

# ABORIGINAL MEN OF HIGH DEGREE

SECOND EDITION



A. P. ELKIN

*Aboriginal Men of High Degree* is the first general account of Australian Aboriginal medicine-men. It is a study of their making, their personalities, their powers and social value.

First published in 1945, this new and revised edition is based on Professor Elkin's Australia-wide survey of the recorded knowledge of Aboriginal rituals, beliefs and practices from the earliest settlement at Port Jackson and from his own field-work in many regions of Australia from 1927 onwards. This second edition also incorporates material from reports and studies made since publication of the first edition, and in addition the author includes specific results of inquiries made through physicians and others in close contact with Aboriginals.

This new edition brings to light the fact that the role of the medicine-men in health services is receiving recognition. In recent decades physicians and surgeons have realized that their treatment of Aboriginals, although apparently successful in removing the symptoms of the illness, was not generally followed by usual recovery. Only the Aboriginal Doctor-man understands and can cope with the causes and so restore confidence in the patient.

Medicine-men are psychologists and psychic experts who include clairvoyance, telepathy and hypnotism in their powers. With their "strong eye" they see through the patient's body to the cause of the illness. They can also detect through a deceased person's body, or through the smoke of a mourning ritual fire who, by black magic, caused the death. This last accomplishment is essential for the restoration of cohesion to the social group bereft of one of its members.

The late **Professor A.P. Elkin**, was one of Australia's most eminent anthropologists, and author of eight books plus numerous articles in anthropological journals in Australia, America, France and England. His well-known *The Australian Aborigines* has been translated into Italian, French and Russian. From 1933 to 1956 he was Head of Department of Anthropology at the University of Sydney. And from 1933 to his death in 1979 was editor of *Oceania*.

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High Degree*

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# Preface

In 1944 Professor A. P. Elkin gave the John Murtagh Macrossan Memorial Lectures at the University of Queensland. These lectures along with two more chapters appeared in the following year as *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*. Published under wartime stringencies, the edition was a small one which, nevertheless, circulated widely, becoming a major source for—among others—Mircea Eliade.<sup>1</sup> It has, however, been unobtainable for many years, and, despite the expansion of Aboriginal studies, it remains the only substantial work on what might be called the Aboriginal occult. With interest in the field now reviving its publication is timely, the more so since the author, now Professor Emeritus, has written a new section.

Elkin's subject is the medicine man. But this term, with its connotations of chicanery and gullibility, scarcely conveys the importance such figures hold for Aborigines. The "clever man", as some English speakers call him, acquired wonderful powers through direct contact with the beings of the Dreamtime: the rainbow serpent; the sky gods; the spirits of the dead. He has come to this state through a long and rigorous apprenticeship and an initiation of terrors and ordeals beyond those that ordinary men undergo. He is what Elkin calls a man of high degree and his experiences have changed him utterly. He has died and come alive again; his entrails have been taken out and replaced; he has been swallowed by the rainbow serpent and

regurgitated; magic crystals have been put in his body; he has acquired an animal familiar that dwells within him. As a result of such experiences, the medicine man can fly and travel over the ground at great speed; he can anticipate events and knows what is happening in faraway places. He can cure and kill mysteriously. He can make rain. He can ascend to the sky world on a magic cord that emanates from his testicles. He can roll in the fire without hurt; appear and disappear at will.

The man of high degree is not peculiar to Australia, of course. He is kindred to Carlos Castaneda's *brujo* Don Juan, and other Amerindian "men of power".<sup>2</sup> The author himself draws parallels with the lamas of Tibet, anticipating Eliade's work on shamanism.<sup>3</sup> Eliade shows that it is not just the general phenomenon but numerous specific features that are to be found alike in Australia and Central Asia. But while Elkin believes that Aboriginal religion "belongs" to the Orient, not to the West, and allows the possibility of an historical connection, he is not inclined to the wide-ranging generalizations of comparative religion. His overriding purpose is to understand the Australian Aborigines.

