DREAMTIME—THE POPULAR IDEA

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The popular idea of the Aboriginal Dreamtime as an heroic, dramatic and quaint poetic epoch has been with us for about a hundred years. It is perhaps one of the most widely known words in our vernacular, but also one of the least understood. This romanticized concept of the Dreamtime is fostered by a continuing stream of collections of Dreamtime stories. Peopled by mythical and magical characters, these stories sweeten and sterilize the original tradition. Dreamtime is popularized and exploited, but the reality and the people who belong to it are ignored.

Dreamtime has become a part of the folk heritage of European Australia. Since the publication of Mrs. Langlo Parker’s Collection of Australian Legendary Tales, Dreamtime myths have enjoyed a constant audience of the very young. In addition, gifted poets such as Roland Robinson have made excellent English translations of Aboriginal myths and scholars of international repute have tried their hand at translating Aboriginal lore for a receptive public. One of the most successful of these was C.P. Mountford. In combination with the rich visual images of artist Ainslee Roberts, Mountford produced three volumes of popularized myths which reinforced the widespread misapprehension of the Dreamtime’s simple magic and mystery (though it should also be noted that Mountford made many valuable contributions to our knowledge of Aboriginal art). This simplification must be remembered in reading the following stories, taken from one of Mountford’s books, The Dawn of Time. The first recounts the creation of the Southern Cross Constellation, and comes from the Flinders Range in South Australia.

THE HUNTERS OF MOROWIE

In the early days of the Dreamtime when the northern Flinders Ranges were being created, two brothers went hunting in the rugged Mount Chambers Gorge. At Morowie Springs, near the eastern entrance, they caught an emu. After trusting it up for carrying, the elder brother placed it on his head.

The two continued their hunting until mid-day; but when they camped to prepare the emu for cooking, the flies, already troublesome, settled on its body in thousands. The brothers had just made the fire to drive away the pests when a hot north wind sprang up.

It scattered the embers and burning sticks everywhere, lighting a bush-fire that raged so fiercely among the grass and low scrub that the hunters had to climb the steep sides of the
gorge for safety. But the fire, still spreading, forced the men higher and higher up the cliffs until they were standing on the summit of a tall isolated peak.

But even there, the flames and smoke of the bush fire still surrounded them. So, to save themselves, the brothers flew up into the sky where they were changed into the brightest stars in the firmament, the Pointers of the Southern Cross.

The second story deals with the myth of Purukupali from the Tiwi people of Bathurst and the Melville Islands.

JAPA, THE MOON-MAN

In the long-ago Dreamtime, Purukupali, the great creator, savagely fought and severely wounded the moon-man, Japara, because he had been responsible for the death of Purukupali’s son Jinini. Japara then made his home in the sky, still bearing on his face the scars from the wounds he had received.

Purukupali, frantic with grief over the death of his son, decreed that all living creatures, once dead, would never again come to life. But the moon-man partly escaped this decree, for, although he dies each month, his life is continuously renewed.

As soon as Japara re-appears, he greedily eats the flesh of the mangrove crabs in such huge quantities that, at the end of a fortnight he is filled to bursting point. But the continuous meals of this rich food finally make him so ill that once more he sickens and dies. The aborigines look upon the silvery crescent of the old moon as the skeleton of Japara, and the body of the old moon (seen by earth shine), as his spirit, Imunka.

During his nightly journeys across the sky, the moon-man, carrying a smaller torch than the sun-woman, Wurupunakal, follows her path. In early times, Japara returned to the east by a road just under the southern horizon. But a nest of hornets stung him so badly that he now uses the same underground passage as does the sun-woman, when she travels to the east to begin a new day.

Nothing is wrong with the popular idea of the Dreamtime as such. English-speaking as well as Aboriginal children may be entertained by these tales. The cosmology stories, for example, offer some of the historicity of the real thing, and may accomplish the traditional function of moral instruction as well. But it is also evident that popularization distorts. As W.E.H. Stanner noted in 1953, there is no word for, or sense of, abstract time among the Aboriginal people. The measuring of time in minutes and hours as units to be counted in anticipation of events is not relevant to Aboriginals. They count time differently. Aboriginal people have a very keen sense of season. In the tropical area of the northern territory, Europeans speak of a two-fold division of the seasons: the wet and the dry. Aboriginals recognize a six-fold division, made according to the rainfall, humidity, budding and flowering of plants, and the life cycle of various animals and fish. As Stanner commented, in the Dreamtime, Aboriginal people do not conceive of time being divided into regularly succeeding cycles of twelve months’ duration. Relations between events of the past, present, and future are not conceived in terms of days, months, and years. Hence the idea of “epoch” as a period that had a beginning and an end at definable times is not valid here. It is difficult to translate “Dreamtime” into English and avoid such temporal abstractions. The Dreamtime happened but did not cease to happen. It was not completed; it changed its form and continued.

