Ancient Australia not written in stone

Has the life of Australia's Aborigines remained unchanged for 45,000 years? A new approach to archaeology challenges us to rethink prehistory.

By Fran Molloy - Published 19 June 2008

Aboriginal people are thought to have inhabited the Australian continent for around 45,000 years before European contact, and are frequently cited as the oldest continuous living culture on Earth.

However, written records of their lives exist only since European contact. Many historians and archaeologists assumed that the culture and traditions of Aboriginal people had altered little over time, and that these written records were an accurate window into the lives of the ancestors of today's Aborigines.

Some archaeologists argue that physical remnants such as this chert knife found in Djadjiling in WA give a more accurate view of life in ancient Australia than re-interpreting post-European contact history. *(Source: Ho New/Reuters)*

But some archaeologists argue that this is not necessarily the case.

A history of change

Archaeology and palaeoanthropology Professor Iain Davidson of the University of New England says popular perception of Australia's ancient history moved slowly from the 1920s view of an unchanging people in an unchanging environment, to one of an unchanging people in a changing environment.

But he argues the perception that Aboriginal culture has remained static for thousands of years is incorrect.

The original inhabitants

The earliest evidence of Australia's first human inhabitants may well be lost in the murky depths of the waters of the northern continental shelf, as sea-levels rose following the end of the last Ice Age.

Unlike North American archaeology — where dates are quite firm — there is much debate over the dates of the earliest archaeological sites, with some arguing that the oldest sites in the Northern Territory are around 54,000 years old, says archaeologist Judith Field, from the University of Sydney.

Dating anomalies plague these assertions, says Field, with many preferring the estimates of "Mungo 3" at Lake Mungo which is believed to be around 42,000 years

old.

The arrival of humans in Australia is popularly placed at around 60,000 years ago, but with few sites in nearby South-East Asia and New Guinea older than around 40,000 to 50,000 years, Field says that most archaeologists now estimate around 45,000 years as likely.

"The first people probably arrived in small groups and at best spoke a few languages. But 50,000 years later ... there were more than 1000 languages, so over that period there was enormous social change," he says, adding, "I think we have demonstrated a changing people in a changing environment."

ANU archaeologist Dr Peter Hiscock and author of the recently released *Archaeology of Ancient Australia*, agrees. Hiscock argues that the social and economic lives of Aboriginals were not only elaborate, but also regionally diverse, adapting to local conditions and changing as those conditions changed.

These transformations did not evolve in one direction, from simple to complex, nor did they slowly evolve into the Aboriginal cultures found at the time of European contact — rather, there has been constant and dynamic change, essential for adapting to life in an often-harsh continent.

Predicting the past

Many historians and archaeologists observed Aboriginal life after European contact to try to understand the nature of their lives before contact.

But relying on these post-contact traditions is a flawed method of discovery, says Hiscock who tackles many prominent archaeologists, including Dr Josephine Flood, author of *The Original Australians*.

Flood argues that the way of life was developed in the Ice Age and "ideally suited to the continent's unpredictable climate and often harsh environment. It survived little changed until disrupted by the impact of colonisation."

While other populations became food producers by necessity, Aboriginal people retained an opportunistic hunter-gathering way of life for over 50,000 years, she says.

"Peter Hiscock and I are poles apart in our view of the past," says Flood. "I use the ethnographic approach and enlist Aboriginal people and historical records to help illuminate archaeological evidence. Like them, I see continuity from past to present, whereas Hiscock focuses on change, which in politically-correct Western eyes equates with progress."

She believes there have only been minor changes in the "stone-age, foraging, semi-nomadic way of life" of Aboriginal people throughout history.

Hiscock says Flood erred in using post-contact traditions to interpret the 30,000 year old burned bones of a woman found at Lake Mungo as resulting from a cremation, assuming there had been no change in rituals over that period.

"Her method did not investigate the nature of ancient life but instead developed interpretations of the past that merely recreated the format of Aboriginal life in the historic period," he says.

"All archaeologists who contributed to the authoritative 2006 book *Mungo over Millennia* agree that it was a cremation," Flood fires back, adding that it is almost impossible to 'prove' anything in archaeology.

Devastating upheaval

One problem that has long existed for Australian archaeologists, Hiscock argues, is that post-contact societies of Aboriginal people went through devastating upheaval when an estimated 80 per cent of most groups were killed in a smallpox outbreak in 1789 that spread across the continent very rapidly, preceding the arrival of European observers in areas beyond Sydney.

Subsequent observers assumed the traditions they observed had been in place for millennia; but many diseases such as these had an uneven impact on groups, with more women dying than men and most older people wiped out.

"Imagine four out of every five people you have ever known dying within a few weeks," he says.

Deaths of more women than men, which caused a sex imbalance, may have led to the rules requiring lending of wives and new, more complex kinship systems that Europeans observed at the end of the nineteenth century.

But ANU anthropologist Dr Ian Keen disputes this theory. He believes that, although smallpox probably had profound effects on patterns of social life, it didn't significantly alter 'the rules and ideals about land ownership or formal kinship systems,' which he believes have been in place long-term.

"In my view, Peter Hiscock ... counts as profound social change what I would see as change in details but not fundamentals," says Keen. "This allows him to downplay the relevance of the ethnography of the last century and a half for archaeological reconstruction."

Man vs megafauna

Theories around remnants of extinct "megafauna" species captured the public imagination when Professor Tim Flannery's 1994 book, *The Future Eaters*, controversially suggested that Aboriginal people were primarily responsible for the extinction of many species of megafauna through firestick farming, which had radically changed Australia's ecology.

But Hiscock argues that extinctions of megafauna occurred primarily because their habitat disappeared due to climactic change, and not because of large-scale human hunting or fires.

"Attempts to explain Pleistocene extinctions as a result of the use of fire by early foragers assumed they acted in the same way as historic Aborigines," Dr Hiscock says. He argues that archaeological evidence doesn't support these assumptions.

While Flannery declined to comment on Hiscock's criticism, archaeologist Judith Field agrees that "the history is not really all that simple."

Field has been involved in extensive excavations at Cuddie Springs, an ancient lake bed in the north-west of New South Wales, where many fossils have been found in a claypan in the centre of the lake floor. Field says that this is so far the only site that has a demonstrated overlap between humans and megafauna.

"We couldn't place most of the megafauna fossils within 100,000 years of human arrival," she says.

"The megafauna debate has been problematic because it has homogenised Australia's history, in a way. Most people pushing the human overkill theory are not archaeologists, because there is little archaeological evidence," Field says.

Hiscock agrees. "In many ways the megafauna debate has had the effect of trivialising and obscuring 50,000 years of cultural life in Australia, and making natural sciences the focus of stories about the Australian past, when the history of Aboriginal people here is so dramatic and noteworthy," he says.

Future Finders

Archaeologists investigating the history of human activity in Australia have had little reliable written history to depend upon.

Some, like Hiscock and Field, argue we should rely on physical records — unearthing remnants of the buildings, artefacts, food debris, quarries, art works and skeletal remains of these ancient people to reconstruct images of their economy, social interactions and perceptions of the world — rather than re-interpreting post-European contact history.

"We've got to be careful that we don't overlay what we know about modern day Aborigines over what was happening 30,000 years ago," warns Field.

But archaeological records in this weathered old land are scant, which makes the task a huge challenge.

"There has been massive change, and we often don't see it is because in this very dry continent, wood and bone may not survive," Field admits.

"The most durable thing in the archaeological records are stone tools, which are often all we've got to draw a picture of what people were like or what they were doing all that time ago."