

1. Description

1.1 Name of society, language, and language family: Pila Nguru or Spinifex people. They speak a southern Pitjantjatjara language.

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

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): The Spinifex people live in the Great Victoria Desert in Western Australia, adjoining the border with South Australia, north of the Nullarbor Plain. The area that the Spinifex people live in is considered the Australian Outback.

1.4 Brief history: They are called the Spinifex people because of the Spinifex grasses that are the dominant feature in this particular desert landscape region. Much of the information regarding the heritage of the Pila Nguru was widely unknown before 1910-1930. It was during this time when missionaries started invading their land. The heritage of the Spinifex people goes back 600 generations of Pila Nguru. Much of the history of the Spinifex people is centered on their artwork that is well known around the world. (2)

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The new presence of missionaries in Australia during the early 1900's had some effect on almost all aboriginal groups. Missionary presence provided food, water, and shelter for the Aboriginal hunter-gatherer groups and were responsible for much of the decline in the traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyle. Most of the Spinifex were moved from their homelands to missions at Cundeelee and Warburton (about 65km east of Melbourne) but some still remained to continue the hunter-gatherer tradition. In 1952, the British government began testing atomic bombs only 300 km away from the location of the Spinifex. The area was so desolate that the British didn't consider that anyone could be living there. In 2000 the Spinifex people became the second tribe to acquire Native Title land rights for an area of over 55,000 km of land. (1)(2)

1.6 Ecology: Flat, sandy wilderness of scrub, alternating with open limestone plains, covered with saltbush and grass. Rainfall in Spinifex country is low (17 -23 cm per year) and very variable, falling mainly in summer storms. The long dry spells feature high temperatures (often above 45°C for weeks on end), baking sun and hot wind - yet nights may fall below 0°C. The region has one of the worlds most diverse lizard populations. Also has a wide range of desert marsupials, birds, plants and insects. Considered an inhabitable place by many due to the harsh living conditions. (2)

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: Population is rapidly decreasing. The tribe was already small before many Spinifex people died of radiation as a result from the atomic bomb testing. Only about 200 people remained on the original Spinifex land during the atomic testing. Today there are roughly 200-500 Spinifex people scattered throughout Australia although the exact population is unknown, the last recorded population was 200 people. (2)

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): Edible plants and shrubbery. Grass seeds.

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: Most reliable meat source are lizards. Kangaroos, rats, and emus are hunted and eaten as well.

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: Spears (barbed and plain), woommeras, throwing sticks, boomerangs of various shapes and sizes, as well as knives made out of quartz.

2.4 Food storage: hollowed out pieces of wood or bark, portmanteaus, dishes made out of clay, mud or grass seed.

2.5 Sexual division of production: Women and men gathered grass seeds and edible plants; however, women were responsible for most gathering while men hunted game. Women rarely hunted.

2.6 Land tenure: No owning of land specifically. Houses are personal property. Mutual respect and understanding for personal space among tribe members as well as between neighboring tribes.

2.7 Ceramics: Main form of art is paintings and murals, some ceramics made from clay and mud. Ceramics were made for functional use, not art. Quartz used for knives and spear tips.

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: Sharing among tribe members is common. Some trade with other tribes but most sought after items (water and small game) one had to acquire on their own. Weapons were primarily traded items.

2.9 Food taboos: none

2.10 Canoes/watercraft? No bodies of water close enough that required means for water travel.

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f):

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f):

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f):

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f):

4.3 Completed family size (m and f):

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): If the birth of a new baby occurred shortly after the death of an older child, the new little one was killed. If a baby was born too close to an older child, the new baby was killed. Infanticide was common. (3)

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f):

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Not very often but not rare. Most common cause was inability of male to provide for family, not extramarital affairs.

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Polygamy was common but it was rare for a man to have more than two wives.

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: No

4.9 Inheritance patterns: Not much to be inherited by means of material items from one generation to the next. Most inheritance was assumed such as a family's home, although it was common for men to pass weapons on to children.

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: If an offspring's birth followed too closely to that of an older child, that is, within two or even three years, the mother would have very little chance of rearing both children, rather, a strong risk of losing them. By smothering the new baby at birth before she had developed any affection for it, the mother's milk supply was renewed for the older child who was not weaned until he was about four or five years of age. Infants born to unmarried mothers, the result of illicit liaisons, or of attempted marriages, which have proved to be unacceptable, for any of a number of reasons, to the tribe as a whole, were killed at birth. (3)

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Homosexuality did not exist in any way whatsoever.