Though Dreamtime was an age of superhuman beings and activities of heroic proportions, it was not an Aboriginal Garden of Eden. As Stanner insists, we must not read into it the idea of a Golden Age. The Aboriginal people have a sense of the “wistfulness that is the past,” but they do not look backward with nostalgia. The past and the Dreamtime have for them “an unchallengeably sacred authority.” It is an active and real notion that continues to have influence, not a completed historical fact.
Nor is it history. The traditional Western historian is concerned with theories of history or with facts as they happened. It has been argued that history is a kind of research generically belonging to the sciences, a form of thought whereby questions are posed, answers are sought, and evidence is interpreted. Its purpose is to increase or produce human self-knowledge, that is, knowledge about the nature of man.

The sacred time offers a different kind of knowledge that has nothing to do with European analytic science or research. Since the knowledge of the Dreamtime is given rather than discovered, it does not seek answers, but provides them. It offers not evidence but the activities of the Ancestors, which predate human activity. It is not concerned with human behavior and produces no knowledge of human nature. It explains why things came to be, but not what they are nor how they are structured.

The word “Dreamtime” itself presents an obstacle to understanding. It was first used by Spencer and Gillen in The Native Tribes of Central Australia (1899) to translate the Aranda word “Alcheringa.” Over the years, it passed into general use in both popular and academic circles, conveying a vague sense of things neither rational nor connected to ordinary life, a mythical realm neither past nor present. There are not many helpful alternatives. Perhaps the best translation that has yet been offered is “Sacred Time.” This translation is a more literal one; it has the singular advantage of avoiding reference to dreams, and it partly corrects the misapprehension of time by introducing the notion of the sacred, which is both past and present.

Set in a universe that has the basic form of ours, the Dreamtime explains how the obvious features of the present world came into being. In the beginning, before the Spirits inhabited the earth, it was a flat and featureless place. Below the surface were Spirit forces not yet beings. The Spirits rose up through the earth and came into being. For a period, they lived in much the same manner as traditional Aboriginals. They travelled across the land hunting as they went, making ceremonies, fighting, bearing children, all the things that are part of normal life. Yet, they were heroic in the sense of possessing superhuman powers. They created waterholes and rivers, mountains and gorges, and all the natural features of the land. At the end of their journeying, the great beings descended into the earth again, to continue exercising their Spirit power. The special sites for procreation of children and insuring the increase of the various species of animals, birds, fish, and insects are remembered and revered by Aboriginals as centers where the relevant Spirit forces of the Dreamtime are most powerfully present. By ritual, the power of the spirits can be renewed and released into the world.

The Ancestral heroes were then as men are now, not universally good. Some were dangerous, malevolent, and violent. Where they now inhabit a site, it is treated with respect, for the dangers inherent in the Spirit of the place continue to threaten human life.

At other places, significant events occurred in the Dreamtime. The Ancestors of particular groups may have congregated for ritual or for war. They may have taught their young elements of tribal law in rituals at such sites. These activities are carried on today by initiated men. The observance of ritual relevant to particular places maintains the law of customary usage. By ritual and by travelling along the ancient ways of the Ancestors, young men are taught law, ethics, and government.
Other Spirit beings did not descend into the earth again but changed into animals, birds, fish, trees, or stars. Others yet turned into prominent rock outcrops. Some became more transient things: the wind, the maintainer of rainfall and monsoons. Yet others left their impact in the shape of sacred objects.

When the world as it is known today had been fully created and the Aboriginal people were in the land, one phase faded into another of a different form; the new phase was fully fledged in the pattern of the Ancestors’ life, but in human dimensions.

The Dreamtime, when the Ancestors were on earth in their human/animal forms, explains how the earth became as it is. It provides an explanation for technology, while sanctioning its efficacy. It divides kin from non-kin: totemic groups descended from one Ancestor from the descendents of another. The Ancestor’s travels describe territorial rights. The non-human forms they took laid the basis for the totemic relations between social and ritual groups and animals, birds, and plants. The forms of ritual and the sacred objects and designs were given by the Ancestors. Dreamtime produced the law that binds society together, the institutions of the State.

