

The universe in a nutshell: messages in Dreaming stories

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...history intervenes in culture as a kind of second nature: that nature which men secrete during the historical process, as they cover up the past with ever new layers and press the old layers ever further down, as if to fill the yawning gap between themselves and a world that nature itself, now plundered and enslaved, is on the point of abandoning (Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Origin of Table Manners: Mythologiques Vol III*, 1978:431).

Can I tell you a story? One night many years ago, I found myself in old Turkey Creek, in the days before any houses had been built for the Warmun community. The people then all lived in humpies, home-made from bush posts, old sheets of corrugated iron, bits of canvas, anything to keep out the rain in the wet season and burning sun in the dry. They had all moved to Turkey Creek from their ancestral lands, where they had worked for almost a century for the European pastoralists who had seized control of their country, only to be thrown off when their labour became unprofitable for the cattle barons. The old Turkey Creek post office sat on the only pocket of land for a hundred miles around that was not under a cattle lease, that the Gija people could legally reside on, a refugee camp in their own land with nowhere else to go. When I arrived at Turkey Creek that night, I was taken to the Top Camp and introduced to two young men in cowboy hats and riding boots as my brothers. As they had no blanket and I had one, we lay down on the bare ground together and spread it over us, with our hats for pillows. Above us stretched the immense radiant shimmering night sky of outback Australia.

That night I heard my first Dreaming story. It was about the two bright stars that are sometimes called The Pointers, as they line up towards the Southern Cross. For the Gija and their neighbours they are a pair of eyes, and a powerful reminder of the Law. The story I was told (in the 'station English' that linguists like to call Kriol) was about young lovers, a girl who was promised to an old man, and the young man she eloped with instead. They escaped one night and ran through the night, putting as much distance as they could between themselves and the elders who would surely follow and punish them with death. When daylight broke, they hid themselves and slept, rising again the next night to run some more, hiding again, and running again the next night. They dared not light a fire for fear of being seen, but held each other as they hid. As my companions told it, the couple kept running night after night, until they reached a place in the desert west of Alice Springs (a thousand kilometre journey). Finally they felt they had run far enough to elude their pursuers, and safe enough to light a fire and camp beneath a tall white gum tree. As they sat before the fire in each other's arms, from behind the bushes one-by-one, painted faces rose up in the firelight. In terror, the young man dashed up the gum tree, with the girl close behind him. But she was too slow. The elders threw their spears and brought her back to earth dead. The young man was so terrified that he leapt right out of the top of the tree and flew up into night sky, where his eyes now look down upon us, a message for all time of the consequences for rash young men of stealing the promised wives of their elders.

It's widely assumed that Dreaming stories carry moral messages, and the moral in this one seems particularly pointed as it was told to a single young man, camping in a strange community. But morals about behaviour are only one layer of meaning in any Dreaming

story. Dreaming stories are time capsules, that generations of ancestors have created to send messages to future generations, down the centuries and millenia. At the centre of every Dreaming story is the Law, and the Law is the eternal centre of Aboriginal society. The Law is the sacred bond that holds Aboriginal societies together, and at the centre of the Law is betrothal. Initiation and betrothal are one and the same; at initiation a man is betrothed to a number of women by their fathers or brothers, from whom he may choose a partner. That is the meaning of a 'promised' spouse: the sacred exchange at the moment of initiation. Ceremonial betrothal sanctifies bonds between families, obligating their members to support each other and share their resources in times of need and abundance, and above all to avoid conflict. So at the centre of the Law is love, of partners in marriage, of families for their children, of men who are betrothed to each other's daughters and sisters. The love is created and cemented by exchanging partners and resources between intermarrying families. The elder whose betrothed fiancé eloped with a lustful young man may have spent years supporting her family, building relationships that were mortally threatened by the elopement. That is the message of the story, and why the boy's eyes still look down upon us.

But there is yet another layer of meaning in most Dreaming stories, because the Law is not just about relationships between people, but their relationships to the land. The lovers' epic journey in this story represents the vast reach of their elders' knowledge and connections. Many Dreaming stories involve journeys of this scale, of a thousand kilometres or more, connecting all the people along them in a common inheritance from the same Dreaming ancestors. The longest of all are the travels of the Red Kangaroo ancestors, into whose Law ceremonies men are initiated across the entire western half of the continent, from the Kimberley coast to the Southern Ocean. Initiation brings not only betrothal but access to the secret sacred knowledge of songs and ceremonies that record the ancestors' acts of creation, and constitute the title deeds to the land. Initiates' knowledge accumulates year-by-year; the older a person gets, the wider their knowledge grows, so that the young can never know what their elders know. The young man in the story imagined he could escape beyond his elders' reach, but their knowledge would always outdistance his.

Other stories are more local, such as the story of the Moon man called *Jawurranji* or *Garnkiny*, whose travels across Gija country are recorded in landforms like the gorges and springs named in the story. Some tellings of this story focus simply on its events, but when elders like Mick Jawalji tell it, they are concerned to name each of the places where the events occurred. For them, knowledge of the Law and knowledge of the land are inseparable. Each of the places they name is pregnant with the spiritual significance given it by the ancestors, manifest evidence of both their ancestors' historical reality, and the rights in land the people today have inherited from their ancestors.

