

# *Understanding The Dreaming*

Jim Poulter



Dedicated to the memory of Uncle Reg Blow (1939-2012)  
and the many hours of discussion we had on this topic

# UNDERSTANDING THE DREAMING - THE BASIC TENETS OF WANDJINIST RELIGION

## Putting aside primitive assumptions

All Australians are familiar with the term 'The Dreaming' or 'The Dreamtime' but very few have any real idea of what this means as a systematic set of religious ideas. A lot is known about the basic tenets of the other world religions, but very little is understood about Australian Aboriginal religion.

In fact, I looked up the Oxford Dictionary of World Religions a few years ago and every conceivable religion in the world was explained, except Australian Aboriginal religion. The words 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' were not even mentioned in the subject index. My letter of protest went unanswered.

This lack of appreciation of the central themes of Aboriginal religion continues to prevail into the present day for two main reasons.

First, there were strict levels of secrecy within indigenous society and many of the deeper religious concepts were only shared with those people initiated into the highest levels of the society.<sup>1</sup> However despite this secrecy, many higher-level religious concepts are embedded within the many Dreamtime stories that have survived. The trick in decoding these deeper concepts is that it requires a respectful understanding of Aboriginal culture and mindset.

I say respectful advisedly, because the second reason was that this was often glaringly absent in the earliest descriptions and valuing of Aboriginal society. When colonisation began in 1788, Aboriginals were regarded as *'the most primitive and childlike people on Earth'*.<sup>2</sup> As a people they were looked at like curiosities in a specimen jar.

Think for a moment of all the pejorative terms you have heard to describe Aboriginal people, terms such as simple, primitive, pagan, nomadic, stone-age, hunter-gatherers. They were regarded as people who did not productively use the land and were seen to occupy the lowest rungs of humanity, or even below it.

Similarly, all accounts of Aboriginal religion that I have seen effectively dismiss it as a vague low-level system of animal spirit worship and ancestor worship. It is commonly classed as 'Animism' and therefore assigned to the lowest rung in the hierarchy of religious thought systems.<sup>3</sup>

In colonial Australia Aboriginal people were not allowed to give evidence in court, even in their own defence. They were considered to not believe in God so therefore could not swear an oath on the Bible.<sup>4</sup> This presumption was however simply not true. Aboriginal people did indeed believe in a Supreme Being but would not readily discuss the deeper levels of their religion unless you showed the capacity to understand. In Aboriginal society, knowledge is rewarded with more knowledge and ignorance is responded to with silence, not argument.<sup>5</sup>

This point was amply illustrated when two Adelaide Missionaries in 1838 spoke with a tribal person about his beliefs. They immediately rejected his explanation, saying that only Jehovah was the true God. The tribal man answered: *'Then I am a liar and you speak truth. I shall not speak another word. You may now speak.'*<sup>6</sup> In other words, he said that the Missionaries were disrespectful to his beliefs and he would not waste any further words with them.

Such disrespect of Aboriginal culture was commonplace in colonial Australia and was born out of the cultural arrogance of the British. The reality is that Aboriginal religion, which I choose to call 'Wandjinism', has many parallels with other world religions.

## The concept of the Dreaming

The first thing to understand is that 'The Dreaming' very neatly encapsulates the idea that the creation of the world and all life was originally internal to God. Our world is therefore a figment of a divine imagination. However, over the last few centuries Western thinking in particular has become dominated by objectivist science. It encourages us to look at the world as an external reality and therefore able to be empirically weighed and measured.

Despite this, we nonetheless still know that human perception also determines our reality. To the question: *'If a tree falls in the forest and no-one is there to hear it, does it make a sound?'* The Aboriginal answer would be *'No, not unless you **imagine** it would'*.

Contrary to this constructivist view of reality, the Bible story of Creation also implies an objectivist stance when God said, *'Let there be light'*. But who was God talking to? The Aboriginal concept of the Dreaming therefore clearly posits that the universe was created by God in an act of imagination.

More than thirty years ago when I looked at all the Dreamtime Creation Stories I could find from across Australia, I was struck by the many similar themes. The first similarity was that the stories all started out in darkness.<sup>7</sup> In the empty darkness the Spirit of All Life began to Dream, and that first Dreaming was of Fire. The similarity both to the biblical story of creation and the Big Bang Theory was a revelation to me.

