

# DEEP TIME AND DRAGON DREAMING: THE SUSTAINABLE ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY OF THE SONG LINES, FROM CELEBRATION TO DREAMING

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update 28<sup>th</sup> March 2014



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**ABSTRACT:** *It is suggested that in a culture that is suicidal, to get a better understanding of what authentic sustainability is about requires us to see through the spectrum of a different culture. Australian Aboriginal cultures, sustainable for arguably 70,000 years, provide one such useful lens.*

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## INTRODUCTION

As I showed in the last section, any culture that destroys its own life support system in the name of progress is suicidal and functionally insane, and has not got long to live. It is a little like sawing off the branch on which you are sitting and calling it progress when you increase the speed by which the saw works. Those that participate in such a culture, when not part of the solution, are part of the problem, and in such a situation that which is believed to be normality is instead part of the insanity. In an ecocidal culture such as our own consumerist modern Industrial Growth Civilisation that sees progress as turning the living tissue of the planetary surface into money as quickly as it conceivably can, we are precisely in this situation. Sanity in such a suicidal situation is seen as “alternative” if not “abnormal”.

Australians are lucky, not only do they have so much natural environment still left intact, but they also have the incomparable Aboriginal heritage. From an environmental point of view this makes them doubly wealthy. In the last section I demonstrated how our culture is undergoing a necessary shift in worldview, the shift from seeing everything as mere lifeless mechanism to seeing it as organism – full of life, mind, intelligence and soul. This realisation is important for the conventional scientist. If we define soul, as the “essence” at the core of things then soul is everywhere.

As I showed in the last section, this realisation was present in pre-Western world views, before the great revolutions in thinking associated with the European “enlightenment”. For such people there was a clear “Anima Mundi” a “soul of the world” that infused the entire Earth, people, trees, water and rocks, with responsiveness and knowingness. Talking with Aboriginal elders has confirmed and demonstrated how the “Anima Mundi”, the Soul of the Earth, of “Dreaming” which animates their whole world view, the whole of the world for them is alive. To become aware of this requires, however, a “deeper listening”, what the Aboriginal Walpuri people call Dadirri, and the Mardu call Pinakarri.

This deeper listening requires us to listen more carefully to the Earth itself, seeing the Earth as a whole having properties similar to living systems. This modern “Gaia Theory” was first developed by Sir James Lovelock in the late 1960s, at a time when he was working with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) of the USA, working to discover a test for life on Mars, that could be sent on a capsule to the red planet. In his own creative way, Lovelock turned the problem around, imagining he was a Martian scientist trying to test for life on Earth. He suddenly realised, that in the paradoxes of the Earth’s atmosphere, where the gases of combustion reside side by side, could only be explained by the vision of the Earth as a life-like self-regulating organism. Gaian scholar Stephan Harding shows how seen from another point of view (one that James Lovelock himself feels very uncomfortable with) we can say that it was the “Anima Mundi” that contacted James Lovelock. After an absence of centuries the “Anima Mundi” was suddenly present again, within the very bastions of conventional science.

Conventional scientists did not like Lovelock using the name of Gaia, even as a metaphor. For them “self-regulating semi-homeostatic autopoietic system” would have been far more satisfactory. To increase the acceptability of his theory, Lovelock himself came to call “Gaia Science” as “Geophysiology”. Part of the problem with this inacceptability of the new Gaian paradigm lay with the motivations of scientists themselves.

“Why should we do science?” The conventional reason, given by many scientists since the days of Bacon and Descartes has been to gain knowledge for control and power over life and the world. Of such systems, Gregory Bateson<sup>1</sup>, the systems thinker, for instance has argued

*"The myth of power, is of course, a very powerful myth; and probably most people in this world more or less believe in it... But it is still epistemological lunacy and leads inevitably to all sorts of disaster... If we continue to operate in terms of a Cartesian dualism of mind versus matter, we shall probably also come to see the world in terms of God versus man; élite versus people; chosen race versus others; nation versus nation and man versus environment. It is doubtful whether a species having both an advanced technology and this strange way of looking at the world can endure..."*

*The whole of our thinking about what we are and what other people are has got to be restructured. This is not funny, and I do not know how long we have to do it in. If we continue to operate on the premises that were fashionable during the Pre-Cybernetic era, and which were especially underlined during the Industrial Revolution, which seemed to validate the Darwinian unit of survival, we may have twenty or thirty years before the logical reductio ad absurdum of our old positions destroys us. Nobody knows how long we have, under the present system, before some disaster strikes us, more serious than the destruction of any group of nations. The most important task today is, perhaps, to learn to think in the new way."*

If Bateson was correct, as given the reality of the last section suggests he was, then our culture thus needs to undergo a major shift in worldview, the shift from seeing everything as mere mechanism, a lifeless machine, to seeing it as a complex organism – full of life, mind, intelligence and soul. This is the biggest project we have on the Earth at the moment. This realisation is an extremely important and challenging one for the conventional reductionist mechanical scientist, attempting to get “power over” nature. It is also important for Dragon Dreaming if we are to ultimately build a truly life sustaining culture as a part of the Great Turning<sup>2</sup>, shifting us away from the cancerous Industrial Growth Civilisation towards a culture that fully sustains life as a whole.

This conventional rationality of control over nature, however, has been upset by the Gaia theory, as control over a living entity as large as the world is simply impossible. This leads us to a new reason, a holistic reason to engage in science. This holistic reason suggests that we should “do” science, not to gain control, but to achieve a greater sense of participation and belonging. This is becoming the real reason why we are doing it.

Arne Naess, who was the first to speak of Deep Ecology, speaks of the “wide identification with the more than human world”. Aldo Leopold, who began to speak of an “ethics of the land” in

the 1940s spoke of the need to start “Thinking like a Mountain” when he saw the great living spark that linked the light in the eyes of a dying wolf with the world in which it lived.

Doing science in the absence of such identification and participation makes science into a dry and lifeless subject which sucks the soul out of that which is studied. We need to reanimate science with soul, poetry, animation, and the joy of our full participation in and with life.

## AN INTRODUCTION TO ABORIGINAL CULTURE

At the start of a Dragon Dreaming intensive workshop I now often start a method that connects Celebration with Dreaming, with a presentation of Aboriginal Songlines, as this provides a powerful way to celebrate ourselves, and the journeys we have taken in our lives to get us to the present moment. The Dragon Dreaming method also works through the creation of the Songlines for the Planning and Doing of your Project, centred in place, connected to the Dreaming and completed in Celebration, and shared in play, story and even in song. These are all concepts drawn from arguably the oldest culture on Earth, the Australian Aboriginal culture and belief, and they are important to Dragon Dreaming for a number of reasons.

The Australian Aboriginal people are the indigenous inhabitants of the driest inhabited continent of the Earth. For probably between 50,000 and 70,000 years Aboriginal people have been occupying the land I was born in, the southwest corner of Western Australia. These people called themselves the Nyungar or the Noongar, a word which in their ancient language means simply “people”. Originally, with approval of the Noongar Council of Elders, Dragon Dreaming was called Waugyl Dreaming, named after the Noongar Rainbow Serpent in my home in southwest Western Australia. However to avoid a frequent “Huh!” reaction and confusion for non Western Australian audiences (and even many Western Australians) it was renamed Dragon Dreaming in the early 1990s, as the Dragon has, as I showed in the last section, some of the archetypal energy associated with the Aboriginal Rainbow Serpent, and is more easily understood in our modern Euro-centric culture.

Like Aboriginal people throughout Australia, the Noongar had built a sustainable culture in a land of continuous climate change; in which the difference between a drought year and a flood year was greater than the difference between the hot dry summer and the colder wetter winter. Furthermore, the lands of the Yilgarn Plateau of most of Western Australia are amongst the oldest on Earth and have been above sea-level for 2.5 billion years. Their natural fertility has long been washed to the sea. Sustainable pre-modern agriculture in such an environment, not dependent upon huge inputs of fertiliser, pesticides or other chemicals transported from long distances by fossil fuels, was clearly impossible. This cultural environment, therefore, could not depend upon high population densities supported by peasant agriculture, as was the case of the cultures to the north, in Indonesia, South East Asia, India, China and Japan. Whilst they understood the principles of farming, Aboriginal people sought and found another way, a way important to the world we are currently entering. They limited their population to below what the highly biodiverse local ecosystems could sustain. With their principles of “firestick farming”, burning a mosaic landscape in spring and autumn, they opened the canopy of forests to make open woodlands, returned small amounts of fertility to the depleted soils, encourage plant

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growth, and encouraged the spread of many fire-resistant species that would otherwise be of limited range. With its coverage of eucalypts, wattles and casuarinas, Australia had the most wooded desert environments of the Earth. A pyrogenic open park-like Australian landscape, praised at first by early European settlers, was their greatest cultural achievement. Aboriginal people were environmental managers of great sophistication, and where these practices have survived the destruction of European white Australian culture, Aboriginal people are now working with conservation authorities to preserve indigenous species and native habitats from extinction.

