

THE ENVIRONMENT AS A LIVING ENTITY

In a previous article, I talked about the nature of the Dreaming and how reality was originally forged in an act of imagination by the Great Spirit. To make the dream real, life was then sent into the Dream in the form of Creator Spirits who each carried a part of the great Dreaming Plan.

The Creator Spirits then completed their part of the giant jigsaw of creation work. After this the Creator Spirits surrendered their Dreaming to become the landmarks and animals we see today.

According to Aboriginal religious belief, mankind is therefore now the only being that has retained consciousness and free will, and so is charged with sole care of the real world. The Spirit of All Life, or Wandjina, therefore now rests in the land and although watching and listening, plays no further part in the unfolding of human affairs.

Aboriginal people therefore believed in a non-interventionist Supreme Being. Wandjina is always depicted with eyes but no mouth, because God sees everything, but says nothing.

The idea of God resting in the land and leaving everything in human hands, very strongly conveys the Aboriginal belief in the sacredness of the land and that human beings are solely responsible for its care. To reinforce this notion of the sacredness of the environment, Aboriginal people have a belief in a complex spirit world that surrounds us.

Anything with a form or shape, even inert objects, is regarded as having an essential being and Dreaming of its own that must be respected by human beings.

Although this idea may seem simple, it has complex ramifications. A tree has a spirit, the copse that the tree belongs within has a spirit and the forest to which all the copses belong also has its own spirit. A rock has a spirit, a rocky outcrop has a spirit and the whole hill has a spirit. A river has a spirit, each area of the river and each creek leading to the river all have their own 'Tikilara' or 'Spirit of Place'. We are therefore surrounded by a complex, overlapping spirit world.

Anything created also gains a spirit. If a bird makes a nest, the nest gains a spirit. If a person makes a digging stick, a spear or a shield, these all gain their own spirit. When it is all boiled down though, the belief in a complex multi-layered, overlapping spirit world is simply a device by which respect for the environment is guaranteed.

As an illustration of this, I was many years ago walking in Framlingham Forest with the iconic Elder Banjo Clarke and his young grandson, who was carrying a stick. The grandson dragged his stick along the ground and was softly admonished by Banjo to never make a mark on the ground unless it was for a reason.

Disappointingly, the Aboriginal belief in a pervasive surrounding spirit world has often been dismissed as just simple 'Animism'. This is a category reserved for supposedly fallacious pagan beliefs that inanimate objects can and do have a soul.

There was a great love by Europeans following the period of Enlightenment, of creating taxonomies, or hierarchies, that placed Western thought systems at the top and Aboriginal thought systems at the bottom. Unfortunately the power of these ideas still exists today.

At the time Australia was colonised in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Christian views of the day could not countenance the idea of anything other than human beings possessing a soul.

Such dismissive views clearly show an ingrained unwillingness to understand how belief in a complex spirit world could actually be part of a coherent broader set of religious ideas. Or that it could be compatible with belief in a Supreme Being. It certainly wasn't compatible with the Christian idea of an interventionist God.

In reality, the belief in a complex surrounding spirit world is not so far from our mainstream life experiences today. Our differential use of the words 'house' and 'home' gives some clue to this. We build a house, but when we move in it gains a spirit and become our home.

As individuals, we each demonstrably have our own spirit, but when we band together with others for a mutual purpose, we then gain a team spirit and a common identity. We will often sit in a quiet park and feel the spirit of the place. We will stand on top of a mountain or look down a majestic valley in quiet wonderment of the power and beauty of what we see.

Just imagine what it was like to be an Aboriginal person seeing the wonders and embedded stories of your Country every single day. Not just seeing these creation wonders each day, but also knowing that you were responsible for protecting it and maintaining its Dreaming Secrets.