


Ritual

Ochre is a valuable and versatile resource that has been used by Tasmanian Aboriginal people for millennia. The following article provides evidence of the ritual significance of ochre.

CROSS CURRICULUM PRIORITIES

 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Histories and Cultures

 Sustainability

CONTENT AREAS

S Science

T Technologies

A Visual Arts

H History

E English

GENERAL CAPABILITIES

 Intercultural Understanding

 Critical and Creative Thinking

 Personal and Social Capability

KEY CONCEPT

Ritual is the performance of ceremonial acts prescribed by tradition... Ritual is a specific, observable mode of behaviour exhibited by all known societies. It is thus possible to view ritual as a way of defining or describing humans.

Encyclopaedia Britannica

SUPPORTING CONCEPTS

- › ochre
- › ceremony
- › identity
- › body adornment
- › culture
- › customs
- › beliefs
- › spirituality

GUIDING QUESTION

What is the significance of ochre in the religious, spiritual and everyday rituals performed by Tasmanian Aboriginal people?

This printed material is to be used with Ochre – a Living Cultures multimedia curriculum resource that can be found at www.theorb.tas.gov.au

The Living Cultures Ochre resource and this supplementary printed material have been designed to foster culturally responsive practice when learning about Tasmanian Aboriginal Histories and Cultures.

Introduction

Evidence for the ritual use of ochre appears throughout the historical record as well as in more recent sources. Following is a collection of materials that evidences this ritual use.

Everyday Ritual Practices

Ritual practices include personal life-patterns, such as our grooming routines, and practices of personal adornment, such as those outlined below.

Perhaps the most visual trait of the Tasmanians [traditional Aboriginal people of Tasmania] was their custom of using ochre to colour their hair and bodies... men plastered their hair with a mixture of red ochre and grease, which, after it had dried, formed a solid helmet-like mass ...

McKay cited in Sagona 1994: 2

One of the natives [Aborigines] on being asked why he painted himself, asked the inquiring individual 'What do you wear fine clothes for?

26 March 1832 | Robinson cited in Plomley 2008: 626



A number of artistic works also contribute to our understanding of the everyday use of ochre in a ritual sense.

Nicolas-Martin Petit was a French artist on the Baudin expedition that arrived in Van Diemen's Land in January 1802.

Petit's depiction of *Ouriaga*, who was probably a resident of Bruny Island, portrays the striking visual impact of the use of ochre. We can see from this painting that Ouriaga's hair is covered thickly with red ochre and grease, with overlapping scales.

Terre de Diemen, Ouriaga | Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Le Havre, France

Similarly, artist Thomas Bock depicted this distinctive use of ochre. Bock, born in England in 1790, was trained as an engraver and arrived in Hobart in 1824 as a convicted criminal. Bock's paintings are considered to be of considerable anthropological importance.

Bock's watercolour of *Woureddy* depicts the use of ochre in the hair as well as a sinew necklace that is smeared with ochre.



Woureddy, native of Bruny Island, Van Diemen's Land | Collection: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, AG712



Petit's painting *Arra Maida and her child* depicts yet another use of ochre as a bodily adornment. Both mother and child have patches of ochre on their forehead and cheeks.

Arra-maïda, a young Bruny Island woman, Van Diemen's Land | Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Le Havre, France

George Augustus Robnson, so-called conciliator of Aborigines, while undertaking the Friendly Mission (1829-1834), recorded his own observations of Aboriginal people's lives, culture, customs, and practices. Robnson's journals contained numerous entries relating to Aboriginal people's use of ochre.

Robnson recorded his understanding of many words from the different languages he encountered in his travels. These records included words related to ochre.

POLE.LE.WIN (E), PYE.RER.TER (B) – this consists in painting the face and body with a mixture of red ochre and fat or grease ... They also paint their hair and twist it in wrinkles. The body they blacken with charcoal. The females also paint their face, head and body.

Plomley 2008: 312

There were also very practical reasons for the use of ochre on the body as evidenced below.

Aborigines smeared layers of the mixture [ochre and grease] on their bodies as protection from the cold.

Sagona 1994: .23

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What do these sources tell us about the everyday ritual use of ochre?
- › For what purposes was ochre used?
- › How was ochre applied to the body?

Funerary Practices

Red ochre was also widely used by Tasmanian Aboriginal people in their religious and spiritual rituals. Funerary practices are one such example of this.

The practice of songs and body painting lasted many days or weeks to commemorate the dead.

After a cremation, eastern Tasmanian Aborigines collected the remaining ashes and crumbled bone and covered them with grass.

The grass was then weighed down with stones, and a stone-shaped covering built of poles and bark was placed over it to form a tomb.

These tombs were known as *rayghe-linene*. Symbols were sometimes drawn [in ochre] on the bark walls inside the tomb.

Living with the Land 1989: 17

François Pèron, a French naturalist and explorer of the Baudin expedition, described a burial tomb in fine detail. Nicolas-Martin Petit and Charles-Alexandre Lesueur drew, with great precision, this monument. The artworks below were created with reference to these drawings.



Terre de Diemen: Ile Maria, Tombeaux des Naturels | In Voyages de decouvertes aux terres Australes Atlas



Tombes de L'île Maria | Muséum d'histoire naturelle, Le Havre, France

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What are some of the traditional uses of ochre?
 - › How can we understand the spiritual significance of ochre to Tasmanian Aboriginal people?
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Ritual Healing

Ochre was also used in healing practices.

After death the bones of relatives were sometimes smeared in red ochre and grease, wrapped with kangaroo sinews also smeared in ochre, and used as a magic charm for the relief of pain or a cure for illness.

Backhouse and Walker cited in Plomley 1987: 229

If they be in pain they suspend some of these bones over the part affected, as a charm.

Backhouse and Walker cited in Plomley 1987: 229

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What does this use of ochre for healing tell us about its perceived power?
 - › Can we see evidence of the ongoing healing power of ochre in contemporary life?
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Contemporary and Traditional Uses

Contemporary Aboriginal people talk about the uses of ochre by Tasmanian Aboriginal people in the past and present.

Compare what you hear and observe from them with the list provided here from the book *Bruising the Red Earth: Ochre Mining and Ritual in Aboriginal Tasmania*.

Possible traditional uses of ochre:

- › Religious and spiritual
- › Pigment – colouring
- › Magical substance
- › Medication
- › Ritual use

Sagona 1994: 8

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- › What are the links between traditional and contemporary uses of ochre?
 - › Why is ochre such a precious resource for Tasmania's Aboriginal people?
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