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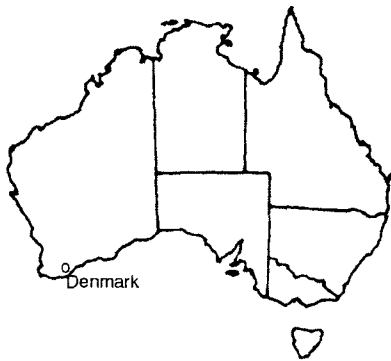


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## An Aboriginal Christmas Celebration

**Gilbert Van Kerckhoven**

*Denmark, Western Australia*



The Golden Hill Steiner School in Denmark, West Australia, is a small “alternative” school and part of the world wide Steiner/Waldorf school movement. In 1998 this young school had 56 students from kindergarten to class 6. Because of the small numbers, primary classes are combined (for 1998 this was a class 1/2, class 3/4 and class 5/6).

It has become tradition in the school that the children perform a (traditional) Christmas play at the end of the year for the local community. In 1998, however, the class 3/4 teacher decided to write a new play, combining elements of the European culture with elements of the local Aboriginal one.

The children had spent an intensive four weeks during the fourth term studying Aboriginal culture, especially the one of the local Nyoongar people. When preparations were being made for the end of year celebrations, it became clear to the class teacher that none of the existing Christmas plays suited the composition of the class. There was nothing left but to write one himself. It was then that the idea came about to combine elements of the traditional European Christmas with elements of the local Aboriginal culture. A play about the West Australian “Christmas Tree” presented itself.

In the south west region of WA there grows a “tree” which is unique to this part of the world. Because it flowers between November and January, it is locally known as the Christmas tree. Its official name is *Nuytsia Floribunda*. The name ‘tree’ is not entirely correct, though the plant presents itself as such for the layman. It is in fact a mistletoe that grows around the roots of certain grasses and pushes its trunk upwards like a normal tree. Hence its name ‘tree’. This mistletoe flowers with the most beautiful deep golden flowers. Especially when a bushfire has gone through, its colour is intensified into a bright glow that sharply stands out against the greyish green of the Australian landscape.

An interesting fact is that this plant doesn’t grow anywhere else. Attempts to grow it elsewhere have, to my knowledge, so far failed. The Christmas tree was Kaanya, a sacred tree for the Aborigines. Called Moodjah in the Aboriginal language of the area, it was sacred because when a person died, they rested in its branches before continuing their journey to the spirit lands. These lands were beyond the horizon, across the ocean, and were called Kurannup. The word means exactly that: place of resting. It is in Kurannup that the ancestors live. Interestingly enough, when the first Europeans came to West Australia by ship, the Aborigines thought that their ancestors had returned: the settlers came from that area where their ancestors lived, *and* they were white, white as the ghosts the ancestors had become. Unfortunately they soon had to realise their mistake.

The children are familiar with the tree, as it grows abundantly around Denmark. In the lead up to the performance, a break was taken from rehearsals when the children went on camp. It turned out that this was good timing, because on hearing about the play, the Nyoongar woman who visited the camp, offered to teach the children how to make ceremonial headbands. She brought some ochre with her that had been harvested from a sacred place, and, together with the ochre the teacher had, the headbands were decorated with the earthly element that is characteristically Aboriginal. The same ochre was used to paint the faces of several of the characters in the play.

Although no creation myths survive of how the Moodjah tree came about, the Aboriginal elder who lives in Denmark endorsed the author's own Dreamtime story of the event. For the play a story was written about how the Rainbow Snake, the highest creating principle for the local Aborigines, had created all the local tribes and had given them the Law to obey.

They did so until one day a man came along, who had not been part of the life of the tribes, but who had gone by himself and had lived a solitary life away from the others. Though still created by the Wargyl (the Rainbow Snake), he had been part of a different creation principle.

He forced his own rules onto the people, and forbade them to follow the Rainbow Snake's laws. The people, now that they could no longer live in harmony with the principles of their Creation Being, became sick. They could no longer hunt, look after the land or go about their daily tasks. They asked the Wargyl to come and help them. When the Rainbow Snake heard their cries, she

sent a sun like being to help them and bring her people back to her. But Mundjaan, the evil man, killed the messenger of the Rainbow Snake. The Wargyl, taking pity on the people, transformed her messenger into the Moodjah tree. Ever since then, when people die, they rest in its branches before continuing their journey to Kurannup, the place where the Wargyl and their ancestors live. The play ended with establishing the connection with the Christian Christmas festival. One of the characters, a white girl who had just been told the story of the Moodjah tree, remarks:

*"It's funny that the Aborigines had a Christmas tree because somebody died and we have a Christmas tree because Jesus was born. It's sort of opposite."*

The play and the creation story found approval with the Aboriginal elder. She was present at the end of year celebrations and enjoyed the performance the children gave. When I talked to her she commented: "You're doing a great job. You are teaching the children to change the world. But you're doing it from the inside out."