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): Occurred frequently and was not looked down upon. Individual preferences differed but there were no restrictions.

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? Most tribes that spoke the Pitjantjatjara language shared the same ideas of what a family meant to a child, his parents are his *mama* (father) and *nguntju* (mother); but his father's brothers are also known as *mama(s)*, and his mother's sisters *nguntju(s)*. To differentiate between the actual parents and uncles or aunts it may be necessary to inquire *whether* a certain relative is the child's "big" *nguntju*, "true" *nguntju*, or "later" *nguntju*. The mother's brothers are uncles, and the father's sisters, aunts. (3)

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows") Mothers were believed to be child bearers and nurturers.

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? No

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape Rare due to distance of other tribes or groups and how close-knit of a community.

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin) No preference in terms of close kin marriages as long as desired spouse did not fall in the category of actual kin. Marriage laws were very strict and enforced harshly. (1)

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? Frowned upon unless married. Children born as a result of extramarital affairs were killed immediately. (1)

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? Others would look after children within the tribe if a mother were to die. Infanticide may occur if child was very young and resources were scarce enough. (1) When a parent dies it is customary for another "mother" or "father" to accept the full responsibility for the orphaned children. To determine whether the children are all offspring of the same parents it can require questioning along biological lines to discover that while all the children may have come from the same womb, they have had different fathers, due to a widowed mother having remarried. (3)

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: No major differences in population between sexes. Usually the female population is slightly higher than the male population among tribes.

4.22 Evidence for couvades No

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

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect?

4.24 Joking relationships? Friendly and playful with one another. No behavioral restrictions regarding displaying emotions or attitudes.

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

4.26 Incest avoidance rules: Very intricate marriage laws and class systems. Marriage prevented consanguinity and incest and was strictly adhered to. Any offense to the marriage laws was usually punishable by death. Restrictions on marriage included a man not being able to marry his mother-in-law, the sister of his wife's mother, the sister of his wife's father, nor the sister of any of the three, or his own sister. But a man can marry his wife's sister. (1)

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? Yes. Often neighboring tribe members will attend such events to revel. (1)

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?) No preference but marriage often occurred within the community.

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Marriages not necessarily arranged, however, fathers would approve of marriages or suggest acceptable spouses. Fathers would not communicate with one another to arrange marriages of children.

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: Female family's would desire daughter to marry a man that was able to provide for the family respectfully.

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: Warfare was not common among groups when first studied in early 1900's to present. History of warfare among tribes before the presence of the white man (1)

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: Most violence that occurred was in-group violence and was not common from the time the Spinifex have been studied since the early 1900's. Tribes were typically not at war with each other. Men would fight each other to settle disagreements of various natures in front of the entire tribe, in some cases to the death depending on the severity of the disagreement at hand. (1)

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: Almost all ingroup violence and killings were related to breaking of marriage laws or theft.

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): Friendly relations with neighboring tribes to support and maintain trade, unless provoked otherwise. (1)

4.18 Cannibalism? None

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: Typically fewer than 40 with close contact to neighboring tribes of the same size.

- 5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality):** Stay in same location due to lack of water sources. Men on hunting excursions typically don't travel more than a day's distance. (1)
- 5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes):** No status system. Old were typically respected more because they were perceived to be wiser.
- 5.4 Post marital residence:**
- 5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense):** No defined territory boundaries but different groups had a general understanding of areas that belonged to one another.
- 5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex):** Husband and wife of different couples typically didn't talk. Interactions with children from other parents were common.
- 5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships:** Friendly and playful with one another. No behavioral restrictions regarding displaying emotions or attitudes.
- 5.8 Village and house organization:** Homes commonly built underground
- 5.9 Specialized village structures (mens' houses):**
- 5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere?** Sleep on ground usually, unless nursing
- 5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc:**
- 5.12 Trade:** Weapons were the most traded item. Trade occurred within the group as well as outside of the group. Presence of trade among groups maintained peace.
- 5.13 Indications of social hierarchies?** none

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6 Time allocation to RCR:

