

# The Dreaming in Australian Aboriginal culture

*Eugene Stockton*

IN *THE PHENOMENON OF MAN*, TEILHARD DE CHARDIN observes how living species ramify as they spread out over the earth. They split into segments and diversify as they move apart. Humanity is the one species that has spread into every part of the globe, expanding into many different races but, because the earth is a globe, the diverse races converge together in a rich interaction: 'a movement of convergence in which races, peoples and nations consolidate one another and complete one another by mutual fecundation'.<sup>1</sup>

To a remarkable degree this has taken place in Australia. As the human race fanned out of Africa, the western and eastern corners of the fan spread furthest from each other. When the British landed at Botany Bay, what transpired was the confrontation of two peoples more distant from each other than any others on earth – and with it the greatest contrast of culture and technology. This cultural interaction is still continuing, but it is in the area of religious culture or spirituality that the two peoples can most expect to 'complete one another by mutual fecundation'.

In *The Aboriginal gift: spirituality for a nation*<sup>2</sup> I tried to describe the spirituality of our indigenous people. I saw it as a core of values and attitudes surviving the loss of the externals of traditional religion (ceremony, myth, language, law, land) and persisting into modern Aboriginality. The potential influence of this spirituality on the mainstream was signalled, not by way of appropriating Aboriginal elements (as, for example, New Agers might appropriate Native American shamanism) but by letting them challenge Christians (and others) to draw similar items out of their tradition, to be combined in a new synthesis appropriate to a new people forming in an old land. Some of the challenges which might be proposed include:

- the sense of celebration and sacramentality of the natural world;
- the rediscovery of the paschal mystery in the Aboriginal view of life;
- reading from the landscape a law of symbioses to shape our interrelationships in the natural and societal environment;

- a sense of family as we relate to each other and to every part of the cosmos under the parenthood of God;
- a sense of real identity with the land, revered as our Holy Land;
- a mysticism at home in the Australian environment.

While these challenges are particularly pertinent to the developing Australian identity and to its expression in spirituality, they are also relevant in the growing global awareness of ecological demands and of the need for an appropriate spirituality to underpin ecological conversion.

### *Sense of Dreaming*

The term 'Dreaming' arose from a mistranslation of an Arrernte phrase which might better be rendered 'originating from eternity'.<sup>3</sup> However, the word 'Dreaming' acquired wide currency in Aboriginal English, anthropological literature, and now popular usage, to cover a package of ideas common throughout Aboriginal Australia. It should be noted that Aborigines in many tribal areas actually prefer the term 'the Law' to express this complex of concepts.

At the very least, according to Rose's study of the Yarralin people in the Northern Territory,<sup>4</sup> the Dreaming refers to:

- the creative beings responsible for the features of the land, the different species and the laws of existence,
- the creative activity,
- the period of this activity,
- the resulting relationship between humans and other species.

Stanner brings together the complex connotations of the Dreaming in a celebrated passage:

A central meaning of the Dreaming is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are; but neither 'time' nor 'history' as we understand them is involved in this meaning . . . Although The Dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, such a time is also, in a sense, still part of the present. One cannot 'fix' The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen . . . Clearly, The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of charter of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man . . . It is a cosmogony, an account of the begetting of the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how what was

created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system.<sup>5</sup>

Although the accounts vary greatly across the continent, they generally concur in highlighting primordial creation, the Dreaming, when ancestral spirits, in human and animal form, went about shaping the land and its inhabitants as we now know them. At the end of their labours they were transformed into animals or natural features. The life force they released at the beginning is still given off at special places, for Dreaming time still compenetrates the present. They also left a law for each species to live by and to ensure continuing life. Life, whether daily or pre-eminently ceremonial, is a celebration of creation.<sup>6</sup>

### *Sense of sacramentality and celebration*

For the Aboriginal Australian, neither the physical world nor one's life within it appeared to be some drab, featureless landscape. In Stanner's words, the ancestral spirits left behind them 'a world full of signs of their beneficent intent' towards human beings, and he describes the environment as some great cathedral in which 'most of the choir and furniture of heaven and earth are regarded by the Aborigines as a vast sign system . . . [One] moves, not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significance.'<sup>7</sup>

In response to a country showing meaning at every turn, one's life was lived out in a celebratory mode reaching its high point in ceremony. By the way tribal Aboriginal people anticipated ceremony months ahead and dwelt on it long after, one could say that they literally lived for ceremony. Ceremony, far from being a time out from routine life, was rather a climax of what was already a celebration of creation.

