

The Divine and the Evil in Aboriginal Mythology

It could be wrongly perceived that literature in Australia began with the white settlement to the continent. In reality, literature in this country goes back to the time when black people walked the land and brought its meaning into their lives in songs and dance stories. White anthropologists believe that these black people were the first to come to Australia, and they came from the north in two waves more than a forty thousands years ago. The Aborigines tell us that they had been in this land since they were spirit people, a combination of gods and humans, and it is the spirit people who created the land and the sky and the seas and all the creatures that live in them. In making the world the spirit people became a part of it. So to the Aborigines, the land owns the people who live in it and provides the text that teaches them the secrets of life. This text which is expressed in stories and songs and rituals are not just a tradition or folklore or oral history, but a culture that makes human and nature one.¹

Aboriginal Mythology comprises of the Dreaming. *“Dreaming in its widest meaning includes the ideas of creation and shaping; of bringing life, natural and human through the activity of cult heroes; of a past which is recreative in the present through ritual, and of a future which is assured by that same ritual. The Dreaming is always present. Everyone is an expression of it though he may not realise the implication of this until after his initiation and he has become somewhat grey. Nor do we begin to understand it until we have been present in the great cult-ritual, recorded the chant text, and so grasped the language and doctrine that we can grasp their esoteric significance”*²

Aboriginal Mythology was expressed through legends and stories that visualize people’s concept of the metaphysical world and give explanation to the differences found in shaping the landscape. In these legends we can sum up values and beliefs similar to those found in other old cultures such as obedience, honesty, loyalty and self-sacrifice. On the other hand the mythology negotiates the eternal quest which was and still a great human issue: Death and Birth.

To achieve harmony in society, Aboriginal laws state that hatred, greed, selfishness and likewise destructive emotions are evil and should be eliminated from society. On the other hand they strongly value family ties and widen the concept of the family to include all relatives and extended to include nature as well (totem, old spirit...). While we in civilized societies seek continuity through dynasty and heritage, the Aborigines diverted to conclusive supernatural culture to assure continuity, where every one is a complementary part of his/her society. This does not mean that aborigines deny individuality, they recognize self assurance, personal power and individual eternity and set rules for these passions in their Dreaming, but the sense of wholeness remains the core of their culture, every one at last is a part of the whole and relatives are very important to the person as a part of his body (leg, arm, eye...). This explains the absence of the possessive pronoun in all Aboriginal languages. Instead of saying my uncle my aunt they see an uncle, an aunt for me. The sense of relating is very powerful to Aborigines and this explains why youth, during the initiation period,

¹ Australian Literature, John McLaren, 1989, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, Aust. The Prologue, p. 9, Latin number

² *ibid*, p 10, Latin number

when isolated, suffer destructive feelings that lead to sickness and in some cases to death

In dreamtime mythology we notice the complicated relation between body and soul, and we read in their rituals the great importance of death. The death, which is the loss of whole consciousness, is followed by the complete destruction of the body, is expressed in their rituals and considered an important part for the circulation of life. It is also an event man looks forward to, either consciously or unconsciously. Men express these feelings in different rituals that include experience of death, while women do it in the important intervals of their lives such as reaching puberty, menopause and through the most important event, birth-giving, an experience that put woman on the brink of death and from within the great suffering gives the bliss of life

In Aboriginal beliefs, every object and every creature on this earth has its own wisdom, spirit and language, whether it has life or not. Every object in this life is like a human being; it has its own conscious and its existing shape. They see this as an assured fact, not subjected to any controversy, and a realistic necessity in all their legends³

In reading Aboriginal mythology, I had noticed that various aspects of their legends correspond to values and beliefs known in many other cultures far away in space and time. Could this mean that the human mind reacts similarly to certain phenomena at a certain stage of cultural development? Is it human imagination that produces beautiful tales to help ease the burden of life, or to console the self by believing that there is something beyond life that is worth living for? Examples of these similarities are what we sometimes find in Aboriginal mythology compared to other well-known Old World material, particularly "Genesis" in the Old Testament of the Bible. In both cases, there is conflict between good and evil, and evil is punished. Moral values such as loyalty and obedience are always highly esteemed, and ill virtues such as jealousy and betrayal are always rejected and dispraised (*The Jealous Twin; the Black Mountain; the Sturt's Desert Pea; Naroondarie's Wives, etc.*)

Obedience is one of the virtues that Aborigines respect and propagate. The concept of obedience in the Aboriginal culture is clear through one of its well known legends, "Naroondarie's Wives"⁴. This legend revolves around the relation between the human being and the metaphysical presence described as the 'Great Spirit'. The story shows that man has to comply with the rules stated by the metaphysical power; however irrational these rules may be. This coincides with what is told in the book of Genesis.