Elkin will not allow the medicine men to be dismissed as frauds and humbugs; nor will he have them reduced to something else. He has been as unsympathetic to explanations in terms of the subconscious mind as he now is to the search for unconscious structures. He finds the notion that shamans are psychologically unstable equally inapplicable to Australia. Medicine men are part of the mainstream of Aboriginal society and culture, despite their absorption in the esoteric. The rigours of their "professional" training and the many ritual observances that surround its practice are, he thinks, enough to deter the mere eccentric and the confidence man.

It is, of course, always easier to explain away the occult than to explain it, and the difficulties are acute in the present case. For a start, we are almost wholly dependent on

what the Aborigines tell us. Neither the author nor anyone else has tried, like Castaneda, to become the sorcerer's apprentice, and few whites can bear witness to the feats that are said to be performed. Elkin relays what he has been told, with the caution that one is probably never told everything.<sup>4</sup> But he wants the accounts to be taken seriously and approached with sympathetic understanding.<sup>5</sup>

Bolder than most anthropologists, Elkin is prepared to entertain the possibility that medicine men really have powers not understandable in terms of the rational and the academic. At one point he suggests that mass hypnosis may be the explanation for an extraordinary event. But he disclaims any special knowledge in this field, and thirty-one years later we are not much closer to an answer.<sup>6</sup> We might also talk in terms of "hallucinations" experienced during "abnormal states" such as trance. (Aborigines do not seem to use hallucinatory drugs.) But this approach begs the question of whether it is the "abnormal state" that induces the visions or the cultural milieu. Again we are in uncharted territory.

One possibility that Elkin does not explore is that some of the medicine man's marvels are deceptions, not in the fraudulent sense but the religious, what W. E. H. Stanner has called the "noble fiction". Lower degree initiations are often conducted in this way: a boy is told that the roaring noise he hears is Daramulan coming to burn him to ashes before reforming him. But when his eyes are unveiled he discovers the bullroarer; now he learns a more precious truth, that Daramulan's voice is "in the wood". The fiction is a secular screen for truths too sacred to be revealed to the uninitiated.<sup>7</sup> As Kenneth Maddock puts it, the novices are deceived only to be enlightened, and the outcome is not scepticism but faith.<sup>8</sup>

We do not know that the initiated medicine man has undergone this kind of "disillusioning" experience. As far as ordinary men are concerned, he has come face to face

with the Dreamtime beings whom they have only encountered through symbols such as the bullroarer. In this connection, Maddock has drawn an illuminating comparison between the Wiradjeri initiation myth and rite: whereas males originally were enlightened by Daramulan, later they were enlightened by their fellows.<sup>9</sup> The situation of the medicine man who is believed to have seen Baiame or been swallowed by the Rainbow Serpent, replicates that of the Dreamtime. It was perhaps in this sense that a Wongaibon described both the medicine men and the Crow of myth as "clever". Thus placed the medicine men bear witness to the existence of the powers which their fellows experience only through symbols. If in fact their own experience is also through symbols they keep it to themselves carrying on behalf of the rest the knowledge that the Dreamtime is after all inaccessible to mortals.

Although the medicine men are few in any community and stand apart from ordinary men, they are not rogues or mavericks. They do not have the marginal, even anti-social character of the Melanesian sorcerer. They are part of the means by which the community maintains its connection with the powers that created the world and which continue to sustain it. They are, as Elkin puts it, "a channel of life". In relation to the totemic and initiation rites their role is complementary: for while the rites deal with general and continuing concerns, they deal with the particular and the contingent, with sickness, crime, dangers, separation and the death of individuals. Moreover, their operations are what Stanner has called "transitive", in the sense that human intentions are—or seem to be—transferred to objects.<sup>10</sup> The rites are, in this sense, intransitive, depending on hope, belief and faith, rather than perceivable results. But since the medicine men's feats derive from the same Dreamtime powers, hope, belief and faith are strengthened.

The book's first part is directed at the layman. In it Elkin is trying to communicate his own understanding of

Aboriginal religion, in the hope that white Australians will come to appreciate it as something worthy of respect. As he says elsewhere, there are Aboriginal thinkers who "have caught a glimpse of, and attempted to grapple with, fundamental philosophical problems."<sup>11</sup>

The second part is more for the specialist. The author moves from the apt illustration of the first part to painstaking comparison of cognate phenomena across the continent. He draws on his field notebooks and those of his then research assistant, now Professor R. M. Berndt<sup>12</sup> and on a wealth of published and unpublished data. Not the least virtue of this survey is the attention it gives to the distinctive and fascinating, but often neglected cultures of south-eastern Australia.