Although the Dreaming spirits were considered ever present in their various transformations (landmarks, sacred objects, totemic emblems, human and non-human totemites), the creative events of the Dreaming were brought into the present most graphically by special ritual actions. Aboriginal ceremonies not only commemorated past creative acts but also mediated that activity into the present. The participants were thereby brought into immediate contact, even identity, with the primordial creation event, thereby releasing a surge of life force. The ground itself was not only the backdrop of the ceremony, but decorated by sand-painting with the totemic emblems inscribed on the *tjurunga*,<sup>8</sup> it became for the duration of the ceremony an enlarged *tjurunga* imbued with the life force of the Dreaming. The dancer, painted with

the same designs of 'his Dreaming', became a living icon, a pure embodiment of the Dreaming ancestor. The dreaming has been re-created at this place for the duration of the ceremony.

The purpose of ceremony is not to worship the ancestral beings or to placate or petition them (so that the totemic species be increased), but rather to participate in the original creative acts ensuring their continuation into the present, for the continuing well-being of the totemites and of the world. So close is the connection between creation and its continuing effects through ceremony that should ceremonies fail, the world would fail too. All people, and not merely a special class of professional priests, share in this task of perpetually renewing the universe. All the labours of humanity are necessary to keep nature functioning harmoniously.

### *Assent to life as given*

Traditional religion is all about life;<sup>9</sup> the underlying philosophy of Aboriginal religion is one of assent to the received terms of life. This is the mood of accepting life as a mixture of good and bad, of joy and suffering, and to celebrate it notwithstanding. Life as given, warts and all, is not some falling away from a primordial golden age, but is now as it was initiated in the Dreaming. The Dreaming myths suggest other choices might have been made, but in fact the ones that were made have set the terms of life ever since. While the Dreaming determines the present conditions of life, the human response to that situation is not tragic or fatalistic, on the one hand, or rebellious and complaining on the other. In contrast to themes of salvation, afterlife, nirvana, messianism or eschatology found in other religions, there are absent from Aboriginal religious thought and practice any 'life-compensatory themes'. Submitting to what is and not quarrelling with life's terms is not the same as passive resignation. There is an enthusiasm for living, a readiness to celebrate existence as it is, a will to survive, and a willingness to pass on the baton to the next generation in the relay race of life.

Life itself, and in itself, is sacred. Whereas western concepts of religion contrast the sacred and the profane, the supernatural and the natural, there is no basis for such distinction in Aboriginal religious thought, as everything is alive and therefore sacred. Standing within the sacred, as it were, and being part of the sacred process, one would not need the acts normally associated with religion, such as sacrifice, petitionary prayer, thanksgiving and praise. Living itself is religion.

Even death, for all that it may be unwelcome, is one of life's gifts. There is the perception that death is part of life, the means of transfer of life. Killing, eating, growing, birth, death – it is a cycle of life in a total system, in which all participate according to their respective Laws. Reverence for life allows respect for death. Assent to life is assent to death. One dies that another may live, each in its own time. Life consumes the living and so brings forth new lives.

### *Aboriginal law*

The preservation and enhancement of life is the ultimate criterion of Aboriginal morality, and the ultimate purpose of Aboriginal Law.<sup>10</sup> The Law is based on the concept that the whole cosmos is a living, self-reproducing system in which all parts are alive, conscious and inter-related. Each part is a moral agent. That is to say that it has its own Law, being responsible for maintaining itself and the whole, while respecting the other parts. The preservation of life as it is demands the preservation of relationships between the parts of a self-regulating cosmos. Each part is autonomous, neither dominant nor subservient to others. Where opposition arises (as in lawful predation, disputes, land management), the attempt is not to destroy but to contain, each part being kept in balance with the other and in equilibrium of power. The autonomous parts are yet interdependent, each acting and reacting with others; in so doing each tests the limits of its boundaries. This harmony calls for discipline to conform one's life to the pattern set by tradition.