Central to the maintenance of this culture was a diverse incredibly nutritious diet of naturally harvested foodstuffs of high nutritional value, far better than European diets of the time. “Bush tucker” plants even hold nutritional and health surprises to scientists today! Circular nomadic lifestyles that prevented the accumulation of waste in any one location or the ruinous depletion of plants and animals, and low population densities, greatly limited the spread of infectious diseases, and as a result when they were first contacted, Aboriginal people, even discounting the effects of infant mortality, had a quality of health and a standard of living far superior to that of contemporary Europeans. In a situation where through cultural simplicity and the limitation of “wants”, a leisured affluence was characterised by a rich ceremonial life, early Europeans found that the Aboriginal people prior to contact had a proud, naturally aristocratic bearing, extremely happy and supportive childhood, and little desire for material possessions. These are all lessons our modern consumerist cultures are all struggling to learn.

These characteristics, and the Aboriginal possession of the land, was a central challenge to European settlers, and in the two centuries since then, in most cases this Aboriginal culture has been systematically attacked, its central institutions of family life, language and culture weakened or destroyed, its use of the land curtailed, and the land itself has ecologically suffered as a result. Today in many parts of Australia, Aboriginal people live a culture of dispossession, similar to other indigenous cultures also impacted by confiscations of land and culture.

European farming techniques, presumed to be appropriate in this far distant land, have been disastrous by comparison to Aboriginal land practices. Clearing land for farming prevented the necessary evapotranspiration of ground waters to the atmosphere, greatly reduced rainfall and led to increased dryland salinity. Soils, broken open by the clearing and ploughing, now depend for their productivity upon artificial applications of agro-chemicals, fertilisers and pesticides. Further ecological collapse has been engendered by the introduction of European species which have gone wild, particularly rabbits, cats and foxes. Before contact the south west of Western Australia was one of the world’s hot-spots for its rich biodiversity of unique and endemic species. Now it is a hot-spot for the numbers of its rare and critically endangered species of plants and animals. At European contact the south west corner of Western Australia had 27 drinkable fresh water rivers. Today, all are saline to a greater or lesser degree and unsafe for human consumption.

The ecological ignorance demonstrated by Europeans when first met by Aboriginal people, was one of the reasons why Aboriginal people called Europeans Djanga, meaning “dead spirit”. There were a number of other reasons for this too. Firstly Europeans demonstrated no understanding of the complex systems of kinship that connected Aboriginal groups with all of life. This fact must have had been forgotten as a result of their spirits having died. Aboriginal

people believed that we came from the stars, a finding now scientifically confirmed by the fact that every atom in our being was once part of a star. But Aboriginal Noongar believed their ancestors' dead spirits also eventually would return to the sky, and there followed the path of the setting sun, to travel skywards, with the stars representing their innumerable ultimate camp fires of their ancestors. Europeans here came from the west, the direction of Karinyup, the setting sun. Europeans had a deathly white pallor, another characteristic of the dead. Aboriginal people also said, thanks to poor European hygiene at the time, that the Europeans, who rarely washed, smelled like corpses. It was also found that any Aboriginal person who too closely associated with Europeans was also liable to suffer a European disease for which Aboriginal people had no immune resistance and they were thus likely to die. Measles and smallpox were especially dangerous. The Aboriginal belief that Europeans were already dead explained why the Europeans were so ignorant of the proper care of the land, and their failure to recognise all plants and animals in the environment as close kindred. After nearly 200 years of contact, only now are European Australians discovering to their cost the damage they have done and the need to take proper care of this land as temporary custodians for future generations.

Europeans have also been highly dismissive of these Aboriginal belief systems. They have been called "primitive totemic animists" for their claims that the human and non human worlds shared a common living ancestral expression. Aboriginal people, it was claimed, lacked a concept of time, complex numbers or of cultural progress, characteristics that made European cultures "superior" to "stone age" Aboriginal people. Such views are still widely held by some European settlers, and even today Aboriginal people are still on occasions, by the uneducated Europeans, referred to as a "primitive people". But as seen in the last section, our vaunted European cultures have now proven to be not sustainable. They have brought our planet to the edge of massive ecological collapse and a mega-extinction of much biodiversity and most complex species and ecosystems with which we share this planet are rapidly disappearing. In such a culture, as I have shown, a form of progress that destroys the life support systems is a form of insanity. To uncover the degree to which we are insane requires us to view our own culture from another vantage point, and I have been fortunate enough to see enough of non-European cultures, like those of the Aborigines, or of the Highlands in New Guinea, Indonesia and Africa, to be able to see just how "insane" our conceptions of progress have become.

## **THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF CIVILISED CULTURES**

This is not new. Civilised cultures are all inherently unstable. Since the building of the world's first city, Eridu, over seven thousand three hundred years ago, in Southern Iraq, possibly as many as 31 civilisations have risen and fallen, some faster, and more violently than others. Like the very first civilisations that developed, they all have by their very nature gradually or rapidly consumed the natural resource base upon which they have depended. In its rapid depletion of non renewable resources by ours is proving so far no different. Vast deserts, from the Atlantic shores of the Western Sahara to the Gobi Desert of China mark the trace of many ancient

civilisations and cultures which, through over-using and abusing the fragile semi-arid living environment of which they were a part, killed the life they depended on and suffered collapse themselves as a result. At the cultural epicentre of this vast zone of destruction, in the salt desert of southern Iraq, lies the first human city yet found, at Eridu, and this is no accident, as it was from this ancient Sumerian centre-point that all civilisations later developed and spread, both west and east. Since then many other cultures have also destroyed themselves in a similar fashion; from Easter Island, which when it had cleared its forests then collapsed into warfare and cannibalism, to the Lowland Maya who destroyed fragile soils of their tropical ecosystem through overpopulation and environmental abuse, to the Norse settlements in Greenland, whose cleared forests and soil erosion with climate change pushed them eventually into starvation and extinction<sup>3</sup>. The last collapse of civilisation in our own particular European history was the collapse of the Western Roman Empire that began the Western European Dark Age, but there have been many other Dark Ages in the past, and some a lot more recent and a lot more destructive. When Columbus arrived in the Americas the population there may have numbered in the 100 million. While the collapse of the violent Aztec and Inca Empires are the most well known, in other places the collapse was no less violent and rapacious. And in our lifetimes this ancient pattern of collapse is now at risk of happening again. Today in the vast zone of Old World, mid-latitude deserts and semi desert zones, we are busy building new desert extensions, in our clearing of fragile tropical forests, to feed our demands for paper pulp, timber and biodiesel palm oil, and as our overuse of fragile soils and water systems and through climate change and loss of biodiversity all show. It seems like slowly boiling frogs<sup>4</sup> we are slow to learn from our past history on this planet. We seem to suffer from Historical Attention Deficit Disorder, a form which means that “those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it”.

During the recent past for example, despite repeated warnings, we have continued to further exceed our available ecological footprint. Over the same period, especially over the last twenty years, sustainability has become a “buzz word”. But how do we recognise and celebrate sustainability even when our culture has had little or no experience of true sustainability for thousands of years and we have not any actual idea of what it is like in reality? Even environmentalists by their actions seem locked in some form of psychological cognitive dissonance – “don’t do as I do, do as I say!” Examining their daily practice shows that they too lead lives which seem to show that their bodies are engaged in everyday activities that are disconnected in some fundamental way from their thinking about natural ecology, as well as from their deepest dreams, their wildest yearning, their thoughts and wishes. With peak oil, climate change, economic collapse, and loss of biodiversity, everywhere our current lives are not currently sustainable in anything like their present fashion. As I have mentioned twice above, any culture that destroys its own life support systems in the name of progress is insane (third time lucky!), and yet, as Jarrod Diamond shows in his book “Collapse: Why some societies succeed and others fail”, so many cultures have done exactly that. In such an insane unsustainable culture, most people become complicit and implicit in the insanity. As Einstein said insanity is “doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results” yet that seems to be our current model of civilisation and we have been doing this for thousands of years, and calling it progress. In its current incarnation, for instance we are told we can only protect our environment through economic growth, without realising that such limitless growth is a symptom of cancer, and kills the body of the host it has infected, thus killing itself!

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There is obviously some psycho-spiritual source to these difficulties. Lynne White Junior argued that the source of the problem was a Judeo-Christian world view in which God gave humans "dominion over the Earth", and commanded them to breed and multiply, but this was only the last step in an earlier view. This is a world view that originated in part as Rudolph Bahro has shown, from a human epistemology, built into the human psyche about the nature of reality. Human languages, as Stephen Pinker, and Noam Chomsky have shown, all share a "deep structure", probably genetic in origin, that separate "subject" (the actor) from the "object" (the acted upon). Unless combated through early childhood experiences, and continual cultural reinforcement, this potentially creates an absolutist sense of "power over", and the creation of hierarchical and authoritarian power structures. We think this separation of subject from object, of "self" from "other" is "real" in some fundamental sense, as even in our earliest memories, there is already a clear separation between an internal "self" as separated from an "external" world. And yet child psychology shows us clearly that such a separation is in fact created through language. In their earliest words a child speaks of itself as an object, my daughter when she was small would not say "I want", but would say instead "Arwen wants". Only as she began to learn the language did she begin to insert a separated individual ego in her speaking and say "I".

In a world polarised in this way between "Self" and "Not Self", survival of the individual becomes problematic. The world "outside" is threatening and dangerous, and even though we have eliminated most large predators of humans, we still live as though this is true. The greatest dangers to us are now other humans. Not only do we believe that our "model" of the world is somehow real, into this model we have inserted a similar model of ourselves. As Ernst Becker showed, the insertion of a model of oneself inside the model of the world, whilst creating the immense power of the possibility of foresight (the Greek God Prometheus) and hindsight (Greek Epimetheus), rehearsing future behaviours or reconsidering the alternatives to the past, this gift of being able to project our awareness into the past and the future introduces the awareness of the troubles of the world, above all the reality of Death. Greek mythology expressed the circumstance well. For their help in aiding the Olympian Gods defeat the Titans in the primeval war of creation, Zeus gave Prometheus and Epimetheus a gift, a woman who was to be their wife, Pandora ("Pan" = everything, "Dora" = gift), and a box, never to be opened. But the curiosity of "the gift of everything" was too great, she opened the box and introduced all the troubles into the world, ending the golden age. Similar to the misogynistic Jewish story of Adam and Eve in the garden, where Eve seduced Adam into eating of the fruit of the knowledge of "Good" and "Evil" and so being expelled from paradise, this myth at its core expresses well the existential angst associated with the childhood discovery of the reality of "death". We find similar stories in the ancient memories of other civilised cultures around the world.

Survival then becomes problematic and two strategies seem to result. In one the child thinks "If I keep myself small, so that no one notices me, I will survive". In the other the child thinks, "If I take control of the external reality, I will survive". But within this polarisation a hierarchical system of "power over" there are always "winners" and "losers", and a zero-sum game of win-lose "power-over" struggles develops, a power struggle which is the dominant character of all civilised cultures. Everywhere we find the development of elites, where a small number of priests, soldiers, bureaucrats or merchant princes, use their power through their control of cultural conditioning, coercion, control or commerce, to dominate the lives of the common



people, extracting socially, politically culturally or economically the surplus production of tithes, tribute, taxation or tariffs on which survival of the elite depends. Maximisation of production, necessary to allow the size of these elites to grow, and thus minimise the intra-elite conflicts, requires either a growing population, increased exploitation of the natural environment, or ever greater extraction of the surplus production, reducing the lives of the commoners to greater poverty. Ultimately socio-technical limits to these processes are reached, intra-elite struggles increase in violence and the destruction that results brings about ultimate collapse. Civilisations, it has been said, don't die, they commit a form of ecological suicide.

To find and live with real sanity in such circumstances then becomes very difficult. One needs to become a fish, capable of leaving the water it swims in to get a different perspective, a new view of the nature of the water that daily surrounds it.

But how can we free ourselves from such a persistent delusion? Our belief about our separateness from the natural world and from each other stems in part because our culture reinforces this split through valuing the logical, linguistic, rational left brain activities more than the integrative, intuitive, creative and holistic right brain activities. We have organised our "objective" thinking, Planning and Doing independently and separately from our "subjective" practices of Dreaming and Celebrating. Our culture separates work from play, and considers play to be less important (and less valued) than work. In trying to take control of life itself, it creates "power over" situations of hierarchical authority structures, where men are more important than women, culture is more important than nature, the individual is more important than the community. In such an adversarial culture governments are considered "winners" over the opposition, in school, academic "winning" leads to "success" and is more important than non academic "losing", which leads to "failure". Our adversarial legal systems are about attaching innocence or guilt, our economic system about becoming rich and avoiding being poor, our health care systems about health as the avoidance of sickness. In a world where we have exceeded the carrying capacity of the natural environment we have as a result built systems of education that cannot learn, health care systems that are sick and diseased, criminal justice systems that are criminally unjust, governments that cannot govern themselves, and as the current economic crisis proves, a world wide economy that cannot economise, and currently is in an economic melt-down as a result. In this hierarchical winner and loser view the work of the head, becomes more important than the work of the heart or the work of the hands, as we model our organisations on a completely obsolete transcendental view of the human body. Persisting in such mistaken views will inevitably result in what Joseph Tainter has called a "General Systems Collapse". The winds of the coming "Dark Age" are already felt in many ways.

Thus even though relativity theory, quantum mechanics, the new physics, the latest biological sciences, modern ecology, neurology and epigenetic theory shows us the falsity of this absolutist theory of linear "power over" model, we continue in our everyday actions to act as though it is in fact correct. We are caught in a position of "double power", where the old win-lose structures of power and authority, not only cannot now solve our problems, but have themselves become part of the problem. Those alternative structures that could solve our problems, have no power or authority. It is cognitive dissonance on a planetary scale.

Albert Einstein himself stated that to find the solution to our problems, we need a different consciousness than that which created the problem in the first place. Yet as the failure of the

recent Copenhagen Climate Summit has so clearly demonstrated, we persist in trying to solve our international problems using the same structures of individualism, limitless economic growth and competing interests of rival national states, that created the problems in the first place. The thought that we need to solve these problems with a different consciousness than that which we believe to be true, has not entered the awareness of most decision makers.

Yet more than 50 years ago, when reflecting upon our circumstances in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Einstein saw what was needed. He wrote

“A human being is a part of a whole, called by us the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.”

This is clearly important work, and should be central to the Great Turning of our civilisation towards a truly Life Sustaining Culture. We now know that we as individuals are not separate from the Earth, and win-lose structures in a culture that has already exceeded the carrying capacity of its environment just produces lose-lose negative sum outcomes for us all. But we struggle in our attempts to build such sustainability; is another way conceivable? We need to find a “new game”, a positive sum game based upon “win-win”. I believe the principles if not the practice discovered by Aboriginal people show us that another way is possible.

## **DREAMING: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW OF TIME?**

In my work throughout Australia with Aboriginal and in other countries with other cultures I have found a way that allows me to a limited degree to become such a fish out of water, and see the cultural water in which we swim in, in a completely new way. It has taught me a little of the consciousness we require to understand and live a life built upon true win-win sustainability so necessary for our children’s children. Aboriginal cultures probably entered the Australian continent for the first time at least 70,000 years ago and they have been sustainable there, despite the huge changes in climate wrought by Ice Ages, drought, flood and fire, probably for that length of time. They are arguably the longest and oldest sustainable culture in the world, and this sustainability comes from the depth of their holistic relationship to time and space and their integrative relationship to the land, their ancestors and their descendents, in a way few Europeans ever experience. In such a dry environment, a culture like ours, based upon win-lose strategies would result in a sentence of death for most of the participants, and a culture based upon “win-win games” becomes the only culture ultimately sustainable. If we are to build true sustainability, such “win-win games” needs to become the basis of all that we do.

Our culture of “power-over” has a narrow, purely linear “progressive” view of time, a shift from the past, through the present, towards the future. We measure it by seconds, and place these seconds in a linear sequence of cause and effect and believe that this is an absolute objective reality. Time has become money. We think we can control and “save time” by becoming “more efficient”, but as I showed in the last section, as Tom Attlee shows us, this results in the fact that time accelerates, “Things are getting better and better, and worse and worse, faster and faster”. Already the speed of change and the stresses this causes is exceeding that which our culture, our communities, our bodies and even the living ecosystems of the planet upon which we all depend, can cope. As everything collapses into a meaningless “Now” we lose track of both the deep past, which is increasingly seen as irrelevant to the present, and a future, which increasingly becomes frightening, fearful and apocalyptic. Our fears of the future threaten to become self fulfilling prophecies as we confront situations of climate change, economic collapse and planet wide biological extinction. Others, feeling threatened by such dark thoughts seek escapism in avoidance, denialism, disillusion or addictive behaviours of mindless consumerism. But an alternative possibility to such a situation does exist. Australian Aboriginal cultural principles show us how.

Recently while running a Dragon Dreaming Workshop, I had a strange dream. Ulrike, the woman who I was working with preparing submissions for a grant for a community project, appeared dressed in a sliver cycling suit and helmet riding an electric monocycle. Stopped by police she explained that she had to deliver medicines to a hospital. The police would not let her proceed, and I said as I was travelling that way with friends I could deliver the medicines. We were with a group wishing to start a community ecovillages on a Polder, land the Dutch have reclaimed from the sea. The Polder was 28 square kilometres in size, and I said that with Climate Change and Global Warming their community would not survive the rise in sea level. One person said, “No worry! The Polder is located in the Rhine at Frankfurt”.

This dream illustrates many of the strange facts of the nature of dreaming. Frankfurt is not on the coast. But there is much in this dream that cannot be easily explained. For example, next morning when sharing the dream in the workshop, Anoutosh, a Dutchman at the training explained that he did in fact live in an ecovillage that was on a Polder and was 28 square kilometers in size (a fact I was completely unaware of). He explained that he had a girlfriend who lived in Frankfurt, and that he was trying to persuade her to live with him in Holland, and she was trying to persuade him to move to Frankfurt. And then recently, whilst considering that the community workshop for which the grant was prepared would go ahead in any case, I received notification that the grant Ulrike and I had been working on was unsuccessful. We had to find a new way to proceed with the work we were wanting.

A second dream at a subsequent workshop had me singing the German Birthday song all night. Next morning whilst sharing the dream, Dörte, one of the participants of the group stated, “yes, today is my birthday, and I was born in the night!”

Where does such insight come from? Had I subconsciously overheard conversations of Anoutosh and Dörte but not paid any conscious attention at the time? But neither Anoutosh or Dörte remembered sharing the information with others at the time. Is this evidence of the existence of some form of telepathy? Anoutosh and Dörte no doubt had been thinking of such things during the time we were together. Whatever the explanation, it does show that through

the process of dreaming we are processing information that connects us to others and to the world in a completely non-rational, non-linear way to what we call normal wakeful consciousness.