Ancestors died and were often immediately turned into features of the land. These symbolize the transition of the soul, which departs the living Ancestral flesh but is not dissipated or diminished. It returns to the store of Spiritual essence that is in the permanence of the land. Geza Roheim sees in this death and transformation the symbol, not only of departure of the spirit, but also of castration. Castration anxiety is produced in death and separation of the soul from the body, but is relieved in the immediate metamorphosis into a symbolic phallus in a stone or tree. In either case, there is the symbology of change and continuity.

Among the Dua Moiety groups of Northeast Arnhem Land, it is from the travels of Djanggawal and his two sisters, collectively titled the Djanggawal, that ritual objects, sacred sites and such are taken.

The Djanggawal crossed the sea from the Island of the Spirits Bralgu. Coming from the east they landed on the coast of Arnhem Land at Port Bradshaw. In their bark canoe they carried with them a conical ngainmara mat and their rangga, or sacred emblems. During their journey the mat, rangga and their bodies were stained with water and salt. These water marks were the basis of the various Dua Moiety Djanggawal cult designs.

After landing at Jelangbara (Port Bradshaw), they spread out their rangga and mat to dry. They established sacred centers in the vicinity that nowadays belong to the Diradjingu. They built a nara shade, a shelter against the weather, and made a number of wells. At the wells they planted junda rangga emblems that grew into sacred trees. Rangga were placed in the wells, upon which the water rose up and overflowed across the land in rivers and streams. In the surrounding country they created birds, fish and reptiles. They sang about other creatures they encountered in their journey.

After leaving Jelangbara the Djanggawal travelled throughout Dua Moiety land creating sites and naming creatures that would become totemic species. They moved along the Coast from Port Bradshaw eastwards through the territory of the Galbu, Djabu and Djarlweg language groups to Blue Mud Bay. From Arnhem Bay they moved westward along the northern shores of Arnhem Land, through the territory of the Ngeenir, Dadiwi and Djambarbingu. In each place they introduced the nara ritual with all its associated symbols, songs and dances.
Interestingly, the two sisters were the keepers of the sacred emblems and the holders of sacred knowledge. However, in Djambaringu country at Marabai, Djanggawul and his sons took advantage of the sisters' carelessness to seize the sacred objects and make their own nara ritual. The sisters resigned themselves to the loss of the sacred authority. Abdicating this strenuous activity, they thereafter concentrated on producing children, the ancestors of the Dua Moiety Clans, and on providing food. They still retained much of their sacred power however, in that they still bore children.

Myths not only deal with acts of creation, but also provide moral examples. The Wagilag sisters of the Dua Moiety are associated with concepts of fertility, increase of all natural species, and changing of the seasons. Before embarking on their travels, the two sisters had sexual relations with men of their own clan, which resulted in pregnancy. During their travels, they gathered yam, giving it its present name and associating it with fertility and male sexual organs. They camped at a waterhole which, unknown to the women, was inhabited by the great python Julunggul and was forbidden to women. Headman of all the animals, the python was disturbed by all his clansmen rushing into the water. During their exertions in building a shelter, some of the women's menstrual and afterbirth blood dropped into the water. This further enraged Julunggul who made lightning, thunder, and rain. He advanced upon the sisters and swallowed them and their children. As he stood erect upon his tail and confessed to having swallowed them, he fell to the ground and regurgitated the sisters. In this story, female behavior with regard to menstruation, pregnancy, and birth is established. The fertility of nature is also associated with the myth. When Julunggul devoured the sisters, the monsoon was created, when he regurgitated them, the southeast wind blew, ushering in the dry season.

In the Fire Dreaming Myth of the Madarupa and Dhalwongu Clans, the Ancestral Spirit Baru, the Crocodile, attended a ceremony with other clansmen. Accidentally, he produced fire by rubbing two sticks together. But the fire got out of control in the bush and the men fled for their lives. Baru, however, was overtaken by the flames and burned. To put out the flames, he plunged into the sea, but the scars remain on the crocodile's back forever.

Similar stories surround the animals and natural features of all parts of the country. In the desert, tropics, and temperate region of the country, snakes have played an important role. Creatures of enormous power and sacredness, they are associated with creation myths involving water, rivers, rainfall, and electrical storms. Intimately associated with natural fertility, they are frequently the central symbols in initiation ritual. Initiation is the period of flux marking the transition of boys to men, the change from the influence of the female sacredness to male power and authority. The adolescent males are seen to have passed from the world of women as if in death, to be reborn in the sphere of adult manhood with its concerns of ritual, temporal power, and exclusive ritual knowledge.

