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TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE SIGNIFICANCE OF "THE DREAMTIME" TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE



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To traditional Aborigines their whole concept of life, whether it is physical or spiritual survival, is centred on their belief in the Dreamtime. The Dreamtime was the period of creation when the Aborigines' life-style was planned and the Aborigines' entire life centred on the need to live in the style prescribed by the mythical Dreamtime ancestors.

An understanding of the Dreamtime is essential to an understanding of traditional Aboriginal culture. Stanner (1979, 23-40) describes the Dreaming as pervading every aspect of life from social organization to food gathering. Not only is it the period of creation when the mythical ancestors roamed the earth, but it is also the life spirit which ties man, society and nature, both past and present, to the living now.

R.M. Berndt (1980) describes the dreaming thus:

The Dreaming therefore constituted a particular view of life, of the place of human beings within a pre-ordained scheme or patterning symbolising a three-sided relationship between mythic beings, nature and people. Each was dependent on the others. People were part of nature, part of particular mythic beings, in social and personal terms.

(Berndt, 1980, 14-15)

Not only did traditional Aborigines believe in the Dreaming, they lived it. It is the Dreaming which provides the blueprint for life.

Central to the belief in the Dreaming is the belief in the mythical beings. These beings were part human and part animal. They roamed the earth in the Dreamtime using super-human powers to create all natural features.

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It is this belief that not only the land, its features and animals, but also man, were created by the Dreamtime beings that ties traditional Aborigines so inextricably to the land. They are in a sense at one with the land and all that is on it. Traditional Aborigines believe in the Dreaming and their evaluation of their world is reflected in the totemic nature of such a world. This totemic view of life is based on the assumption that man and the world around him are in complete unity.

This totemic concept was a link between all facets of Aboriginal life. Men and women were bound together in a number of groups which acknowledged descent from a particular Dreamtime ancestor.

(Lofgren, 1975, 23)

This idea of totemism is central to the traditional Aboriginal religion. It is, however, not a religion by itself; it is more a philosophy which has a direct bearing on religion, social organization and prescribed patterns of behaviour. It is the Aborigines' proof of the existence of mythical beings who handed on a lifestyle. Berndt, perhaps, outlines this relationship when he writes:

However, it is more appropriate to think of 'totems' as agents (specific natural species, elements, and so forth) which serve as intermediaries between mythic and human beings. Or, to put it another way, totems are symbolic manifestations of spirit beings which link the human with the non-empirical (supernatural) world; the intervening 'totem' or symbol in animal or some other form, provides a tangible expression of the relationship between human beings and their deities.

However, there was not simply a linking of Aboriginal people with the supernatural, but links through it/them to specific stretches of land which contained sites through which the mythic beings were spiritually manifested.

(Berndt, 1980, 14-15)

The traditional Aborigines therefore believed that they had a common heritage with all that surrounded them. The mythical beings created their world as well as them and showed them how to live in harmony with all elements of their world. The same ancestors who supply babies and rain also provide the flora and fauna which the Aborigines relied upon for their food. As the mythical beings travelled over the land, they created the natural features. In some areas of the Western Desert it is believed that

all creeks were made by the mythical Rainbow Serpent as he moved over the country. At Jigalong, red ochre is believed to be the metamorphosed blood of the mythical ancestors. The echidna or *mingwa* is said to be the earthly representation of a mythical being, as is the Mountain Devil or *Kata Puta*. Mount Lewin near Nullagine is the metamorphosed body of *Mingwa*, who died after a fight with *Kata Puta*. The myths that explain the existence and behaviour of the worldly creatures are many, but explain the entire Aborigines' world. There are myths that explain the habits of the kangaroo, the emu and the bush turkey, as well as the existence of physical features such as hills, mountains and the stars.

Not only did the mythical beings create the world, they showed the way in which people should relate to each other and to their surroundings. In their myths the Aborigines record the behaviour of these beings who had all the frailties of human nature: they stole, raped and killed and were punished for their antisocial actions. They travelled their areas creating food sources and providing water holes for the people to follow.

The Aborigines see their entire culture as the legacy of the Dreamtime epoch. In their nomadic existence they are re-enacting the wanderings of the creative beings, and in their subsistence pursuits, reciprocity, kinship behaviours, and virtually everything else within the bounds of normal activity they emulate the life design that was set for all time in the creative epoch.

(Tonkinson, 1978, 16-17)

The record of the activities of these mythical beings is contained in the myths of the Aborigines. The myths explain why certain areas of land are sacred and why certain rituals are important to maintain contact with the life force which pervades Aboriginal life. The creative beings are not reachable through everyday activities, but as relatives they are thought to be receptive to appeals from their human kin. Every Aboriginal group must fulfil certain sacred and ritual obligations to their spiritual relatives in order to ensure continuity of life. If these rituals are not maintained then life will not continue.

