Chapter 1

Reinventing Aboriginal Australia

Traditional approaches to prehistory have been always regulated towards scientific analysis of data with no consideration whatsoever to the voice and viewpoints of the very people whose history was being considered. But the modern day demands different approaches, a new and holistic negotiation of the complex area that is prehistoric archaeology and hence, in many states of Australia, any attempt at excavation of Aboriginal prehistory requires mandatory involvement of local Aboriginal communities. For, it is their past and hence they have every right to not only see what is excavated but also determine how it is presented and used. Thus, "the recent renaissance in Aboriginal society and culture throughout Australia and Tasmania has drawn upon, and been empowered by, knowledge of the distant and more recent past; and is embedded in a reassertion of Aboriginal identity and its association with the land.

Synonymous with their name, the word ‘Aboriginal’ meaning ‘the first’ or ‘earliest known,’ Aboriginal people, the original settlers of Australia may have very well been the first of the world’s human species. Excavations in a quarry near Penrith in New South Wales have thrown up stone tools dating back to a time which is, at a rough estimate, twelve thousand years, before the first appearance of the *homo sapiens* in the European mainland. Other than the Penrith site, which carbon dating reveals to be about forty seven thousand years old, two similar sites throw up almost similar figures. A site in Western Australia is estimated to about forty thousand years old and another one in Lake Mungo, in New South Wales, reads thirty-five thousand years in the year-
meter. To clock time-scales, it is astonishing to note that from the year 1788, when the first white invaders arrived in Australia, a total of 8-9 generations can be traced, while the original Aboriginal inhabitants stretch back a minimum of 18,500 generations.

The prehistory of the Aboriginal peoples is the history of which there is no written record and is solely based on archaeological evidences and Aboriginal oral traditions which have percolated down generations. As such, dates derived from archaeological studies have been instrumental in creating all theories regarding the initial colonization of Australia. Native Aboriginals are of the opinion that they have always been living in Australia and their origins can be traced back to the ‘Dreamtime.’ The Dreaming tracks, crisscrossing the continent contain records of the travels and travails of the early residents, and apparently seem contrary to Western archeological evidences, which put the year of first occupation in the region at sixty thousand years. However, such facts combined together also indicate that the earliest ancestors of the settler Aboriginals migrated to the landmass from across the sea from northern lands and islands. As such, it is easy to come to the conclusion that while other populations, in other sections of the world, evolved from earlier primitive forms, the Aboriginal populace set foot on Australian shores as evolved, modern *homo sapiens*, sometime between fifty thousand and sixty thousand years ago. Thus, the Aboriginals lived a lifestyle which was based on Dreamtime beliefs and their lifestyle and culture practices have remained unchanged through the thousands of years they have survived as a race in Australia. Such period, also referred to as the traditional period gave way to the historical period which commenced with settlement of Europeans on the land and gradual displacement of the native indigenous populace.
The method of excavation, analysis and dating of Australian prehistorical data is a very complex process involving thousands of years of time and is dependent on a variety of factors:

Australian archaeological data incorporate a wide range of site types, among which the most investigated include rock-shelters and caves with their deeply stratified sedimentary sequences. More subject to the vagaries of preservation are open sites, which, in coastal and aquatic regions, include shell middens, which are accumulations of shell and other organic remains and sediments. A third important group of sites includes sand dunes, which often incorporate archaeological material within their matrix. (H. Lourandos 4)

Such material is excavated carefully and analyzed on the field or in the lab and then dating is carried out using radiocarbon dating processes. As great amounts of time are involved in the dating of Australian prehistory, two major time spans have been determined: “the later Pleistocene (from before 40,000 until about 10,000 years ago), when the climate was generally colder and drier than today, and many parts of the earth were glaciated; and the Holocene period (from about 10,000 years ago until today), when climates more similar to today’s predominated.” (H. Lourandos 5)

A consideration of the geographical formation of the earth would reveal the accessibility of the continent from the Asian landmass. Fifty or sixty thousand years ago, the Ice Ages had not taken place and the levels of the sea were considerably lower, almost 500 to 600 feet lower according to estimates. As such, the entire geographical portion encompassing Australia, Tasmania and New Guinea were part of one land
formation and the widest possible gap of sea between the Asian continent and the Australian continent would have been a mere eighty miles, in rough estimates. Such proximity most probably allowed human beings settled in the Indonesian islands to view bush fires burning in Australian shores and being first-rate swimmers and seamen, the first ancestors must have scaled the distance to land on the new land. After arrival, they must have spread along the coastline to all parts of Australia, including Southern Australia and even Tasmania, by walking across the land bridge. Thus, even though, today there are hundreds of cultures and languages among the modern day Aboriginals in various parts of Australia, their roots can be traced back to that single group of people who crossed over, and the diversity in the modern day being the result of the diverse geography in different parts of Australia.

Nicholas Wade in an article in *The New York Times* dated 8 May 2007 titled *From DNA Analysis, Clues to a Single Australian Migration* (Wade n.pg) states that while it is generally accepted that humans arrived in Australia some fifty thousand years ago, archeological evidences indicating human habitation in the upper Swan river in Western Australia date back by about forty thousand years, and, at least thirty thousand years ago, there existed a land bridge with Tasmania. Interestingly, Palynological evidences from the South Eastern part of Australia indicate fire activity dating back to almost one hundred twenty thousand years, but such evidences though contrivable as human activity, are not irrefutable.

