

Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions

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Chapter 3

Australia: the Dreaming

*Moon makes baby come...When the moon is full the woman knows her time is near...*¹

The ancient culture of Australia presents us with a living picture of a religious cosmology which may date back tens of thousands of years in a continuous tradition. It has been said that the Aboriginal Australians are arguably the world's first astronomers, a view proposed by Roslyn Haynes.² Actually, it's more likely that the first astronomers were Africans, for Africa is where, all the current evidence indicates, human life began. That said, the Aborigines certainly have a sky-based culture of considerable antiquity. There is some datable, material evidence for this claim in the form of artefacts such as a diprotodon tooth dated to around 18,000 BCE and carved with twenty-eight notches, perhaps representing, Hugh Cairns has argued, the days of the lunar month, can be seen in the Museum of Victoria in Adelaide.³ There are also intriguing instances of rock art and some examples of the kind of notched bones which are frequently interpreted as lunar counters. To quote Haynes again, the Aborigines' 'complex systems of knowledge and beliefs about the heavenly bodies evolved as an integral part of a culture which has been transmitted through song, dance and ritual over more than 40,000 years'.⁴ Now, while this statement could also be true of any other culture, the distinctive feature of Aboriginal astronomy – and cosmology – is its continuity. What we see now, we could have seen 40,000 years ago. At least, that is our working assumption. The same caveat about generalisation applies to Aboriginal cosmology as to any other extended culture.

¹ Jane Goodale, *Tiwi Wives: A study of the women of Melville Island, Seattle and London*, University of Washington Press, 1971, p 146, cited in Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991), p. 358.

² Raymond Haynes, Roslynn Haynes, David Malin and Richard McGee, *Explorers of the Southern Sky: A History of Australian Astronomy*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 7; Roslynn D. Haynes, 'Astronomy and the Dreaming: The Astronomy of the Aboriginal Australians', in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Astronomy Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Astronomy*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 53.

³ Hugh Cairns, 'Aboriginal sky-mapping? Possible astronomical interpretation of Australian Aboriginal ethnographic and archaeological material', in Clive Ruggles (ed.), *Archaeoastronomy in the 1990s*, (Loughborough: Group D Publications, 1993), p. 143.

⁴ Roslynn D. Haynes, 'Astronomy and the Dreaming: The Astronomy of the Aboriginal Australians', in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Astronomy Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Astronomy*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 53.

The first and most obvious problem is the lack of reliable sources. It is estimated that when serious European settlement began following Captain Cook's first landing in 1770, Australia as home to between 350 and 750 social groupings, with possibly a similar number of languages. By the beginning of the twenty-first century there were less than 150 languages in use, of which around 130 were counted as endangered. The consequence, of course, is a massive loss of information, most of which can never be recovered – and was often never recorded in the first place.

The investigation of Aboriginal astronomy by western scholars was taken up by nineteenth century enthusiasts such as the clergyman and amateur astronomer Peter MacPherson, who published his findings in 1881, but has attracted remarkably little interest overall. Until recently, the convention amongst most educated white Australians was that the Aborigines either had no astronomy or as I was told when I inquired in the 1990s, were simply not interested in the sky. The situation has been partially rectified due to the efforts of such scholars as Haynes (to whom I am indebted for many of the astronomical details in this chapter), Ray Norris and Hugh Cairns, but there is still immense scope for scholarly work, especially for ethnographic accounts of the use and meaning of astronomical information.

The sources for Aboriginal cosmology are as limited as they are in any other oral culture, a problem which is compounded by the initiatory nature of much traditional knowledge, and a consequent reluctance to disclose it to outsiders; disclosure would, of course, destroy its value. Isobel White has pointed out that, in an initiatory context, it may not be the actual knowledge that matters, but what one is permitted to know.⁵ Such knowledge possesses value only according to who knows it and, as value is everything, it has no power if it is disseminated amongst the uninitiated. It will, in effect, cease to be knowledge.

