

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family:

Burrara, Australian (2)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com):

bvr (2)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude):

Northern Territory, Arnhem Land, Maningrida, 12° 4' 0" S, 134° 16' 0" E (2)

1.4 Brief history:

In 1931, the Australian government set aside about 30,000 square miles (80,000 square kilometers), including islands off the coast, as Aboriginal reserves. Today, Arnhem Land is one of the last strongholds of traditional Aboriginal life. About 9,000 Aborigines live in the area. Some of them have chosen to live a more traditional life in smaller centers. But most live in settlements originally established by government and mission bodies. The main settlements include Bamyili, Goulburn, Groote Eylandt, Maningrida, Milingimbi, and Oenpelli. The Burrara live very close to Maningrida. (5)

The Burrara are believed to have lived in Australia for 40,000 years. (1)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors:

After Europeans arrived in Australia in 1788, European diseases, malnutrition, and violent conflicts with the settlers greatly reduced the Aboriginal population. As European settlers pushed the Aborigines off their homelands, the Aboriginal people lost their livelihood and became poor and dependent. Whole families and clans died. Government policies denied Aborigines many of the basic human rights that other Australians took for granted.

Nowadays, government policy has changed. Aboriginal people have received Australian citizenship. They have gained land rights and have reclaimed some of the land that they lost. The government now provides funding to help Aboriginal people buy back land. Government programs also help the Aborigines overcome the effects of discrimination. (6) Note: There was no Burrara –specific information on this topic, but thousands of Aboriginal tribes were affected, the Burrara included.

1.6 Ecology (natural environment):

The area includes savannah grasslands, eucalyptus rain forest and tidal mud flats. This tropical region has a wet–dry monsoonal climate. (1)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density:

Groups of people who are all related (families) are called clans. Clans live together in villages or create their own village if they are big enough. Clans that all speak the same language are organized into tribes. Traditionally, tribes were the main form of government and each tribe had their own land boundaries. Nowadays, tribes are more of a cultural identity. Similar tribes sometimes bonded together for religious ceremonies, wars, or other big events. These groups were called nations. (6)

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s):

Seeds, fruits, nuts, edible flowers and nectar, honey. (6)

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources:

Fish, sea turtles, eggs, small animals, and big animals like kangaroos on special occasions. (6)

2.3 Weapons:

The use of iron pre-dates European settlement of the Northern Territory. The iron axe (“tomahawk”) was used to make dugout canoes. Both men and women also used wooden-headed spears, some with multiple barbs, or barbed on both sides, etc. They also used these spears to parry and block, they did not carry shields. (3)

2.4 Food storage:

They pounded meat with red ochre and green plum to produce a paste that could be stored without spoiling for some time. (3)

Cooking Methods: an earth oven was used for larger game: stones were placed in a fire in a shallow pit, covered with dampened paper-bark or leaves, the meat placed on the bark or leaves, and covered with the same material, and the whole covered in sand. Smaller game and fish were cooked directly on the fire, or first wrapped in paperbark.

2.5 Sexual division of production:

Men were the main hunters of large animals, and women were the main hunters of small animals. Women did most of the food collecting, although men would also collect as the opportunity arose. Both men and women fished by setting traps in rivers. (6)

2.6 Land tenure:

Nowadays, several different Aboriginal tribes jointly own the land known as Arnhem Land, the Burrara among them. Therefore it is private land and all visitors must receive a permit before entering it. The availability of permits depends on whether it is the dry season or wet season. (1)

2.7 Ceramics and Art:

Known for bark paintings. The material of choice is the bark from Stringybark. It is best cut from the tree in the wet season when the sap is rising. Two horizontal slices and a single vertical slice are made into the tree, and the bark is carefully peeled off with the aid of a sharpened tool. Only the inner smooth bark is kept and placed in a fire. After heating in the fire, the bark is flattened under foot and weighted with stones or logs to dry flat. Once dry, it is ready to paint upon. The designs seen on authentic bark paintings are traditional designs that are owned by the artist or his clan, and cannot be painted by other artists. (4)

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns:

Hunting is mainly done within families, so that is who gets the food. Men, women, and children all eat equally. (6)

2.9 Food taboos:

None. Food is often scarce, so the Burrara eat whatever they catch, including sharks, crocodiles, turtles and other potentially endangered species. This is probably more rare nowadays because they have access to grocery stores and other modern methods of receiving food. (1)

2.10 Canoes/watercraft:

Several different types of water transportation: bark canoes (lashed together), dug-out canoes (like outrigger canoes), and many types of rafts depending on whether you are using them in the ocean, a river, or a swamp. Nowadays, many Burrara people have cars, too. (3)

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

Men: 5ft 10in

Women: 5ft 4in (7)

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

Only available for birth weights, not for adults.