The third part, which Elkin has now added, brings to light data that have come to hand since the first edition. In particular it looks at Aboriginal men of high degree in the settings of mission and settlement and the context of cultural disintegration. The clever men of south-eastern Australia have indeed vanished and there is no possibility of their return. According to my own informants in western New South Wales, they were "too clever to live" and ended by killing one another, a verdict suggested by catastrophic population decline at a time of cultural collapse. Some lapsed into alcoholism while others despaired as they found the younger generation unwilling or unfit to receive their knowledge. The half-caste Bandjigali, George Dutton, told me how, as a young drover, he had refused to take on the powers of a dying uncle. Riding home that night he saw the euro which was the old man's familiar accompanying him along a stretch of road and then turning off into the darkness.

In the Centre, however, things are different. On the basis of recent reports Elkin now thinks that the obituary he wrote for the medicine man was premature. He notes an interesting division of labour between black and white medicine men in some places, and goes on to suggest that

the former may still have a significant role to play in the outstation movement.

When *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* first appeared there was little likelihood that Aborigines would read it. The few who had been educated to do so had also learned to be ashamed of their heritage. Today the situation is different, and I hope that this book, free as it is of technicalities and jargon, may enable some to re-establish the link.

Jeremy Beckett  
Sydney 1976

### Notes

1. See particularly Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Translated by W. R. Trask (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1964). Mircea Eliade, *Australian Religions: An Introduction* (Cornell University Press, 1973).
2. See Carlos Castaneda, *The Teachings of Don Juan—A Yaqui Way of Knowledge*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970.) Also three further volumes.
3. Eliade, *Shamanism*.
4. Elsewhere Elkin has written: "It is difficult to obtain complete knowledge of the initiation of adult males into full membership of their secret life. Judging from fresh bits of information that I acquire from time to time, I doubt whether we have, in any one instance, been admitted into all the secrets of the ritual and knowledge. But if this is difficult, it is more so when we come to inquire into that ritual through which a medicine man acquired power. Those who are not members of this profession know little about it." *The Australian Aborigines: How to Understand Them*, 4th edition, (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964), p. 325.
5. Elsewhere Elkin writes: "The anthropological field worker who has a sympathetic understanding of Christian or other religious groups, cannot fail to regard Australian Aboriginal cults as religious. Certainly no member of such an esoteric society as the Masonic, which claims to rest on religious foundations, could deny it." "Religion and Philosophy of the Australian Aborigines" in *Essays in Honour of G. W. Thatcher*, ed. E. C. B. MacLaurin (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), pp. 19–44.
6. At least one attempt has been made to test Extra-Sensory Perception among Aborigines: see W. A. McElroy, "Psi-Testing in Arnhemland". *Oceania* 26 (1955–56).
7. See R. H. Mathews, "The Burbung of the Wiradthuri Tribes", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 25 and 26 (1896 and 1897).

The writer recorded a similar account from a Wongaibon informant in 1957.

8. Kenneth Maddock, *The Australian Aborigines: A Portrait of Their Society*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), p. 115.
9. Maddock, *Australian Aborigines* pp. 116–17.
10. W. E. H. Stanner, "On Aboriginal Religion, Part I", *Oceania*, 30 (1959): 124–27.
11. Elkin in *Essays in Honour of G. W. Thatcher*, p. 41.
12. Berndt subsequently published his own findings in two fascinating articles, "Wuradjeri Magic and 'Clever Men'", Part I, *Oceania* 17 (1946–47); and Part II, *Oceania* 18 (1947–48).

# *Introduction to Second Edition*

Thirty one years have gone by since the first edition of this book was published. In the meantime more and fuller information on the making and powers of "Men of High Degree" has become available, especially for the Kimberley Division of Western Australia, and the New South Wales north coast.

