

READINGS IN AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

-The History you were never taught

THEME 2: ABORIGINAL THOUGHT SYSTEMS

Virtually no effort has been in the past devoted to understanding the status, integrity and merits of Aboriginal philosophy and religion. Everyone has heard of the concept of 'The Dreaming', but practically nobody knows what this actually means. It rates no mention whatsoever in the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions.

Based on his decades of discussion with tribal people such as Donald Murrawilli and Elders such as Uncle Reg Blow, Jim offers some insights into the complex and sophisticated Aboriginal thought systems.

AH 2.1	An analysis of Aboriginal philosophy
AH 2.2	Understanding the Dreaming
AH 2.3	The basic tenets of Wandjinist religion
AH 2.4	The environment as a living entity
AH 2.5	Sorry Time

THEME 2 QUESTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION

1. If everyone on Earth died tomorrow, would the universe continue to exist without anyone to know it?
2. What difference is there between the Big Bang theory, the biblical story of creation and the First Dreaming of fire?
3. If a child makes a birthday card to give you, does it become more than just a card?

Using Western Philosophic Concepts to Analyse Traditional Aboriginal Society

Innumerable studies of traditional Aboriginal society by archaeologists, anthropologists, ethnologists and sociologists, have all come to reductionist conclusions. All implicitly view Aboriginal society as 'primitive' in comparison to other technologically advanced cultures. Similarly, the academic discipline of Philosophy has made no attempt to conduct a metaphysical analysis of Aboriginal thought systems and culture. This malaise is clearly indicated by the fact that in the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions, no mention whatsoever is made of Australian Aboriginal religion. The following therefore attempts to briefly explicate Aboriginal philosophy.

Ontology: Aboriginal people throughout Australia believed that the purpose of human life was fulfilled through our consciousness of both the material and spiritual worlds, and our agency in maintaining balance and order in the world. Human beings are seen as an integral part of the ecological system, not above it. Human perception and ritual is therefore seen as a key agent in maintaining balance and order in the real world.

Theology: Aboriginal religion is a unique blend of belief systems and is best described as 'Wandjinism'. Despite there being more than 350 languages, religious tenets were consistent across Australia and Wandjinism can be seen to contain elements of Animism, Pantheism, Ancestralism, Totemism, Humanism and Deism.

The foundational belief of Wandjinism is that the universe was created by a Supreme Being in an act of imagination (the Dreaming). To give permanence to the Dreaming it was broken up into innumerable jigsaw pieces and life was introjected into the Dreaming in the form of Creator Spirits, with each having a piece of the jigsaw. When these Creator Spirits finished their creation work they surrendered their Dreaming and became the landmarks and animals we see today. The only creatures left with full consciousness were human beings, so our role is to protect the living spirit world that surrounds us and is represented by the Land and the Dreaming.

When Wandjina saw that human beings understood their ecological responsibilities, all knowledge that would ever be needed was seeded into the Dreaming, and we have access to it through our own Personal Dreaming. God then retired and takes no ongoing part in the affairs of the real world, but watches. This is why in Aboriginal art Wandjina is always represented with eyes but no mouth. God sees everything, but says nothing.

Epistemology: Unlike other cultures where knowledge has become increasingly specialised, compartmentalised, reductive and decontextualised, Aboriginal knowledge was fully integrated through the totem system. All knowledge was therefore ultimately geared toward serving ecological purposes.

Economy: Through the integration of knowledge to serve ecological purposes, all Aboriginal clans across Australia lived sustainably within their designated water catchment systems. Being part of the ecology, all Aboriginal clans ensured that their population was always matched to the carrying capacity of the land. Their land, food and population management practices therefore guaranteed that they lived in continuous plenty, even in the worst of years. Aboriginal people were therefore **not** hunter-gatherers as they have most often been described. They were in fact **permaculture farmers**. Their sustainable economy also meant that there were **never** any wars of conquest or invasion in Australian history, prior to 1788.

Sociology: All clans occupied a specific water catchment area and **the land owned them**, not the other way around. Social structure was the same all over Australia and was determined by the totem system. All clans were divided into two halves, most frequently represented by Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. These halves (moieties) were then divided into half again, forming four 'Skin Groups' which were in fact Ritual Lodges. Each one of these four Skin Groups had a special totemic 'class' relationship with each of the other three groups, on the basis of father-child relationship (Spirit) mother-child (Flesh) and husband-wife (Skin).

Skin Group or Ritual Lodge membership was determined by a generational cycle. All children had to be a different Skin Group to either parent, but the same Spirit Class as the Father and the same Flesh Class as the mother. You could not marry into your own Skin Group or that of your mother or father. The most common mistake made by anthropologists is in confusing the concepts of Spirit and Flesh with European ideas of male and female descent. In the generational cycle every individual in the third generation ended up in the same Skin Group as both their father's father and their mother's mother. So it was neither and both at the same time.

Politics: All clans were governed by a system of Eldership based entirely on aptitude and character. There was no right of leadership by inheritance, lineal descent, age seniority, or physical force. There was no separation between Church and State, so all Elders had to be fully competent in both spiritual and secular matters. The roles of male and female Elders were closely prescribed and clearly separated.

Gifted children were identified early and assiduously trained and groomed for designated roles that matched their attributes. Achievement of Elder status was preceded by a long apprenticeship and a slowly increasing but indirect role in decision making. When an Elder retired they appointed a trainee to 'speak with my voice' Each Skin Group was equally represented on the Elders Councils and therefore no individual, group, lodge or family could effectively 'take over'. The political structure is therefore best described as a '**Druidic Meritocracy**'.

UNDERSTANDING THE DREAMING

Every Australian, and probably a lot of rest of the world, has heard the word the 'Dreaming' or the 'Dreamtime'. It is a powerful and evocative term, but virtually nobody has any idea of what it means as a coherent set of religious ideas. Many people still hold the mistaken belief that Aboriginal people did not have a religion and did not believe in a Supreme Being. However this is usually tempered by a vague concession that Aboriginal people are '*very spiritual*'.

Tribal people I have spoken to say that the use of English term 'The Dreaming' to describe their belief system is '*just right*'. To them it aptly conveys the idea that the world was not originally created as an external physical reality, but was an idea in the mind of the Spirit of All Life. In other words the universe and everything in it were originally created as part of a divine Dreaming. Ultimately we are all just figments of God's imagination.

In the mid 1980's I set myself the task of understanding the concept of the Dreaming, so I read every Aboriginal Dreamtime creation story I could find. I also spoke to some tribal people I knew from Yirrkala, in particular Donald Murrawilli. I was astounded by the themes and implications of these stories. Most started in empty darkness and the first Dreaming was of fire, then of wind and rain, earth and sky, land and sea, and so on. It was like a retelling of the Big Bang Theory and the geological stages in the formation of the Earth.

The stories I read then went on to tell how the Secret of Dreaming was passed to Mankind. I was again astounded at how the passing on of the Secret clearly followed an evolutionary path. Finally only Mankind was left with consciousness and free will, and with responsibility for care of the environment. I then distilled these many stories into one and produced my first Aboriginal theme book in 1988, called 'The Secret of Dreaming'. When I showed the book to David Gulpilil, the actor from Arnhem Land, he read it, looked at me and said '*I know this Story*'. I could not have been happier that a tribal person had said that the story was authentic.

In a narrative at the end of the book I try to explain the basic tenets of what I now refer to as 'Wandjinist Religion'. As indicated earlier, creation began as an act of imagination in the mind of Wandjina. After a long Dreaming of fire, wind, rain, earth, sky land and sea, Wandjina began to grow tired, but wanted the Dream to continue. So Wandjina broke the Dream up into a million jigsaw pieces and sent life into the Dream to make it real.

These Creator Spirits took their part of the Dream and as they moved through the plastic environment, it took shape according to both the movement of their bodies and the dictates of their Dreaming. As they finished their creation work each Creator Spirit surrendered their spirit and their Dreaming to become a landmark or animal we see today. Finally only Man was left with consciousness and the responsibility to protect the Dreaming. When Wandjina saw that human beings understood their responsibilities to the environment and the Dreaming, two more things were done to ensure the Dreaming would be sustained.

First, the spirits of all children ever to be born were seeded into the Dreaming, where they must wait until it is their turn to be born. This happens when a father finds the spirit of the child in a dream and directs it to the body of their mother, who makes their flesh. One implication of this belief is that every single human being is part of original creation and therefore has a direct, personal connection with God.

When this concept of pre-existence was explained to early anthropologists, it was dismissed as a childish belief. I have even seen written in texts '*Aboriginal people do not understand sex*'. This is just one of the ridiculously arrogant notions I have seen in supposedly learned texts.

The second thing that Wandjina did to sustain the Dreaming was to seed all knowledge and the answer to every question into the Dreaming. We therefore have unfettered access to this knowledge through our own Personal Dreaming. We can find the knowledge and shape the world according to our own Dreaming.

With the understanding and acceptance of this human responsibility, God withdrew from any further involvement in the real world. Aboriginal people therefore believed there is no divine intervention and everything that happens is due to human agency, either witting or unwitting,.

This is why all drawings of Wandjina are shown with eyes but no mouth. God sees everything, but says nothing.