These creation stories then all commonly described how the Dreaming continued. There was a Dreaming of wind and rain, earth and sky, land, and sea and so forth. It gave the indelible impression of an understanding of the stages involved in the geological formation of the Earth, but as a product of a divine imagination.

God then began to grow tired from the long Dreaming but wanted the dream to continue and be real and self sustaining. So, God broke the Dream up into millions of pieces and sent life into the Dream, in the form of Creator Spirits, to make it real. Each of these Creator Spirits carried their own piece of the original creation jigsaw with them and continued their creation work, forming the landscape with their bodies in accordance with their Dreaming.<sup>8</sup> We are all very familiar with these many stories of the work of Creator Spirits, but the stories also show how objective reality became fashioned in accordance with their piece of the dreaming puzzle.

When these Creator Spirits finished their work, they surrendered their Dreaming and became a landmark or animal we see today.<sup>9</sup> Finally only one Creator Spirit was left and that was Mankind. Man walked across the land recognizing the creation work that had preceded and knew that it was his duty to protect the whole fabric of the Dreaming. When God saw that Man finally understood his responsibilities to the Earth, two more things were done to make the Earth self sustaining.

First, God created the spirits of all children ever to be born and seeded them into the Dreaming.<sup>10</sup> This was so that each child born would have consciousness and free will, would know their responsibility to the Dreaming. They would then receive the wisdom of their parents and family in the continuing day-to-day care of the Dreaming.

Aboriginal people therefore believe in pre-life rather than after-life and before a child can be born, a father must dream the finding of the child's spirit. The father then directs the child's spirit to the body of their mother, who makes their flesh.<sup>11</sup> When the child is born into the real world, their soul is unified in the flesh, and their skin is the package that keeps spirit and flesh together in the real world.<sup>12</sup> Skin is therefore the symbol of family and marital relationship.

Spirit, Flesh and Skin are therefore the trio of concepts that determined social organisation in Aboriginal Clans across Australia. Spirit denotes the father-child relationship, Flesh denotes the mother-child relationship and Skin denotes the husband-wife relationship. However, when Aboriginal people tried to explain this pre-existence of the child's spirit and the concepts of

Spirit, Flesh and Skin to Europeans, they were again often confronted with cultural arrogance. I have even seen the ludicrous conclusion drawn in anthropological texts that *'Aboriginal people do not understand sex'*.

The second thing that God did before permanently retiring from any intervention in the real world was to seed all knowledge into the Dreaming. The answer to every question that could ever be asked therefore resides in the Dreaming and we have access to it through our own Personal Dreaming.<sup>13</sup> This means that we do not have to pray to God for guidance in our everyday affairs, we only have to look into ourselves and find the answers in the Dreaming. In reality this is no different to personal prayer.

### **Wandjina as a non-interventionist god**

Following the gift of human consciousness and human recognition of our responsibility to be Caretakers of the Earth and the Dreaming, the creation Dreaming was finally complete. God therefore sought rest in the land and takes no further part in the affairs of the world, but continues to watch and listen. This is why all drawings of God, also known as Wandjina, are shown with eyes but no mouth. God sees everything but says nothing.<sup>14</sup>

Although Wandjina is a West Australian name, the concept of an all-pervading and non-interventionist life force applied across Australia, with names like Baiamee and Booriel being used for the Supreme Being. In Victoria for instance the famed William Barak in explained to a French visitor that Booriel was a superior and infinite being, whom they discussed as little as possible. This was so as to not to look foolish in trying to discuss something they could not possibly understand.<sup>15</sup>

As a consequence of divine non-interventionism, Aboriginal people saw everything that happened as a product of human agency, whether witting or unwitting. Things can happen for good or evil, but this is nothing to do with any conscious will of a Supreme Being or Anti-God. It is simply the unfolding of human affairs into which Wandjina will not intervene. As a religion Wandjinism is therefore clearly in the category of Deism rather than Theism, because it subscribes to a belief in a non-interventionist God.<sup>16</sup>

Because of this belief in human responsibility Wandjinism should therefore be regarded as a humanist religion. Whilst some might argue that 'humanist religion' is a self-contradictory term, to me it makes sense. Time is not taken up in idle worship and abstract piety, as there is the business of the real world to be taken care of. Spirituality must therefore instead be reflected in our daily responsibility to the care of each other and the environment.<sup>17</sup>

