

Arnhem Land



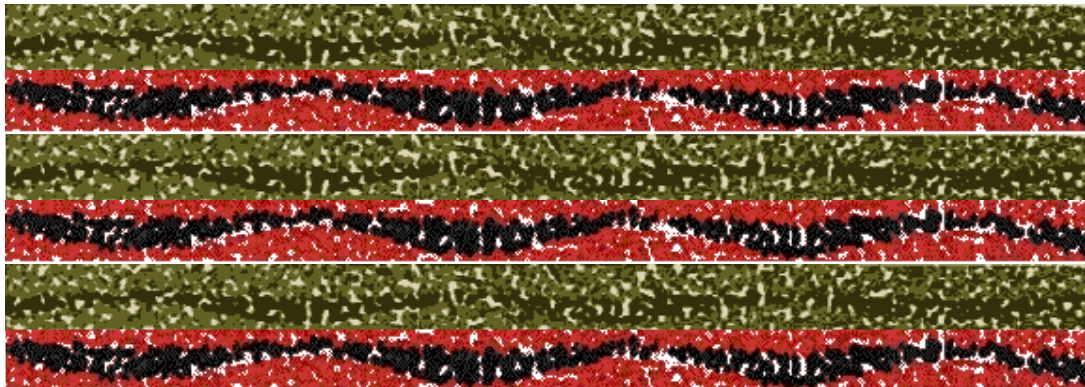
Arnhem Land covers over 95 000 square kilometres of the Northern Territory between the East Alligator River in the west, and the Gulf of Carpentaria in the east, between the Roper River in the south and the Arafura Sea in the north. It was named after the Dutch ship, the Arnhem, which sailed the Gulf of Carpentaria in 1623. The ship was named after a large town in Holland.

Arnhem Land is a diverse habitat including sandy beaches, mangrove swamps, coastal plains, inland forests and rocky plateaus.

Before the Invasion

Before European settlement, the people of Arnhem Land were semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers. They had no flocks or herds and planted no crops. They moved from place to place within their territory following seasonal foods and game. The basic social unit was the family, usually consisting of a man, his wives and children, and older relatives. Several related families would form a clan, and a group of clans would form a tribe. A tribe would share a common language and territory.

The land was particularly important to the people. As well as their dependence upon the land for survival, specific sites held spiritual and religious significance. They believed in the Dreaming and the active involvement of the spirit world in their lives. They had a complex system of ceremonial, family and criminal law administered by the elders, all of which was reflected in their elaborate artwork.



History of Foreign Contact

The earliest foreign contact Arnhem Land Aborigines had was with the Macassan (or Makassan), Indonesian fishermen from around the 1600s. Later the Chinese, Dutch, Arab, Japanese and Portuguese sailed through the area. During the early 1800s British explorers mapped the coastline of Arnhem Land. Between 1824 and 1849 three short-lived settlements were established by the Colonial Government in Britain around the north western tip of the Northern Territory.



Ludwig Leichhardt was the first of the documented white overland explorers to travel through south eastern Arnhem Land. In 1845 he named the Roper River after a member of his expedition, John Roper. He was traveling from Moreton Bay, Queensland, round the Gulf of Carpentaria, to Port Essington in the north-west of what is now the Northern Territory. This later became a major route for cattle drovers and goldminers.

Impact of European Settlement

With white settlement came major conflict with the indigenous people. The land was taken over and Aborigines were driven out. There was significant resistance from the original inhabitants but those who resisted were usually shot or poisoned. Aborigines who speared cattle, having lost much of their land and livelihood, or attacked whites to protect their property were systematically hunted. Often Aborigines from other areas were employed by pastoralists to hunt the local Aborigines. Sometimes the police were called in to 'disperse' (kill) the blacks.

Aborigines were not only displaced, shot and poisoned, but also suffered from foreign diseases such as measles and leprosy to which they had no immunity. The effects of opium and alcohol bought in by the Chinese and Europeans also took a heavy toll on their communities. By the early 1900s many people thought that Aborigines were close to extinction.



Aboriginal Mission at Roper River

At the instigation of the Church of England Bishops of North Queensland and Carpentaria a mission was started by the Church Missionary Association (CMA), (later the Church Missionary Society - CMS) Victorian Branch in 1908. The Commonwealth government granted two hundred square miles of land, 70 miles from the coast on the Roper River for an 'Inviolable Reserve' for the use of the Aborigines.



Extract from a speech by George Horsfall Frodsham, Bishop of North Queensland, at the Church of England's Australian Church Congress in Melbourne in 1906.

"We have an airy way of speaking about Australia being a white man's country. But Australia first of all was a black man's country and I have never heard that a black man invited us to take his property away from him...a previous speaker at this Congress has said that the 'British were put by God into Australia to preach the gospel to the heathen.' I have never heard a more complete condemnation of the stewardship of the Australian people. We have developed the country and we have civilised it, but we have certainly done very little to preach the gospel to the people we have dispossessed.

The blacks have been shot and poisoned while they were wild and dangerous. They are now left to kill themselves with white vices where they have been 'tamed'...but very few have received at our hands either justice or consideration... The Aborigines are disappearing. In the course of a generation or two, at the most, the last Australian blackfellow will have turned his face to warm mother earth, and given his soul to God who gave it. Missionary work then may be only smoothing the pillow of a dying race, but I think if the Lord Jesus came to Australia he would be moved with great compassion for these poor outcasts living by the wayside, robbed of their land, wounded by the lust and passion of a stronger race, and dying - yes,

dying, like rotten sheep - with no man to care for their bodies and souls."