Thus to start with, one should begin at the onset of migration during the closing stages of the Pleistocene Age, when sea levels were considerably lower. Such decrease in sea levels up to almost hundred meters in the Australasian region has been
attributed to continual occurrences of extensive glaciation during the Pleistocene period. The result was that the Australian continental landmass extended very far into the Timor Sea and Sahul was the name of the combined continent of Australia and New Guinea. They were, in fact, joined together by an extensive land bridge across the Torres Strait, Gulf of Carpentaria and the Arafura Sea. In spite of such land connections, it is without doubt that the sea still posed a great threat and the only way such primitive men could have crossed over would have been through island hopping. Two routes for such movement seem probable – the first following an island chain between Sulawesi and New Guinea and the second, ending up in the North Western part of Australia through Timor. This movement of the Aboriginals is perhaps the earliest example of sea travel. Though the exact location from where the early Aboriginals set out for Australia is not known, it is almost certain that they used some sort of water boat to move across the hundred odd kilometers from the islands in the north towards Australia. While there is no evidence to gauge the time taken by the Aboriginals to reach the continent, present scouring of ancient camping sites all point to one simple fact that they arrived thousands of years before the white man landed on the Great South Land. Evidence of such connections exist in the similarity of the plant and animal species in Australia, New Guinea and the Indonesian islands though modern land formations most probably took place about six thousand years ago when, after the end of the Ice Age, the last of the land bridges between Australia and New Guinea went under the sea. Notably, the first Aboriginals encountered a better environment in the continent than it is today with lots of vegetable food and large animals providing lots of meat. Further archeological evidence is provided by 'charcoal,' which indicates the growing use and dependence on
fire across all parts of the continent. Fire became an integral part in the lives of the
hunter-gatherers as it served manifold purposes like keeping off wild animals, clearing
forest cover and also creating new greenery to attract animals. Such rampant use of fire
changed the landscape, as densely covered areas were converted into grasslands, fire-
tolerant species of plants like eucalypts, acacia became predominant, and the mega
fauna, disappeared completely. In total, there was extinction of almost sixty different
species vertebrates like many flightless birds like the ostrich and even carnivorous
kangaroos.

Prior to European colonization of Australia, the number of populations of
Aboriginal people who lived on the land, is a matter of great conjecture as there has
been a lot of pointers towards both ‘trihybrid’ and single-origin hypotheses (H.
Lourandos 81). Such issues have led to widespread politicization, for if it is assumed
that there was a single origin, cultural commonality is manifested, while compound or
hybrid origins provide fuel for justification of the colonization of Aboriginal domains.
Unfortunately there is an absence of objective data to settle the issue once and for all
and though DNA studies reveal that there has been influx of Y chromosomes from the
Asian subcontinent (Redd and June Roberts-Thomson n.pg), it is not enough to pitch for
any of the ‘wave invasion model’ or ‘single settlement’ theories.

Some fifteen thousand to eighteen thousand years ago, there was an increase of
aridity in the continent but by the end of the Pleistocene period, there was also an
abrupt end in the ice age, and as Aboriginal legends reveal, a rise in sea levels and
associated events like tsunamis and fish falling from the sky. The enveloping of the land
bridge lead to the separation of the Tasmanian Aboriginal populace from the
mainstream, and even extinction in such islands like the Kangaroo Island. But that contact had remained between Aboriginals living in the far North and the Austronesian tribes of New Guinea is evident from both genetic and linguistic evidences which point to trade between the two, but there has never been a case of direct colonization, as was inflicted by Europeans hundreds of years later.

In the very beginning, some thirty thousand years ago, the population of the Aboriginals was quite small in number. They lived together in small family groups and were primarily involved in hunting, fishing and collecting of food, as cultivation or domestication of animals had not yet been achieved. Land was the ultimate provider for them and they lived in clans, with each clan occupying a well-defined area of land with which it had a close and dependent relationship. Thus, the Aboriginals were an integral part of the environment and belonged to the land— a land given to them long ago in the Dreamtime. Their Dreamtime beliefs told them that the land had been created for them by ancestral heroes and heroines. Thus, every rock, tree and waterhole; every animal, bird and insect; the sky above and all it enclosed were supposed to have been created in the Dreamtime. Moreover, after some time, the creators had disappeared, though it was common belief that the remained in secret places on the land— in rivers, caves and other places. Thus, there was no buying or selling of land, for land was something with which the future of the entire clan was dependent, as it had the ability to provide them with food, water and animals to hunt for meat.

The land thus had religious connotations, but it also was an economic resource for it provided the people with food, wood, fiber and glue, utensils and other tools.
Probably they were the first environmentalists of the world for they took ample and appropriate care of their land through their practices of performing increase ceremonies, singing 'Songlines' and their conservatory relationships with the flora and fauna based on totems. The food habits of the clan was determined by the range of foods available in the area of the clan but what is commendable is that clan members had the knowhow to be able to differentiate between edible and non-edible items of food. But the gathering of food was not an easy task and sometimes entailed spending almost a whole day for procurement of meat or other food items. Living in such a land was not always an easy task and it is widely believed that the Aboriginals should be commended for surviving in a land for thousands of years where many would have become extinct in a matter of a hundred years. Probably the greatest factor between life and death was the search for fresh water and in that, the clan members were masters. They travelled inland to procure water, knowing all the water holes and soaks in their area. And even in such ancient times, they practiced such modern day practices like rain water harvesting, or dew collection for survival, going even to the extent of extracting water from roots and barks of trees and bodies of frogs. In a clan, members spoke the same dialect and survived as a big family, depending on one another for survival. Daily survival practices were carried out in groups of clan members and it was common to roam about from place to place, within the clan area for food and water, based on the season. In contrast, clan activities in the more fertile coastal areas were more stagnant as food was more readily available and in abundant quantities, than in arid regions, where existence was a daily struggle against the elements. A very interesting side effect of such a lifestyle of constant movement was that the Aboriginal could carry with him very
little of his possessions. Thus there was categorization of possessions and multipurpose belongings ruled the roost, like the coolamon, a type of curved wooden dish, used to carry water, carry the baby, scatter seeds, collect plant food or even to dig. Work and carriage of possessions while on the road was divided with the men, being the hunters, having in their possession the spear and weapons for hunting game while women carried the babies and rest of the household items.

The Aboriginal was entirely dependent on nature and the land for items of day-to-day use. To make nets, baskets, mats and even fishing lines, strings, hair and cord was used, while the wood and barks of trees were used to make dishes (coolamon), boomerangs, spears and shields. Huge tree trunks were carved to be converted into canoes and crafts for use on the water. Tools and weapons were made from chipped stones while large pebbles and flat stones found its way into the kitchen for making flour from seeds. Bones from animals were converted into needles for sewing or for being pointed ends of spears. The skins of animals and sometimes even tree barks were treated and then sewn together for making cloaks and rags, or for carrying water. Hunting was carried out through the use of nets, spears, snares and even clubs. Thus while large animals were clubbed to death or hunted with spears, smaller ones were captured in nets, or trapped in snares. The expertise was such that all could tell and differentiate between the footmarks of their own clan members and that of different animals and such extraordinary skills allowed the Aboriginals to be extraordinary hunters, men who could even follow the trail of an animal based on faint markings or a broken twigs. Fish was caught using nets and traps and sometimes, very innovatively, by poisoning the water with plant juices. The expertise of the Aboriginal was evident in
his various hunting techniques. Thus, for example, many indigenous tools were used to get within striking distance while stalking the prey was carried out by disguising body smell with mud, running behind bush cover and crawling in the open. While hunting a water-bird, the hunter swam like a fish, gliding over the water with lily-leaf or a bunch of rushes as cover. Other birds were baited or lured with bird call imitations, while the curious emu was captured by imitating its movement with sticks and feathers. Such catches were prized ones but not always available and hence the family had to depend on plant food and small animals collected by women. The males hunted such animals like kangaroos, wallabies, echidnas and possums, and reptiles like snakes and lizards, and even birds like parrots, swans and ducks. They would go out hunting with spears and boomerangs, but sometimes even climbed trees to procure birds, etc. The methods of hunting, in groups, were also unique, for some men would be the ‘beaters,’ who would drive or herd the hunted animals towards another group of waiting hunters, who would then spear or kill them. The woman, often with a baby on the back, was in fact, the greater procurer over the two, and was able to, skillfully keep the mouths fed even in adverse and harsh conditions. Food was anything which either moved or grew, from fruits, honey, manna, roots, yams, grass seeds to witchetty grubs, lizards and even snakes – prepared wonderfully in earthen ovens. According to some researchers, ‘gathering’ was the primary source of food for the Aboriginals and in many cases, the environment determined the food habits. In some places, the peoples were vegetarian as meat or animals were not found in the area, while in another, there was greater amount of seafood or marine life like fish, mussels and oysters in the plate as they were predominant in the clan area. Notably, survival was very much dependent on the
Aboriginal knowledge of their surroundings and especially the life-cycles of the flora and fauna of the region. Interestingly, Australian anthropologist Kenneth Maddock notes in *The Australian Aborigines. A Portrait of their Society* that Australia was probably the only continent in the world which had hunter-gatherers until up to the modern day. But such dependency on hunting and gathering of food by the Aboriginals have also had a side effect in that, they have been portrayed as a backward race because of the absence of proper agricultural practices or domestication of animals, a tag which is highly refutable for there is proof to the contrary. Though not directly cultivating the land, the Aboriginals harvested plants as they made flour and domestication was improbable as the animals in the vicinity were composed of not cattle but only kangaroos, wombats, possums and snakes. Aboriginals living in coastal regions or near rivers caught fish and eels in a number of ways. Thus, the men would use a spear as well as build fish-traps by making rectangular areas with rocks, that were above the water at low tide. The trick was to make the fish swim in during high time and trap them when the water receded. Then for example in the Illawarra district, the hunters would cordon off rivers with dams made of branches of trees and logs, thereby trapping the fish as they swam down the river towards the sea. They also fished from rocks and beaches using hand lines made from plants and hooks made from shells.

It should be remembered that the Aboriginal people had to catch and collect their food, each and every day of their life and hence, for survival, intimate knowledge of food-chain cycles, the migration patterns of birds and of their habitat where they lived, were needed. It is not that there were never any food shortages, but the more important aspect is that they exerted dynamic control by having a comprehensive understanding
of the flora and fauna within their tribal territory. Such dynamicity can be referred to as Bhabhaesque narration of European modernity, i.e. its reinvention as also presented by Partha Chatterjee in *Our Modernity*. It thus basically negates Western beliefs, for if the basic requirement of progress or enlightenment or even well being, is modernity, then the Aboriginals were so thousands of year back. Linked to such acts of survival was also the understanding of the need for ecological preservation which gave birth to totemic practices that protected species because an individual could not eat his own totem and others needed consent to catch another person’s totem on his land.

The huts of the Aboriginals were also composed of natural ingredients like barks and branches and leaves of trees but uniquely, varied from place to place and time to time, depending upon factors like climate, time of the year and the length of time required to be inhabited. Aboriginal people were social beings who lived and gathered together in family groups. Each camp comprised of a number of gunyas (bark huts), but there were also people who lived in caves or in the open air. The population of camps also varied and ranged from as small of six to ten people to as big as four hundred people. The Elder or Elders gunyah (hut) was positioned in the center of the camp and others moved out in circles around it. Most probably, the camp Elder decided where he wanted to sleep with his wife or wives and the rest spread-out from the spot he had chosen, with most important ones staying near him.

As survival in such harsh conditions was very demanding, the Aboriginal child, very soon after its birth, was made aware of all such practices and factors, and taught to deal with both the material and non-material things surrounding it. Being born into a
nomadic group or family, it was expected to very soon learn the rules of survival and as a member, adhere to the rules and traditions of the society. At a very young age, the child had the luxury of being tended to by its mother and loved and caressed by all adult members, but the moment s/he was able to walk, the situation changed dramatically. The honeymoon period was over and while the male child had to follow his father and other members with small spears for hunting and other activities, the girl child was expected to follow the mother and other female members and learn all her chores. Besides learning the methods of survival and existence, the adhering to one's culture and heritage also formed an important part of the growing up of a child in the Aboriginal social setup. The children were made to participate in all matters spiritual and taught by rote all rhythms of dances which would come handy in various rituals of the clan. Also, stories and songs, passed down from one generation to another was imbibed into the child, for whom the entire life was a learning process. The time of the child’s movement into adulthood with the attaining of puberty was a very important phase, though the rituals differed between male and female members. For the girl, the rituals were simple, though at time they could be spectacular in nature. But for the boy’s movement from childhood to adulthood, the process was long drawn, stretching over a number of years and marked by a number of traditional rituals. The entry into adulthood was viewed similar to entering a membership of society and hence the stress was always on training the incumbent in the customs, traditions and mythology of the clan. Marked by circumcision, the process involved his gradual movement into the world of adults, the scared life of the group. And only after the final initiation rituals were completed that the new adult was allowed to be married, the occasion marking his official entry into
adulthood. From then on, he was a full grown man, who had a wife and maybe a child to feed and with that obligation, he was expected to use all skills learnt during childhood to enable the clan's survival.

For the Aboriginal, his tradition and culture was of paramount importance and all the life was spent in learning and carrying the values forward for succeeding generations. Interestingly, each clan also had a totem for itself, and the relationship demanded total responsibility towards it. Thus for example if a certain animal was the totem of a certain clan, they would ensure that they did not harm or kill the animal and always tried to protect it. The Dreamtime was undoubtedly the most important element in the life of all Aboriginals. It was the time from the mythological past when the spirits of their ancestors traversed the length and breadth of country and not only set down rules for future generations to follow to live in communion with nature but also gave the land its form and physical features. And thus in generations of Aboriginals, stories of such spirits like the Fertility Mother, The Great Rainbow Snake, the Djanggawul brothers and sisters, etc have survived and formed an intrinsic part of their cultural heritage. Religious practices were followed both separately by men and women and also together, with some initiated adult men being aware of certain scared features of the stories and rituals. Like all other societies of the world, the Aboriginals were also believers of supernatural powers and superstitions. Being plagued by problems like plagues, droughts, diseases, death and food and water shortages from time to time, the blame for every single event was put on supernatural powers and forces. And correction for the same was attained with the use of a combination of magic and rituals with the help of the ‘doctor’ or the ‘medicine man.’ His method of treatment varied from
massages of the sick area, to sucking to get rid of the evil spirit, to application and administration of natural medicines prepared from plants. The basic premise was that the source of all illness was the spirit. First, evil thoughts acted on the spirit, later on it was manifested on the body, and the person who was under a spell would usually grow sickly and die. The Aboriginals also had great regard for their aged, who were esteemed for their experience, acquaintance and good judgment, and taken great care of. On death, the custom of mourning also varied from clan to clan, but almost always, the rituals were highly complex. The manner and intensity of expression of sorrow was also varied and the most extreme form would involve covering one’s body with clay and ochre. The disposal of the dead could either be by cremation, burial, placement on platforms on trees or caves and rock shelters. Sometimes, in a strange ritual, the dead person’s forearm bone was recovered and preserved as a treasure or relic for generations.