Average male AND female birth weight: 7 ½ lbs

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

Usually around the age of 13. (10)

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

Anywhere between 15 and 20 years old, that remains true today. (10)

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

A woman will have about 3 children in her lifetime. (10)

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f):

A mother did not conceive another child until the first one was done breastfeeding. This could take up to four years, depending on the strength of the child. (10)

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

At 9 years old, girls were delivered to their promised husband. They did not engage in sexual acts until after puberty, and then marriage. The age of the man varied. (10)

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce:

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously:

Traditionally, most marriages were monogamous. A man might take a second wife, however, if his first wife could not bear children. Nowadays, marriage is solely monogamous. (10)

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?:

How gifts were provided by a man to his future in-laws formalize the union and distinguished it from a casual liaison. Gift exchange also gave the man the right to take his wife away to his own family. (10)

4.9 *Inheritance patterns:*

4.10 *Parent-offspring interactions and conflict:*

The process surrounding marriage ensured that the woman's family secured alliances with individuals in other hordes, along with the right to visit them. (10)

4.11 *Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals:*

4.12 *Pattern of exogamy (endogamy):*

4.13 *What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized?*

4.14 *What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows")*

4.15 *Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)?*

4.16 *Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape*

4.17 *Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin)*

4.18 *Do females enjoy sexual freedoms?*

At one time, certain Aboriginal tribes practiced intocision which was done by the old women. This was conducted when women wished to hasten puberty, the ceremony being regarded as essentially desirable since a girl can then take lovers. (10)

4.19 *Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring*

4.20 *If mother dies, whose raises children?*

4.21 *Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females*

4.22 *Evidence for couvades*

4.23 *Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older)*

4.24 *Kin avoidance and respect?*

4.24 *Joking relationships?*

4.25 *Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations*

Matrilineal. Mothers are in charge of arranging marriages; therefore all gifts from the potential husband go to her. (10)

4.26 *Incest avoidance rules*

4.27 *Is there a formal marriage ceremony?*

Traditionally, there was no formal marriage ceremony. Marriage was viewed as a contract between two families, upheld by the mothers of each. (10)

4.28 *In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name?*

4.29 *Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?)*

4.30 *Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)?*

Until on the threshold of marriage, young women had little contact with the group into which they were destined to marry some day - that is, the group to which the woman was betrothed or promised. After the age of nine years, or possibly later, the young woman was handed over to her future husband and sleep at his fireside from time to time. In this respect, the young girls generally aged between nine and thirteen were not required to participate in sexual relation with their future husbands until they were beyond puberty. (10)

4.31 *Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who:*

Warfare/homicide

4.14 *Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare:*

Nowadays, very little. Many aboriginal tribes work together to maintain their culture. In the past, men fought over territory, but wars were infrequent so most deaths were of natural, non-violent causes. (6)

4.15 *Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death:*

Unknown, there is little violent death in modern Burrara society.

4.16 *Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing:*

Since the Burrara live with mainly family members, there are not many violent conflicts. Occasionally, punishment by a tribe leader will result in death, but that is very uncommon. Exile is preferred, which usually leads to starvation and death. (6)

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations):

Until English settlement, the Burrara were a fairly peaceful tribe, as were many Aboriginal tribes. They only fought if their land was invaded, which was seldom. However, the English settlers thought that the best way to seize control of Australia was by killing the indigenous people and taking their land. In the northern territories, where the Burrara lived, there was not much warfare because the area is very difficult to live in. However, the population was greatly reduced due to a number of things such as disease. (6)

4.18 Cannibalism?

There is no history of cannibalism, but there is not any information stating that the Burrara oppose cannibalism, either.

