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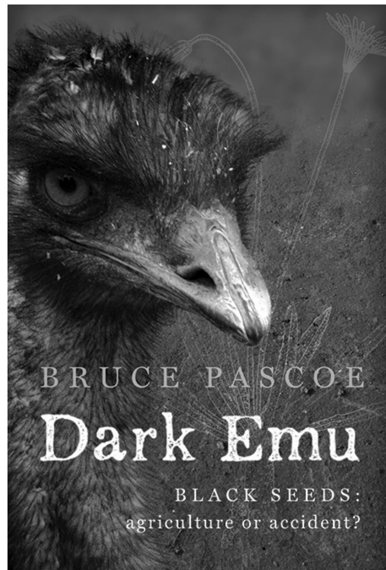

Dark Emu. Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?

Bruce Pascoe

Magbala Books, 2014

Dark Emu, which gives its title to the book, is the creator Spirit Emu Baiame, the dark shape in the Milky Way that we cannot perceive, for culturally we have not been taught to do so. This sums up the whole thrust of this book, which exposes the nature of traditional Aboriginal society that we have not been educated to see.

The book is marketed in its media release as challenging 'the hunter-gather tag as a convenient lie promulgated by colonisers who ignored the possibility of prior Indigenous possession of the land.' This summary sells the book short. The book rarely discusses dispossession and certainly does not argue there is a 'convenient lie.' Pascoe is too nuanced and careful for that. What he does say is more profound. Pascoe argues that European colonisers possessed a mindset unable to imagine that a people deemed 'savage' and 'primitive,' and leading a so-called 'miserable' life, as William Dampier alleged in the late seventeenth century, could in fact be masters of their environment. Nor could they conceive that Aboriginal people cultivated and harvested seeds, tubers and yams, constructed semipermanent settlements, and preserved and stored their food production. There was no lie, simply no understanding.

However, the original observers, the often maligned explorers, did often understand, and Pascoe knows it. Indeed, he has many compliments to extend to explorers – especially Sir Thomas Mitchell – because of the careful observations they made of Aboriginal people at first contact. Pascoe researches this book extensively and in part from a careful reading of many explorers' journals – Mitchell, Eyre, Sturt, Stuart, Giles and others. He also has researched key early colonial observers like Peter Beveridge and the Aboriginal protectors, William Thomas and George August Robinson. He has also drawn on the work of archaeologists, anthropologists, botanists and other scientists over the last few decades.

Pascoe explores agriculture and provides examples from many parts of Australia of Aboriginal people harvesting, grinding and cooking seeds such as nardoo and panicum. He reveals the bounteous ways fish, eels, abalone and other marine and riverine foods were harvested and the ways food was prepared and stored. Pascoe has a section on the more familiar 'fire-stick farming,' drawing well on the fine work by Jones, Gammage and others. Rupert Gerritsen's work is an inspiration for Pascoe. He also discusses observations of Aboriginal housing, pointing to many semipermanent settlements close to abundant seasonal food sources. All acts on the land have stories, Pascoe argues, so Aboriginal religion is inextricably bound with food production – and discussed. Pascoe rarely overstates the case, drawing back several times from arguing all Aboriginal groups practised agricultural production or lived in houses as seen by explorers. He often calls for more research.

His arguments about the reality of Aboriginal agriculture, aquaculture, food storage and preservation are not new, but hitherto they have been buried in scientific papers, less accessible writings, or not pursued in such a sustained manner. He has done a great service by bringing this material to students and general readers, and in such a lively and engaging fashion. The one drawback is that Pascoe tends to pile example upon example throughout the book, which can become a little tedious. However, he reflects on this, commenting: 'the reason I have provided so many examples, however, is to emphasise the depth of the available material and the desperate need of a revision of our history.'

Interesting but more speculative sections exist on the spread of Aboriginal languages, arguing trade and cultural exchanges, not conquest, spread languages. He believes this reveals social stability and a common response to food procurement. He wonders about what has been called (technological) intensification and whether it occurred earlier than 4–5000 years before present, given the unfolding longevity of Aboriginal society. Usually the realist, Pascoe does tend to see traditional society as peaceful, being marked by acceptance and no wars over land or resources. However, *inter se* violence stemming from clan feuding, ritual transgression and gender relations was a reality.

Aboriginal people are presented in this story as active agents, who shaped and managed the land, and were not shaped by it. In reality, the influence was both ways, as it generally is with culture and nature.

Pascoe concludes by acknowledging this two-way relationship, discussing the need for Australia of the future to learn from Aboriginal use of nature, and adopt seeds adapted to the

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environment, and husband meats such as emu and kangaroo. Not only are such foods adapted to an arid land and thus environmentally sustainable, but they are often rich in energy and low in fat. Nature may yet force us to adapt culturally and see the wisdom of taking up Aboriginal foods adapted to this continent and its aridity.

I heartily recommend this book to teachers of Aboriginal studies and congratulate the author and Magabala Books for a well-designed production.

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