- 6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine):** Rain doctors
- 6.2 Stimulants:** No stimulants. For male initiation, only anesthetic involved "Seizing each an arm of the victim, two stalwart "bucks" (as the men are called) run him up and down the cleared space until they are out of breath; then two more take places, and up and down they go until at last the boy is exhausted.
- 6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal):** Used specific grounds for initiation ceremonies or corroborees. "A youth on arriving at a certain age may become a warrior, and is then allowed to carry a shield and spear. Before he can attain this honour he must submit to some very horrible rites—which are best left undescribed." (1) During the operations that follow, the men dance and yell round the fires but the women may not be witnesses of the ceremony. Members from all neighboring tribes meet at such times and hold high revel. (1)
- 6.4 Other rituals:** Rain doctors or "Mopongulleras" would perform ceremonies annually with rain sticks.
- 6.5 Myths (Creation):**
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games):** Most known for their artwork and have many professional artists. Some of the aboriginal artwork is thousands of years old. They would use clay, mud, and ochre to draw paintings on cave walls. Cave wall paintings usually told stories about the tribe although many paintings consisted of religious ideals or daily life. Up to eight adult men or women may work on a single painting.
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR:** No initiation rituals for women.
- 6.8 Missionary effect:** Missionaries intentionally and unintentionally converted aborigines to Christianity.
- 6.9 RCR revival:** RCR prominence within the Spinifex people has decreased over the years constant with the population.
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs:** Believed quality of afterlife was related to how much time one devoted to deities during their life. Very specific burial procedures, "the grave, though apparently only large enough for a child, was really destined for a grown man. When a man dies his first finger is cut off, because he must not fight in the next world, nor need he throw a spear to slay animals, as game is supplied. The body is then bent double until the knees touch the chin—this to represent a baby before birth; and in this cramped position the late warrior is crammed into his grave, until, according to a semi-civilised boy that I knew, he is called to the happy hunting grounds, where he changes colour! "Black fella tumble down, jump up white fella." A clear proof that this benighted people have some conception of a better state hereafter." (1)
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people?:** Names of recently deceased would not be given to baby born close to the death of a person.
- 6.12 Is there tekonymy?** No
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.)** They follow the Dreamtime religion. Each tribe member follows different deities and they have many drawings of them.

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint:** Common for ceremonies.
- 7.2 Piercings:** Present but not as prevalent as most aboriginal groups
- 7.3 Haircut:** Men and women have long hair and most men have beards.
- 7.4 Scarification:** Became less popular as population decreased. Almost non-existent in the Spinifex people today. (2) Most scarification was performed with a quartz knife. "With this exceedingly rough implement self-inflicted gashes on the chest and arms (presumably for ornamentation) are made." (1)
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.):** "Amongst the ornaments and decorations were several sporrans of curious manufacture. Some were made up of tassels formed of the tufts of boody's tails; other tassels were made from narrow strips of dog's skin (with the hair left on) wound round short sticks; others were made in a similar way, of what we conjectured to be bullock's hair. All the tassels were hung on string of opossum or human hair, and two neat articles were fashioned by stringing together red beans (Beans of the Erythrina) set in spinifex gum, and other seeds from trees growing in a more Northerly latitude." (1)

- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment:** In initiation ceremonies for rite of passage, a male may be circumcised or have teeth knocked out. Circumcision was performed with a quartz knife, “The rites of circumcision, and other initiatory operations, for the proper performance of which one would suppose the skill of a trained surgeon necessary, are carried out by means of this crude blade.” (1)
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment:** No female adornment. Women rarely covered the upper half of their body. (2)
- 7.8 Missionary effect:** Missionary presence brought about an end to such ceremonial and ritual traditions involving male puberty. The Spinifex people were quick to adopt the use of clothing that had been introduced to them by the missionaries.
- 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment:** none

8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system:** Sisters of wife’s mother and father were considered siblings. (1)
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate:** The strict marriage laws did not prohibit the marriage or sexual relations of the sister of a man’s wife. (1)
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.):**

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

- Pila Nguru translates to “home country in the flat between sandhills”
- also know as the “people of the sun and the shadow”
- The most vivid description of the desert area in which the Spinifex live that I came across was from an English explorer in 1896 who stated, “The country was, quite open, rolling along in ceaseless undulations of sand, the only vegetation besides the ever-abounding spinifex was a few bloodwood trees. The region is so desolate that it is horrifying even to describe. The eye of God looking down on the solitary caravan as it presents the only living object around must have contemplated its appearance with pitying admiration, as it forced its way continually onwards without pausing over this vast sandy region, avoiding death only by motion and distance, until some oasis can be found.” (1)

Numbered references

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2. Spinifex Country. (2006). Retrieved May 9, 2017, from <http://www.aboriginalartonline.com/regions/spinifex-2.php>
3. Hilliard, W. M. (1968). *The People In Between: The Pitjantjatjara People of Ernabella*. London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited.