

Tiwi

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Entered by Emily Pitek, Human Relations Area Files

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Entry tags: Australian Traditions, Religion

The Tiwi are Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia's Melville and Bathurst islands. This entry focuses on the Tiwi living on Melville Island around 1929 (before substantial European influence). At this time, the primary social unit was autonomous clans with fluid leadership based upon prestige. The major components of the Tiwi religion consist of taboos (pukimani), beliefs and rituals related to death and burial, initiation ceremonies for boys, and mythology (Hart and Piling, 1960:87). Religion played a minimal role in daily life, aside from occasional ceremonies and the pukimani system. The pukimani system is best described as a temporary state of being, during which certain behaviors are prescribed (for example, a woman is pukimani for a week or two after giving birth) (Hart and Piling, 1960:88). There are no religious specialists or practitioners (such as a priest, shaman, or medicine man) among the Tiwi.



Date Range: 1904 CE - 1930 CE

Region: Melville Island

Region tags: Oceania, Australia

Melville Island, ca. 1929

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Divale, W. 2004. Codebook of Variables for the Standard Cross-Cultural Sample. *World Cultures: The Journal of Cross-Cultural and Comparative Research*.
- Source 2: Murdock, G.P. & Wilson, S.F. (Jul., 1972). Settlement patterns and community organization: *Cross-Cultural Codes 3. Ethnology*, 11(3), 254-295.
- Source 3: Murdock, G.P. (1967). *Ethnographic Atlas*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=oi20-001>
- Source 1 Description: Hart, C. W. M. (Charles W. M.) & Pilling, A. R. (1960). *Tiwi Of North Australia. Case Studies In Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Source 2 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=oi20-000>
- Source 2 Description: Goodale, J. C. (2009). *Culture Summary: Tiwi*. New Haven, Conn.: Human Relations Area Files.

– Source 3 URL: <http://ehrafworldcultures.yale.edu/document?id=oi20-002>

– Source 3 Description: Mountford, C. P. (1958). *Tiwi: Their Art, Myth, And Ceremony*. London: Phoenix House in association with Georgian House, Melbourne.

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

Notes: "Today [circa 1930] the Tiwi have been incorporated into the modern world as a part of the Australian nation, yet they came to understand outsiders, including Australians, through persons with many national backgrounds" (Hart and Piling, 1960:100). "There were in 1929 only two year-round settlements of outsiders which were significant to the Tiwi. One was Bathurst Island Mission, but then nearly twenty years old, the only permanent white-man establishment on the islands. It acted as the main exit point for travel to Darwin, the other focus of Tiwi life. There was also the large camp of Mandiimbula and Yeimpi on the south coast of Melville Island, which owed its existence to the sexual arrangement between the Tiwi and Japanese pearlers" (ibid, pg.105).

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 1649, Frequency of Internal Warfare (resolved rating), indicates that internal warfare seems to occur (original code 3.5) between once every 2 years, to every year, but usually only during a particular season (Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 1650, Frequency of external warfare (resolved rating), indicates that external warfare seems to be absent or rare (original code 1). Additionally, SCCS Variable, 1654, pacification, indicates that the society is inferred to be unpacified because warfare frequency is greater than or equal to 3. Source of information: Ember and Ember, 1992; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the recruitment of new members.

Does the religion have official political support

– No

Notes: Although elements of religion permeate many aspects of society, religion does not play a major role in daily life aside from big ceremonial occasions and pukimani, or taboos (Hart and Piling, 1960:89). Additionally, there is no official political office to give support. The Tiwi have no political

authority beyond the local community, which is reflective of autonomous bands and villages (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: "A careful and exhaustive census of [the Tiwi] (by Hart) in 1928–29 showed that the approximately 2900 square miles comprising the two islands were occupied and used by 1062 people" (Hart and Pilling, 1960:5). No population figures are available for Melville Island on its own during the time this entry focuses on.

Are there recognized leaders in the religious group:

– No

Notes: "The Tiwi do not recognize full-time or specialist religious practitioners and curers. Instead, each person uses culturally transmitted religious knowledge to communicate with the spiritual world by participating in burials, community rituals and initiation rites. Shared religious knowledge is also essential for interpreting dreams and making sense of illness, death, birth, and taboos" (Goodale, 2009).

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also "oral scriptures" (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of scriptures.

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: According to Murdock and Wilson (1972), column 6 (large or impressive structures), "There are no structures in the community that are appreciably larger or more impressive than the usual residential dwellings."

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Notes: According to Murdock and Wilson (1972), column 6 (large or impressive structures), "There are no structures in the community that are appreciably larger or more impressive than the usual

residential dwellings."

Are pilgrimages present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of pilgrimages among the Tiwi.

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Yes

Notes: "At the death of an aboriginal, the mopaditi [spirit] rises out of the chest of the corpse" (Mountford, 1958:61).

