

UNDERSTANDING THE DREAMING

Every Australian, and probably a lot of rest of the world, has heard the word the 'Dreaming' or the 'Dreamtime'. It is a powerful and evocative term, but virtually nobody has any idea of what it means as a coherent set of religious ideas.

Many people still hold the mistaken belief that Aboriginal people did not have a religion and did not believe in a Supreme Being. However this is usually tempered by a vague concession that Aboriginal people are 'very spiritual'.

Tribal people I have spoken to say that the use of English term 'The Dreaming' to describe their belief system is 'just right'. To them it aptly conveys the idea that the world was not originally created as an external physical reality, but was an idea in the mind of the Spirit of All Life. In other words the universe and everything in it were originally created as part of a divine Dreaming. Ultimately we are all just figments of God's imagination, made real by the infusion of conscious life.

In the mid 1980's I set myself the task of understanding the concept of the Dreaming, so I read every Aboriginal Dreamtime creation story I could find. I also spoke to some tribal people I knew from Yirrkala, in particular Donald Murrawilli. I was astounded by the themes and implications of these stories. Most started in empty darkness and the first Dreaming was of fire, then of wind and rain, earth and sky, land and sea, and so on. It was like a retelling of the Big Bang Theory and the geological stages in the formation of the Earth.

The stories I read then went on to tell how the Secret of Dreaming was passed to Mankind. I was again astounded at how the passing on of the Secret clearly followed an evolutionary path from fish to turtle, then to reptile, bird, possum and kangaroo. Finally, only Mankind was left with consciousness and free will, and with responsibility for care of the environment.

I then distilled these many stories into one and produced my first Aboriginal theme book in 1988, called 'The Secret of Dreaming'. When I showed the book to David Gulpilil, the actor from Arnhem Land, he read it, paused and looked at me, then said 'I know this Story'. I could not have been happier that a tribal person had said that the story was authentic. Nowadays, some people might try to accuse me of 'cultural appropriation'.

However, if one reads the narrative at the end of the book, I try to explain the process I followed and the basic tenets of what I now refer to as 'Wandjinist Religion'. As indicated earlier, creation began as an act of imagination in the mind of Wandjina. After a long Dreaming of fire, wind, rain, earth, sky land and sea, Wandjina began to grow tired, but wanted the Dream to continue. So Wandjina broke the Dream up into a million jigsaw pieces and sent life into the Dream, in the form of Creator Spirits, to make it real.

These Creator Spirits took their part of the Dreaming jigsaw and as they moved through the plastic environment, it took shape according to both the movement of their bodies and the

dictates of their Dreaming. As they finished their creation work each Creator Spirit surrendered their spirit and their Dreaming to become a landmark or animal we see today.

Finally only Man was left with consciousness and the responsibility to protect the whole of Dreaming jigsaw. When Wandjina saw that human beings understood their responsibilities to the environment and the Dreaming, two more things were done to ensure the Dreaming would be sustained.

First, the spirits of all children ever to be born were seeded into the Dreaming and the Land, where they must wait until it is their turn to be born. This happens when a father finds the spirit of the child in a dream and directs it to the body of their mother, who makes their flesh. One implication of this belief is that every single human being is part of original creation and therefore has a direct, personal connection with God.

When this concept of pre-existence was explained to early anthropologists, it was dismissed as a childish belief. I have even seen written in texts 'Aboriginal people do not understand sex'. This is just one of the ridiculously arrogant notions I have seen in supposedly learned texts. It is in reality, arrogant ignorance.

The second thing that Wandjina did to sustain the Dreaming was to seed all knowledge and the answer to every question into the Dreaming. We therefore have unfettered access to this knowledge through our own Personal Dreaming. We can find the pre-existing knowledge and shape the world according to our own Dreaming.

With the understanding and acceptance of this human responsibility, God withdrew from any further involvement in the real world. Aboriginal people therefore believed there is no divine intervention and everything that happens is due to human agency, either witting or unwitting.

This is why all drawings of Wandjina are shown with eyes but no mouth. It clearly points out that God sees everything, but says nothing.