She could not have given a greater compliment. This is, in my opinion, exactly what education is about: to change the world by teaching the children respect for each other, for nature, for other people, for themselves(!). But not from above ("thou shall respect thy neighbour") or from outside ("rule number x: 'you will not ...'"), but out of **their** love for what they learn, i.e. from the inside. If adults had learned, as children, to love and respect differences in people, cultures, etc, would Australia be faced with the difficulties it encounters today?



### THE MOODJAH TREE

A Christmas play based on an Aboriginal legend of WA.  
by Gilbert Van Kerckhoven

This play was written for and performed by the children of class 3/4 of the Golden Hill Steiner School, Denmark, West Australia. It was the result of an intensive four weeks during which the local Nyoongar people were the main topic of the lessons.

The play was performed at the end of year Christmas celebration, at which traditionally at the Golden Hill Steiner School the classes present scenes from the nativity story to the (school) community. In 1998, however, the class 3/4 presented the Moodjah Tree instead of a traditional Christmas play. It preceded the lower class's play. Hence the references to this play at the beginning and at the end of 'The Moodjah Tree.'

All the parts were written with specific children in mind. The traditional headbands the ancestors wore during the performance were made by the children themselves under guidance of a Nyoongar woman from Albany.

#### CHARACTERS

<b>Larnce</b>	)	<b>Danjup</b> – recently deceased Aborigine
<b>Dylan</b>	) 4 children	<b>Wargyl</b> - the Rainbow Snake
<b>Stephanie</b>	)	<b>Sun girl</b> – messenger of Rainbow Snake
<b>Lucy</b>	)	<b>Aboriginal Mother</b>
<b>Mokanbe</b>	) 2 Aboriginal	<b>Mundjaan</b> – evil Creator Being
<b>Titjena</b>	) children	<b>Ancestors</b> (dressed in white)

(Dylan and Larnce were dressed in screaming clothes, baseball caps back-to-front on their heads; Stephanie and Lucy were in their festive clothing).

<b>Larnce</b>	(from behind the side door)	Hey, Dylan .
<b>Dylan</b>		Yeah?
<b>Larnce</b>		Come and have a look.
<b>Dylan</b>		What is it?
<b>Larnce</b>		Come here!
<b>Dylan</b>		Why?
<b>Larnce</b>		There are heaps of people in the hall!
<b>Dylan</b>		How many?
<b>Larnce</b>		I don't know. 1,2,3, 4, Gosh - lots.
<b>Dylan</b>		What are they doing here?
<b>Larnce</b>		What kind of a question is that? Oh, look, I can see Stephanie. Hey, Stephanie. Stephanie. <b>Stephanie!</b>



**Stephanie** (coming from the audience) What?  
**Larnce** Come here.  
**Stephanie** What is it?  
**Larnce** What are you doing there?  
**Stephanie** I'm waiting for the play to begin.  
**Dylan** What play?  
**Stephanie** The Christmas play.  
**Larnce and Dylan** Christmas play? What Christmas play?  
**Stephanie** Come on, you know, the Golden Hill Steiner School Christmas play.  
**Dylan** How do you know it's Christmas.  
**Stephanie** Everyone knows that, silly.  
**Larnce** Well, how do you know?  
**Stephanie** I don't know, my Mum told me I suppose.  
**Dylan** How does she know?  
**Stephanie** From a calendar?  
**Larnce** How does the calendar know?  
**Lucy** (coming from the audience) Hey, guys, what are you doing here?  
**Stephanie** They don't even know it's Christmas.  
**Lucy** That's stupid. Everyone knows it's Christmas, just look outside.  
**Larnce** We can't. We're stuck in here and we're not allowed to open the door.  
**Lucy** Come here then and look through the window. See what that is?  
**Dylan** What is it?  
**Lucy** That's a Christmas tree, of course. It only grows in WA.  
**Larnce** What's so special about that Christmas tree?  
**Lucy** It only flowers around Christmas, and for the Aborigines it was a very special tree.  
**Dylan** What do you mean?  
**Lucy** The Aboriginal people of this area were called the Nyoongars. And for them our Christmas tree was very special. OK, sit down, I'll tell you the story.

(sounds of Aboriginal music)

(Enter an Aboriginal woman with her two children. Sits down and starts to collect food. Children play around till they come near the Christmas tree.)

**Mother** Children, come back, don't play under the Moodjah tree.  
**Mokanbe** What's a Moodjah tree, mother?  
**Mother** See that tree over there? That's a Moodjah tree.