Dreaming thus seems to have an essential timelessness, in which both past, and future expectations together interact in strange weird ways with the present.

We are stranger, and our lives are much stranger than we imagine. It has been shown, for example, that we need about 7-8 hours sleep a day and that our performance is decreased if it is significantly less than this. Why is this so? It has also been shown that even for creatures as simple as ants, sleep is essential for survival, but biology still has found no answers as to why this happens. Sleep proceeds through cycles, for example there is what is called Slow Wave Sleep or SWS that occupies about 80% of the night and is a state deeper than dreaming. Sleep too is stranger than we know. For example sleepwalking is a phenomenon which occurs during SWS sleep, not in our dreams, as is sometimes thought. More common in children, affecting more than 5% of the population, sleepwalking nevertheless can affect even adults. Adults have even made love, driven cars or written semi-coherent emails while sleep walking! Sleepwalkers have even been found not guilty of murders they have committed in this state. I can personally vouch for such an event as my daughter, married to an ex-soldier once reported that she awoke once with her husband's hands around her throat during the night.

Dreaming has been found to be largely, though not completely associated with what is called Rapid Eye Movement (or REM) sleep, and become more frequent over the course of the night towards morning, and it occupies 20-25% of total sleep time. The average person currently has about seven dreams each night, and these dreams typically last in the range of 5 to 45 minutes. Such dreaming has been an important part of all human cultures since prehistoric times, and there have been many attempts to understand their nature. They are clearly biologically important as people who have difficulty dreaming have a number of clearly defined psychological problems, but the biological nature of dreaming is also not clearly understood. Being conscious of an active dream life has also been shown to be linked with greater effectiveness of personal functioning and creative problem solving in everyday life too. Despite this, most people in our culture do not recall their dreams upon waking, although this has been found to be able to change with practice. The Iroquois Indians of North America believe that people who have lost awareness of their dreams have lost part of their soul, a belief shared by many indigenous cultures, and they have developed ritual practices by which this "soul" can be recovered.

Biology also shows that we are biologically programmed to have a second period of sleep after lunch. In workshops I find this period after lunch is often the "graveyard shift" when conceptual performance of participants is lower and so I often give an extended siesta time to participants at this period to enable them to recover. In fact in ancient times people who worked throughout the day without pause were regarded by their neighbours with suspicion, and the "siesta" (from the Latin, meaning the "sixth hour" (Sexta) after sunrise) is still an important part in many cultures. The modern habit of working right through the day without napping, has been shown to result in lower performance than otherwise. Truly creative or effective individuals, Leonardo da Vinci, Isaac Newton, Napoleon Bonaparte, Gandhi and Albert Einstein all were famous mid-day nappers. Churchill even credited his taking a mid day nap with winning the

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Battle of Britain! The dreams associated with napping are also especially important to afternoon creativity. NASA has found mid-day naps improve performance of astronauts and many airlines have now adopted the practice<sup>5</sup>.

Our internal clocks are also governed by seasonal variations in light and dark; extending daylight artificially into the night leads to a craving for sugar, and has been shown to be linked with obesity and other health problems. Lack of sleep has been shown to inhibit the production of prolactin and melatonin which deranges our immune systems and increases the risk of depression, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer.<sup>6</sup>

In the Bible dreams are thought to have brought important information to the dreamer, and the person who could successfully interpret dreams, like Joseph or Daniel, was considered holy. In the Torah Jacob and Solomon both could converse with the divine through dreams. The three wise men were directed through a dream not to see Herod, and Joseph was told to flee to Egypt with Mary and the infant Jesus through a dream. The thought that we can acquire other information than that available by rational thought, through our dreams, to the ancients, was no problem to their belief systems.

In Shia'ite Islam dreaming is an important part of "inner prophethood" and such dreams are divided into two kinds, those experienced in deep sleep and those experienced on the edge of consciousness at awaking. These special dreams are experienced by the dreamer as either unusual ecstasy, awe-inspiring yet with cognitive elements; a departure from the body, often guided by an angel; or transformation into a winged creature that flies to fantastic realms<sup>7</sup>. As explained in the Qu'ran Mohammed experienced such a vision in his mystic journey to the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem. Many cultural differences can colour dreams, nightmares about falling through the air are common among women in Arab nations, perhaps for metaphorical reasons. "There's such a premium in these countries on women remaining chaste, and the dangers of becoming a 'fallen woman' are so intense," sleep researcher Kelly Bulkeley says, "that the naturally high baseline of falling dreams is amped up even more."<sup>8</sup>

Artemidorus in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE, wrote the *Oneirocritica* (The Interpretation of Dreams), and suggested that dreams are unique to the individual dreamer. Nevertheless "Graeco-Roman dream literature functioned as a language of signs that formed a personal and cultural pattern of imagination and gave tangible substance to ideas such as time, cosmic history, and the self."<sup>9</sup> At the healing centre of the Asclepion, sacred to Asclepius the God of Healing, at Epidaurus, in Ancient Greece, those seeking healing travelled in pilgrimage to the site, and were encouraged by the priests to sleep, remembering their dreams which contained important clues necessary for their healing. This practice continued for more than 1,000 years! Asclepius, the God of Healing, through dreams provided guidance or divine inspiration, as well as information permitting an accurate diagnosis in ways rational thought was incapable of doing.

In this way Dreams "have strongly influenced both the beliefs and practices of religious traditions all over the world, throughout history" Kelly Bulkeley continues "Whether dreaming came before religion or religion came before dreaming is an impossible question to answer. But we now have evidence strongly suggesting that the natural rootedness of dreaming in the human brain-mind system makes it a universally available source of experiential awareness of precisely those powers that people have historically associated with religion. To accept that

evidence does not mean abandoning science or pledging faith to some religious creed or dogma. Rather, it means acknowledging the reality of an autonomous visionary capacity within the human brain-mind system, a capacity driven by an unconscious intelligence deeply rooted in our biological nature yet continuously striving for transcendent understanding and insight.”<sup>10</sup>

Ever since Freud’s work, an interpretation of dreaming has been considered to be linked to an understanding of the operation of the subconscious mind, which operates at times like autopilot for everyday activities, or which can, at times be linked to a sudden rush of feeling or strange flights of the imagination<sup>11</sup>. This unconscious mind is far larger than we realize, and usually lies completely beyond and outside of our awareness of our individual self. For example we speak of “something has come over me”, or of “not being myself”, or “being out of character”. Dreams and the imagination seem to work from the unconscious through some kind of subconscious symbolic language which is difficult to interpret.

Carl Jung whose view of dreaming as accessing a collective unconscious resembled that of the Australian Aboriginals, wrote, “God speaks in dream.” Marie von Franz, the disciple of C.G.Jung, using a number of important case studies shows how connections through recorded dreams are revealed between the personal and family histories of the dreamers and individual and collective mores of their times<sup>12</sup>. Such a view has become commonplace in Jungian and other forms of Western psychotherapy. But even there our dreams seem to escape easy understanding.

At the same time, the primary visual cortex is inactive, whilst the secondary visual cortex, which processes sight, creating the internal visual landscape in which we live, is very active. Fortunately, the brain stem seems to be paralysed during dreaming, preventing us acting out our dreams, which is why sleepwalking is not associated with normal dreaming. One definition of “nightmare” is a dream which causes one to wake up in the middle of the sleep cycle and remember the experience of a negative emotion, such as fear. This type of event in Western cultures occurs on average once per month. Preschoolers are relatively immune to nightmares under 5 years of age, waking nightmares are more common in young children (25% experiencing a nightmare at least once per week), most common in adolescents, and become less common in adults (dropping in frequency about one-third from age 25 to 55).

At the same time in our culture, we dismiss “dreaming” as a subjective individual process, and thus most people ignore their dreams, most of the time. They are often considered distracting annoyances which we forget immediately upon waking, not related to our experiences that are found in “objective linear time”.. But it has not always been so, even in our culture as I showed above. The Lakota Sioux used “Vision Quests” as a rite of passage, fasting and praying until an anticipated guiding dream was received, to be shared with the rest of the tribe upon their return.<sup>13</sup>

As shown above, dreaming is important, as people who cannot dream suffer a strange kind of neurosis, in which daily effectiveness is greatly impaired. Most people in our culture cannot remember their dreams, and most dreams are forgotten within 5 seconds of waking. Yet dreaming, both “daydreaming” and “night dreaming” is often the source of a deep creativity. Our forgotten dreams can be recovered. Keeping a “dream journal” beside your bed to write down your dream immediately upon waking, or going to sleep intending to remember a dream

upon waking, can be a great help. Research on dreaming, shows that many dreams are associated with a high level of arousal, or even anxiety. Sleep researchers estimate that in nearly three quarters of our dream the predominant emotions are negative. Magnetic Resonance Imaging and brain scans of dreamers shows that the Amygdala and Anterior Cingulate Cortex, important parts of the brain in processing strong emotions of fear and anxiety, are particularly active in dreams, whilst the Neocortex of rational thinking is almost totally inactive. This is why we can easily accept people changing into animals, or the existence of fanciful creatures such as dragons, in dreams, without thinking it odd or bizarre. Nightmares are common, particularly in the early part of the night, with more pleasant dreams just before you awaken. Nightmares, like all dreams, take on the colour of one's life, and in periods of difficulty nightmares too are more common, leading some to suppose that dreaming is a kind of "mental discharge" of powerful emotional states experienced during the day.