This is precisely what Douglass Price-Williams and Rosslyn Gaines found in their fieldwork, when interviewing aboriginal artists about the distinctive feature of Aboriginal cosmology the 'Dreaming', or 'Dreamtime'. They reported, of one interviewee,

We asked her how she differentiated ordinary night dreams from these kind of dreams, and she said that first they had to be explained to an elder. Then she added the remark "It's gotta to be sung." which we had only heard from one person. At this point in the conversation, the curator clearly became worried. And she seemed to retreat from her previous statements, saying outright that her paintings did *not* come from dreams.⁶

Our available texts therefore consist of ethnographic reports by anthropologists who, inevitably, have their own agendas and interpretations, and may be talking to Aborigines whose ideas may, in turn, have been influenced by contact with other westerners, especially missionaries and,

⁵ Isobel White, 'Sexual conquest and submission in the myths of Central Australia', in L.R. Hiatt (ed.), *Australian Aboriginal Mythology*, (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975), p. 126.

⁶ Douglass Price-Williams and Rosslyn Gaines, 'The Dreamtime and Dreams of Northern Australian Aboriginal Artists', *Ethos*, vol. 22, no. 3, (Sep., 1994), p. 383.

sometimes, previous anthropologists. On the other hand, some evidence emerging from anthropologists in recent years suggests that some Aboriginal elders would rather trust academics with their knowledge than their own youngsters, on the grounds that the former are sometimes now more respectful than the latter.

The difficulties of distinguishing Australian astronomy which has been influenced by colonial ideas from that which has not is exemplified, as Price-Williams and Gaines demonstrated, are evident in our understanding of the 'Dreamtime'. The term was coined by Francis Gillen, promoted by Walter Baldwin Spencer in 1896 and publicised in 1899 in their major study of Aboriginal culture, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, and is a translation from the Arrernte word *alcheringa*. Dreamtime is often used as a synonym for Dreaming, which is often preferred in the grounds that it is more suggestive of a general process than a defined, past period, which is implied by the use of the suffix 'time'.

So, let us describe the standard view of the Dreaming, as commonly accepted. Essentially, it contains the originals of everything that exists in the physical world. We may describe these ideas as 'souls' in the sense that they constitute a life-force which both manifests in matter and animates material objects. At the creation of the physical world, some of these souls became stones, others plants and animals and the rest human. The Dreaming then establishes order for everything in humanity's experiential, phenomenological world; social order, moral order and natural order, and can be accessed and experienced through creative engagement with the environment, including song, dance, story and visual images. The ancestors, however they are conceived, whether as human, or animal, or fantastic, moved across a formless land creating the hills, valleys, planes and forests which are, in different ways, sacred or significant. As they moved they created the Songlines, paths in the sky and land. If walked, the Songlines will connect the traveler with the Dreaming, with the underlying, creative, living power. As Bruce Chatwin put it, 'legendary totemic beings ...wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path – birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes...so singing the world into existence'.⁷

Dreamtime stories come in a huge variety of forms, as might be expected in a continent which contained hundreds of languages. They have been told, acted, sung, painted, walked and chanted for tens of thousands of years, and have been overlaid on other stories, creating a rich and deep tapestry of thoughts, images and impressions. Popular Songline creators which feature in these stories include snakes whose movement is echoed in the serpentine form of valleys, caverns and weathered rock faces, and birds, whose flight paths become songlines in the air.

The concept of Dreaming is found in other cultures and should be understood as one of a family of cosmologies, known as 'essentialist' or 'substantialist', in which the physical world, dominated as it is by matter and change through time, is embedded in, or is a manifestation of, an eternal, unchanging world, which contains the original forms of everything which exists in physical form. In western culture the chief exemplar is Platonism. Now I do not want to diminish

⁷ Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines*, (London: Picador, 1988), p. 2.

the concept of the Dreaming by presenting it as a form of a familiar western philosophy.⁸ However, I would suggest that we are offered a prime example of similarity between western and non-western ideas, a corrective to the former, and now thankfully abandoned, western view of all non-western worldviews as 'primitive' and a warning against the opposite tendency - the excessive romanticisation of Aboriginal beliefs as somehow superior to western rationalism. In addition, I suggest that a sympathetic understanding of the Dreaming may lead us to an enhanced appreciation of the context out of which Plato's archetypal cosmology emerged. This is only a shocking comparison if we cling to notions of early classical philosophers as dry intellectuals rather than initiatory teachers. However, and this is a very big 'however', the entire concept of Dreaming has become entangled in the obsession with categorisation which afflicts so much anthropology, to the point where we must almost despair of the entire discipline. Does Dreaming, it is asked, relate to a time in the past or is it ever present and, if the latter, does it reveal itself in ordinary dreams?⁹ Why can't it be all these things? Why, we ask, do so many scholars attempt to categorise human experience out of existence? Then there is the counterblast, the radical claim that Dreaming is nothing more than anthropological construct, a western ideology which Aborigines accept because they are unaware that they are being subjected to a form of philosophical neocolonialism.¹⁰ The problems here is really the over-intellectualisation of those anthropologists who remain perpetual outsiders, unable or unwilling to actually experience the mindset of the people they study. The way to experience the Dreaming is to live outside, under the sky, moving through the land, letting modernity slip away, enjoying whatever meditative, ritual or ecstatic practices, induced perhaps by song or dance, allow one to actually experience what, in the modern west is often called an 'alternative reality', but only because the word 'real' is customarily applied only to what can be weighed and measured. The stars' chemical composition can be evaluated by modern science, but their dramatic qualities are more elusive.

In the Northern Territory, Yolngu cosmogony has a celestial element.¹¹ The spirit who flew across the land from the east to the west, bringing the first people to the land and creating plants, animals and landscape, was Barnumbirr, a being associated with Venus. In Western Australia, the Boorong people believed that the sun, Gnowee, was made by Pupperimbul, one of the old spirits, Pupperimbul, who were removed to the sky before ordinary humans populated the earth.

⁸ For comparisons of Aboriginal and Greek philosophy see Max Charlesworth, 'Introduction', in Max Charlesworth, Françoise Dussart and Howard Morphy, *Aboriginal Religions in Australia*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2005), pp. 9-11.

⁹ Douglass Price-Williams and Rosslyn Gaines, 'The Dreamtime and Dreams of Northern Australian Aboriginal Artists', *Ethos*, vol. 22, no. 3, (Sep., 1994), pp. 373-388.

¹⁰ Patrick Wolfe, 'On Being Woken Up: The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler Culture', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 33, no. 2, (1991), pp. 197-224.

¹¹ Haynes, R.D., 'Aboriginal Astronomy', *Australian Journal of Astronomy*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1992), pp. 133-4.

The sun was actually created when Pupperimbul threw an emu egg into the sky, the egg burst, the sky was flooded with light and the sun was born. As the celestial bodies were created so they formed genealogical relationships, forming a heavenly clan to watch over earthly families. Amongst the Boorong, Venus, or Chargee Gnowee, is the sun's sister and, in her turn, is married to Jupiter, Ginabongbearp. Not all celestial relationships were friendly and one of the common heavenly motifs, a popular one for modern Aboriginal dot painters, is the perpetual pursuit by Orion of the Pleiades, the seven sisters.¹² This story occurs in many cultures, and is therefore a candidate for one of the archaic, Paleolithic star tails whose origin precedes the dispersal of humanity. Astronomically, the myth personalises the fact that the stars of Orion's belt follow those of the Pleiades across the sky. Socially it has been interpreted as a motif of pursuit, rape and sexual fear or fantasy. Yet, if astronomically, Orion can never catch the Pleiades, does this provide reassurance that he will never reach the end of his chase? In some versions of the story one of the Pleiades is caught and raped while on earth but in the sky the pursuit is perpetual, its quarry never caught: the starry realm offers safety in its regularity and order.