Aboriginals see themselves linked by kinship ties to every part of the cosmos. They saw the cosmos itself as simply the furthest extension of the family and clan, and so the Law operating on the cosmic level is naturally seen as applying on the social level. As in the environment, so in society relationships are marked by a strong sense of sharing and caring, arising out of an awareness of mutual indebtedness. Each part of society, whether individual or group, prizes its autonomy. The combative propensity of human beings is limited in its exercise by a sense of balance and equilibrium so that in conflict one side sets out not to destroy but to contain the other, exacting only sufficient retaliation. In the face of outside threat, such as that posed by European invasion, there is a creative accommodation to test the limits of what one might salvage of control and advantage in an overall adverse condition.

### *Family world-view*

Westerners typically view their world in a hierarchical fashion, seeing someone/something at the top and a descending series of subordinate classes beneath. The Aboriginal world-view is egalitarian, to judge from the principle of autonomy in the Law. More particularly, the family as it sits around the campfire, with extended kinfolk and siblings, ranging from infants to grown-ups, offers a vivid paradigm of how an Aboriginal person sees the world. In this paradigm, all are equal but some are senior (so commanding more respect); all belong. Each is in a different degree of maturity and dependence; each is related to the other in a different mode of mutual reciprocity. The whole is a web of diverse, interdependent relationships, under the dominance of no one.

### *Land and sacred place*

Land is a cornerstone of traditional Aboriginal religion, the physical link between living humans and all that is unseen and eternal in their spiritual world. The Dreaming establishes the moral, social and psychological bond between humans, ancestral beings and the natural environment, recognizing the unity and mutual interdependence between humans and non-humans in that environment.

The land is a sacred place, the locus of creative acts of the Dreaming, which persist into the present. It is still peopled by ancestral spirits who give form to the landscape and its denizens and now rest at special places, the life centres. There, though dormant, they are yet conscious and active, releasing the spirit children and life force of their totem. It is not simply a landscape studded with discrete locations known as sacred sites. The whole is sacred with varying degrees of sacredness throughout. Those who know, through totemic affiliation and initiation, have a mental map of their country, marking out where events of the Dreaming took place, criss-crossed by lines where the totemic ancestor travelled the sacred tracks between camps and places of significant happening, and highlighting his resting place and life centres. This is the mental map in stylized form which the old man produces when he 'paints his dreaming', or which is often reproduced in more or less summary form in designs on the *tjurunga* or other sacred objects, and on the ground and dancer in ceremony.

The land has a story to tell. Since the features of land are the physical record of Dreaming events, so an Aboriginal Australian can call the land 'my bible'. He can also call it 'my Law' because the ancestral spirits who gave form and life to the land also encoded in it an ethical

system which was entrusted to the descendants. Country cares for countryman,<sup>11</sup> sustaining life, and countryman cares for country (by ceremony and land management) so that it fulfils itself as a self-perpetuating cosmic principle. As unwritten bible and *Torah*, the land calls for careful attention for it is 'a vast sign-system . . . a humanised realm saturated with significations'.

The European readily speaks about 'identifying with the land', but more often that is only a metaphor for affection and solidarity, for it is inherently western to see the land as a separate entity, on which one walks as a superior intelligent being and which one uses as an object for economic gain or pleasure. The Aboriginal Australian speaks of real identity: 'I am the Land'. She feels part of a whole, in fact she is part of every other as every other is part of her, so that she is enmeshed with the land in a real dynamic identity. The land is not just the surface but includes flora, fauna, even celestial bodies, in a corporate organic whole that is as animate, sentient, intelligent, self-conscious and communicative as any of its parts.

### *Mysticism and responsible living*

All that has gone before comes together in mysticism. Aboriginal mysticism is based on what Rose terms 'intersubjectivity'.<sup>12</sup> In the environment all things are alive, conscious and paying attention to each other. So a person is not only alert to the environment, but the environment is felt to be alert to and communicating with him or her, each responsive to the other. The intense mutual knowledge and the intimate, face-to-face lifestyle that an Aboriginal Australian shares in family and community is extended to the experienced cosmos. Out of this mutual attentiveness arises a sense of harmony, oneness and wholeness between all parts of the cosmos: all parts of the cosmos act responsibly and engage in a mystical union with the cosmic whole.