The Aboriginals were also highly developed in their art forms – body art, rock engravings and paintings, with art being considered to be an integral part of their life and culture. Body art was an integral part of all their rituals and ceremonies and the markings and designs painted on the bodies were related to the totems of the clans and hence were very symbolic. At the same time, the modes, means and meanings of such forms were passed on to the young who were taught how to engage in the same. Rock engravings and paintings, archeological evidences which have stood the test of time, have great significance and walls and roofs of Aboriginal rock shelters were used as canvass. Being perishable in nature, there was also regular repainting or retouching for preservation of the same. The earliest know art form of the Aboriginals is undoubtedly
bark painting, though their creation depended entirely on the finding of suitable tree barks, something common only in areas like Arnhem Land. For paintings, colours and pigments were created from rocks, charcoal and clay, the entire gamut presenting the colours of brown, white and black. The motifs in the paintings told stories of Aboriginal life, times and past history and helped people not only to record their religious beliefs but also to record incidents from their past lives to the present day, reflecting, through paintings of animals or stories of contact with other peoples and tribes.

In the last five thousand years, the Australian landscape has witnessed manifold changes like improvement in the climate of the land and related weather parameters like temperature and rainfall. Parallely, it has also given rise to a highly developed and very refined tribal society which relied on trade. The primary items included flints, precious stones, shells, seeds, food items, etc and even songs and dances. At the same time there was widespread coverage of the Pama-Nyungan language family from Cape York to all of the South West, except the South East portions. Culturally and religiously, there was concord in the belief in the Dreamtime and religious ideas and stories were similar all over the land. The tribal social structure was highly evolved and strict rules governed all practices and rituals. Thus there were mass feasting and celebratory ceremonies for initiation of young boys and girls into adulthood, while strict rules governed behaviour towards other members of the tribe. Responsibility was divided and stringently governed rules determined responsibilities among members of families like brothers and sisters, uncles and aunts and even one’s in-laws. Australian historian and anthropologist Inga Clendinnen in her description of Aboriginal culture and society of the times notes:
They [...] developed steepling thought-structures - intellectual edifices so comprehensive that every creature and plant had its place within it. They travelled light, but they were walking atlases, and walking encyclopedias of natural history. [...] Detailed observations of nature were elevated into drama by the development of multiple and multi-level narratives: narratives which made the intricate relationships between these observed phenomena memorable.

These dramatic narratives identified the recurrent and therefore the timeless and the significant within the fleeting and the idiosyncratic. They were also very human, charged with moral significance but with pathos, and with humour, too - after all, the Dreamtime creatures were not austere divinities, but fallible beings who happened to make the world and everything in it while going about their creaturely business. Traditional Aboriginal culture effortlessly fuses areas of understanding which Europeans 'naturally' keep separate: ecology, cosmology, theology, social morality, art, comedy, tragedy - the observed and the richly imagined fused into a seamless whole. (n.pg)

The power of rule was vested with community elders and an elaborate set of tribal laws helped settled disputes of any kind among community members. Though quarrels and inter personal feuds took place, there was no scope or place of organized warfare or violence as all members were allied and bound to each other, be it through blood or marital bonds or through a common shared belief system of one's ancestry and descent.
The development of a primitive society depended not only on its cultural and social progress but also on its technological prowess. And in that, the Aboriginal society and its people of fore were highly developed, at around three thousand years before their colonial encounter. Their greatest innovation was undoubtedly in the use of quartz, which was used to replace chert by native craftsmen while the dingo, brought in from South Asia, was a part of their efforts to ride the waters. They also made inroads in small scale farming methods with eel farming in West Victoria and yam harvesting in Geraldton. Another important feature of Aboriginal culture was the method of disposal of the dead. It is believed that an estimated twenty thousand years ago, the Aboriginal populace had started burning of their dead, a first among populations of the world. Similarly, artwork found in the Koonalda cave in Nullarbor Plain, dating back to an almost similar time prove that indigenous art predates even the first attempts of the prehistoric Europeans.

Besides wide spread movement over the length and breadth of the Australian continent, the prehistoric settlers also had contact with populations living outside Australia. For many thousands of years, the people settled along the Northern coastline, in areas like Cape York, Kimberley, Amhem Land; had contact with outsiders as there free movement of goods with residents of New Guinea. Developed initially over the land bridges, which joined Australia and New Guinea, the subsequent flooding some six thousand years ago also did not have any effect, and trade and commerce flourished through the newly formed Torres Strait. It was a hundred and fifty kilometer long channel which was easily navigable and the islands provided suitable stopping points. History also reveals that the Aboriginal people were not limited to dealing with just
people from New Guinea, but had interactions with even Indian, Chinese and Arab traders.

The first European encounter with the Australian continent was in the year 1606 when the Dutch ship Duyfken landed on Australian shores. The first encounter was not at all mention worthy for, in the words of the captain of the ship William Jansz, the natives were black savages who reacted cruelly and killed a few of his sailors: “...savage, cruel, black barbarians who slew some of our sailors.” (Humphrey n.pg) Later in the same year, when the Spanish Luis Vaez de Torres navigated the Torres Straits, he found the native population similarly savage with fat naked bodies and ill fashioned weapons and tools. He wrote “...very corpulent and naked. Their arms were lances, arrows, and clubs of stone ill fashioned.” (Humphrey n.pg). Later, in the year 1623, another visitor Jan Carstenz had similar unflattering things to say: “..the most arid and barren region that could be found anywhere on earth; the inhabitants too, are the most wretched and poorest creatures that I have ever seen in my age or time.” (Humphrey n.pg) Narrating several fights with the Aboriginals, he termed them as the most pathetic and poor creatures he had ever set his sight upon and described Australia to be probably the most inhospitable and scorched land anywhere on Earth. Interestingly, such reports went a long way in determining the decision of the Dutch government not to form colonies in Australia at such a time.