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size:

This depends on how large a family is and if they live with others. In the past, families kept to themselves but lived within a tribe's territory. Nowadays, indigenous tribes in the Arnhem Land (including the Burrara) live at about 0.5 people per square kilometer, so the area is still very sparsely populated. (8)

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):

Besides the original migration into Australia some 50,000 years ago, the Burrara stay in their territory all year. One mobility issue is that modern Burrara cannot use their cars in the wet season, so they must boat everywhere. This limits their range of mobility. (1)

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):

Tribe or clan leaders verbally disciplined people who broke the rules. Those who continued to break rules were given a beating. Those who still broke rules faced banishment from their group. Expelled people were forced to find food and shelter on their own. In extreme circumstances, Aboriginal leaders killed members of their group who repeatedly caused trouble. (6)

5.4 Post marital residence:

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):

All the Burrara live in Arnhem Land, and that is where they have lived since they can remember. There is no record whether there were set boundaries or if all tribes and people coexisted, as they now do. All the indigenous people live together in Arnhem Land, but there is a centralized area where many Burrara live. This system has functioned peacefully for many years now. (1)

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:

5.8 Village and house organization:

The environment in the North allowed people to camp in the one area for longer, so in the past the Burrara made more elaborate structures, sometimes elevated platforms with a fire below designed to make smoke and repel mosquitos. One type of simple bark shelter consisted of bending or folding a length of bark and burying the ends into the ground to fix them. In wet and cold conditions, closed dome-shaped shelters were made, commencing with a framework of sticks bent over and meeting in the centre (10)

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?

With much of Australia having a mild climate, people often slept in the open, warmth and comfort provided by the campfire, and often people kept warm by sleeping between two small fires. The dingo, as a camp dog, also slept beside people providing warmth. (10)

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:

Groups of people who are all related (families) are called clans. Clans live together in villages or create their own village if they are big enough. Clans that all speak the same language are organized into tribes. Traditionally, tribes were the main form of government and each tribe had their own land boundaries. Nowadays, tribes are more of a cultural identity. Similar tribes sometimes bonded together for religious ceremonies, wars, or other big events. These groups were called nations. (6)

5.12 Trade:

Nowadays the Burrara engage in trade with other Aborigines in Arnhem Land and the Northern Territory and people all across Australia. (1)

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies

The older you are, the more valuable you are. There is no indication that men and women are viewed unequally, however. (3)

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR:

Currently, there is not a lot of time dedicated to rituals or traditions because the Burrara are slowly assimilating more into western/ Australian culture. Burrara elders are trying to pass on traditions, but with only 400 speakers it is difficult to maintain their original culture. (1)

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):

6.2 Stimulants:

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):

Children were spoiled until the young people were old enough to undergo initiation, the age depended on the family and when they thought the child was ready. Among the physical operations performed in some areas as part of the initiation were scarring the body, knocking out one or two teeth, or, for boys, circumcision. After initiation, children had to start learning law, adult skills, and the religious and practical knowledge that would enable them to become contributing adults and, eventually, respected elders. (6)

6.4 Other rituals:

Many traditional rituals are secret, so there is not much information about them. One researcher said that she was threatened by several Aborigine tribes when she asked for details about their ceremonies. (8)

6.5 Myths (Creation):

According to Aboriginal beliefs, ancestral beings created the world long ago during a period called the Dreaming, or Dreamtime. According to this belief, the ancestral beings, called Dreamings, traveled across the land, making and naming the places and people who would belong there. These ancestral beings never died but merged with the natural world into the sky or ground, or became plants, animals, and people. They were shape shifters who could change back and forth between their human shape and their animal shape. According to the Aborigines' beliefs, even the sun and the moon once were Dreamings and walked the earth. The Dreamings are immortal and live eternally in sacred sites. (6)

6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):

Bark paintings (see ceramics section) is the main form of physical art. Music plays a very important part in Burrara life. There is even an Aboriginal music group called The White Cockatoo Performing Group that includes several members of the Burrara language family. They play traditional music of Arnhem land that includes drums, chants, humming and other traditional instruments. They even have a myspace page where people worldwide can listen to their music. (9)