The Basic Tenets of Wandjinist Religion -the World's Oldest Faith

1. *In the beginning the world and the universe was created in the imagination of the Spirit of All Life and the laws of nature were also created in this Dreaming, so that the world was complete in itself. The rising and setting of the sun, the tides, rains and all natural events thus occur in accordance with these laws of nature.*
2. *Then the Great Spirit sent life into the Dream to make it real, and the Secret of Dreaming was given to mankind so that the Dream would be sustained. Consciousness and free will were therefore given to mankind so that we would have responsibility for the Earth and all that happened, whether for good or evil.*
3. *And so that mankind would have the knowledge to guide the decisions that need to be made in the course of following these responsibilities, all knowledge and truth was seeded into the Dreaming, where we have access to it through our own Personal Dreaming. Whether we use it for good or evil is our own unfettered choice.*
4. *The Dreaming therefore surrounds us and is past, present and future all rolled in to one.*
5. *Therefore although always watching and listening, the Spirit of All Life will never intervene in our lives. This is why the Great Spirit, also known as Baiamee, Booriel or Wandjina, must always be represented with eyes but no mouth. God hears and sees everything, but says nothing.*
6. *So when we pray it cannot be for the guidance or intervention of the Supreme Being. Our prayers can only be for the inner strength to recognise and accept our responsibilities and find the truth through our own Personal Dreaming. Mankind is therefore left solely responsible for the land and each other.*
7. *There is no reward for accepting these responsibilities, other than the gift of life itself. There is also no consciousness or individuality after death, only oblivion and reabsorption of our life force into the Dreaming.*
8. *Neither is there any judgment after death, only how we are remembered by the living.*
9. *Life is therefore a once only experience that must be lived affirmatively. It is only by accepting our responsibilities to the Earth and each other that we affirm life and find meaning in our existence.*
10. *Because human consciousness is a direct gift from God the only true connection with God is through our own Personal Dreaming to the knowledge that has been seeded into the Dreaming.*
11. *In creating the world God did not intend that mankind should spend time in pious worship, but should care for the real world and find meaning to our lives in our relationships with others. This then, is God's only will and the meaning of life.*

God's only will is for us to care for the land and each other

THE ENVIRONMENT AS A LIVING ENTITY

In a previous article I talked about the nature of the Dreaming and how reality was originally forged in an act of imagination by the Great Spirit. To make the dream real, life was then sent into the Dream in the form of Creator Spirits who each carried a part of the great Dreaming Plan.

The Creator Spirits then completed their part of the giant jigsaw of creation work. After this the Creator Spirits surrendered their Dreaming to become the landmarks and animals we see today.

According to Aboriginal religious belief, mankind is therefore now the only being that has retained consciousness and free will, and so is charged with sole care of the real world. The Spirit of All Life, or Wandjina, therefore now rests in the land and although watching and listening, plays no further part in the unfolding of human affairs.

Aboriginal people therefore believed in a non-interventionist Supreme Being. Wandjina is always depicted with eyes but no mouth, because God sees everything, but says nothing.

The idea of God resting in the land and leaving everything in human hands, very strongly conveys the Aboriginal belief in the sacredness of the land and that human beings are solely responsible for its care. To reinforce this notion of the sacredness of the environment, Aboriginal people have a belief in a complex spirit world that surrounds us.

Anything with a form or shape, even inert objects, is regarded as having an essential being and Dreaming of its own that must be respected by human beings.

Although this idea may seem simple, it has complex ramifications. A tree has a spirit, the copse that the tree belongs within has a spirit and the forest to which all the copses belong also has its own spirit. A rock has a spirit, a rocky outcrop has a spirit and the whole hill has a spirit. A river has a spirit, each area of the river and each creek leading to the river all have their own 'Tikilara' or 'Spirit of Place'. We are therefore surrounded by a complex, overlapping spirit world.

Anything created also gains a spirit. If a bird makes a nest, the nest gains a spirit. If a person makes a digging stick, a spear or a shield, these all gain their own spirit. When it is all boiled down though, the belief in a complex multi-layered, overlapping spirit world is simply a device by which respect for the environment is guaranteed.

As an illustration of this I was many years ago walking in Framlingham Forest with the iconic Elder Banjo Clarke and his young grandson, who was carrying a stick. The grandson dragged his stick along the ground and was softly admonished by Banjo to never make a mark on the ground unless it was for a reason.

Disappointingly, the Aboriginal belief in a pervasive surrounding spirit world has often been dismissed as just '*Animism*'. This is a category reserved for supposedly fallacious pagan beliefs that inanimate objects can and do have a soul.

There was a great love by Europeans following the period of Enlightenment, of creating taxonomies or hierarchies that placed Western thought systems at the top and Aboriginal thought systems at the bottom. Unfortunately the power of these ideas still exists today.

At the time Australia was colonised in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Christian views of the day could not countenance the idea of anything other than human beings possessing a soul.