In this regard Aboriginal religion has many similarities to Taoism as a system of ethics for living. Like the concepts of Yin and Yang, Aboriginal philosophy sees the world as consisting complementary opposites, most commonly represented by the moiety totems of Black Cockatoo and White Cockatoo. Also, the inwardly focused Taoist virtues of Compassion, Moderation and Humility directly equate with the more outwardly focused Aboriginal values of Caring, Sharing and Respect. When it is all boiled down, every religion is ultimately a system of ethics for living.<sup>18</sup>

Compared to most other world religions it seems that Wandjinism was able to achieve a much stronger emphasis on both free will and human responsibility in its theology. It did not believe in predestination, with events unfolded according to some unfathomable divine master plan. Wandjinism instead emphasised the power of individual Dreaming in bringing personal options and choices into being.

On one level Wandjinism conveys an idea of divine determinism in that all options or eventualities that will ever confront human beings were anticipated in the original Dreaming. The seeds of all ideas, options and choices therefore already exist in the Dreaming. However, it

is by our own connection to the Dreaming that we are able to find these choices and options and enact them into reality. In this sense then, Wandjinism articulates an 'optional determinism'.

Simply put, God provides the choices, and we make them. However, the pattern of the choices made is not part of a grand divine plan and Wandjina is simply an interested spectator to the unfolding of human Dreaming. Whether human actions achieve good or evil is therefore not part of some greater divine plan. It is entirely a matter of human choice and human consideration and simply part of the fabric of life. In Wandjinist religion good and evil are therefore not seen as having their inspiration in opposing divine sources such as God and Satan. Good and evil are human conditions and in Aboriginal society their religion was fully integrated with their daily life.<sup>19</sup>

This therefore is the foundation for the Aboriginal belief in human sorcery. It is not to be dismissed as 'primitive superstition' as has so often occurred in the past. It is a natural extension of the foundation concept of a non-interventionist God. The natural corollary to a belief in a non-interventionist God is that human beings are responsible for all that happens, whether for good or evil.

Blaming Satan for the evil in human lives, only serves to deny personal responsibility for our deeds.

### **The environment as a living entity**

The idea of God resting in the land and leaving everything in human hands, very strongly conveys the idea of both the sacredness of the land and human responsibility for care of the Land. To reinforce the notion of the sacredness of the environment, Aboriginal people have a belief in a complex spirit world that surrounds us and is interdependent with us.

They believe that anything with a form or shape even inert objects, have an essential being and Dreaming of their own that must be respected by human beings.<sup>20</sup>

Although the idea may seem simple, it has ramifications of a complex overlapping spirit world. A tree has a spirit, the copse that the tree belongs in has a spirit and the forest to which the copse belongs 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 'Spirit of Place'. 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 objects 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. All knowledge was integrated through the totem system to ultimately serve ecological purposes,<sup>21</sup> and the role of human beings was simply to care for the land and each other.<sup>22</sup>

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

The disappointing part is that this Aboriginal belief in a pervasive surrounding spirit world has often been blithely dismissed as just 'Animism'. This is the lowest category in the hierarchy of religious thought conceived by Europeans, but it is just one of the many hierarchies of thought that place Aboriginal culture on the lowest rung. Animism is the lowly category reserved for the supposedly fallacious pagan belief that inanimate objects can and do have their own spiritual essence.

The Christian churches were particularly censorious about such beliefs, as it was held that only human beings could have a 'soul'. But is the idea that a spiritual essence can be possessed by inanimate objects really too different from the veneration of sacred objects and symbols by other



religions? And does not our own daily lived experience in fact show many contradictions to our espoused beliefs? In practical reality many of our inner convictions can be seen to embrace elements of Animism.

For instance, if we build a house, it gains a spirit and becomes a home. As individuals, we each demonstrably have our own spirit, but when we band together with others for a mutual purpose, we gain a team spirit and a common identity. When we sit in quiet parks, we can all feel the spirit of the place.

### **‘Sorry Time’ as lifting the Earthly burden of the dead**

The Aboriginal belief in a complex spirit world, therefore necessarily included a belief in human ghosts and bad spirits, but this also has to be seen within a broader context. Belief in a non-interventionist God of necessity means that there is no judgment after death on how you have lived your life.