The legend tells the story of two girls who are imprisoned in a grass tree and later released by a holy man – a messenger of the Great Spirit, who guides his people to the right things. After releasing the girls to whom he becomes very attracted, he marries

³ The above mentioned information picked of:

(a) Wise Women of the DreamTime, collected by K. Langloh Parker, edited, with commentary by Johanna Lambert, Rochester, Vermont 1993

(b) Marcie Muir, My Bush Book: (Sydney 1982)

(c) Paperbark, J. Davice & Others, (Queensland, 1990)

⁴ PaperBark, a Collection of Black Australian Writing, edited by Jack Davis and others UQP, 1990, Queensland, pp. 19 - 32

them. He cites the laws of the Great Spirit to them. One of the laws is not to eat a certain kind of fish, known by the name of Tookurie. After their settlement, the girls break the law and eat the forbidden fish. The story depicts the journey of agony and the severity of the fate they meet due to their disobedience. The legend meets in many faces with a story well known in the book of Genesis – Adam and Eve.

Both stories agree that women have a devious nature. Eve seduces Adam by convincing him to eat from the forbidden tree, and the girls seduce the holy man so that he sets them free. They make melancholic sounds and call for help when Naroondarie is passing by. They are conscious that a plant like a Grass Tree is not a good medium to send their message through, so they make their voices sound as if they were coming through the She Oak. In this manner the cunning maidens succeed in “touching the cord of pity in the sacred man’s heart”. The sacred man uses the power given to him by the Great Spirit to set them free. Instead of staying loyal and grateful to the man who saves them, they betray his trust and eat the Tookurie fish, which is strictly forbidden for a woman to eat. They flee to avoid his anger.

Similarly to the book of Genesis, the Great Spirit intervenes in order to delay their escape. The Spirit conjures wild storms and as punishment the wives are transformed into rocks (similar in to the story of Sodom and Amora in the Old Testament). Then comes the role of the savior – Naroondarie – who, in an act of love, risks his life and goes deep in the ocean seeking the spirit of his two wives. He rescues them from the watery grave and together they rise upwards to join the land of spirits, remembering always to obey the will of the Great Spirit.

This remind us of the story of savior Jesus Christ, who came to earth and suffered pain and death to save the human race and wash it from the original sin committed by Adam and Eve. The water here is a common factor. In Christianity, baptism is a means of cleansing from the original sin. The two wives merged deep into water to have their souls cleaned in order to be able to access the land of the sacred spirits.

The feeling of guilt is another factor that the two stories share. Adam and Eve, after committing their sin, tried to hide from God as the two wives do by attempting to escape.

Women in both legends are the ones who revolt and question: the maidens express their delight in enjoying such sweet food, “Ah the men are clever! They know what are the nicest foods, and so they make laws to prevent and deprive us. But we have been too clever”. Eve is unconvinced by the irrational order God has given her about the apple tree.

Food in both stories is the field of experiment in which the act of disobedience is exercised. The only difference is that the book of Genesis bans both man and woman from the apple tree. The Aboriginal myth restricts women only from the eating of the fish.

Disobedience, guilt, punishment and salvation are four distinct stages that follow each other in the same order in both stories. The question that stays open is whether these myths and legends remain loyal to their roots or whether the culture of the interpreter

intervenes to color them. Should this be true, one wonders what additional influences David Uniapion brought to the telling of the original.

Narondaree's wives is only an example of certain aspect that could be found in aboriginal mythology. When reading these legends we should consider that these have not only translated to a different language but into a different kind of text.⁵ A great part of these legends has been lost due to displacement or disruption and the passing of many communities as a result of white settlement. Some of what has been left has been collected and recounted by white anthropologists and writers. Some are still being kept in the surviving communities where they are passed on from generation to generation carrying, while told, what could fit the mentality of the white settlers. We should consider, as well, that the white settlement, destroyed the wholeness and continuity of the text, a matter doesn't concern young Aboriginal writers any more, they are more concerned with the struggle to preserve their identity than with the restoration of harmony.⁶

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5-Sep-01

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⁵Legend and Dreaming, Roland Robinson, Edward & Shaw, Sydney, 1967, forward by A. P. Elkin, p 6

⁶ Australian Literature, ibid, prologue, P, 9