

ALL ABORIGINAL KNOWLEDGE SERVED ECOLOGICAL PURPOSES

In Western society totemism is not well understood. It is seen to not conform to the canons of empirical science and so tends to be dismissed as just a set of superstitious beliefs held by 'primitive' people.

At its core however, Australian Aboriginal totems can be seen as symbols of ecological relationship. Whilst my knowledge of totems could easily be printed on the head of a pin, I have come to realise that the Aboriginal totem system was in fact the world's first computer system. Like all computers it is a binary matrix, and through this, all Aboriginal knowledge is related and integrated.

This can be noticed most clearly when looking at the 'Skin Totem' system, which determines social structure and family relationships. All tribes throughout Australia were first divided into two halves called Moieties. The two Moieties were then divided into four quarters called Skin Groups. Each of these four Skin Groups had a binary (paired) relationship with each of the other three Skin Groups. These pairings represented the father-child, mother-child, and husband-wife relationships, and were repeated over a three generation cycle.

This division into halves or moieties was fundamental to Aboriginal thought systems and was applied universally to both the living and non-living worlds. This is because everything with a form or a shape is seen to possess a life essence or spirit. The splitting of reality into dualities or complementary opposites included for instance day and night, thunder and lightning, wind and rain, and suchlike. The two moieties therefore reflected and were a mechanism for maintaining the balance of nature.

This splitting of reality into complementary opposites is quite similar to the Taoist concepts of Yin and Yang, with which people are usually more familiar. In a quite fundamental way Yin and Yang are both totems, yet Taoism is regarded as a fully-fledged religion. In Australia the totems most commonly representing these two halves of reality are Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. In some areas of southeast Australia, between roughly Melbourne and Sydney, these moiety division totems are Eagle and Crow.

Within this moiety system, everything is balanced between the two halves and every species is therefore protected. For instance brush-tailed possum, red kangaroo, frill-necked lizard and shark might belong to Black Cockatoo. This would be balanced by ring-tailed possum, grey kangaroo, stumpy-tailed lizard and barracuda belonging to White Cockatoo. This division included every single species, even insects.

Nobody was allowed to hunt or kill any animal in their own moiety, because they are your spirit cousins, so under this system, no species could ever be hunted to extinction. If a particular creature was endangered, it would be made a clan or tribe totem, so then nobody could hunt it.

Each individual totem had a matrix of connections both within and across the moiety divisions. A totem can therefore at the same time represent an animal, a person, a family, a clan, a constellation, a weather pattern, a reciprocal relationship, an abstract idea and, most importantly, an ecological relationship.

As well as knowledge being integrated through the totem system to ensure ecological balance, each totem could also have a more metaphoric meaning. For instance Eagle represents power, Crow means wisdom, Owl means death, Turtle means age, and Bees mean youth and so on. This means that a metaphoric subtext is often embedded in what might at first appear to be a simple story. For instance the story might be about an Eagle killing a Crow to take his tree. However the Crow then comes back to life so Eagle agrees to share the tree.

In a metaphoric sense, the story says that in the short term power can overcome wisdom, but wisdom can never truly die, so power and wisdom must balance each other. Power must be used with wisdom and with wisdom comes power. The story also conveys the message that as part of a greater ecology, human relationships also have to be in balance.

Totems therefore provide an integrating and synthesising system to all Aboriginal knowledge. This is starkly different to western thinking in particular. Western thinking is compartmentalised into separate sciences or study areas, such as astronomy, meteorology, biology, botany, ecology, psychology, art, history, religion, sociology and so forth.

This compartmentalisation of knowledge in western thinking tends to lead to de-contextualisation. Aboriginal people therefore refer to Europeans as 'knowledge splitters' where specialist knowledge is in danger of becoming divorced from practical reality and even common sense.

The totem system therefore provides an ecological context to all knowledge, and Aboriginal people see themselves as 'knowledge bundlers' rather than 'knowledge splitters'.

This totem-based knowledge is however not static. The Dreaming is seen as a reservoir of all knowledge that has not yet been found, so this helped ensure that traditional Aboriginal society continued to adapt, with new knowledge constantly being incorporated into the totemic system. It continues to do so.