

Aboriginal Burials

lutruwita is the country of Tasmanian Aboriginal people and everyone has a responsibility to protect our heritage.



In pre-colonial times, Aboriginal people had several different practices in dealing with a person's body after death. Records of pre-colonial practices are sketchy because they were written by European people during the colonising experience. During this time Aboriginal people were pressured to adopt European practices such as placing a deceased person's body inside a wooden coffin and burying it in the ground.

Burial

In general, Aboriginal burials were less than one metre depth in the ground. They were more likely around the sea coast and along rivers where the sand and soil were softer. Some reports suggest the person's body was placed in a crouching position. The burial place was sometimes covered with a large flat stone. In some places several burials are located close to each other.

Cremation

Cremations were more common than burials. A cremation is when a person's body is burned. Branches and grasses were gathered together and formed into a structure about one metre high. This is called a pyre. The person's body was placed in a sitting position on top of the pyre before being covered by more branches and grasses. Sometimes it faced the east. The cremation pyre could be on open ground, inside a hut, in hollow logs or hollow trees. There appear to be different practices among the tribes around the island.

One practice was to build the funeral pyre inside the deceased person's hut so that the cremation pyre and the person's hut were consumed together in the fire. Although burials became more common in the colonising years, there is one report of a 'traditional' cremation occurring at the Wybalenna

Settlement on Flinders Island in the 1830s.

Human remains have also been found within some shell middens. It is not clear if these were placed in the midden at the time of death or were placed there later.

Carrying bones

A commonly reported practice was a family member carrying a bone, or several bones, of a recently deceased relative. Some report adult jaw bones hung by a grass cord around a person's neck, or carrying a parcel of ashes from a cremation site. These bones and ashes were thought to be used to cure illness.

These practices are consistent with Aboriginal peoples' belief in the nearness of the spirits of deceased people and the potential healing power of their bones.



Cemetery at Wybalenna, Flinders Island.

Beliefs

It is very difficult to be certain about pre-colonial beliefs of Aboriginal people because all records were created during the colonising years and were strongly influenced by those relationships and those contexts.

Some Aboriginal people appear to have had a strong sense that their death was coming soon. This included a description of a man preparing his own funeral pyre.

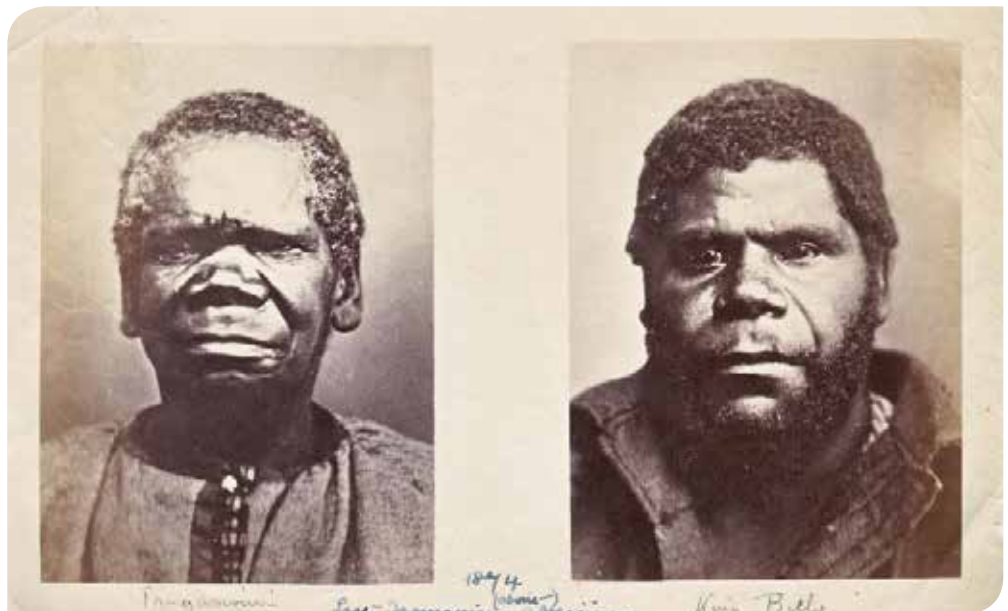
There are reports of Aboriginal people who believed they returned to their home country when they died. Other statements indicate people believed they became a younger and healthier version of themselves after death. A statement in the 1830s by a young Aboriginal man, Walter Arthur, indicates a belief that people's skin colour changed to white in their post-death experience. He wrote "we skin black people died then arose from the dead became white men we begin to make friends of them ..." (Robinson Papers, Mitchell Library, A7074).

Repatriation of human remains

The bones of Aboriginal people have been removed from graves by Europeans since early colonial contact. The European belief that Tasmanian Aboriginal people were a primitive form of humanity led to an obsession with examining their bones. The most well-known desecrations are of William Lanne and *Trukanini*. However, the bones of many other Aboriginal people were removed to private collections, such as the Crowther Collection, and to museums overseas.

Long and continuing campaigns have led to the return of the remains of many Aboriginal people. However, many museums are reluctant to co-operate. When human remains are returned to the Aboriginal community exhaustive research has identified the people's traditional home country. The Aboriginal community have conducted cultural ceremonies when placing their ancestral remains in their home country.

Trukanini and William Lanne.



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