Further, a significant change has been occurring recently in the attitudes of some welfare and health agencies, official and non-official, towards medicine-men. *Where this is so*, they are no longer ignored as men without knowledge nor brushed aside as imposters. On the contrary, their age-old "professional" contribution to the well-being of their people is recognized, and their co-operation in official health services is asked for and is given, though somewhat tentatively on both sides.

For these reasons I have added Part Three to this new edition. Its main theme is the role of medicine-men in the Aborigines' rapidly changing world. In 1945, the depopulation of full-blood Aborigines, which began in 1788, was still continuing and their extinction in the not far-off future seemed inevitable. By the 1950s, however, the tide had turned and both they and Aborigines of "mixed-blood" were definitely increasing. Therefore problems connected with their health, social conditions and economic needs could no longer be allowed to drift, but had to be tackled seriously, above all with the help of the Aborigines themselves. So, governments have set up

Aboriginal councils, boards and committees on various aspects and interests of their life, giving them opportunity for self-determination and for exercising responsibility.

Accordingly, I refer to the relevance and role of Aboriginal medicine-men in this new age: Is their role finished, as was thought by many even only a decade ago? If not, will they remain in an Order which is characterized by symbolical and mystic aspects and/or will they become trained nursing aides and medical assistants in Aboriginal clinics and hospitals? The answers will be given by the Aborigines themselves.

To discuss these questions, I suggest at the end of the book that a conference be arranged of medicine-men and some elders drawn from a wide-spread inter-tribal range of communities. It would be held preferably in a Settlement away from townships, be run by the medicine-men and be subject to adjournments. This third suggestion is to ensure that the various communities and "tribes" can feel and think their way through the implications of any decision the conference might propose.

As the lectures in 1944 from which this book grew, were given on a University of Queensland Foundation, I welcome the publication of the new edition by the University of Queensland Press. The original was well received, but its selling price, as a first edition, has long since gone beyond the pockets of students and most general readers. In spite of this, requests for the book have been constant.

I thank persons far afield who have corresponded with me on aspects of the subject. They have included Dr Dayalan Devanesen (Alice Springs), Mrs Mary Laughren (Yuendumu), the Reverend L. Reece (Warrabri and Alice Springs), Mr E. Evans (Darwin) and Mr H.H.J. Coate (Derby).

Continuous and ever-watchful help has been given me by Mrs Betty Dunne, Secretary of "my" Department of Oceania Publications, University of Sydney, in Library search as well as with typing and retyping. I thank her

very sincerely as I do also Mrs Joyce Beaumont, assistant in the same Department, for her ready co-operation in many tasks, especially in the preparation of the maps.

Finally, I thank Dr Jeremy Beckett of the Department of Anthropology, University of Sydney, for his furtherance of the project and particularly for writing the Preface.

A.P. Elkin

Department of Oceania Publications,  
The University of Sydney,  
1976

## Introduction to First Edition

The term medicine-man as applied to Aboriginal Australia is used in a wide sense. Medicine-men are leeches, in that they use objective means for the curing of illnesses and wounds. They are magical practitioners, for they cure some sicknesses by magical rituals and spells. In many parts they are sorcerers as well; they know how to, and may, insert evil magic, extract "human fat", or cause the soul to leave the victim's body, bringing about sickness and death. And finally, they also possess, in many cases, occult powers: they can commune with the dead; they see spirits fly through the air, and do the same themselves, they go up to the sky; they practise telepathy and mass hypnotism; and they gain knowledge by psychical means of what occurs at a distance. Such are the claims and beliefs. They therefore partake of the character of witches, clairvoyants, mediums and psychic experts.

The very existence of such powers suggests that mere instruction in leech-craft or indeed in the use of magical substances is not sufficient to make a person a medicine-man. He possesses or is endowed with powers concerned with much else besides causing and curing illness. And even with regard to this, the Aborigines insist that the possession of such super-normal powers is the basis of the medicine-man's curative efforts. He is a person of high degree, and not merely a member of a profession; he is a "clever man"—one who has been admitted to the secrets not disclosed to the ordinary, though fully initiated, man.