Newborn children spend up to 80% of their time dreaming, and in fact the brain patterns associated with the dream state have been found in the foetus from 5 months, and as Aboriginal people knew, that this dream state is, as I shall show, associated with the first movements of the baby in the womb. In normal dreams, the person is unconscious that they are in fact dreaming. There is also a category of lucid dreaming, when during the dream itself, a person becomes aware that they are in fact dreaming, and they have a degree of conscious control over the subject and direction of the dream. Lucid dreaming is an experience that may be associated with an "out of body experience" (OOBE) on the borderline between dream sleep and arousal similar to these reported by people who have "near death experiences" (NDE). Such "out of body" experiences are more common than psychologists have thought. In my own case, my second oldest memory, at the birth of my youngest brother Chris, is associated with a particular out of body memory, that is especially vivid in my imagination. As with these OOBE or NDE experiences, lucid dreams can produce permanent changes in a person's values and beliefs, including permanent changes in personality and a deep feeling of being connected to and with a greater appreciation for all of life, higher personal self-esteem, a greater compassion for others, a heightened sense of meaning and purpose, and a desire to learn and contribute meaningfully to the world. Lucid dreaming greatly helps the process of Dragon Dreaming. It helps us overcome the separation of "self" from "other" built into our culture. These are all skills absolutely necessary for the Great Turning to a Life Sustaining Culture of the future. It also helps people discover a personal answer to "what is the purpose of my life?" or "what does it all mean?"

People can train the capacity for lucid dreaming. As I mentioned above, intentionality helps, especially if just before sleeping you consciously intend to be aware of dreaming whilst you are dreaming. With this power, you can become a "dream shaper", and be capable of shifting your dream whilst in the midst of the experience. Equally if you have an unpleasant dream, it is possible on succeeding nights or even on the same night in the same dream, you can re-enter the dream with the intention of discovering an answer as to what the dream really means. Recently at the Copenhagen Conference on Climate Change, for example I dreamt that I was on the edge of a forest meadow, and a man with a gun aimed at me. Not wanting to be shot, I said to myself, this is not acceptable. Immediately a big black black dog jumped at the man, grabbing his arm and deflecting his aim. Later in the same dream, disturbed why someone would try to shoot me, I dreamt of meeting the man in a bar and asked him why he was trying to shoot me.

He said, “Well, you know what Gandhi said, ‘first they ignore you, then they ridicule you, then they attack you, then you win’! I was attacking you”. The dream made sense because I have been corresponding with a forum on climate change, and a particularly difficult climate change denialist had been verbally attacking personally anyone who expressed a view contrary to his own. But in all these cases, in the dominant western view, we see such dreams as purely subjective, unreal experiences.

Australian Aboriginal people have a similar view to our own that concerning reality and subjectivity of sequential linear time, moving from past, to present and future and “the dreaming”, but they hold a contrary view to that of our culture. Like Albert Einstein, they knew that linear time is a purely relative and subjective experience, not absolute and objective as our dominant Newtonian concept of time suggests. Aboriginal people would have agreed with Einstein, who demonstrated that “the distinction between past, present and future is only an illusion, even if a stubborn one”. Explaining relativity theory Einstein said “When you are courting a nice girl an hour seems like a second. When you sit on a red-hot cinder a second seems like an hour. That's relativity”. Aboriginal people also believed, with evidence, that our linear experience of time is wholly relative and subjective, created as a result of the split consciousness between a personal self and an external other found in our first memory. This they believed became an anchor point, around which we organise our past, and thence our future. It is this split of self and other, and the corresponding organisation of past and future, which creates our subjective view of linear time. Before this, they believed, all our real existence was found objectively “in the Dreaming”. Despite the fact that Western writers have told Aboriginal myths and legends as though they somehow were only in the past, Aboriginal Dreaming stories were not something from the past, although they were there too. They were also, in the retelling, brought into the present, and in that way available for the future. Dreaming was also flexible and adaptive to new circumstances and new realisations, but not fixed for all time. Even for us, each evening at night we return to the Dreaming, and as we lapse into unconsciousness Dreaming at the end of life, as we confront the mystery of our coming non existence, so we are returning to the Dreaming. These findings are consistent with both OOBE and NDE experiences as confirmed in modern psychology, and are fully consistent with Australian Aboriginal belief.

Thus “Aboriginals believe in two forms of time; two parallel streams of activity. One is the daily linear activity, the other is an infinite spiritual cycle called the ‘Dreamtime’, more real than reality itself. Whatever happens in the Dreamtime establishes the values, symbols, and laws of Aboriginal society. It was believed that some people of unusual spiritual powers had contact within the dreamtime”<sup>14</sup>. “The Dreaming” in modern scholarship often refers to the “time before time”, “time outside of time” or “time of the creation of all things”, as though it were the past. But the Dreaming, as I have shown, in a real sense is also present and in the future. Aboriginal “Dreaming” also preserved the strange possibilities of metamorphosis and time travel sometimes found in dreams, between animals, humans and even inanimate objects, similar to the two examples I gave above. This is similar to the experience of the Daoist philosopher Chuang Tzu who stated that “last night I dreamed I was a butterfly, flitting around in the sky; then I awoke. Now I wonder: Am I a man who dreamt of being a butterfly, or am I a butterfly dreaming that I am a man?” This vividness of dreams is especially true for young children. I remember as a 7 year old boy having dreams of flying so vivid that I spent a morning at the



beach running down a path and jumping, whilst my brothers and sisters were playing in the water.

## **ABORIGINAL DREAMING, DEEP ECOLOGY AND THE ECOLOGICAL SELF**

This ability for humans to turn into animals, or for animals to become humans, is thus simply explained by the cultural importance given to the nature of Dreaming. It is central to the “Council of All Beings” created by John Seed and Joanna Macy. The clear inter-subjectivity of dreams, in which subject and object are not clearly marked, is found not just in Aboriginal myths. Dreams offer all human beings a potential source of visionary insight, creative inspiration, and expanded self-awareness. Dreaming is found also in the deepest states of meditation reported by Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Neurological scientists studying such deep meditation methods have found that the MRI scanning of the meditators brain shows an overall lowering of energy consumption, and a balancing of areas of brain activity, particularly between the left and right hemispheres, in those parts of the left hemisphere which is responsible for maintaining the illusion of separate existence of a discrete “self” from “the other”. The Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh describes this intersubjectivity or “inter-being” in his evocative poem, “Call me by my true names”.

*Do not say that I will depart tomorrow  
because even today I still arrive  
Look deeply: I arrive in every second  
to be a bud on a spring branch  
to be a tiny bird, with wings still so fragile  
learning to sing in my new nest  
to be a caterpillar in the heart of flower  
to be a jewel hiding itself in stone*

*I still arrive, in order to laugh and to cry,  
in order to fear and to hope,  
the rhythm of my heart is the birth and death of all that are alive.*

*I am the mayfly metamorphosing on the surface of the river,  
and I am the bird which, when spring comes, arrives in time to eat the mayfly.  
I am the frog swimming happily in the clear water of the pond,  
and I am also the grass-snake who,  
approaching in silence, feeds itself on the frog.  
I am the child in Uganda, all skin and bones,  
my legs as thin as bamboo sticks,  
and I am the arms merchant selling deadly weapons to Uganda.  
I am the 12 year old girl, refugee on a small boat,*

*who throws herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate,  
and I am the pirate, my heart not yet capable of seeing and loving  
I am a member of the politburo, with plenty of power in my hands,  
and I am the man who has to pay his "debt of blood" to my people,  
dying slowly in a forced labour camp.*

*My joy is like spring, so warm it makes flowers bloom in all walks of life.  
My pain is like a river of tears, so full it fills up the four oceans.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can hear all my cries and my laughs at once,  
so I can see that my joy and pain are one.  
Please call me by my true names,  
so I can wake up,  
and so the door of my heart can be left open,  
the door of compassion.*

Please Call Me by My True Name  
by Thich Nhat Hahn

The awareness of this intersubjectivity seems to have been a core feature of many indigenous of "first peoples" belief systems. Chief Seattle, in his statement to the President of the USA, in 1854 clearly recognised that the Europeans blindness to the intersubjectivity of what we now recognise as an "ecological self" was a major weakness and would result in the destruction of the life support systems upon which all life depends. It was also found in indigenous European cultures too. Amergin, the druidic bard of ancient Ireland sang,

*I am a Stag: of seven tines  
I am a flood across the plain  
I am a Wind: upon the waves  
I am a Tear: the sun lets fall  
I am a Hawk: above the cliff  
I am a Wonder: among flowers  
I am a Wizard: who but I sets the cool head aflame?  
I am a Spear: that roars for blood  
I am a Salmon: in a pool  
I am a Lure: from Paradise  
I am a Hill: where poets walk  
I am a Boar: ruthless and red  
I am a Breaker: threatening doom  
I am a Thorn: beneath the nail  
I am a Tide: that drags to death  
I am an Infant: who but I peeps from the unhewn dolman arch?  
I am the Womb: of every holt*

*I am the Blaze: on every hill  
I am the Queen: of every hive  
I am the Shield: for every head  
I am the tomb: of every hope*

Although there at the beginning of our own culture, such inter-subjectivity or “interbeing” has been lost in the modern world. This is an appreciation our culture urgently needs and we need to recover it if we are to achieve the Turning to a Life Sustaining Culture and survive beyond the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Otherwise we risk what the British Astronomer Royal, Martin Rees has warned us could be “The Last Human Century” as we are currently unleashing the 6<sup>th</sup> mega-death, a mega-extinction of up to 50% of life on the planet over the next fifty years.