On the other side of the spectrum, the Macassans from Macassar and Celedes were among the earliest of visitors to the land of the Aboriginals, in northern Arnhem Land and in the Melville and Bathurst Islands. Their coming to the land of the Aboriginals were most probably from prehistoric times and the natives had a big place in
their hearts for them: “The Macassan visitors came in what the Aboriginals regard as historic times, and their camps were both large and well organized. The campsites are still marked by tamarind trees, which grew from the seeds of the fruit, dropped by the fishermen.” (Humphrey n.pg). The Macassan visitors were highly developed and organized and their introduction to the Aboriginals resulted in the latter becoming richer with a variety of techniques and methods. Aboriginals learnt the use of the dugout canoe and how to use metal for making knives, tomahawks, spear blades, etc. They participated in their ceremonies, learnt to adapt songs to the tunes of foreign musical instruments and even play cards. There were also cultural exchanges with many Aboriginals travelling in the Macassan boats back to Macassar and returning back with firsthand knowledge about their lives and traditions. In fact, such was the influence that the Aboriginals even borrowed or adopted words from the Macassan vocabulary on such areas as compass directions, names of tools and parts of boats.

Probably the first of the detailed descriptions of the Aboriginals was carried out by the Englishman William Dampier who wrote in his *New Voyage round the World* (1697) that he believed that the Aboriginals, settled on the Western coast of Australia, were the most wretched people of the world with their grotesque bodies: “the miserablest people in the World ... they were tall, straight bodied, and thin, with small long limbs. They have great heads, round foreheads and great brows. Their eyelids are always half closed, to keep the flies out of their eyes.” (Humphrey n.pg) In Europe, at about a similar time, the concept of the ‘noble savage’ was gaining credence and there was a general leaning to the belief that even though the ancient people were the so-called ‘savage’ peoples, they possessed material and spiritual minimalism which should
also be the aim of the white man. As such, such an idea was inculcated in the minds of future explorers, especially the notable Captain James Cook who began his journey in 1768 with the self purpose of exhibiting: "...The utmost patience and forbearance with respect to the native ... They are human creatures, the work of the same omnipotent author, equally under his care with the most polished European; perhaps being less offensive, more entitled to his favour." (Humphrey n.pg) Regarding the Aboriginal populace he wrote: “these people may truly be said to be in the pure state of nature, and may appear to some to be the most wretched upon the earth; but in reality they are far happier than ... we Europeans” (Humphrey n.pg) – a frank and honest admission about the superiority of the Aboriginal civilization over all things European.

Twenty years later, the colonization process was on – the first batch of invaders arrived on 18 January 1788 with the intention of not harming the native population which was at that time, at an estimated three hundred thousand. Thus as history states, Aboriginal groups had been living undisturbed all across Australia for thousands of years before the British arrived with a fleet of 12 ships at Botany Bay on the eastern coast of Australia. The main purpose of the expedition was to start a colony which would double as a prison for Britain’s worst criminal offenders. The ships were carrying 1530 people, 736 of which were convicts. But Botany Bay turned out to be a very bad choice and in less than a month the colony was relocated a few miles up the coast to Port Jackson. The colonists found Port Jackson to a huge improvement from Botany Bay and renamed it Sydney, after Lord Sydney the British home secretary. In fact, even today, Sydney’s harbour is still considered to be one of the best natural harbours in the world. Captain James Cook set the colonization of Australia into motion by traveling
around and charting the prolific eastern coast of Australia. Initially the settlement was started by Governor Philip, with the intention of "reconciling the Aboriginals to live amongst us, and to teach them the advantages they will reap from cultivating the land." (Humphrey n.pg) Though seemingly good from the British point of view, the basic premise that they were superior to the native population was unacceptable because the invaders were also of the opinion that the natives, being non-Christians, "did not try to 'improve' the land of their birth by agriculture (and) were not only inferior beings, but also deserve to have their country take over." (Humphrey n.pg) Interesting, instead of putting the native knowledge to good use, regarding how to survive in such a harsh country and environment, the British led by their Governor Macquarie asked the Aboriginals in 1816 to "relinquish their wandering, idle and predatory habits of life, and to become industrious and useful members of a community where they will find protection and encouragement." (Humphrey n.pg) But the Aboriginals, and not surprisingly, refused and resisted such change, thereby ironically, reaffirming the British viewpoint that the natives were indeed inferior. At the outset, there was some trouble between the Aboriginals and the British, for the Aboriginals local to Botany Bay complained about the British felling of trees. In due course, as most of the offenders who were set free couldn't afford to sail back to England, settled there and Sydney became a real colony, and Australia was on its way towards becoming a mostly British settlement. (F. G. Rose n.pg) But strangely, the British signed no treaties or agreements regarding their movement in what was till then unrestricted Aboriginal land, the attitude to which differed greatly among the two groups: "To the Aboriginals, to whom the Land was part of this life and the future of his group, land was not something to be bought
and sold - it was not a commodity for exchange. The British believed that land could not only be bought and sold, but taken to be exploited by productive agriculture, and that those who carry out this obligation had some kind of ‘moral right’ to the land.” (Humphrey n.pg) And the movement and advancement of the invaders into the interiors of the continent, the situation started changing drastically as the Aboriginals began being deprived of everything that symbolized their life and culture – their hunting fields, their watering holes and everything else worth noting. While the Aboriginals resisted such advancements, sometimes successfully, they also had a great price to pay as not only did they lose their farming and grazing endeavours, their lives were also snuffed out easily under fire from superior British weapons and artillery. Violence was justified “with the argument that these ‘savages’ needed to be ‘taught a lesson’ to ensure .. future peace. (Also) …. although the Aboriginals were supposed to be protected by British law, this protection was difficult to enforced - almost impossible at the frontiers of settlement.” (Humphrey n.pg)

