

Old Blind Moses has Preached Last Sermon

PEOPLE in Central Australia have been strongly moved this week by the death of Old Blind Moses, a patriarchal figure of the Aranda tribe, whom black and white respected as a preacher and a link with the past. This is his story.

● From Our Alice Springs Correspondent

Old Blind Moses is dead. The words flashed across Central Australia. People of the great Aranda tribe at camps along the creeks heard it and the words seemed to rustle through the leaves of the tall ghost gums.

The wailing of the lubras and the silence of the menfolk was tribute to Moses, the aborigine evangelist, who for over sixty years strode the bush carrying the Word of God.

A small, very dirty little aborigine boy named Djalkabotta, squatting in the Central Australian dust beside a fire in which sizzled luscious witchetty grubs, was among the first to hear that a strange white-looking men had invaded the tribal country.

The locality was Jeremiah Creek, seventy miles west of where now sits Alice Springs. It was Aranda country. The year was 1876 and the white men seen were Lutheran missionaries who had come to establish Hermannsburg Mission.

Djalkabotta was to become Central Australia's most gifted aborigine evangelist, but in those days he felt only fear at the strangers and had never heard of the word Christ.

To begin this story of Djalkabotta, who became known as Old Blind Moses, it is necessary to tell the end.

On 13th June, at Jay Creek, tall, stately Moses, white head nodding to emphasise his words, preached his last sermon to a congregation of Aranda tribespeople.

A short time ago, he died in the heart of his beloved country. He was about 85 years of age.

Since his death, many people tell little stories, from which some of the history of this remarkable man can be pieced together.

But to talk with quiet, learned Pastor Albrecht, Lutheran missionary in Central Australia for 27 years, is to travel with Old Blind Moses back through the years. You will know of a human who was great in spirit and love for his fellows—so great that he broke the immense barriers of tribal tradition and primitive beliefs and fears to strike the bush, speaking of God.

He sought no reward except to feel he was crusading for his people.

It all began three years after Moses, as a boy of about seven, first heard of the coming of the white.

Missionaries at Hermannsburg set up a school in 1879 and among the first pupils—wild little bush natives—was Moses.

In those days, the Aranda tribe was suspicious of the white men, but they offered food. Children were allowed to go along to the queer corroboree or school.

In a few years the subject taught at Hermannsburg which most impressed Moses was Bible studies. His father, a stern tribal elder named Tjetta, did not like what he saw happening to his son, and took him away from school.

Tjetta had seen young Moses drifting to a new belief, something outside his comprehension, and he feared for him.

Despite pressure from his father, and, it is said, threats of tribal punishment, Moses returned to Hermannsburg and continued his studies. As a youth he worked with the missionaries and assisted in the early work of establishing the mission, acting as a shepherd for the sheep herd. He became a tall, handsome youth. Later, he married an Aranda woman, Sophie.

In 1905, the famous South Australian missionary, the Rev. C. Strehlow, began his monumental task of translating the New Testament into the Aranda tongue, and Moses, who was now the most prominent linguist among the Arandas, worked for years with him.

The work of Bible translation developed in Moses an even greater love for the Word of God.

His studies were so intense that whole chapters of the Bible became embedded in his mind, and even in recent years he could recite great passages by heart.

But his learning was no parrot-like copying. He became so convinced of the need for teaching the Arandas that he adopted the role of evangelist and embarked on a life of preaching service to God.