Belief in afterlife:

– Yes

Notes: "...if the person [who has died] has lived for some time, its mopaditi stays around the grave, mourning because it has to leave its old companions. But after three days have elapsed, the mopaditi calls out 'Nimbung'i' (good-bye), and sets off, unaccompanied, to the locality where it was born, which, before the white man came, would have been its totemic place" (Mountford, 1958:61).

Reincarnation in this world:

– Yes

Notes: Infants who die young will be reborn. This does not occur if the person has lived for some time. "At the death of an aboriginal, the mopaditi rises out of the chest of the corpse. If the corpse is that of an infant, or a very small child, its mopaditi stays in the immediate neighbourhood, sleeping with the bereaved mother every night, but leaving in the morning before she wakes up. This continues until the woman has recovered from her grief. After some months, the spirit child, now called a buda-buda, re-enters the body of its previous mother through her vulva and starts life again as a human being. On the other hand, if the person has lived for some time, its mopaditi stays around the grave, mourning because it has to leave its old companions. But after three days have elapsed, the mopaditi calls out 'Nimbung'i' (good-bye), and sets off, unaccompanied, to the locality where it was born, which, before the white man came, would have been its totemic place" (Mountford, 1958:61).



In a human form:

– Yes

Notes: Infants who die young will be reborn; this does not occur if the person has lived for some time (Mountford, 1958:61).

↳ In animal/plant form:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of reincarnation in animal/plant form.

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Yes

Notes: "All bodies of dead persons were buried within twenty-four hours of their death by digging a hole near the camp where the death had occurred and placing the body, wrapped in bark, in it" (Hart and Pilling, 1960:90).

↳ Interment:

– Yes

Notes: "All bodies of dead persons were buried within twenty-four hours of their death by digging a hole near the camp where the death had occurred and placing the body, wrapped in bark, in it" (Hart and Pilling, 1960:90).

↳ Corpse is extended (lying flat on front or back):

– Yes

Notes: See Mountford, 1958:65

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of co-sacrifices.

Are grave goods present:

– Yes

Notes: "The 'workers' laid Waniamperi's personal belongings at the base of a tree...tied his loin cloth and tobacco to the top of a thin sapling which had been driven into the ground at the head of the grave, made a large fire, and left a container of water. The aborigines believe that the mopaditi, seeing his belongings near at hand, water to drink and fire to warm himself and cook the food he gathers in the surrounding forest, will stay near the grave until the time comes for him to leave the locality...Normally, all the belongings of the dead, except those left at the grave, are destroyed. If a man has a canoe, however, it is inherited by a male relative, not necessarily of the immediate family. But the canoe cannot be used until after the final pukamuni. It is then painted white and overturned on a smoky fire to drive out the dead man's mopaditi. If this ritual were not carried out, the mopaditi would warn the sea creatures and spoil the fishing" (Mountford, 1958:64-65).

↳ Personal effects:

– Yes

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the mopaditi, seeing his belongings near at hand, water to drink and fire to warm himself and cook the food he gathers in the surrounding forest, will stay near the grave until the time comes for him to leave the locality...Normally, all the belongings of the dead, except those left at the grave, are destroyed. If a man has a canoe, however, it is inherited by a male relative, not necessarily of the immediate family. But the canoe cannot be used until after the final pukamuni. It is then painted white and overturned on a smoky fire to drive out the dead man's mopaditi. If this ritual were not carried out, the mopaditi would warn the sea creatures and spoil the fishing" (Mountford, 1958:64-65).

Are formal burials present:

– Yes

Notes: "All bodies of dead persons were buried within twenty-four hours of their death by digging a hole near the camp where the death had occurred and placing the body, wrapped in bark, in it. Near most well-used camping spots there was already a graveyard marked by old graveposts, and the latest corpse was buried there or near there. Seldom was the body carried any distance for burial" (Hart and Pilling, 1960:90).

↳ In cemetery:

– Yes

Notes: "All bodies of dead persons were buried within twenty-four hours of their death by digging a hole near the camp where the death had occurred and placing the body, wrapped in bark, in it. Near most well-used camping spots there was already a graveyard marked by old graveposts, and the latest corpse was buried there or near there. Seldom was the body carried any distance for burial" (Hart and Pilling, 1960:90).

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

Notes: "The Tiwi spirits of the dead, the mopaditis, live in self-contained communities at the various totemic places on Melville and Bathurst Islands" (Mountford, 1958:61).

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Yes

Notes: SCCS Variable 238, Religion: High Gods (note: identical to Ethnographic Atlas column 34) indicates that a high god is present but not active in human affairs (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004). Because the high god is otiose, there is limited information surrounding the god.

↳ The supreme high god is anthropomorphic:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god is a sky deity:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god is chthonic (of the underworld):

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god is fused with the monarch (king=high god):

– No

Notes: No monarch is present among the Tiwi.