The Aboriginal cosmos was gendered and, generally, the sun was male and the moon female.¹³ This seems to have been a widespread assumption in an environment which could encompass a host of local variations. Although we find as many regional differences in the physical structure of the cosmos, as we do in the nature of the Dreaming, Roslynn Haynes points out that the model developed by the Tiwi people, who occupy the Bathurst and Melville Islands, some 50-60 km north of Arnhem Land, itself the far north coast, is typical.¹⁴ The Tiwi hold that the earth, *kaluwartu*, is a flat disc, surrounded by water and covered by a solid dome, *juwuku*. So prevalent is this scheme, prior to the development of classical notions of a spherical earth suspended in space in the first millennium BCE, that we may assume that it developed as soon as human beings were able to conceptualise and visualise their wider environment. There was a world beyond the *juwuku*, though. Some imagined it as a place where the dead lived on, appearing as stars as they shone through holes in the dome, and surrounded by flowers which were always in bloom and never wilted. Communication between the *juwuku* and earth could be two-way and take place via a rope, spear, tree or rainbow, and a person who reached the sky might become a star or constellation. The dome itself is supported by wooden posts in some versions, or by a tree in others, or by star people or, in one constellation version, by two guardians of the circumcision ceremony who live in the equivalent of the Greek stars of Scorpius, and are responsible for moving the sky. Below the earth, meanwhile, was an underworld – *Yilaru* to the Tiwi – through which the sun travelled at night and which, for some people in the south, was home to the spirits of unborn children.

¹² R.D. Haynes, 'Aboriginal Astronomy', *Australian Journal of Astronomy*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1992), pp. 135-8.

¹³ R.D. Haynes, 'Aboriginal Astronomy', *Australian Journal of Astronomy*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1992), p. 130.

¹⁴ Roslynn D. Haynes, 'Astronomy and the Dreaming: The Astronomy of the Aboriginal Australians', in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Astronomy Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Astronomy*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 56.

Some star myths preserve the memory of possible celestial cataclysms, again a genre of myth which is shared with most cultures and is usually read as representing meteor collisions. For example, the giant crater at Gosse Bluff, west of Alice Springs, is said to have been formed when the baby of one of the ancestral women fell to earth. The story tells how the ancestor-woman put her baby down while she danced in the Milky Way so it contains a clear double-meaning. On the one hand it explains an astronomical event of great magnitude and, on the other, it warns new mothers to take care where they put their children. The explanation is at once scientific and social.

The earliest substantial accounts of Aboriginal astronomy were published in the late nineteenth century, but were largely restricted to terminology. For example, Peter MacPherson gave his report to the Royal Society of New South Wales in 1881. Relating western constellations to varieties of their Aboriginal equivalents, he pointed out that the Northern Crown is a Boomerang, part of Leo an Eagle's Claw, the Crow a Kangaroo, the Coal-Sack Nebula (actually a dark cloud rather than a group of stars) an Emu. MacPherson also summarised the information provided by W.E. Stanbridge in 1857. Stanbridge's concern was with stars as season markers and, in MacPherson's version, Stanbridge reported that

The Pleiades (*Larnankurrah*) are a group of young females playing to a corroboree part of young me (*Kulkunbulla*) represented by the belt and dirk of Orion. The red star Aldebaran, *Gellarlec*, or rose-crested Cockatoo, is an old man keeping time to the dancers. This as a summer group corresponds well with the beautiful moonlight nights of November and December, when the air is balmy, and the signs in the heavens are the resplendent groups of Orion and the Pleiades, with such individual bright stars as Sirius and Aldebaran.

This is a rather fine description and brings alive the notion of the sky as theatre – a dramatic setting for the living spirits of the Dreaming. As seasonal markers, stars enabled the Aborigines to navigate their life-world. We should not imagine though, that a seasonal marker merely marks the passage of the seasons for functional reasons. True, when Arcturus appears in the eastern sky at sunrise, the Aborigines of Arnhem Land harvest the *rakia*, a spike rush valuable for making baskets and fish traps while, in Victoria, when the star was in the north in the evening, it indicated that it was time to find and eat *bittur*, the pupa of the wood ant and an excellent source of protein.¹⁵ Yet, in marking the seasons, the stars reveal the Dreaming as experienced in the rhythms of life. Seasonal rituals might be determined by the seasons of the sun, the monthly patterns of the moon, or of the regular appearance and disappearance of Venus. In Arnhem Land, in the north, the Venusian 'morning stars ceremony' is an important feature of the ritual for the dead. During the ritual Venus, *Barrumbir*, is represented by cluster of white feathers or down, with long strings with other feathers attached at the ends representing, it is said, rays, on top of a totem stick.¹⁶ Feathers, though, may represent flight as much as light, and it is invariably a mistake to imagine that a symbol has one meaning.