The missionary in charge, Rev. John F.G. Huthnance, was responsible to the CMA as a missionary, and to the South Australian government as a Sub-Protector of Aborigines. The CMA also sent Rex D. Joynt and Charles Sharp from Victoria. On their way through North Queensland they stopped at Yarrabah, an ABM (Australian Board of Mission) mission where three Aboriginal Christians, James and Angelina Noble, and Horace Reid volunteered and were commissioned to join the mission.



The Roper Mission was a safe haven for the remnants of Aboriginal tribes of the region. Within a few months of the missionaries arriving there were over 200 Aborigines living there. Numbers fluctuated significantly with the seasons and the level of violence perpetrated by pastoralists.

Many people came initially in response to Gajiyuma, 'King Bob', an elder of the Mara people who spent the last months of his life until he died in 1909 walking the land, encouraging Aborigines to go to the mission for safety.

JAMES NOBLE (1876-1941)

Born near Normanton in the gulf district of western Queensland, in his teenage years Noble worked as a stockman droving cattle between a property on the Gregory River in western Queensland and a property near Scone, NSW. He gained an education whilst working for the Doyle family in Scone, and also became a Christian there, being baptised and confirmed at St. Luke's Church of England, Scone in 1895. He later moved to Yarrabah, Queensland, run by the Australian Board of Mission (ABM), where he married Angelina, and developed his skills as a teacher and preacher.



When the CMA missionaries from Victoria passed through Yarrabah on their way to start the Roper River Mission, James and Angelina volunteered to join them as founding missionaries. They served at Roper River for several years before moving on to further ministry in both Queensland and the Kimberley's. James was ordained in 1925 in Perth Cathedral.

ANGELINA NOBLE (? - 1964)

Born in western Queensland, Angelina had been a 'stockman's boy' - abducted as a young girl by a white stockman, she had been dressed in boy's clothes, renamed Tommy and forced to accompany him for many years. Angelina was finally freed by the police, who arranged for her to go to Yarrabah.

At Yarrabah, Angelina gained an education and became a Christian. She married James Noble and they had six children. Angelina worked together with James in his missionary endeavours, Angelina being not only a committed Christian but also a particularly gifted linguist.

The Mission Philosophy

The purpose of the mission was both spiritual and industrial. The missionaries intended to civilise and evangelise the Aborigines and teach

them to be self-sufficient through learning about agriculture and developing other practical skills. Within a year they had built staff houses, a dispensary and school, cleared land for farming and purchased cattle. They conducted church services, a school and encouraged adults to work on the mission station for food and other goods.

The early missionaries had a strongly Euro-centric view of their work. There is evidence that they saw a clear distinction between 'civilising' (teaching European culture) and 'evangelising' (teaching Christian truth that people may respond to Jesus). However, the debate of the time revolved around the perceived need for native peoples to be civilised first that they may then be evangelised. This worked out in terms of an expectation that Aborigines should learn to live a settled agricultural or industrial life rather than a semi-nomadic hunter gatherer life style, should wear clothes, live in houses, learn to read etc.

However, change was not forced on the population, they were free to come and go from the mission, and to take or leave both the western culture and the Christian religion.

Roper River Mission Today

The mission was destroyed by flood in January 1940. Another site further upstream was chosen for the new mission. It was finished in 1941 and functioned as a CMS mission until 1968 when the administration was handed over to the Northern Territory government. Since the hand-over it has been referred to as 'Ngukurr', 'place of many stones' and controlled by an Aboriginal Council. Today it has a population of approximately one thousand people, only about twenty of who are of a non-indigenous background.

**First Christian Service at Roper River
27 August 1908**



**James and Angelina Noble with
Roper River Children**



Bishop Gilbert White (seated) with CMS missionaries 1914.

Left to right CM Hill, Hubert Warren, WG Vizard, Mary Crome



Languages

The Roper River Mission community came from nine different local tribes, each with their own distinct language. The original Victorian missionaries spoke only English and the Aboriginal missionaries spoke English and their local Queensland Aboriginal dialects. Many CMA/CMS missionaries spent a lot of time learning local languages, some missionaries becoming quite proficient at one or two languages.

Alf Dyer at Oenpelli, a CMS mission closer to Darwin:

"If you drew a circle of 100 miles radius round the station you would find you had from five to ten languages amongst the people. We actually started school with eleven scholars speaking five different languages. We had not time to study a language, so for us there was only one way out; we taught them English, not pidgin English but proper English. When I started daily Services, they were given by interpretation into the three best-known languages; nearly all who attended could speak at least three languages; one man I knew spoke seven."

Over time a Pidgin English arose at Roper River. Pidgin English eventually became the mother tongue of many; that is it was creolised. It is now known as Kriol, is spoken by twenty thousand Aborigines across north Australia and recognised as a modern Aboriginal language. Now the most used languages in the Roper region are Kriol, English and Ritharrangu, one of the original tribal languages. There is some evidence that Pidgin English was in use before 1908 when the mission was commenced.

1 (1) Wal dijan na stori blanga Jisas Kraiss wanim imbin shoum langa im wekinmen. God bin dalim Jisas blanga shoum ola kristjan pipul wanim garra hepin bambai, en Jisas bin dalimbat dis stor na garram im einjul. Imbin jandim det einjul langa det wekinmen blanga im neim Jon, (2) en det wekinmen bin raidimdan ebrijing wya imbin luk. Rebaleishan 1:1-2

Aboriginal languages had always been oral languages, never written down. It was not until the missionaries learnt the languages that they were transcribed. This has been an important step in preserving Aboriginal languages. Many missionaries today are still involved in helping Aboriginal people translate the Bible and other documents into their own tongue, and teaching their people to read and write their own language.