The form and reason for these rituals may vary from group to group. In certain areas the majority of rituals are said to have been composed by the ancestral beings and have been handed down by countless generations. One of these rituals is associated with male initiation and concerns the exploits of *Marlu*, the ancestral kangaroo in man. The ritual surrounding the novices' circumcision and subincision is believed to be a repetition of a ritual carried

out by *Marlu*, the ancestral being. It has to be undergone to gain access to the secrets of the tribe.

Another form of ritual which is crucially important is the increase rites; it is the practice of these rites which is believed to maintain the supply of plants and animals and other elements left behind by the spiritual ancestors. The practice of these rites is well documented (Berndt & Berndt, 1970; Strehlow, 1970; Elkin, 1974; Tonkinson, 1974 and 1978; Stanner, 1979). During these rites the traditional Aboriginal people travel to the spirit centres (places where the spirits are believed to reside) and perform certain rituals which are believed to ensure the maintenance of the natural resources essential for life. Tonkinson (1978, 96-105) records that these sites may be quite unspectacular and consist only of a flat rock or a hole in the ground. To the Aboriginal people they are the source of life itself as it is from these sites that the spirit children travel to make women pregnant or cause a plentiful supply of kangaroos or other foods. The rituals may not be very involved, but they must be practised to ensure continuity of life. These increase centres are situated throughout the Aborigines' traditional lands and are considered very sacred.

Strehlow (1970, 92-140) records increase rituals carried out by Wankanjiru to increase rain, carpet snakes and acacia seeds in their tribal area.

As can be seen, it is impossible to divide the traditional Aboriginal lifestyle into convenient headings, for all aspects of their life were intermingled and prescribed in the patterns of life laid out in the Dreamtime. Above all is the Aborigines' need to follow life as laid down by their spiritual ancestors of their traditional tribal land. The Aborigines had a deep love for their local territory. To get anywhere near understanding this affinity with the land, one must understand that not only did the land provide life, it was in fact living. To the traditional Aborigine the land was a rich landscape of symbolism and religious significance. The physical features were not simply rocks, trees, creeks and waterholes, but in essence were kin.

The Aboriginal people of today who are striving to maintain their cultural heritage and traditional beliefs are adapting to Western culture, and in some areas using it to the advantage of the traditional life. In the central reserve the Aborigines now use motor vehicles to travel to their sacred sites to perform the necessary sacred rituals. In parts of South Australia the Pitjatjantjara and Aranda people now have free title to their traditional lands and are able to travel to their sacred areas to perform the important and life-sustaining rituals. Tonkinson (1974) reports

of the rejection by the Aborigines of Jigalong of 30 years of missionary control, and their insistence on the maintenance of traditional law. The younger people of Jigalong are beginning to question the traditional way of life, a thing which never occurred in the past. An interesting aspect is that, while the young people question traditional ways of life as regards choosing of marriage partners, etc., there is still acceptance of the need to undergo initiation and perform the necessary rituals (personal observation 1981-82).

Another interesting aspect is that of the increase rituals. Although the people of Jigalong no longer rely on the traditional foods, which have been replaced by Western foodstuffs purchased from the community store, there is still an insistence on the performing of the increase rituals. This is not hampered by the people's inability to visit the increase centres in the past. Tonkinson (1974, 89) reports that the Jigalong Aborigines believe they are able to visit these in "Dream Spirit Journeys". On these journeys they "call up" the spirits and thereby ensure the continuity of the life sustaining ties with the desert proper. The Aboriginal doctors and certain elders came to have the power of flight long before the white people.

In some areas there is a resurgence of traditional ritual. Akerman (1980, 234-243) sees that the resurgence in the traditional ritual associated with circumcision rites in the Kimberleys relates to a spiritual revitalization of the people living in the Northern Territory and Central Australia. Akerman believes that with the granting of land rights to some groups and a stabilization on their traditional land of others, there has been a meaningful return to the traditional rituals associated with sacred sites. This has led to a boosting of morale of their neighbors with whom they have cultural ties. Akerman sees the whole renaissance as a strengthening of religious bonds and a re-affirmation of the belief in the Dreaming and of Aborigines' struggle to return to their traditional life-style. As has been discussed, traditional Aborigines were reliant on their land as not only a source of physical survival, but also religious sustenance, and without unlimited access to their land the the sacred sites bequeathed them by the mythical beings of the Dreaming, life can have little or no meaning.

Let us hope that governments will begin to realise this, and not practise cultural genocide as attempted at Noonkanbah and thousands of other places throughout Australia.

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