In Aboriginal culture, Dreaming was a phenomenon built upon such movements and which led to the deep appreciation of our kinship with the whole of life. Aboriginal people also knew that linear time is a subjective, not an objective experience.

Dreaming, through its strange juxtapositions, was considered by Aboriginal people the source of all creativity. It is not by accident that our language refers to dreams as our “deepest yearning”. Our dreams establish the framework across which we build the bridges, the songlines and narratives of our daily lives. This confirms the approach to creativity of Arthur Koestler, who believed that creativity occurs as a result of bringing together different frames of reference, normally kept apart<sup>15</sup>. Like the dream state it leads us to trust things that are alien, whilst perhaps alienating things that are unthinkingly trusted. Noongar elders of Aboriginal Dreaming, known as Djinagabee or “Feather foots”, certainly brought together the three archetypes of Artist, Sage and Jester, considered by Koestler to be the epitome of creativity, together in a powerfully evocative union. Like with many other great scientific discoveries, once again the connection of Dreaming and creativity was given by Einstein who after years of fruitless calculations, suddenly had the solution to the general theory of relativity revealed in a dream “like a giant die making an indelible impress, a huge map of the universe outlined itself in one clear vision.”<sup>16</sup> Just as for Einstein, Dreaming was for Aboriginal people a means of gaining access to the collective consciousness of their people<sup>17</sup> that gave meaning to the world, and from which came all art, song, dance and celebration.

*One could say that the Dreaming is a spiritual realm which saturates the visible world with meaning; that it is the matrix of being; that it was the time of creation; that it is a parallel universe which may be contacted via the ritual performance of song, dance and painting; that it is a network of stories of heroes...*

*It is not quite right, however, to say that the creation period is in the past, because it is a past that is eternal and therefore also present. Ancestors sink back into, but also emerge from and pass through, sites. In other words, an ancestor's journey, or story, became a place, and that place holds past, present and future simultaneously.*

*For traditionally oriented Aboriginal people, the ...Dreaming encompasses and surrounds this time of living memory, which sinks into it. Time sinks into place, into Country.*

*Each sacred site contains a potentially limitless supply of the particular species left there by an ancestor. But in order to ensure their continued generation, ceremonial action is required. If this isn't done, or isn't done properly, that life-form will eventually disappear....*

*Earth is sacred, sentient stuff; it is not a counterpoint to heaven. Heaven and earth are embedded together, on the same plane. A country is saturated in consciousness. It recognises and responds to people. It depends on people.”<sup>18</sup>*

But even this view is a distortion. Davidson’s implicit and unstated belief that the world was not sacred and spiritual, or that matter was somehow dead and inert and devoid of living spirit, is a western and not an Aboriginal concept. Thus Ancestors actually and literally do return to specific places of the Earth from which they arose, an Earth which has sustained them with every breath that they have taken. This is an actual statement of what is real, not some disconnected “spiritual” belief.

Thus, as Inga Chedinnen has written of the Aboriginal Dreaming

*“They also developed steeping thought-structures - intellectual edifices so comprehensive that every creature and plant had its place within it. They travelled light, but they were walking atlases, and walking encyclopaedias of natural history. They were Scheherazades, too, because this complicated knowledge was not written down but allocated between human minds in song, dance and story. Detailed observations of nature were elevated into drama by the development of multiple and multi-level narratives: narratives which made the intricate relationships between these observed phenomena memorable.*

*These dramatic narratives identified the recurrent and therefore the timeless and the significant within the fleeting and the idiosyncratic.*

*They were also very human, charged with moral significance but with pathos, and with humour, too - after all, the Dreamtime creatures were not austere divinities, but fallible beings who happened to make the world and everything in it while going about their creaturely business. Traditional Aboriginal culture effortlessly fuses areas of*

*understanding which Europeans 'naturally' keep separate: ecology, cosmology, theology, social morality, art, comedy, tragedy - the observed and the richly imagined fused into a seamless whole."*<sup>19</sup>

Chedinnen continued "W. E. Stanner called the 'Dreamtime' the the Enduring, or the Abiding -- the word Stanner preferred to the more familiar 'Dreaming', which he thought altogether too fey and vaporous." Later in his own Boyer Lecture series "After the Dreaming" he referred to it as the "Everywhen"<sup>20</sup>. The Vietnamese Zen Buddhist scholar and teacher already mentioned, Thich Nhat Hanh as I have shown above calls this "Interbeing", and suggests that it is vitally important for the healing of ourselves within the world. In the last section I briefly showed how this concept is necessary for us in the Great Turning, to reinhabit time. Einstein too understood this. In this way, Dreaming is part of the ultimate pattern behind the pattern – the living systems pattern that connects. In his Special Theory of Relativity, through its "Space-Time Continuum", Einstein understood the "Everywhen" with a view of time as being everywhere totally present, this is a way very similar to the interpenetration of time and country of the Aborigines.

## DREAMING AND SUSTAINABILITY

But Aboriginal spirituality went even further than Einstein. It was not just a set of scientific equations. It was alive and ecological as well as physical in nature. It was based upon the importance of sustaining their food supply and not depleting the environment upon which it depended. Living in such a fragile environment as that in Australia had shown Aboriginal people that if they became "Future Eaters"<sup>21</sup>, eaters of their own future as we have done, there would be no eating in the future.

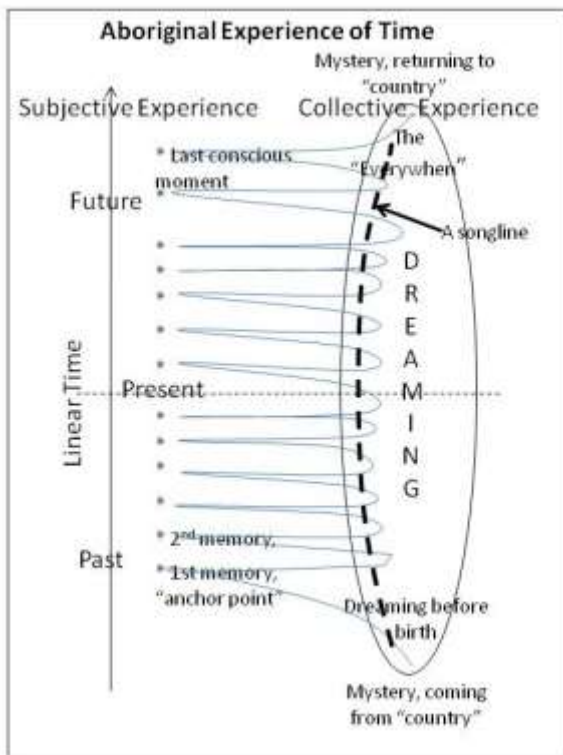
As Chedinnen shows, "Aborigines had sustained a delicate balance between population and food supply by restraint in consumption and choreographed seasonal movements." These movements were determined by the Songlines. Bruce Chetwin described songlines as

*"...the labyrinth of invisible pathways which meander all over Australia and are known to Europeans as 'Dreaming-tracks' or 'Songlines'; to the Aborigines as the 'Footprints of the Ancestors' or the 'Way of the Law'.*

*Aboriginal Creation myths tell of the legendary totemic being who wandered over the continent in the Dreamtime, singing out the name of everything that crossed their path- birds, animals, plants, rocks, waterholes- and so singing the world into existence."*<sup>22</sup>

Robyn Davidson writes of Songlines when she says

*Many different ancestors created a country, by travelling across it and meeting each other. In that way, a particular country is shared by all creatures who live there, their essences arising from the Dreaming, and returning to it. Some Dreamings crossed many countries, interacting with local ones as they went, and connecting places far from each other. Thus the pulse of life spreads, blood-like, through the body of the continent – node/pathway, node/pathway – as far as, and sometimes into, the sea....*



This leads to a very different behaviour with regard to how one treats the natural environment. The recognition of the kinship with all life, amply demonstrated scientifically with the discovery that we are all descended from the Last Universal Common Ancestor, some early bacteria which lived more than three and a half billion years ago, leads to a condition of respect such as you would show members of your immediate biological family. Ian Tarrant in his book "Under the Carley Tree" reports an experience when with an Aboriginal elder he came across a fruit tree laden with fruit. The two men began harvesting the abundance. Tarrant was busy plucking every fruit from a branch, when he noticed his companion had stopped and was looking at him with puzzled indulgence. "Why have you stopped?" Tarrant asked. "Because we

need to leave fruit for the others in our family," was the reply. Tarrant asked, "What others?" knowing that there was no-one within hundreds of miles. "The other animals and insects which also depend upon this fruit", he was told. In this way kinship with the other animals of the songlines has created a culture which does not take and take and take from the environment, leaving an emptiness behind, but ensures enough is left for all. We need such a sensitivity, to become aware that the Earth is about to change rapidly because she has been used as an inexhaustible supplier of our resources and a bottomless pit for our wastes. The attitude of respect, and deep service to the Earth, demonstrated by the Aboriginal custodians care of their country, needs to be built into ever Dragon Dreaming project and activity. We all need to work in service to the Earth, to encourage the flourishing and well-being of all life, because we are a

part of the Earth and the Earth is a part of us. What we do to the Earth we do to ourselves. And as seen above, empty deserts are the result of not taking such care.

