

## Welcome to the fish trap: Dark Emu and the radical difference of pre-1788 Aboriginal society

*White Australia needs to understand the sheer otherness of the pre-1788 world. The debate hasn't got it yet.*



*Bruce Pascoe*

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The principle of Indigenous fish traps, as I understand it, is to convince the fish that it is going in the opposite direction to the one it's actually taking, and then start it turning in ever smaller circles.

With the debate around Bruce Pascoe's *Dark Emu*, we now know how the fish feels. In thirty-plus years of culture wars one has never seen a stoush which is so defined by confusion, misprision, projection and people standing for the opposite of what they think they're doing.

To not know the basics of the *Dark Emu* wars you'd have to have been out in the desert somewhere — OK, bad metaphor, but the basics are this: in 2014, novelist and short story writer Bruce Pascoe published said book, which argued that the Aboriginal Australians, far from being wholly nomadic hunter-gatherer-foragers, had been agriculturalists and semi-sedentists, storing and farming food, and living in villages of stone huts. Their arrival on the continent was not 60,000 years ago but 120,000.

These cultural practices were “achievements”, Pascoe argued, which should be celebrated. The picture of hunter-gatherers moving across the surface of the earth finding food by chance and putting up shelters that were temporary at best was quite wrong. Pascoe drew in part on earlier sources, but his skills as a writer of compressed narrative gave *Dark Emu* a pace and energy earlier accounts lacked.

For decades no anthropologist has doubted — and Indigenous people raised in their traditions never have doubted — what Pascoe focuses on: that the Indigenous peoples in some places (or at some times) engaged in seed-scattering vegetable replanting; the crushing, pasting and baking of foods; catching wild fish in intricate traps; wearing sewn clothes made from animal skins in the south-east; sometimes making circular, durable huts, sometimes using stone for parts of it.

But this remains unknown to many white Australians, who still believe — from outdated curriculum materials and the “productivist” nature of everyday life — that Aboriginal people wandered naked from one kangaroo or bush orange tree to the next, relying on luck — an almost impossibly bare life.

So Pascoe’s record of this will be a revelation to many, and one suspects that accounts for much of its sales success and popularity. Pascoe is rapturous about these discoveries, seeing them as allowing us to understand Indigenous people as ingenious and “advanced” — arguing that seed baking, for example, predates baking in Egypt by many millennia. “The bakers of antiquity: why don’t our hearts fill with wonder and pride?” Pascoe asks.

For veteran anthropologist Peter Sutton — author, with Keryn Walshe, of the just-published *Farmers or Hunter-gatherers*, a book-length reply to *Dark Emu* — this is to get both the evidence, and Aboriginal society (by “Aboriginal society” from here on, I’ll mean “pre-1788 Aboriginal society”) quite wrong.

Pascoe is at fault in his surmise that these practices were accompanied by substantial storage, systematic planting and harvesting, and that this amounted to incipient agriculture. They say, and it seems a fairly compelling case, that Pascoe has not considered the absence of any evidence for these practices, despite the presence of those more minimal activities. He’s failed to include exhaustive studies of bush food use, which rule out cultivation, has misread or truncated the accounts of many explorers and invaders/settlers, and has included little oral evidence from elders in areas where transmission of such has been relatively unbroken, and who explicitly reject notions of proto-agriculture.

Why has Pascoe not “seen” the absence of larger activities? Because, the authors suggest, he wants to see agriculture. He’s brought a developmentalist mindset — the “wonder and pride” — which sees farming as better and more advanced than hunting and foraging, and has thus leapt on anything that might be seen as an early trace of it. These growing and tending practices, Sutton and Walshe argue, are part of the repertoire of the relatively unchanging way of life, and often rare — in particular fish trapping, used by only two groups/clans of the thousands who constitute the pre-contact population. The same goes for clothes and housebuilding. The children’s version of *Dark Emu* is particularly stark in this respect, because it is necessarily simplified and more or less depicts Aboriginal people quite differently to the “spirit-

following nomads” picture of them built up by hundreds of other researchers, and elder oral tradition.

That indicates the deeper problem with Pascoe’s account, they argue, and it’s that he simply does not understand the radically different nature of societies such as Aboriginal Australia, in which spirits and forces are present, absolutely viscerally there in every tree, thunderstorm, bubbling creek, branch fall and so on. While Pascoe talks of myths, he appears to see them as somewhat separate to life practice, such as gathering, and subject to a separate process of ingenuity, experimentation and the like. But that’s a worldview — the separation of the gods into the sky, away from total presence in the world — that only occurs in the West *with* the creation of agriculture.

It seems harsh to say but Pascoe, who claims indigenous ancestry, appears to look to agriculture to fill a world whose completeness he cannot see — one in which the people believe themselves to be producing food by ritual religious practices that call out the spirits tending eel ponds, yam patches, baobab trees and so on. “Spiritual propagation” was the way to get food happening. The foraging expertise — knowing when and where the eels came, or the grasses flowered — was encoded in the stories told, a vast oral compendium.

Indeed Sutton could have, *should have* gone further. What most non-Indigenous people don’t understand, and which for us can only be accessed by some immersion either in anthropology and/or elder oral tradition, is that such traditional societies are based on systems of meaning in which everything is bound in everything else.