So personal mysticism is part of responsible living and is itself a responsible act to enhance the whole cosmos in its cosmic mysticism, but from a personal centre. I am playing my part in 'minding the universe'. Aboriginal religion has been described as one of immanence

based on a fundamental wholeness of which each singular entity is a manifestation. Spirit moves through us all; to be at One is to be powerfully at Home. Mysticism in this tradition is an apprehension of the world in an intensely heightened awareness of intersubjectivity. Self is not incorporated into the Other, but is totally engaged with others.<sup>13</sup>

In our own time Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr is a bridge between Aboriginal mysticism in the traditional form and one which is thoroughly at home in the Christian tradition. In an address to a liturgical conference in Hobart in 1988, she described a form of contemplation, called in her own language *dadirri* and having its setting in the bush, around the campfire or in ceremony.<sup>14</sup>

It is inner, deep listening and quiet, still awareness.  
 'Dadirri' recognizes the deep spring that is inside us.  
 We call on it and it calls to us.  
 This is the gift that Australia is thirsting for.  
 It is something like what you call 'contemplation'.  
 When I experience 'dadirri', I am made whole again.  
 I can sit on the river bank  
 or walk through the trees;  
 even if someone close to me has passed away,  
 I can find peace in this silent awareness . . .

The contemplative way of 'dadirri'  
 spreads over our whole life.  
 It renews us and brings us peace.  
 It makes us feel whole again . . .

The other part of 'dadirri' is  
 The quiet stillness and the waiting.  
 Our Aboriginal culture has taught us to be still and to wait  
 We do not try to hurry things up.  
 We let them follow their natural courses – like seasons.  
 We watch the moon in each of its phases.  
 We wait for the rain to fill our rivers  
 and water the thirsty earth.  
 When twilight comes, we prepare for night.  
 At dawn we rise with the sun . . .

I would like to conclude by saying again  
 that there are deep springs within each one of us.  
 Within this deep spring,  
 which is the very Spirit of God, is a sound.  
 The sound of Deep calling to Deep.  
 The sound is the Word of God – Jesus.



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## NOTES

- 1 P. Teilhard de Chardin, *The phenomenon of man* (Collins Fontana, 1965), p 267.
- 2 E. Stockton, *The Aboriginal gift: spirituality for a nation* (Sydney: Millennium, 1995; now Harper Collins, Melbourne).
- 3 T. G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian religion: personal monothetism in a polythetic community*, Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Special Studies in Religion Series, Vol 2 (Adelaide, 1978).
- 4 D. B. Rose, *Dingo makes us human: life and land in an Australian Aboriginal culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p 44.
- 5 W. E. H. Stanner, 'The Dreaming (1953)' in *White man got no Dreaming* (Canberra: ANU Press, 1979), pp 23–24, 28. One might see a parallel between this description of the Law and the Jewish Mosaic Law, the *Torah*, codified and embodied in the narrative of the Pentateuch, personified in Sirach 24 as Divine Wisdom, who was herself enfleshed in the Incarnate Word in John 1:14.
- 6 For a lively, fuller narrative see T. G. H. Strehlow, *op. cit.* The following owes much to M. Wilson who first suggested sacramentality and celebration to be the prime Aboriginal contribution to national theology (*New, old and timeless*, Nelen Yubu Missiological Series No 1, Kensington, 1979).
- 7 W. E. H. Stanner, 'Religion, totemism and symbolism' in R. M. and C. H. Berndt (eds), *Aboriginal man in Australia* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1965), pp 215, 227.
- 8 The *tjurunga* is a sacred board embodying Dreaming spirit.
- 9 The following derives mainly from W. E. H. Stanner, 'Religion, totemism and symbolism' and 'The Dreaming (1953)'; and D. B. Rose, 'Consciousness and responsibility in an Australian Aboriginal religion', *Nelen Yubu* (1985), pp 11–13 and *Dingo makes us human*, pp 91–105.
- 10 On the 'meta-rules' of Aboriginal Law, see D. B. Rose, *Dingo makes us human*, pp 44–45.
- 11 'Countryman' is a term used by Aboriginal Australians. It underlines the reciprocal relationship between 'country' and inhabitant.
- 12 D. B. Rose, 'Consciousness and responsibility', endnote 8, pp 8–9; *Dingo makes us human*, pp 90–91, 226.
- 13 D. B. Rose, *Dingo makes us human*, p 237.
- 14 Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann, 'Dadirri', *Compass Theology Review* 22/1–2 (1988), pp 9–11.