6.7 Sex differences in RCR:

6.8 Missionary effect:

From 1870 to the mid-1900s missionaries took the Aboriginal children, including the Burrara, from their families and placed them in special government institutions, missions, or foster homes. The missionary leaders did not allow the Aboriginal children to speak their own language or to learn their Dreaming religion and law. Government officials changed the children's names and tried to prevent the children from finding their family and returning to their home country. That is one of the reasons that people claim Aboriginal ancestry, but cannot speak the language. (6)

6.9 RCR revival:

There has not been a cultural revival for the Burrara, they are slowly assimilating more into western/ Australian culture. Burrara elders are trying to pass on traditions, but with only 400 speakers it is difficult to maintain their original culture. (1)

6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:

The traditional belief was that people were reincarnated after death. They might be reborn as an animal before coming back in human form, but they expected that death would not be final. They also believed that dead people also remained in their country as spirits. These spirits guarded the country against strangers and helped the living people get food and water. (6)

6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?

6.12 Is there teknonymy?

6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)

According to Aboriginal beliefs, Dreamings created connections between groups of people and their nation, and between groups of people and other animals and plants. The Dreaming tradition included a belief called totemism, which distinguishes tribes, clans, or families by linking them to a totem, usually a plant or animal. These totems are kept secret to those outside of the tribe, so there is no information as to what the Burrara token is. Youths learn it during initiation and must swear to keep it secret. (6)

7. Adornment

7.1 Body paint:

Burrara children use the white beach clay to paint their faces as they play. It is possible the clay was used for war paintings in the past, but there is no record. (3)

7.2 Piercings:

No cultural piercings, although many modern Burrara have assimilated with Western traditions of piercing women's ears. (3)

7.3 Haircut:

Both Burrara men and women wear their hair short to prevent it from getting sweaty and bothersome. (3)

7.4 Scarification:

7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):

7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:

Both sexes wear head bands, decorated differently depending on the ceremony. (3)

7.7 Sex differences in adornment:

Given the hot climate, clothing in this region is minimal. Women and children wear a pubic covering, necklaces, arm-rings, and in certain ceremonies, a string breast girdle; men wear hair belts, arm-rings, and carried "spirit bags" of looped string, painted with red ochre, round the neck. It was traditionally used by healers and hunters, and was carried in the teeth when fighting to lend courage and power. (3)

7.8 Missionary effect:

From 1870 to the mid-1900s missionaries took the Aboriginal children, including the Burrara, from their families and placed them in special government institutions, missions, or foster homes. The missionary leaders did not allow the Aboriginal children to speak their own language or to learn their Dreaming religion and law. Government officials changed the children's names and tried to prevent the children from finding their family and returning to their home country. That is one of the reasons that people claim Aboriginal ancestry, but cannot speak the language. (6)

7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:

There has not been a cultural revival for the Burrara, they are slowly assimilating more into western/Australian culture, especially in the way they dress. Most Burrara wear T-shirts and shorts every day, except for ceremonies or other rituals. (3)

8. Kinship systems

8.1 Sibling classification system:

There does not seem to be any difference in treatment between brothers or sisters. Like in most cultures, the eldest son is expected to continue to lead the family and take his father's place, but this is often not the case. (6)

8.2 Sororate, levirate:

8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):

The Burrara mainly like to stick to their immediate family. There is not a lot of information about the bonds to extended family or whether it is against cultural rules to marry a cousin or other relative. (5)

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

A fire-brand of pandanus heart-wood was carried on journeys. People used fire for cooking, repelling mosquitoes, as a deodorant during mortuary ceremonies, to burn off long grass and undergrowth, and as a tool for the shaping of bark and wood, to produce steam for shaping wood, and in rites of passage. (3)

Aboriginal custom all over Australia bans a person from talking directly to their mother in law. This rule applies to both men and women talking to their mother in law. Perhaps this rule was developed to overcome such a common cause of friction in families, when a husband or wife has to endure many years of disagreement or argument from their mother in law! To allow this rule to work, communication took place via a third person. So, if you wanted your mother in law to do something for you, you might ask your spouse or another person: "Please ask your mother (so and so) to do (so and so) for me". When food was divided and shared around campfires, a mother in law had a small fire of her own separate to her son in law or daughter in law and their spouse. Her own daughter or son would chat and bring over some of the meat, or perhaps a grandchild would sit with her and act as messenger between herself and her daughter or son's partner. (10)

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