When the story says Moon came from the west with his 'promised wives', this means they were not only the 'right-skin' kin relation, but were betrothed to him in the ceremonies. The implication is that these women came from people west of Gija country, with whom the Gija participate in Law ceremonies and intermarry. When they and Moon turn south-east they enter Gija territory, so that this part of the story belongs to the Gija people, as do the places they visit and give shape to. Interestingly, the range of the black headed python (*Aspidites melanocephalus*) is north and west of Gija territory but not in the more arid south. When Moon is denied marriage to the black headed python, he travels south, away from her territory.

A characteristic feature of Dreaming stories is a disruption, an inversion of normal or appropriate relationships. In the Gija Moon story the disruption begins with the departure of his promised wives, although they are obligated by their ceremonial betrothal to stay with him if he wishes. Crucially for the story's interpretation, this is also what certain stars do each year, famously the Pleiades or 'Seven Sisters' that stop rising in southern skies each winter but return in spring. The Gija Moon story is related to similar stories all over Australia, in some of which the Moon pursues the Seven Sisters, while in others they are pursued by a man who becomes the Orion constellation. In many of these stories, it is the eldest sister after whom he lusts; in the Gija story it is their mother. The Gija story names the mother and several sisters as stars, although they are not specifically identified as Pleiades. But the astronomical significance is that for a few years each decade or so, the Moon travels with the Pleiades star cluster each night for part of the year, until the Pleiades stop rising, and then again after they have risen in spring, until the Moon's orbit moves away from them again. Here is a photo of the Moon/Pleiades conjunction in 2005, with Greek names for the sisters. In common with many peoples, the ancient Greeks also believed that the Pleiades were once sisters pursued by the hunter Orion (Andrews 2004). For the Greeks, they were the daughters of Pleione and Atlas, seen here close to the Moon.



<http://www.biblicalastronomy.com/05Feb.htm>

Thus the story's disruption begins with the sisters leaving their promised husband Moon, and then when they meet again at Godford Gorge, he rejects them one-by-one. This is Moon's right, as a man is betrothed to several women, and may choose from among them, or may choose none and marry another. Hence the disruption of the sisters' rejection is reversed as Moon asserts his right, but then he goes too far in choosing their mother instead. The taboo against him even saying her name derives, not only from their 'wrong-skin' relation, but from the ritual betrothal of her daughters to him; she is the last person he should desire. Significantly, as the Moon passes through the Pleiades, it blocks the light of one star at a time (called occultation by astronomers), mirroring the story's sequence as Moon rejects the sisters one-by-one, then attempts to choose the mother. This time the disruption is countered by the people objecting that she is Moon's mother-in-law. In the version told to Phyllis Kaberry in the 1930s, they not only shouted at him, but 'She and the other women with her attacked him in fury and cut off his organs which changed to stone' (1939: 199-200). He cannot have her, and travels on southwards, away from the country of the black headed python who cannot accompany him, as the Moon travels away from her in the sky.



This is a powerful illustration of how Dreaming stories operate to represent abstract principles about human society, and its relations to nature, the land, and the cosmos. They use the everyday grammar of stories, rather than the abstract grammar of scientific interpretation, as I am doing here, but they create abstractions by layering meanings onto each other. Thus the travels of Moon, his promised wives and their mother, are at once the historical journeys of people across actual places in the land, the astronomical travels of heavenly bodies across the sky, and the ecological habits of species such as the black headed python, and the fish that Moon caught. The stories embody a theory of the social and natural universe, but its generalisations and abstractions are expressed in the concrete particulars of people, events, and places, along with humour and emotion.

The one dimension that is not particular in Dreaming stories is time. It is not the time of yesterday, or the recent past, as ordinary stories recount, nor the historical time of societies like ours that like to count the years that separate them from nature. The Dreaming is a time that is at once immeasurably long ago, and eternally present behind the everyday appearances of people, places and events. Its evidence can be seen in the behaviours of people and animals today, the shapes of the land, and the Dreaming stories, songs and ceremonies that recount its events. For Gija people, the distance in time between themselves and Dreaming ancestors is collapsed by the kinship system, so that ancestors such as the Moon man *Jawurranji/Girkany* are spoken of as kin to the people today. Time in the kinship system is not linear, but cycles through the generations, as grandchildren are considered the same generation as their grandparents. The cyclicity of kinship follows the order of nature, as the Moon dies and returns each month, the Pleiades disappear and reappear each year, and the Moon and stars come together and part each decade. We die, but the Moon returns, along with the rest of the universe. It does so because the people insisted on the Law, against the selfish lusts of one man. By breaking the Law, Moon threatened to break the cyclicity of time itself; the price for ensuring its eternal return was our own mortality.

What can this view of time mean to us moderns, for whom time has become a commodity, like everything else in creation? What can the Dreaming stories mean to us, if not also merely commodities to collect as exotic curiosities? One possible answer is that they connect us to a shared past that history and religion have been trying to suppress for centuries, and which modernism is now doing its best to obliterate, as Levi-Strauss laments. Human culture did not spring up independently in different places; it has a common origin in the depths of time, long before our ancestors spread across the earth, tens of thousands of years ago. The ravages of time and conflict have almost erased its memory in Europe and elsewhere, but in Australia its memory has been nurtured down the millenia, in the Dreaming stories bequeathed our generations by the ancestors of Aboriginal Australians.

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