Thus, Britain seized the continent in order to enlarge and spread out its empire, just like it seized colonies in America, Africa and Asia. Also, its officials came up with the fictional legal term _terra nullius_ – which branded Australia to be an empty land – thereby ignoring the very existence and history of three hundred thousand Aboriginals, with the aim of getting control of the land without cost. From the beginning, armed force was used to drive Aboriginals from the land to secure this imperialist outpost, like in 1790 when Governor Phillip sent troops out to infuse a universal terror among local Aboriginals who were resisting the theft of their land. In 1816, his successor Governor Macquarie sent three armed detachments of the 46th regiment to attack the tribes on the
outskirts of the settlement. He wanted the heads of Aboriginals leaders cut off and their bodies strung up in trees. But the war against Aboriginals widened dramatically with the expansion of the pastoral industry for the rise of wool production alongside Britain’s booming textile manufacturing provided the foundations for a homegrown Australian capitalist class with its own distinct interests. And in the 1820s in Tasmania, pastoralists spread a million sheep through the midlands, an act which ensured that the Aboriginals were driven off their own land. At the same time, government organized and sanctioned retaliatory expeditions or nigger hunts were carried out which butchered Aboriginals like they were pests on the land. The last recorded massacre was within living memory at Forrest Creek in WA in 1926. (F. G. Rose n.pg) Similarly, the Native Police force that came into being in the 1840s played a vital role in the growth of the pastoral industry for while they were engaged in scattering of the natives, the pastoralists slyly took control of the land. In 1861, the Queensland government advertised that land was available in the north of the state and guaranteed settlers the protection of the Native Police.

The act of conquering Aboriginal land was combined with the gruesome and sadistic practice of taking away Aboriginal children from their families -- another mechanism of dispossession. Thus towards the end of the nineteenth century, unlimited numbers of Aboriginal children were rounded up and herded onto missions and reserves for so-called protection. Though presented a human face, such acts were not at all humanitarian and were carried out with the belief that the Aboriginal race was dying out and in its last limbs and the government was merely smoothing the dying pillow. The real reason was however more gruesome, and similar to Negro exploitations in the plantations in America, the missions and reserves were used as a source of
cheap labour for the pastoral industry. However, a more subtle policy of extermination continued with the theft of half-caste children as part of a process of biological absorption. In May 1937, AO Neville, Chief Protector of Aborigina in WA, was reported in Brisbane’s Telegraph as holding the view that within 100 years the pure black will be extinct. But the half-caste problem was increasing every year. Therefore, the idea was to keep the pure blacks segregated and absorb the half-castes into the white population.

Thus, the need of the hour is to take a fresh look at the prehistory of Australia and its original inhabitants, by casting aside traditional approaches and shifting to more radical and Aboriginal-centric viewpoints. Traditional theory views the Aborigina as the ‘original human society, as a part of the nature and dependent on the environment and environmental changes. Thus the hunter-gatherers and the Australian and Tasmanian Aborigina “have been seen in this light; as representatives of the ‘original human society’, where change was minimal, and where biological and socio-cultural factors, even the number of people on the ground, were largely determined by the natural environment.” (H. Lourandos xiv) Such a traditional viewpoint is detrimental for the Aboriginal populace for it marks them out as a passive group of people who are not in control of their lives and fate. But the ground reality was something different for the Aborigina were people who interacted directly with both the environment and the socio-cultural setup, and has the ability to dynamically change, alter or determine the fate of themselves and their clan. Such an assumption would enable

....hunter-gatherer peoples, or those whose lifestyle is predominantly aimed in this direction, no longer need stand apart from others, such as
horticulturalists and agriculturalists, and people of so-called more complex societies, with whom they are so often contrasted." (H. Lourandos xiv)

Land rights claims are central to the social and economic betterment of many Aboriginal communities, and the tie to land is often validated through traditional, including archaeological information." (H. Lourandos xv) The unequal relations, which is in a way an inheritance of colonialism, is the bane of the Aboriginal communities, for the attempt has always been to interweave the past with the present – a past of colonial oppression and disadvantage. As a means of social control, the prehistory and history of the communities have been interweaved to leave them at a disadvantage for:

unilinear evolutionary models of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, for example presented by anthropologist and archaeologists, which placed these peoples in the lowest rungs of the socio-cultural evolutionary ‘ladder’, have largely served to preserve the status quo; to keep Aboriginal Australians and Tasmanians in their place – as dependent, ‘conquered’ peoples, largely divorced from land, society, economy and their past. The traditional models of Australian prehistory .... With their emphasis upon the dominance of the natural environment over Aboriginal society –assigning to the latter a passive role – producing long-term stability and lack of change, have, in their own way, also reinforced these conditions." (H. Lourandos xvi)

Thus, to just look at past Aboriginal communities as living in equilibrium with their environment and in total control of natural forces, as Joseph Birdsell opines, leads to a lot of aberrations as the Aboriginal setup in prehistoric times was very much
heterogeneous and changing. Moreover, socio-cultural variations need to be acknowledged for the Aboriginal of the past had a dynamic relation with his environment and emphasis has to be put a wider range of social, political, demographic and economic issues, thereby granting them a cultural complexity they rightly deserve. The individual histories of Aboriginal communities and the natural and cultural environment went a long way in determining the communal configuration, demography, economic independence, technological prowess and sedentism among the hunter-gatherer-fisher peoples of Australia. Thus for example, Lourandos writes:

"...many hunter-gatherer societies have had a long history of contact with a variety of neighbouring peoples, including agriculturalists, and more recently, with quite complex societies, including states and empires. These external contacts may have produced a variety of changes in the original hunter-gatherer society (Denbrow 1984; Gordon 1984; Schrire 1984; Bird-David 1988; Woodbarn 1988). In course of time, individual societies also have fluctuated between varying degrees of hunting-gathering-fishing and horticulture." (H. Lourandos 5)

As Bender and Morris, and Myers write, recent developments have moved on from viewing ahistorical and static factors to dynamic ones, which consider both long-term and short-term historical forces at play both within and outside as well as beyond, in Aboriginal communities and other interacting societies. Thus Aboriginal prehistory is also their social, political and cultural history based on relations both within communities and without, i.e. with one's neighbours. Such themes would obviously lead to discussions, according to Leacock and Lee in *Politics and History in Band Societies*, on
land, land rights and disputes regarding both leadership and territory. Also, recent developments must take recourse to ‘optimal foraging’ studies “which consider the underlying ecological structure and evolutionary significance of hunter-gatherer subsistence practices” (H. Lourandos 10) and socio-cultural factors involved in adaptation to the environment and natural forces. Thus, the Aboriginal peoples are viewed as one who has been able to adapt to both a natural and socio-cultural environment, though the importance of such influences are highly debatable. The influences can be external is there is dominance of the environment and demography; and internal, if socio-cultural factors predominate, a fact which has been successfully accommodated in modern studies. Thus, it is the Aboriginal society or community which dominates all other influences and factors in their life and cultural practices manipulate both the natural setting and human demography. It is this back shelving of demography which is prime importance because, even though Cohen views it to be the primary force in human history, Hassan and Bender point out that society influences demography in multifarious means. Thus, ultimately, there is a paradigm shift from the concept of ‘static equilibrium’ with respect to the Aboriginal and his environment to a ‘dynamic equilibrium’ with the Aboriginal occupying primary place and possessing dynamic roles.

The environment is of tantamount importance in the life of the community for it is able to, based on diverse factors, determine response and choices of the communities but such act is also a cultural phenomenon and as such there is a complex inter-related relation between the environment, the socio-cultural realm and demography: “The distribution of natural resources in time and space can influence the pattern of hunter-gatherer subsistence and settlement.” (H. Lourandos 12) Thus, if there is more
concentration of certain resources in a certain place, there in an increase of sedentism or duration of stay as well as greater exploitation of the same for survival, leading to maybe, even changes and alteration of whole ecosystems. In conclusion, while distribution of natural resources can lead to new patterns in Aboriginal community behaviour and influence its society and economy among other things, it should also be remembered that ultimately, it is always the human being which is the dynamic constituent, determining cultural responses.

Traditionally it has been believed that Aboriginal societies, being dependent on natural resources, settled or moved from one place to another based on local factors like rainfall, water availability and even seasonal or annual bioproductivity and hence the demography or population of a place changed annually or seasonally. Though such an approach about the behaviour of the Aboriginal communities is not disputable, it should be remembered that demography is not singly determined by abundance or scarcity of natural resources. The patterns of movement and settlement in Aboriginal communities were determined by socio-cultural factors for "in Aboriginal Australia while large and lengthy intergroup gatherings were often associated with local resource gluts it is clear in many cases that resource availability was not the main reason for these events and that resource productivity was manipulated in a variety of ways .... (serving) to illustrate that the spatial (dispersal) patterns ......through time, are not solely subject to biological, ecological-environmental or social factors." (H. Lourandos 16-17)

Thus the dynamicity of the Aboriginal with respect to his external environment and natural resources can be proved without doubt. For, it is he who made cultural, communal and demographic choices, based on the chronological and spatial division of
natural assets and it is also he who changed the natural environment and its ecological structure. Secondly, his settlement or moving away from a certain place was very much his own decision based on socio-cultural factors. Finally and very importantly, the Aboriginal economy was a highly complex one and functioned at two levels – the domestic and the inter-clan. The range, patterns and complexities of operations at both levels, though somewhat more at the inter-clan level, indicates his use of a large number of wide-ranging and concentrated tactics, which even changed with time.