Songlines were also believed to deposit “the spirits of unborn children and determined the forms of human society,”<sup>23</sup> In the Wadjuk Noongar culture of the Aborigines who used to live around Perth, it was believed that the spirits of unborn children rested in specific large rocks on song-lines, called Booyar, and when a married woman who was already sexually active wished to conceive, she would spend a night by one of these stones, and the spirits of unborn children would visit her in her dreams. So strong was the belief that this intentionality was sufficient to limit pregnancy as a form of psychological birth control for women who were not yet prepared to be mothers. Men were not allowed to visit such sites, and had to back away if inadvertently approaching one, as it was considered “secret women’s business”. At Goonininyup, a sacred site near Perth, Europeans pushed this stone into the river, in an attempt to prevent Aborigines visiting the site, and so inadvertently in their ignorance rendered many local women infertile.

When the baby moves in the womb for the first time, the mother considers that it is the country in which she is standing, the Songline on which her feet rest, that has chosen to activate her unborn child, and he has started his Dreaming. When he is born the child is told that this spot is his country, not as an act of ownership in the Western European sense. Rather that he is custodian, a responsible caretaker for that part of the Songline, and rather than “owning” that song or story, he is in a real sense an embodiment of it – as much owned by the story as owning it. Aboriginal artists are only allowed to paint such Dreamings as they have such a social relationship with<sup>24</sup>. In this way, a Songline related also to one’s personal destiny or story within society and in relation to the Earth.

In Dragon Dreaming, it is often a good idea to give people the chance to explain their own personal Songlines that have brought them together to work on a common project. These Songlines are theirs, based upon past personal and interpersonal social experiences, gathered over their own lifetime, and perhaps over the lifetime of parents or others whom they have met and worked with over the course of their life. Such a Songline gives the meaning to the personal story of themselves that they have gathered in life. Others hearing and respecting these stories, without judgement, gives people the chance to be acknowledged, recognised and celebrated for who they are and the uniqueness of their journey that has brought them to this place and time in the hear and now, the heart of the Everywhen.

It reminds me of an occasion when after having created a “game plan” for a particular project in the Aboriginal community of Halls Creek, in the far north east of Western Australia, an old Aboriginal elder, who has been sitting with a bemused smile, in silence, at the back of the room for much of the proceedings, came and took me by the hand, and led me into the foyer of the building in which we were working. There on the wall was a magnificent fifteen foot high Aboriginal work of great art. “I did that” he said. “It is of my Dreaming”. He pointed back at the messy diagram of the project we had been working on. “You have just created a new Dreaming, new Songlines for our country.” In his quiet way he had shown me that Dragon Dreaming is more than creating a Board Game for creating outrageously successful projects. It is a map of a sacred, secret territory, the way we are part of this world, always were and always will be. And in Dragon Dreaming this encounter between self and other, between thinking and action, linking Dreaming and Celebration to our Planning and Doing in a way that always occurs in a specific

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place – a country that will exist long after we have gone, and for which we are only temporary custodians.

## DISCOVERING YOUR OWN PERSONAL SONGLINE

The Noongar Tradition of the people of the South West of Western Australia, saw the creation as a product of “Karl” or “Garl”, the fire. It is the fire of the east, the sun, that begins the day, and the return of the sun after the cold wet season of Makuru, associated with the flowering of Djilba, and the coming of the honeyeater of the same name, that marked the turning of the year. The place where the fire was lit, the hearth, was the “Karlup”, a place of the safety and the celebration at the end of the day. The people who gathered around the Karlup were the “Karlupgur”, people with whom you felt kinship, sharing food, story, song and making decisions together.

The Karlupgur was not a fixed group, but often a temporary gathering, a meeting place where people could join with others. Karlupgur often had the same form as the Dragon Dreaming workshop, they would gather in a half circle around the Karl or fire, because depending upon which way the wind was blowing, would determine which direction the smoke would blow. In a Karlupgur, people could come from many different directions, and have many different stories to tell.

The true nature of celebration is the way in which the transformation of your practice leads to the transformation of you as an individual. It is the way in which your knowledge becomes true wisdom of the kind we have been speaking about above, wisdom in the way in which you act in the world, and how this leads to the world acting on and through you. To Celebrate the people who gather at a Dragon Dreaming workshop I often start with the discovery, sharing and celebration of your own personal Songline.

From what I have described above, therefore, in Aboriginal culture therefore every person was the custodian of a highly personalised “Dreaming”, drawn upon the land in which they lived. It was an important part of the transformation of “Self Knowledge”. “Knowing Thyself”, (γνώθι σεαυτόν or *gnōthi seauton*) one of the two great injunctions of the temple of Gaia at Delphi, later taken over by Apollo, is the source of discovering your personal Songline. To truly “know oneself” in this sense involves a deep sense of personal celebration, a spiritual transformation whereby you seek to orient yourself towards understanding your own phenomenological perceptions of reality, so as to gain earnest insight and meaning into aspects of your own existence. Thus the theological sense of “Know Thyself” entails an experiential revolution of spirit. Aboriginal peoples’ own personal Songline was determined by the movement of their lives between the linear time of memory back into the dreaming, the source of creativity and meaning, and back again. This moving shuttle in the tapestry of a life creates a “thread”, or a bridge, between the mystery of what was there before birth and what will follow after their death. In the workshop I get people first to connect with their breath, and to visualise these two



mysteries as a blankness across which the rope bridge of their life stretches. Once people have connected to this thread, we make it become a reality in the following way.

In Greek mythology these threads were believed to be given to us by the three “Fates” or Moirae, or “apportioners”, before whom even Zeus, the King of the Gods was powerless.

**Clotho** was the spinner of the thread of your life: in a Dragon Dreaming workshop this person holds the ball of wool or string which is the source of the Songline.

**Larchesis** was the measurer of your life. She held the measuring rod, that determines the length of your life, which determines how long your rope bridge is between birth and death. I usually have one length of cord measured in advance that this person holds.

**Atropos**, or the inevitable one, holds the scissors, and when she cuts the thread, this determines the exact moment of your death. I get people to breathe and focus upon this for as the Buddha said, “One thing is certain in life and that is our death, another thing is uncertain and that is the moment it occurs, from awareness of these truths comes enlightenment”.

First measure a length of thread (wool or string is perfect) between 4 metres (for an older group) to six metres (for a younger group) in length. This becomes the “measure” for the person who will take the role of Larchesis.

The cutting of your thread by a woman taking the role of Atropos determines the moment of birth for the next person sitting in the cycle, and in the workshop I get the next person at the time of the death of their neighbour, to give gratitude and thanks to their existence, and to honour their passing, as it gives space for a new life on Earth. Gaia consumes and recycles herself and all thereon and from death always comes new life.

Once you have been given the sacred thread of your life, I get people to divide it in half with a knot, and then divide it into quarters. As the average life expectancy in developed countries is now nearly 84 years, each knot represents about 21 years of your existence. I then get people to tie yet another knot that measures their present moment along this thread.

In our culture the word “weird” means strange or different. But the Songline that you have been given is closely related to the Old English term *Wyrd* which refers to how past actions continually affect and condition the future, but also how the future affects the past. The concept of *Wyrd* highlights the interconnected nature of all actions and how they influence each other. Indeed, for a true comprehension it is key for the *Wyrd* to be embraced as a conceptual mystery, your destiny, wherein the tides and tidings of time and timelessness flow and weave always, all ways, entwining the tapestry of the fabric of being and non-being into the thread of your personal life.

Then on a post it note I get people to write a brief description or do a drawing of their earliest memory in this lifetime, and attach it to the appropriate place on the thread. As people do this they then get in touch with what feelings arise within this memory. Such feelings may deeply colour and determine the direction taken by future decisions across the course of their life.

Then I get them to consider the three greatest joys of their lives and attach these at the appropriate places, again connecting as deeply as possible with the feelings that arise within these joys.

Then comes the three greatest sufferings, the source of their deepest wounds. We often keep these wounds hidden. I remember my wife Vivienne, who suffered greatly at the hands of her father who was himself deeply wounded by being raised in Nazi Germany within a pro-Fascist family. My wife left the family and had nothing to do with her parents for many years, even going to the extent of refusing to speak German, her mother tongue. In a workshop on Sacred Psychology with Dr Jean Houston, the psychologist who briefed the astronauts on returning to the Earth from the moon, Jean suddenly turned to Vivienne and asked her to speak German with another participant, a man who equally had suffered something similar. Vivienne at first refused, but then Jean explained that these wounds give you an insight unique in the world important for giving an understanding of who you are, and the hard wrought understanding of the world that you have achieved, and provides a gift to your true work in the healing of our world. The concept of the wounded healer is an ancient one, and we are all wounded in many ways. It is a part of being human living in these times in such a culture.

