

SORRY TIME

In a previous article I spoke about the Aboriginal belief in the environment as a living entity and that we are surrounded by a complex, overlapping spirit world. Aboriginal people believed that everything with a physical form or shape had a spirit or essence of its own. Everything in the environment was therefore a part of the fabric of the original Dreaming and as such had to be respected and protected.

The Aboriginal belief in a complex spirit world surrounding us, therefore also included a belief in human ghosts and bad spirits. However rather than being dismissed as a simple, pagan belief, this has to be seen within a broader context.

As I also indicated in an earlier article, Aboriginal people believed in a non-interventionist God. Wandjina sees all but says nothing. This of necessity means that there is no judgment after death on how you have lived your life. We were given free will and responsibility for all that happens, so why would we be judged after death for using this gift?

The only concern for Aboriginal people was whether your spirit was at peace and ready to be reabsorbed back into the Dreaming, to once again become part of the cyclical fabric of life. Ghosts are therefore only the spirits of the dead that have not achieved peace after death. Similarly, bad spirits are somehow the product of disturbance to the dead, or a failure in proper ritual.

When we die, re-absorption back into the Dreaming can therefore only occur when we are alleviated of our accumulated earthly sorrows, through proper human ritual. That is, rather like Judaic religion, Aboriginal people believed that during the course of our lives we accumulate many sorrows.

Therefore, before an individual can achieve peace and oblivion after death, this burden of life's earthly 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.

Aboriginal religious beliefs, or as I prefer to label it, Wandjinist religion, hold that 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 the equivalent of a heavenly afterlife. What is of greatest importance in traditional Aboriginal belief is how many wrongs have been done to you in your lifetime. Every wrong that is done to you and every sorrow you experience 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. 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 in the accumulation of life sorrows. Mentioning the name of the dead only provides a pull back to the sorrows of the real world and a disturbance to their peace after death.

After a person's death, the end of Sorry Time was usually signified by a particular totemic signal related to that person. There was therefore not a specific fixed period for Sorry Time, except that for very important leaders and Elders, 28 days (one lunar month) was given for messages to be sent out and people to arrive, often from great distances.

This was seen in the early colonial period with the deaths of Wurundjeri leaders Bebejern in 1836 and Billibelleri in 1846. Both deaths were marked by a 28-day Sorry Time. It is also interesting to note just how many Wurundjeri leaders have died in August, which is immediately prior to the traditional season for childbirth. Beberjen died in August 1836 but the precise date is not known. Billibelleri died on 9th August 1846 and William Barak died on 15th August 1903. Winnie Quogliotti (Terrick) whom I knew and who founded the Wurundjeri Tribe Council, died on 4th August 1988.

Since the colonial period in Victoria, this tradition of Sorry Time has survived in essence, with people even still today referring to 'Sorry Time' or 'Sorry Business'. Aboriginal funerals nowadays still involve people travelling great distances to pay their respects, to give testimony to their life and share in the ritual grieving that helps the individual find peace after death.

The idea of Sorry Time was partly embraced by the apology of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to the Stolen Generations on February 13th 2008. Saying sorry certainly helps the living to reconcile with past sorrows, so it was gratifying to see the good grace with which Aboriginal people across Australia embraced this ritual event, even though the notion of Sorry Time was not properly understood.