(children want to go nearer)

**Mother** Come back, children, I told you not to go near it.  
**Titjena** Why?  
**Mother** Because it's a sacred tree, one that nobody's allowed to approach, not even the hunters.  
**Mokanbe** What when a kangaroo is hurt and hides underneath it.  
**Mother** Even then the hunters will stay away from it, because only the wise men can go near it.  
**Titjena** Why?  
**Mother** Listen. Can you hear that? (sounds of Aboriginal music)  
**Mokanbe** Yes, I can hear music.  
**Mother** That's our people singing back in camp because old Danjup has died.  
**Titjena** Why?  
**Mother** Danjup was old and her spirit longed to go back to her ancestors. So she asked the Wargyl to come and take her to them. And that's what she did. Now she's on her way back to the resting place where all Nyoongars go to when they die.

(sounds of Aboriginal music getting louder)

**Titjena** Why are they playing?  
**Mother** They are singing so the soul of old Danjup can find her way to the Moodjah tree.  
**Mokanbe** This Moodjah tree?  
**Mother** Maybe. She will rest in the branches and then she will continue her journey to Kurannup.  
**Mokanbe** What's Kurannup?  
**Mother** Kurannup is the place where our ancestors live, far beyond the great wide sea.  
**Titjena** Is that the great wide sea we saw when the moon was bright?  
**Mother** Yes, child, that same wide sea where the moon was bright.

(soul of old Danjup enters – music increases)

**Danjup** Moodjah tree, my Moodjah tree. Here I have to wait till my ancestors are ready to receive me. I can rest before I continue my journey.

(Danjup goes to sleep. Ancestors appear next to the tree)

**Ancestors** Come old Danjup, come. Your ancestors are waiting. Come. It is time to start your journey, it is time to come to us. Come, old Danjup, come. Tear away the sleep and come.



When the sun still shone with its happy light  
The Wargyl had made a place for each tribe  
And had given the Law to obey.  
The people, afraid to upset their Creator  
Kept to the rules she had given.  
And the world was awash with the songs of the tribes  
Who worked and who loved and obeyed.  
But a man came one day who had lived by himself  
Who had gone to far places alone.  
Who had not learned to live as the Snake had decreed  
Who had made his own rules to obey.  
And he came to the land where the Bibbulmun lived  
And said: "From now on it is me  
Who will tell you the rules what can or what not."  
And he started to change all the Laws.  
Very soon all the people became sick and dismayed  
And they longed for the Wargyl to come  
And to take them away to the Land of the Spirits  
Whereto she herself had gone.  
And the Wargyl did hear the complaints of her children  
She heard their deep cries and their tears.  
And she thought of a way to deliver them all  
From the clutches of evil Mundjaan.  
Very soon after that a woman came past  
Who was bright as the light of the sun.  
She touched all the people and bade them to follow  
On her journey to Wargyl the Snake.  
But Mundjaan got angry and he took up his spear  
And threw it with force at the girl.  
The weapon struck her in the full of the back  
And she died leading the people away.  
He fled in the mountains, he never came back,  
He died a most terrible death.  
But the Wargyl had pity on all who had followed  
The girl whom she'd send down to earth.  
She changed this young woman who was not from this earth  
Into a beautiful tree.  
And ever since then when a person begins  
Their journey across the wide sea,  
They sleep for a while in the rest giving branches  
Of the flowering Moodjah tree.  
Come old Danjup, come. Your ancestors are waiting. Come. It is  
time to start your journey, it is time to come to us. Come, old Danjup,  
come. Tear away the sleep and come.  
(Exit Danjup and ancestors – Aboriginal music).

**Mother** That's why children are never allowed to play under the Moodjah tree, because they might disturb the soul of the travelers who prepare themselves to go to Kurannup.

**Mokanbe** I didn't know that.

**Titjena** Neither did I.

**Mother** That's why you should always listen to what your elders say. Because there are many things that children don't know. If they do something that they're not allowed they may upset the Rainbow Snake, even if they didn't mean to.

**Titjena** I'll always do as I'm told.

**Mokanbe** Me too. Except when I forget.

**Mother** I'm sure you will, children. Come now, it's getting late, we have to go back to camp and prepare food for the others.

**Titjena** Can we say goodbye to the Moodjah tree?

**Mother** Of course you can

**Mokanbe** Bye Moodjah tree.

**Titjena** Bye Moodjah tree.

(Aboriginal music)

**Stephanie** So the Christmas tree was a holy tree for the Aborigines.

**Lucy** I've just told you so.

**Stephanie** I like that story, Lucy.

**Larnce** So do I

**Dylan** Me too.

**Stephanie** It's funny that the Aborigines had a Christmas tree because somebody died and we have a Christmas tree because Jesus was born. It's sort of opposite.

**Larnce** Well, what are we waiting for?

**Stephanie** What?

**Larnce** Well, look at all those people. You said they were waiting for a Christmas play. We better get going.

**Dylan** Who's going to do a Christmas play?

**Stephanie** Class 1 and 2. You know, the one about the shepherds.

**Dylan** I like that one. That was a good one.

**Lucy** Yeah, and they're good actors.

**Larnce** Come, let's sit down and watch.

**All** Yeah, let's watch it.

(exeunt)