↳ The monarch is seen as a manifestation or emanation of the high god:

– No

Notes: No monarch is present among the Tiwi.

↳ The supreme high god is a kin relation to elites:

– Field doesn't know

↳ The supreme high god has another type of loyalty-connection to elites:

– Field doesn't know

↳ The supreme high god is unquestionably good:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god has knowledge of this world:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god has deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god has indirect causal efficacy in the world:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god exhibits positive emotion:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god exhibits negative emotion:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god possesses hunger:

– I don't know

↳ The supreme high god communicates with the living:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 238, Religion: High Gods (note: identical to Ethnographic Atlas column 34) indicates that a high god is present but not active in human affairs (Murdock, 1962-1971; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– Yes

Notes: "The Tiwi spirits of the dead, the mopaditis, live in self-contained communities at the various totemic places on Melville and Bathurst Islands" (Mountford, 1958:61).

↳ Human spirits can be seen:

– No

Notes: "No living person has seen these mopaditis, for they are invisible by day, white in the moonlight and black in the darkness" (Mountford, 1958:61).

↳ Human spirits can be physically felt:

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits have deliberate causal efficacy in the world:

– No

Notes: "It was noticeable in such explanations of nonsuccess that the failure, or in our terms the bad luck, was attributed to the violation of the taboos, never to the active displeasure of the spirits. The spirits simply did not figure in the picture" (Hart and Piling, 1960:89).

↳ Human spirits have indirect causal efficacy in the world:

– I don't know

↳ Human spirits exhibit negative emotion:

– Yes

Notes: "...the mopaditis of the newly dead are lonely people, always on the look-out to steal the spirit of some living person, as a companion. The husband is in especial danger" (Mountford, 1958:65).

↳ Human spirits possess hunger:

– Yes

Notes: "In the spirit land, the mopaditis, who are eternal, retain their totems (pukwi), marry spirit women of the correct tribal relationships, and have children who grow to maturity. They eat the same food as the aborigines, going hungry if the hunting is poor, and use the same implements and weapons" (Mountford, 1958:61).

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– No

Notes: Non-human supernatural beings are present in mythology (see Mountford, 1958 for accounts of such myths), but not in the daily lives of the Tiwi.

↳ Mixed human-divine beings are present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of mixed human-divine beings.

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of supernatural monitoring among the Tiwi.

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– No

Notes: "It was noticeable in such explanations of nonsuccess that the failure, or in our terms the bad luck, was attributed to the violation of the taboos, never to the active displeasure of the spirits. The spirits simply did not figure in the picture" (Hart and Piling, 1960:89).

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of messianic beliefs.

Is an eschatology present:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of an eschatology.

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of required castration.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence for the presence of human sacrifice.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale "ceremonies" and "festivals."

– No

Notes: Funerals and burial ceremonies were the main religious events of the year, but it does not appear that participation was mandatory (see Hart and Pilling, 1960:40).

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A tribe

Notes: The Tiwi have no political authority beyond the local community, which is reflective of autonomous bands and villages (Ethnographic Atlas column 33, Murdock, 1967; retrieved from Divale, 2004). However, Murdock and Wilson (1972; Column 10: Descent) indicate that the Tiwi have double descent (both patrilineal and matrilineal) with dispersed sibs. Further, the Tiwi live in agamous communities with matrilineal phratries. Source of information: Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1967),

Columns 19, 20, 22. Because the Tiwi have kin ties, the society is most accurately categorized as a tribe.

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– No

Notes: No evidence for the presence of a formal education among the Tiwi.

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– No

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Notes: SCCS Variable 20 (Food Storage) indicates that food is stored in individual households (Murdock and Morrow, 1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004).

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Notes: It can be assumed that transportation infrastructure is not present, as routes of land transport are "unimproved trails", according to Murdock and Morrow (1970; Retrieved from Divale, 2004; SCCS Variable 14).

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– No

Notes: No ethnographic evidence indicating the presence of taxes or tithes.

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 10, Police (note, equivalent to SCCS variable 90, Police) indicates that "police functions are not specialized or institutionalized at any level of political integration, the maintenance of law and order being left exclusively to informal mechanisms of social control, to private retaliation, or to sorcery."

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– No

Notes: Tuden and Marshall (1972) column 9, Judiciary (note, equivalent to SCCS variable 89, Judiciary), indicates that "supreme judicial authority is lacking at any level above that of the local community".

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– No

Notes: Because there is neither an institutionalized police force nor judges, it can be assumed that the Tiwi do not have a formal legal code.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Yes

Notes: The Tiwi rely on hunting, gathering, and fishing for subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.



Please characterize the forms/level of food production [choose all that apply]:

– Gathering

– Hunting (including marine animals)

– Fishing

Notes: The Tiwi rely on hunting, gathering, and fishing for subsistence. Source of information from Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock, 1962-1971), retrieved from Divale, 2004; Variables 203-207, 232.