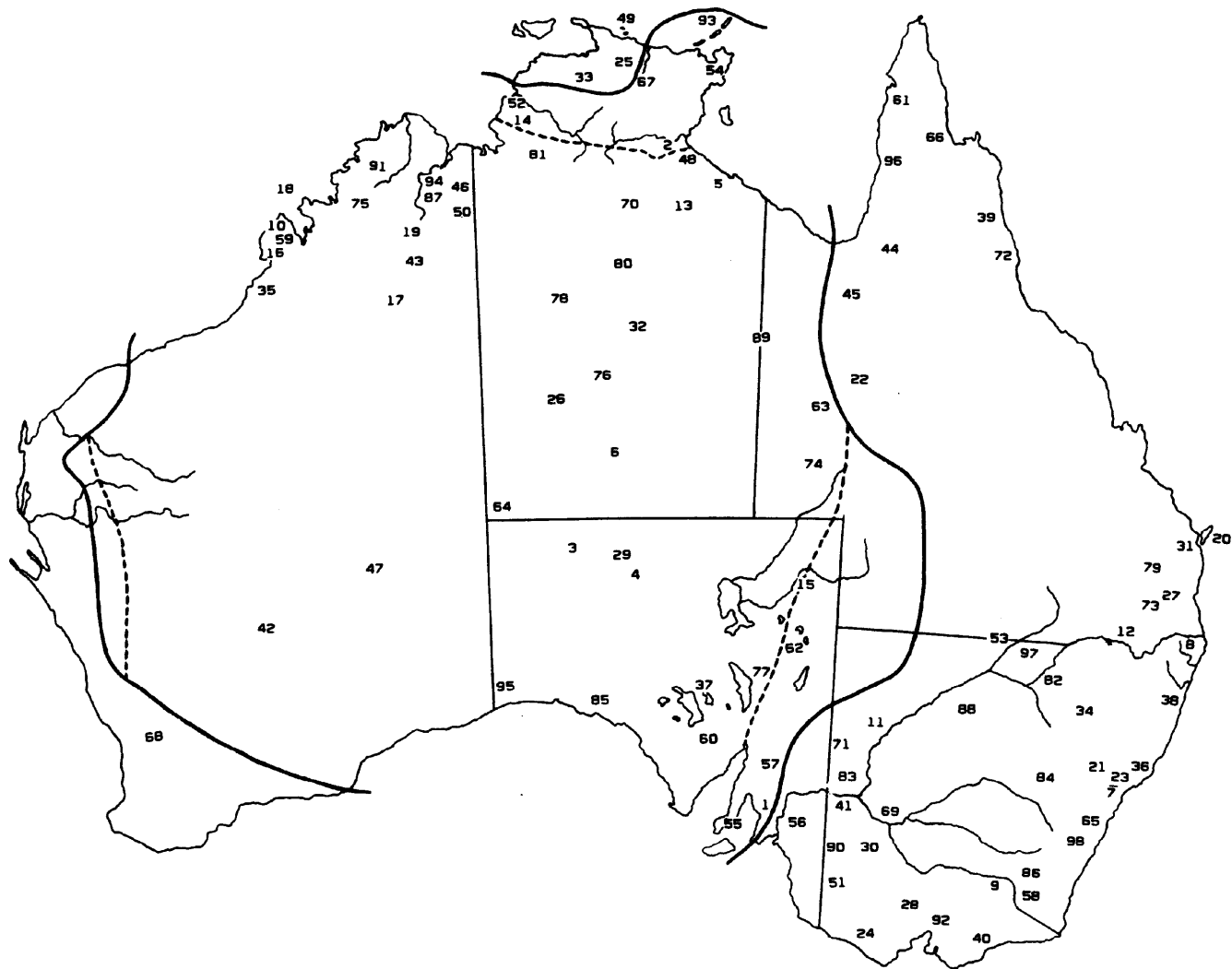
Moreover, the admission to such knowledge and the ritual endowment with "life" are the necessary prelude to the exercise of super-normal and magical powers.

A survey of the rites of the making of medicine-men reveals the type of ritual deemed essential and the powers with which they are endowed. We have information, often inadequate, for about eighty tribes. The inadequacy of the information is not surprising, seeing that the investigator must be on very confidential terms with the medicine-man before the latter can be expected to impart his knowledge and beliefs, and to describe his experiences. Moreover, a sound knowledge of the native language is also desirable, if not essential. Unfortunately, very little attention has been paid to the medicine-men, possibly because the prevailing concept of the inferiority of the Aborigines did not lead anyone to expect that any individuals would be worth study and understanding. In any case, native doctors were too often simply passed off as old rogues. Not even did Spencer and Gillen's interesting descriptions of medicine-men in their books on the Native Tribes of Central and North-Central Australia, and the useful suggestions in A. W. Howitt's *Native Tribes of South-East Australia* inspire workers to probe deeply into this field. In recent years, Dr W. L. Warner, Mr R. H. Berndt and myself have paid some attention to the subject, and I hope that the publication of these lectures will result in more attention being paid to this sphere of native life. If this occurs, I trust that the Chancellor and Senate of the University of Queensland will feel that their selection of the John Murtagh Macrossan Lecturer for 1944 was worthwhile.

For my own part, I considered that the best way to show my appreciation of the honour conferred on me by the University of Queensland was to select a field in which much research is required, and one which is of absorbing human interest.

Chapters 1 and 2 are the lectures as delivered, with a





1. Adelaide Tribes [Kaurna, etc.]; 2. Atewa; 3. Aluridja Tribes [Antakerinya, Kokata, Jangkundjara, Ngelea, Wonggai, and some others]; 4. Antakerinya; 5. Anula; 6. Aranda [Arunta]; 7. Awabakal [Lake Macquarie]; 8. Bandjelang; 9. Bangerang; 10. Bard; 11. Barkinji [Wampanga]; 12. Bigumbal; 13. Binbingi; 14. Daly River Tribes; 15. Dieri; 16. Djaber-Djaber; 17. Djaru; 18. Djaui; 19. Djerag; 20. Frazer Island [Batjala]; 21. Geewe-Gai; 22. Goa [Koa]; 23. Gringsai; 24. Gunditj-Mara; 25. Gunwinggu; 26. Ipirra [Walpari]; 27. Jagara; 28. Jajauring; 29. Jakundja-djara; 30. Jupagalk; 31. Kabi; 32. Kaitih; 33. Kakadu; 34. Kamilaroi; 35. Karadjeri; 36. Kattang; 37. Kokata; 38. Kumbaingari; 39. Kunggarji; 40. Kurnai; 41. Laitu-Laitu; 42. Laverton Tribes; 43. Lunge; 44. Maikulan; 45. Maitakudi; 46. Maingni; 47. Mandjindja; 48. Mara; 49. Maung; 50. Miriwun; 51. Mukjarawaint; 52. Mulukmuluk; 53. Murawari; 54. Murngin; 55. Narranga-ga; 56. Narrinyeri [Lower Murray and Encounter Bay, Jaralde and other tribes]; 57. Ngaduri; 58. Ngerigo; 59. Nyul-nyul; 60. Pankala; 61. Pennefather River Tribes [Nggerikudi, etc.]; 62. Piladapa; 63. Pita-Pita; 64. Pitjintara; 65. Port Jackson Tribes; 66. Princess Charlotte Bay Tribes; 67. Rembarunga; 68. South-west Corner W.A.; 69. Ta-Ta-Thi; 70. Tjingili; 71. Tongeranka [Danggali]; 72. Tully River Tribes; 73. Turrabel (possibly part of Jagara, No. 27); 74. Ulupulu [Karanja]; 75. Ungarinjin; 76. Unmatjera [Anmatjera]; 77. Walipi; 78. Walbiri; 79. Wakka; 80. Waramunga; 81. Wardaman; 82. Weihwan; 83. Wimbaio [Maraura]; 84. Wiradjeri; 85. Wirang; 86. Wolgal; 87. Wolyamidi; 88. Wongaibon; 89. Worgaisa; 90. Wotjobaluk; 91. Wunambul; 92. Wurunjerri [Wurunjerri]; 93. Yaerungo; 94. Yeldji [Forrest River]; 95. Yerle-Mining; 96. Yir-Yoront; 97. Yualai; 98. Yuin.

Continuous line indicates limits of spread of circumcision, and also of subincision except where the limits of the latter are indicated by the broken lines.