¹⁵ Roslynn D. Haynes, 'Astronomy and the Dreaming: The Astronomy of the Aboriginal Australians', in Helaine Selin (ed.), *Astronomy Across Cultures: the History of Non-Western Astronomy*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 56.

¹⁶ R.D. Haynes, 'Aboriginal Astronomy', *Australian Journal of Astronomy*, vol. 4, no. 3, (1992), p. 134.

We have evidence of the use of a general astrology by the Aborigines, in their devotion to the ritual harmonisation of their lives with the stars, but we have only the slightest glimpse in the surviving evidence of an astrology in the sense of the interpretation of the meaning of celestial signs, and consequent action. The Moon, we understand, is more mysterious than the sun, and hence more dangerous, and serves as a warning against immoral action. The obvious association between the lunar and menstrual cycles resulted in a link between the moon and fertility and a warning to young girls not to look at the moon unless they wished to become pregnant. If one falls pregnant, though, the moon will provide a celestial time-keeper. In 1971 the anthropologist Jane Goodale described aboriginal practices amongst the Tiwi on Melville Island was reported that, 'As soon as a woman knows she is pregnant, she starts to "follow moon". "Moon makes baby come"... When the moon is full the woman knows her time is near...'¹⁷

That physical formations on the surface of the earth were an integral part of the living cosmos gives added significance to the rock art that constitutes a secondary source of information about aboriginal cosmology; to create rock art is to engage with the spirits who created the forms of the earth during the creation. Hugh Cairns has identified certain carvings north of Sydney as dated to between 4500 and 6000 years old and argues that they represent a series of prominent star groups equivalent to the western constellations Scorpio, the Southern Cross, Orion and the Pleiades.¹⁸ It would be entirely consistent with what we know of such representations in other cultures, including the tradition of sacred iconography in Orthodox and Catholic Christianity, that these images, in that they are representations are also, the same as the thing which is being represented, and can, in a magic sense, invoke the power and protection of that thing. The problem with rock art, though, is the extensive and often speculative interpretation it requires. Many archaeoastronomers suffer from the same desire to discover affirmative evidence as do other scholars, so caution is necessary. We are, unfortunately left, with the general proposition that Aboriginal rock art is ceremonial, ritual, cosmological and likely to contain astronomical referents but, of the details there is little we can say with any degree of certainty.

The evidence which we have now gathered suggests that the Aborigines made no more distinction between land and sky than did any other pre-modern people, and that the sky (and the land) constituted a stage set within which, and against the background of which, they lived. This analogy, in turn, only makes sense if we imagine the earth and sky as also living – as alive as are human beings. This general proposition is simple enough. However, there is a strange lack of scholarship concerning Aboriginal astronomy, which has been seriously ignored by the European population. But, then, perhaps it is not so strange if we consider the way in which most white

¹⁷ Jane Goodale, *Tiwi Wives: A study of the women of Melville Island*, (Seattle and London, University of Washington Press, 1971), p. 146, cited in Chris Knight, *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the Origins of Culture*, (New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1991), p. 358.

¹⁸ Hugh Cairns, 'Aboriginal sky-mapping? Possible astronomical interpretation of Australian Aboriginal ethnographic and archaeological material', in Clive Ruggles (ed.), *Archaeoastronomy in the 1990s*, (Loughborough: Group D Publications, 1993), p. 149.

Australians either ignored, devalued or set out to destroy Aboriginal culture until recently. As a consequence, while the stars and constellations were documented by the mid-nineteenth century, there remains a huge opportunity for sympathetic ethnography in order to engage with their meaning, functional application and ritual uses. This project, though, might ultimately have to be conducted by Aboriginal people themselves, the insiders in their own culture.