Having celebrated and mourned your suffering wounds then I ask people to think about the three greatest turning points in their lives. These turning points, which may not have been especially important at the time, in hindsight represent moments of “Kairos” when time becomes a cross roads, and you become aware that, perhaps with a tiny step you could have gone along a completely different path. A “Kairos” is a time in between, a moment of undetermined period of time in which something special and otherwise unexplainable happens. Just as “Chronos” is the passage of linear time, it is “Kairos” that connects and reconnects us back to our Dreaming. Mark your Kairos Turning points and attach them at the appropriate places along your Songline.

Looking at these ten or so points, what now would you like most to be remembered by at your death, what quality, work, gift or characteristic would warm your heart if this was what people remembered about you the most. Write this on another post-it note, and attach this right at the end of your Songline.

Now look back to consider the present moment. Looking at all that you have created in your life, the people you have known, the circumstances that have led to this present moment, and the direction your life is pointed in what is it that you are seeking? That which they are truly seeking lies behind your hidden motivation to come and attend a Dragon Dreaming workshop.

Once you have answered these questions you are now ready to share your some of your Songline with a neighbour, as they share theirs with you. As you hear their story, practice deep listening, celebrating the gift of the unique journey you are being offered as you are hearing about their life. In this world value is often determined by scarcity. The Songline you are hearing is unique in this universe. If only we could treat each other with the true value of our uniqueness, this world could be a paradise.

I always invite people to keep their songline, to take it home and share it with others in their life. It resembles a Tibetan Prayer Flag, with different colours marking the events of one’s life. I

invite people to hang it in a prominent place and add to it from time to time when the urge or the insight comes.

In Aboriginal culture Songlines met and connected at specific parts of the “Everywhen”. Such meeting places were deeply sacred, and shown as the meeting places where various Songlines converged. Such places were often Karlupgur points, important meeting places in Aboriginal myths and legends, but also meeting places in the present and the future. By fate or accident, or maybe both, the Songlines of all the participants at a Dragon Dreaming workshop have come together, as if by appointment, at this time and place, at the Karlupgur of the Dragon Dreaming workshop, sharing stories, songs, learning and celebration, and making decisions about our future, together or separately. The sharing of this dream, the source of which propelled them to come to this particular time and place, is a powerful place in which to start the Dragon Dreaming workshop. After everyone has made their songline, I encourage people to take the present moment, and holding it carefully, place it as close to the centre of our circle as possible, with their journey to the workshop, and the unknown journey away, travelling along their songline, creating a visual representation of the richness of experience gathered in the room. Tracing the Journeys that the individuals have made on a single large sheet of paper also creates a work of art which can be revised and revisited over the course of the rest of the time in their project together, and can be a good place to look at the “journey beyond” at the end of the Dragon Dreaming workshop. At the end of these exercises, sharing “Aha! Experiences” by passing the Crystal Ball or the talking piece around the circle, is a great way of discovering the personal transformations of your life’s songline, and of coming to deeply value the others who share the story with us.

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<sup>1</sup> Bateson, Gregory

<sup>2</sup> Macy, Joanna and Brown Molly “Coming Back to Life:” and Korton, David “The Great Turning”

<sup>3</sup> Diamond, Jarrod “Collapse: How Societies Succeed or Fail”

<sup>4</sup> The “boiling frog principle” states that if you place a frog into hot water he will immediately escape and so save his life. But if you place him in cold water which you heat slowly, he will stay in the water and boil to death.

<sup>5</sup> Mendick, Sara and Erdman, Mark (2006), “Take a Nap: Change Your Life” (Workman Publishing Company)

<sup>6</sup> Wiley, T.S. (2001), “Lights out: Sleep, Sugar and Survival” (Atria)

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.iranian.com/Iranica/Sept97/Dream/index.html> retrieved 1st April 2009

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Bulkeley, quoted in “The Dreamscapes of Nightmares; why we dream at all”  
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B07E4DA1539F930A15753C1A9619C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=print> retrieved 1st April 2009

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<sup>9</sup> Miller, Patricia Cox (1997), "Dreams in Late Antiquity: Studies in the Imagination of a Culture" (Princeton Uni Press)

<sup>10</sup> Bulkeley, Kelly (2008), "Dreaming and the World's Religions: a comparative history" (NYU Press)

<sup>11</sup> Johnson, Robert A. (1989) "Inner Work: Using Dreams and Active Imagination for Personal Growth" (Harper One)

<sup>12</sup> Von Franz, Marie Louise (1998), "Dreams: A Study of the Dreams of Jung, Descartes, Socrates, and Other Historical Figures" (Shambhala)

<sup>13</sup> Webb, Craig (1995). "[Dreams: Practical Meaning & Applications](#)". The DREAMS Foundation.

<sup>14</sup> Wolff, Fred Allen (1994) "The Dreaming Universe" quoting from Peter Weir's movie, "The Last Wave"

<sup>15</sup> Koestler, Arthur (1964). "The Act of Creation." (Arkana)

<sup>16</sup> Brian, Denis, (1996), "Einstein: A Life" (John Wiley and Sons)

<sup>17</sup> C.G.Jung called it the "collective unconscious", but that is mainly because our post-enlightenment has repressed much that formerly we used, into our sub-conscious realm, calling it superstition. Altered states of experience have been used, as Stan Groff shows, by most cultures, to give us awareness of interconnectedness beyond what we get by our rational left brain, but our culture has marginalised, pathologised and criminalised such activities.

<sup>18</sup> Davidson, Robyn, (2006) "No Fixed Address: Nomads and the fate of the planet" (*Quarterly Essay*, Issue 24, 2006, p14-15)

<sup>19</sup> Inga Clendinnen, (1999 ) "Inside the Contact Zone: Part 1", ABC Boyer Lectures, December 5,

<sup>20</sup> Stanner, W. (1968) "After the Dreaming" (ABC Boyer Lectures)

<sup>21</sup> Flannery, Tim (2002), "Future Eaters: an ecological history of the Australasian lands and people" (Grove Press)

<sup>22</sup> Chatwin, Bruce (1987), *The Songlines*, (Jonathan Cape, and Vintage)

<sup>23</sup> Molyneaux, Brian Leigh & Piers Vitebsky (2000). "Sacred Earth, Sacred Stones: Spiritual Sites And Landscapes, Ancient Alignments, Earth Energy." (London, England: Duncan Baird Publishers.)

<sup>24</sup> Were songlines a form of geomancy or mathematical geometry? This is unknown. There has been work done on the mathematics of "Group Theory" in relation to Aboriginal kinship systems. For example, many Aboriginal groups (like the Noongar) divided people by moiety (into halves). Thus you were either a Wardungmat (Crow leg or lineage) or a Manitjmat (White cockatoo leg or lineage). This is a little like Yin and Yang but it does not apply to gender. Crows had to marry cockatoos and vice versa. Daisy Bates shows that there were various subsections within these groups, but I am not sure whether subsections were exogamous or endogamous (marrying within or without). In the Noongar of Perth, children always took the same lineage as their mother. In Albany and Denmark amongst the Bibulmen and the Mineng, it was the lineage of the father that counted.

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In addition, in many groups, particularly there was another system of age grades, what we would recognise as "generation levels". There was a prohibition of marrying someone outside your generation level, as they would be recognised as "mother" or "father" (even if they were younger than you). When all of this was put together it would establish a pattern, which geometrically looks quite beautiful. There were different patterns for different groups, and people recognised which group they came from by the differences in these patterns.

On top of this were the various "degrees" of initiation. Circumcision was not practiced amongst the Noongar, which is why the Desert Groups referred to the land of the Noongar as "the land of the boys" (they had not undergone the ceremony that sorts "the real men from the boys"). But there were at least three degrees of initiation amongst the Noongar. Joobaitj, who died in 1907, was the last third degree initiate of the Whadjuk Noongar of Perth.

I don't know how it worked with the Noongar of Perth, but in the interior, third degree initiates were called Djinagabee, or "Feather Foots", and had the power, it was believed, to appear in two places at once. They also had the power of declaring certain places "off limits" especially for children, and to defy such injunction would lead to the person falling sick. They also had the power to "point the bone" at transgressors.

How does this relate to song-lines?

Chrastaller did work in Europe on the placement of different kinds of settlement of different sizes, based upon whether it was transport, administration or market towns that were most important. The best way to cover a space is by a series of equilateral triangles, as there will in such a pattern be the least amount of overlap. Arranging these triangles around a central point will create a series of interlocking hexagons. Song-lines as transport routes or story trails, intersected at various points and at these points there would be stories about how the two Dreaming heroes met. For example at Walyunga, outside Perth, there was such an intersection between the Waugal and the Djittidjitti (Willy Wagtail). If one was to plot such intersections for songlines, I don't know if it would produce a pattern of hexagons and triangles or not. I do know David Mwarljali of the people outside Derby produced a map of Australia, showing it covered with song-lines and their intersections, but I cannot remember if this was in a pattern of triangles or not. It was more diagrammatic than actual I suspect.

How does this relate to the kinship patterns? People got their "skin" through various ways that linked song-lines to kinship, and this was linked further to patterns of food taboo, that meant certain people were not to eat certain kinds of plants or animals related to your song-line. This would prevent over-killing of a particular kind of animal, and keep a refuge area for that animal, so it would never become rare or endangered, and that the population of that animal could increase once the people moved to a new area.