

Obituaries

Russian delved into Aboriginal society



UNORTHODOX: Vladimir Kabo studied Aboriginal artefacts collected by Alexander Yashchenko in 1903.

VLADIMIR KABO
Born February 7, 1925;
died June 4, 2009

Vladimir Kabo was born into a family which belonged to the Russian-Jewish intelligentsia. His father, Rafail Kabo, a member of the generation of Russian Jews who saw the revolutionary movement as a way of assimilation into the wider Russian culture, was secretary of the Moscow Menshevik organisation in 1917.

On leaving school in 1943, Kabo joined the army and was decorated for combat service in the battles for Berlin and Prague. During World War II, he was to discover the depth of anti-Semitism in Russian society, and even attempted to change his Jewish name to a Russian one.

After the war, Kabo entered Moscow State University as a student in the department of history. His growing non-conformism became apparent during Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign of the late 1940s, when

Kabo was the only student who had the courage to speak out in defence of his Jewish professor.

In 1949, he was arrested and accused of being part of a mythical anti-Soviet underground organisation. After a year in various prisons, Kabo was sent to a labour camp in the Gulag. His time in the camp defined the focus of his later life: here he developed his interest in "archaic society". Studying the social structure of the community of professional thieves, the main category of inmates in his camp, Kabo came to the view that its rigid hierarchy reflected archaic social forms which underlay any society. The same archaic social structures, with a sharp division between those who were accepted and the "enemies" who were not, could be found in Soviet society. Kabo's "The Structure of the Soviet Concentration Camp and Archetypes of Consciousness" was published in *Canberra Anthropology* in 1991.

After his release from the camp in 1954, Kabo resumed his studies at Moscow University. He embarked on a study of the collection of Aboriginal artefacts brought back by Alexander Yashchenko from his expedition to Australia in 1903. Kabo

continued this study while employed at the Leningrad division of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences.

His study of Australian Aborigines as an example of enduring archaic society brought him to a conclusion contrary to Marxist orthodoxy. According to Engels, all mankind progressed from the stage of a matriarchal clan to that of a patriarchal clan, but Aborigines seemed to lack the attributes of a matriarchal clan-based society. To uphold Marxist orthodoxy, some Soviet ethnologists claimed the patriarchal social group developed among Aborigines only under the influence of European colonisation. Kabo discredited this view in his 1969 book on *The Origins and Early History of the Australian Aborigines*. He further developed his vision of an archaic, community-based society in his *Tasmanians and the Tasmanian Problem* (1975). He also investigated the social structure and economy of hunter-gathering societies in his book *The Primitive Preagricultural Community* (1986).

One of the disappointments of Kabo's life was the impossibility of undertaking field work in Australia: Soviet expeditions were extremely rare and when one was arranged,

in 1970, he was not included, apparently vetoed by the KGB. Instead, he undertook field work in the Soviet Far East, on Sakhalin, studying local hunter-gatherers.

In 1983 Kabo married Elena Govor, who shared his passion for Australia. From the 1960s, Kabo was in contact with leading Australian anthropologists, such as Canberra's John Mulvaney. In 1990 Kabo received a research grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies to come to Australia. Thus Kabo and his wife at last arrived in Australia. They settled in Canberra, where their son, Raphael, was born in 1992.

In Canberra, Kabo wrote his memoirs *The Road to Australia* (English edition with afterword by Rhys Jones, 1998). In the years that followed he published his new comparative study, *The Wandjina and the Icon: Australian Aboriginal Art and Russian Icon Painting* (2002), a book of philosophical essays, *The Eternal Present* (2006) and his major work, *The Circle and the Cross: the Reflections of an Ethnologist on the Origins of Spirituality* (2007). His last essay, "Ethnic Christianity as a historical-ethnological problem" was completed in January this year.

Dr Anna Taitstlin