The moon is your mother-in-law but it’s also an eel, and that tree over there has a platypus spirit so you can’t go to the right of it during the moonlight, but your cousin — on your mother’s not your father’s side, duh — can but not if they married into the sand hill people, because... and on it goes.

Everything signifies, including yourself, because you’re a platypus person, but your cousin’s an eel, and your cousin on the other side is a possum. Possums hunt with platypi but can only marry eels or snakes who can’t marry each other, because the Great Eel tricked the Great Possum into giving up its beak, which is that great smooth rock over there, and now.... Where we see nature as absence and backdrop, for such people the landscape, even the desert landscape, teems with the significance a cityscape has for us.

We live among buildings, ads, cars, cranes, confrontations, graffiti, buskers, people yelling into their *churinga* iPhones, negotiations. It’s all coming at us all the time, and so it was for them.

Our myths and stories of the city come out of Netflix, the exemplary tales we live by (don’t do a drug deal gone wrong! Don’t get in that car!), and the ghosts of our ancestors visiting us (*Casablanca* playing tonight on the golden oldies channel!); theirs flowed from the landscape itself, were present in it.

If agriculture never developed here, one reason is because of all the clamour, because too much was going on. And of course, this too is an oversimplification, because modes of thought in such societies also have a basic purposiveness to them. When a branch falls, you jump out of the way.

But “spirit-world” oversimplification is far truer to that different way of life than one that presents it, by default, as an absence of modernity.

This view — the “spirit-kinship” eye, if you like — is not something non-Indigenous people can get in a single act of thought. It takes a while to really see a creek, a stand of trees, the flight of birds in anything approximating the way they would once have been seen. The object-oriented view — there’s a pile of mud, some grass and a bunch of trees — squats in our head, and even those who with knowledge of botany are seeing a rationalised form; an acacia is a form of grass, with a certain cellular structure, not an echidna turned into a plant by the Great Eagle, which is why you can’t marry your third maternal cousin, once removed. Duh.

That is what one gets introduced to in anthropology but it has never made its way sufficiently into the school curriculum. And that is the paradox of *Dark Emu*. It simultaneously introduces people to much of the richness of Aboriginal life practice while re-inscribing the myth of an absence waiting to be filled by development.

Bewilderingly, Pascoe begins the book with the sort of view of spirit-foraging lifestyle that sounds as bad as the most blinkered invader/settler account: “Could it be that the accepted view of Indigenous Australians simply wandering from plant to plant, kangaroo to kangaroo, in a hapless opportunism, was incorrect?”

Accepted by who? No specialist has thought this of the hunter-gatherer/spirit-forager lifestyle for more than a century. If many in the ordinary population still think it, that’s a failure of our education system and our storytelling. I can’t think of any worse way to lessen understanding of Aboriginal society than using this view of it to promote agriculture as an alternative.

So who were all these people praising *Dark Emu*, when all us pointyheads were meant to be (according to the right) terrible cultural relativists, trying to remember the readings from Marshall Sahlins and Clifford Geertz in Anthropology 101 all those years ago?

I suspect it is many in a “middle band” of people — those many non-Indigenous Australians who are passionate about seeing Indigenous Australians as full equals, and yet who still have the “naked and starving” view of the hunter-gatherer lifestyle in their heads.

*Dark Emu* offered a way to see Aboriginal society without the condescension of seeing absence, and so it was seized upon. Perhaps that’s why, on Sutton and Walshe’s book excerpt in *Good Weekend*, the authors — defenders of the autonomous validity of Aboriginal lifeways — were pilloried on social media, by people defending a Eurocentric account of those lifeways in the name of anti-racism.

To add to the complication — this is a *verrry* twisty fish trap — the right seized on *Dark Emu*, not to champion the autonomous validity of Aboriginal society, but to deny Pascoe’s argument *and* to reaffirm the “absence” theory of hunter-gatherer/spirit-forager life; that it was nasty, brutish and short.

Keith Windschuttle, the ex-Khmer Rouge sympathiser author of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, had described the Indigenous people of Tasmania pretty much as

stupid for having relatively few implements, and who would have died out anyway (after just the odd 35,000 years!), and this spitting hatred was everywhere reproduced on the right. Irony of ironies, their disdain for Aboriginal society, past and present, was pure envy of a people for whom a real culture survives; the Australian Anglo culture that the right would like to draw on long since disappeared under the tsunami of US mass-produced “culture”.

Nothing terrible is going to happen to children from *Dark Emu* being in the curriculum, given how much shoddy stuff is still in there anyway. Education is approximate myths we tell about many matters, which further education corrects (a sample from your education: mathematical infinity is not the largest quantity, money did not emerge from barter, the electron does not orbit the nucleus, the industrial revolution did not create capitalism, and more).

It's less untrue to know that Aboriginal people trapped fish, grew vegetables and used multiple hut types than to think they wandered the land like daytrippers who'd lost their luggage, looking for a discarded sandwich somewhere.

But it would be far better to teach the autonomy and validity of pre-1788 Aboriginal culture on its own terms, and try and convey something of the “thick difference” of it to modernity.

One can't really see that the children's version of *Dark Emu* should be taught, and Pascoe — a passionate man who has seen the Aboriginal people of Australia with an eye that is generous and loving, but is still the settler's eye — needs to rethink the text. Even if he does, the existing story is out and about now. One hell of a fish trap for our slippery times.