It is only a question of whether your spirit is at peace and ready to be reabsorbed back into the Dreaming and once again become part of the cyclical fabric of life. Ghosts are only the spirits of the dead that have not achieved peace after death.

Re-absorption back into the Dreaming can therefore only occur when we are alleviated of our accumulated earthly sorrows through appropriate human ritual. That is, rather like Jewish people, Aboriginal people believe that during the course of our lives we accumulate many sorrows. Before an individual is able to achieve peace and oblivion after death, this burden of life’s sorrows must be taken from them and shared by the living. If this is not done through proper ritual grieving, then the dead are in danger of becoming tormented ghosts forever.

In Wandjinist religion it is entirely of no consequence how many good deeds an individual may do in the course of their life. This will in no way provide any guarantee of peace after death or a heavenly afterlife. On the other hand, every wrong that is done to you and every sorrow you experience in your lifetime will accumulate and affect your ability to find peace after death.

Death in traditional Aboriginal society is therefore marked by ‘Sorry Time’ where grieving and ritual will help absorb the sorrows of the dead and share it amongst the living.<sup>23</sup> It is a tradition still alive today and of course shares a commonality with all human cultures. The traditional Aboriginal practice of the living no longer mentioning the name of the dead is therefore an extension of this belief of life’s accumulated sorrows. Mentioning their name only provides a pull back to the sorrows of the real world and a disturbance to their peace after death.

In conclusion, you would have noticed that this narrative was dedicated to the memory of Uncle Reg Blow who was a Senior Elder of the Melbourne Aboriginal community. Reg and I were friends and colleagues for more than thirty years and spent many hours together discussing traditional Aboriginal culture and thought systems and drawing parallels with other world religions.

Reg rang me in late 2012 to tell me he was *‘on the way out’* with terminal cancer, so we met several times to put the finishing touches to our ideas. In the week before his death on 12<sup>th</sup> December 2012, he tapped the final copy and said, *‘That’s it’*. The following page is therefore the final summary we had made on the basic tenets of Wandjinist religion, which is undoubtedly the world’s oldest faith.

# **THE BASIC TENETS OF WANDJINIST RELIGION**

## **-THE WORLD'S OLDEST FAITH**

1. In the beginning the world and the universe was created in the imagination of the Spirit of All Life and the laws of nature were also created in this Dreaming, so that the world was complete in itself. The rising and setting of the sun, the tides, rains and all natural events thus occur in accordance with these laws of nature.
2. Then the Great Spirit sent life into the Dream to make it real, and the Secret of Dreaming was given to mankind so that the Dream would be sustained. Consciousness and free will were therefore given to mankind so that we would have responsibility for the Earth and all that happened, whether for good or evil.
3. And so that mankind would have the knowledge to guide the decisions that need to be made in the course of following these responsibilities, all knowledge and truth was seeded into the Dreaming, where we have access to it through our own Personal Dreaming. Whether we use it for good or evil is our own unfettered choice.
4. The Dreaming therefore surrounds us and is past, present and future all rolled into one.
5. Therefore although always watching and listening, the Spirit of All Life will never intervene in our lives. This is why the Great Spirit, also known as Baiamee, Booriel or Wandjina, must always be represented with eyes but no mouth. God hears and sees everything but says nothing.
6. So when we pray it cannot be for the guidance or intervention of the Supreme Being. Our prayers can only be for the inner strength to recognise and accept our responsibilities and find the truth through our own Personal Dreaming. Mankind is therefore left solely responsible for the land and each other.
7. There is no reward for accepting these responsibilities, other than the gift of life itself. There is also no consciousness or individuality after death, only oblivion and reabsorption of our life force into the Dreaming.
8. Neither is there any judgment after death, only how we are remembered by the living.
9. Life is therefore a once only experience that must be lived affirmatively. It is only by accepting our responsibilities to the Earth and each other that we affirm life and find meaning in our existence.
10. Because human consciousness is a direct gift from God the only true connection with God is through our own Personal Dreaming to the knowledge that has been seeded into the Dreaming.
11. In creating the world God did not intend that mankind should spend time in pious worship but should care for the real world and find meaning to our lives in our relationships with others. This then, is God's only will and the meaning of life.

**God's only will is for us to care for the land and each other.**

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