androgynous beings were the heroes of religious beliefs of a high order among the Australians (and elsewhere), made extensive use of C. Strehlow's material (e.g. in Mythos und Kult der Steinzeit), till his pen and tongue were silenced (1940) by a veto from Rome. Róheim's voluminous writings – undertaken from the Freudian viewpoint – are based to a very large degree on material collected in Central Australia by Spencer and Gillen, C. Strehlow, and later by himself. In Australia itself the writings of Elkin, Worms, the Berndts, and others have done much to promote a finer appreciation of the religious and ethical thought expressed in aboriginal ritual and mythology. The most striking

opposition to the view expressed by Frazer may be found in Stanner's recent studies of aboriginal religion, in which he speaks about the lineaments of sacrifice and sacramentalism in Northern Australia (Oceania, Vol.XXX, No.2, and the following numbers).

The depth of the disagreement between the opinions cited in this introduction points to the need for a complete restatement of the aboriginal religious concepts which underlie Australian mythology and ritual. Since this necessitates a demonstration of the close connection between religion, ritual, social organization, and certain purely geographic aspects of the environment, I shall take most of my illustrations from the region I know most intimately – the far-flung Aranda-speaking area, where I have been carrying out detailed investigations of this kind for thirty years.