

A WOMAN'S PLACE IN ABORIGINAL SOCIETY

Aboriginal women in full tribal state enjoyed a much higher status than generally believed, Mr P. A. Haslam told a meeting of members at the Day Meeting on November 10.

Mr Haslam, first Convocation Scholar at Newcastle University researching Aboriginal culture, said there had been too much denigration of Aboriginal women; so much was their history distorted that most Europeans had for generations gained a false view of how important a part Aboriginal women played within their own society.

They were not menials, as frequently depicted in cartoons; instead, they had their own special powers and privileges in conformity with age-long beliefs of the First Australians.

Mr Haslam cited the case of the Wadyuk tribe, whose people once roamed the area now occupied by the City of Perth. These people at intervals elected a "grandmother" of the tribe, she having much greater power than any man. If she thought a fight among the men was not warranted, she would break the tips of their spears — and peace would reign.

Women had once held sway over the possession of fire, ever so important in primal days, until the three feminine keepers were seduced by a handsome warrior, and they lost control forever. This transfer of ownership was perpetuated in sacred ceremonies.

He said women had their own sacred rites and spoke a special domestic, or mother-in-law language, as required by the Sambar law. This law, according to ancient legends, originated in the Hunter Valley, and its actual location, with rare paintings, was known.

A son-in-law in their region could only communicate with his wife's mother through a relative who spoke this domestic facet of mother tongue.

The legends and mythological beliefs of this region, in many of which women played a significant role, was one indication of how long Aborigines had lived in the region.

Mr Haslam said women were the feminine guardians of Aboriginal morality. Tribal discipline in the old days was very strict at all age levels; this code of behaviour was enforced through sacred ceremonies.

One of the great feminine personalities of the Hunter Region — indeed Australia — was Queen Margaret of Lake Macquarie, who was the last known full-blood member of the Awabakal Tribe, original owners of Newcastle and Lake Macquarie. She figured successfully in struggles to maintain land and other rights of her people. She had the help of the first Mayor of Newcastle (Ald. James Hannell) and Ald. Peter Fleming. The latter took an active interest in the welfare of the Lake Aborigines. He had land at Lake Macquarie; in fact, he was largely responsible for a fishing boat being granted to the Lake Aborigines so they could fish.

Another interesting character was also a woman — Lily Belingen, who lived in bark lean-to in the Belmont area. She is best remembered as an independent lady, smoking a clay pipe, and carrying a shotgun, escorted by her dogs. She did much of her shooting around Jewells Swamp.

Mr Haslam said that European understanding of Aboriginal culture, first developed by pioneering missionary, Rev. L. E. Threlkeld, who established a mission at Belmont in 1825, still lingered in the region. This feeling could still be seen in the friendly white-black relationships in this area.