Such dismissive views clearly show an ingrained unwillingness to understand how belief in a complex spirit world could actually be part of a coherent broader set of religious ideas. Or that it could be compatible with belief in a Supreme Being. It certainly wasn't compatible with the Christian idea of an interventionist God.

In reality, the belief in a complex surrounding spirit world is not so far from our mainstream life experiences today. Our differential use of the words 'house' and 'home' gives some clue to this. We build a house, but when we move in it gains a spirit and become our home.

As individuals, we each demonstrably have our own spirit, but when we band together with others for a mutual purpose, we then gain a team spirit and a common identity. We will often sit in a quiet park and feel the spirit of the place. We will stand on top of a mountain or look down a majestic valley in quiet wonderment of the power and beauty of what we see.

Just imagine what it was like to be an Aboriginal person seeing the wonders and embedded stories of your Country every single day. Not just seeing these creation wonders each day, but also knowing that you were responsible for protecting it and maintaining its Dreaming Secrets.

SORRY TIME

In an earlier article I spoke about the Aboriginal belief in the environment as a living entity and that we are surrounded by a complex, overlapping spirit world. Aboriginal people believed that everything with a physical form or shape had a spirit or essence of its own. Everything in the environment was therefore a part of the fabric of the original Dreaming and therefore had to be respected and protected.

The Aboriginal belief in a complex spirit world surrounding us, therefore also included a belief in human ghosts and bad spirits. However rather than being dismissed as a simple, pagan belief, this has to be seen within a broader context.

As I also indicated in an earlier article, Aboriginal people believed in a non-interventionist God. Wandjina sees all but says nothing. This of necessity means that there is no judgment after death on how you have lived your life. We were given free will and responsibility for all that happens, so why would we be judged after death for using this gift?

The only concern for Aboriginal people was whether your spirit was at peace and ready to be reabsorbed back into the Dreaming, to once again become part of the cyclical fabric of life. Ghosts are therefore only the spirits of the dead that have not achieved peace after death. Similarly, bad spirits are somehow the product of disturbance the dead, or a failure in proper ritual.

When we die, re-absorption back into the Dreaming can therefore only occur when we are alleviated of our accumulated earthly sorrows, through proper human ritual. That is, rather like Judaic religion, Aboriginal people believed that during the course of our lives we accumulate many sorrows.

Therefore, before an individual can achieve peace and oblivion after death, this burden of life's earthly sorrows must be taken from them and shared by the living. If this is not done through proper ritual grieving then the dead are in danger of becoming tormented ghosts forever.

Aboriginal religious beliefs, or as I prefer to label it, Wandjinist religion, hold that it is entirely of no consequence how many good deeds an individual may do in the course of their life. This will in no way provide any guarantee of peace after death or the equivalent of a heavenly afterlife. What is of greatest importance in traditional Aboriginal belief is how many wrongs have been done to **you** in your lifetime. Every wrong that is done to you and every sorrow you experience, will accumulate and affect your ability to find peace after death.

Death in traditional Aboriginal society is therefore marked by 'Sorry Time' where grieving and ritual will help absorb the sorrows of the dead and share it amongst the living. It is a tradition still alive today and of course shares a commonality with all human cultures.

The traditional Aboriginal practice of the living no longer mentioning the name of the dead is therefore an extension of this belief in the accumulation of life sorrows. Mentioning the name of the dead only provides a pull back to the sorrows of the real world and a disturbance to their peace after death.

After a person's death, the end of Sorry Time was usually signified by a particular totemic signal related to that person. There was therefore not a specific fixed period for Sorry Time, except that for very important leaders and Elders, 28 days (one lunar month) was given for messages to be sent out and people to arrive, often from great distances.

This was seen in the early colonial period with the deaths of Wurundjeri leaders Bebejern in 1836 and Billibelleri in 1846. Both deaths were marked by a 28 day Sorry Time. It is also interesting to note just how many Wurundjeri leaders have died in August, which is immediately prior to the traditional season for childbirth. Beberjen died in August 1836 but the precise date is not known. Billibelleri died on 9th August 1846 and William Barak died on 15th August 1903. Winnie Quogliotti (Terrick) whom I knew and who founded the Wurundjeri Tribe Council, died on 4th August 1988.

Since the colonial period in Victoria, this tradition of Sorry Time has survived in essence, with people even still today referring to 'Sorry Time' or 'Sorry Business'. Aboriginal funerals nowadays still involve people travelling great distances to pay their respects, to give testimony to their life and share in the ritual grieving that helps the individual find peace after death.

The idea of Sorry Time was partly embraced by the apology of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Stolen Generations on February 13th 2008. Saying sorry certainly helps the living to reconcile with past sorrows, so it was gratifying to see the good grace with which Aboriginal people across Australia embraced this ritual event