In Aboriginal art, these myths of the Dreamtime are given visual form. All art, therefore, has a sacred nature. In each area, iconographic patterns relating myths belonging to specific clans are fashioned. Each clan's designs and patterns identify the legal right to the story and its illustration. In Eastern Arnhem Land abstract patterns, derived from the watermarks on the bodies of the Djanggawal, Barama, and Landjing are used. In Western Arnhem Land, paintings are more figurative. In the Desert region, Nancy Munn has shown that the iconography is based on the tracks of animals and a topographical approach to territorial knowledge. The

activities of the Ancestors are shown as if seen from above, the abstract iconographs give a sequential illustration of their activities. While stories were being told, the teacher drew designs on the ground to illustrate the dialogue. The abstract designs reflect camps, seated figures, tracks and natural features, and identify particular sites bearing the physical marks of Ancestral activities in the Dreamtime. The iconographs have individual significance, but designs as a whole reflect their natural context; the hills and watercourses can be identified and followed.

C.P. Mountford recorded a myth in the Pitjantatjara country of South Australia that illustrates the relationship between myth, natural features, and designs. In the Dreamtime, a party of Pungalungas, giant beings surviving on the flesh of Aboriginal men, travelled from the west to a camp at Katajuta (Mt. Olga). They foraged for Aboriginal prey during the day, returning to their camp at night with the bodies of the victims tucked into their hair string belts. Aboriginals today still carry game in the same manner. The tors at Mt. Olga are the transformed Pungalunga men, seated around their campfire. Small caves in the sides of the lower tors are the hollows in the ground made by the Pungalunga men as they knelt beside their cooking fires. The black water stains on the tors are the black beards of the beings.

In the design illustrating the myth (see Figure 1), the crescents enclosing the dots (A) represent the Pungalunga men seated behind their wind breaks. (F) indicates cooking fires. The parallel lines represent the deep gorges between the transformed Pungalunga and the watercourses that follow the gorges down to the plain.

While all art is sacred, not all of its purpose is somber reflection or high ritual. There are lighthearted stories and mundane events recorded both in sand and on bark—stories of folly, luck, strength, and comedy involving sacred characters and taboo matters. As humorists and urbane beings within their own cultural boundaries, Aboriginals approach Dreamtime with as much levity and wit as any other culture, or cluster of cultures. However, it should never be forgotten that whatever the Freudian implications of mythology and ritual behavior, the Spirit world is at all times powerful, dangerous, and imminent.

The order of things presented in the Dreamtime is not incapable of change. As organic structures, social systems, individual behavior, moral ideas, economics, political and religious behavior are subject to external influence and change by mutation. The influence of Macassans in Arnhem Land is evidence of the flexibility of Aboriginal culture in the face of external pressure. Language, ritual, symbolism, and technology have all felt the winds of change. The seaward arrival of the Djanggawul might well be said to reflect the arrival of the Macassan fishermen each year to gather and process trepang. The disappearance of the fishing fleet is much like death, with the waving of flags and grieving at the ceremonial departure. This ritual has been incorporated into funerary mythology; after the final ceremonies involving masts and flags, the spirit of the deceased departs the land to cross the sea in a canoe to the Island of the Spirits.

Christianity has been integrated into pre-existing mythology on Groote Eylandt. Christ has become the Ancestral hero. The death and transfiguration have been adapted to pre-existing forms. The moral instruction is inherent in both myths. The difference perhaps is that the original myth saw the Spiritual “heaven” as the termination of life, without the transformation of the world at the Second Coming.

On Bathurst Island, air travel and the destructiveness of the Second World War have been incorporated in song and dance cycles. They are not yet a part of creation mythology and no sacredness attaches itself to these events, but they have begun the journey into myth.
A personal side is involved in myth making and "Dreaming." The individual sees events and interprets everyday occurrences through the medium of dreams. These dreams are expressed in songs, dances, and in many cases through painted designs. Certainly the paintings of the Western Desert have the character of individual interpretations of dreams, both in the classical and contemporary senses of the term.

Finally, it is necessary to understand the fundamental power of art in the Aboriginal culture. The creation of the order of things during the Dreamtime was an expression of Spiritual potency in action. That potency was not lost, but was removed from the world of men. Essential to the ongoing energy of the land and of Aboriginal society, it can only be indirectly reached. Through the singing of songs, dancing, and the painting of sacred designs, the potency of the Dreamtime can be realized. The arts themselves serve as a releasing agent for Spiritual power. In traditional arts, the force and presence of the Spirit World are continually renewed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY