

The Land Down Under
seen through the eyes of Bunna, a native Australian

Part four

Day after day, Bunna, our Aboriginal bush guide, has led us deeper and deeper into the Dreaming or the Dreamtime, a term we are now familiar with. It refers to Aboriginal religious beliefs that were passed through tribal ceremonies, songs, dance, story-telling and art.

Bunna, can you tell us how the world was created in the Dreamtime ?

As you have seen, the Rainbow Serpent is a common motif in Aboriginal art. There are innumerable versions of the Rainbow Serpent story, also referred to as the Story of Creation.



The Rainbow Serpent in modern Aboriginal art

How can you explain it ?

Well, it is common in oral traditions that stories vary from place to place. The details in the various myths reflect the differences in the environment and the social structure of the different tribes. Remember Aborigines were hunter-gatherers who lived in perfect harmony with the land so their religious beliefs were deeply rooted in their nomadic way of life.



The Blue Mountains, New South Wales

Bunna , what is your version of the Creation myth ?

Back in the Dreamtime, the world was flat, bare and cold. The Rainbow Serpent lay asleep beneath the surface of the Earth. She was pregnant, holding all the animals in her belly. Then, one day, she woke up and crawled into the open to give birth. As she slithered and wriggled along the flat, dry, empty land, she made the mountains, the hills, the rivers, the lakes, the billabongs as they still exist today. She also created the sun, the fire and all the colours. She made the land fertile and welcoming for all the different types of animals.

You just mentioned the billabongs. What are they ?

It is an Aboriginal term. It refers to the waterholes, the ponds or any place where water lies undisturbed.



a billabong

What about man ? When did he come into being ?

He was created last. The Rainbow Serpent brought out a man and a woman and showed them where there was abundant food and water. She also taught them how to respect all living creatures and care for the Earth.

Bunna, does this mean that the Serpent is regarded as a benevolent protector by the Aborigines ?

It is as long as they respect their initial promise : to respect the Earth and care for it. If not, the Serpent can turn against them and punish them !



The Rainbow Serpent depicted with water

How ?

Well, she punishes all law breakers by downing them in floods !

To go back to Aboriginal art, what are the most ancient rock paintings depicting the Rainbow Serpent ?

It is widely believed that the first Aborigines settled down in Australia more than 60,000 years ago. As I mentioned last time, the first rock paintings were carved at least 40,000 years ago. One recurrent motif that can be found in these caves is the Serpent.



Cave paintings at Ubirr, Kakadu National Park

Aboriginal culture is then, by far, THE oldest continuing culture on Earth. Am I right ?

Yes, but it came very close to disappearing under British rule. As you know the arrival of white settlers in the 18th century had dire consequences on our cultural heritage. As Kath Walker, a major contemporary Aboriginal writer, put it into words in one of her poems :

« *Let no one say the past is dead. The past is all about us and within* ».

You can understand why it is so important for the Aborigines to reclaim some of their ancestral land. Our land is part and parcel of our rich cultural, religious, artistic heritage.



Aboriginal tribal ceremonies

Bunna, tell us about Aboriginal symbols. Are they also linked to the Dreamtime ?

Yes, symbols are used to retain and record significant information. For example, they can indicate a sacred site, the location of a waterhole and the routes to get there, a place where animals inhabit ... or illustrate stories from the Dreamtime.



sand painting

How were all these symbols recorded ?

Since my people travelled vast distances across the country, significant information was recorded during regular tribal ceremonies. Paintings on sand and bodies kept the symbols alive and remembered within the tribe.

Do contemporary Aboriginal artists still use them ?

Yes, of course. When you look at contemporary Australian Aboriginal paintings from the Central and Western Desert art regions, it is obvious that their works are rich in Aboriginal symbols.



Aboriginal dot painting : the Rainbow Serpent



Aboriginal sand painting

What are the most commonly used symbols ?

Generally the symbols used by Aboriginal artists are a variation of lines, circles and dots.

However, similar symbols can have multiple meanings and their combination can tell stories from the Dreamtime.

Do you mean that you actually have to understand the meaning behind the symbols to fully appreciate the work of the Aboriginal artist ?

Well, it is not that simple either. Aboriginal artists often use the technique of over-dotting to obscure meaning and mask certain symbolism.



Aboriginal artist at work

Bunna, please initiate us into some Aboriginal symbols. For example, what is the symbol to represent a human being ?



The U shape usually represents the mark left behind a person.



Groups of U shapes would indicate a meeting place : Aboriginal men sitting around a campsite.

Are Aboriginal men and women depicted alike ?

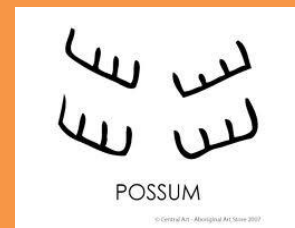
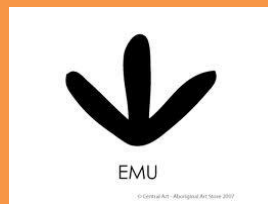
No, the gender is determined by what is associated with the symbol. For example, spears - straight vertical lines - indicate a group of men whereas Aboriginal women are generally depicted with food or domestic implements next to them.



women with digging sticks

What about animals ?

Interestingly, both humans and animals are shown by their tracks left behind in the sand. They are usually drawn from an aerial view point. A snake is symbolized by a curvy line, a dingo by a set of paw prints, and so on.



You must understand that in the Aboriginal animist context, all living creatures, human and animal, are sacred. They are the very mythical beings of the Dreamtime and worshipped as such. That's why Aborigines fought fiercely to defend their land rights. They do not view the Earth as something to be owned or exploited but rather as something to be passed on to future generations, together with the codes to respect ancestral traditions.

You also mentioned that these symbols were like maps to spot campsites, waterholes or any places and to record the routes to travel between them. Can you show us some examples of these ?



If you look closely at these two Aboriginal paintings shown above, they both represent campsites with concentric circles and the routes between them. On the left, the straight lines symbolize dirt paths leading to and from the different campsites. On the right, the wavy lines represent running water.

I understand that this information was vital for the Aborigines' survival as they were entirely dependent on mother Nature.

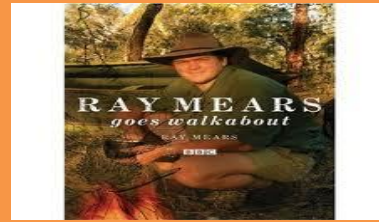
Thank you Bunna for opening our eyes and hearts to another reality. We definitely have much to learn from these so-called « primitive » people.

Bunna, for our very last visit, I'd like you to take us to some other Aboriginal sacred site. Do you think you can do that ?

Well, let me think about it.

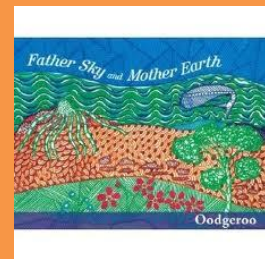
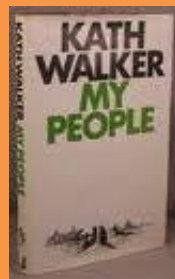
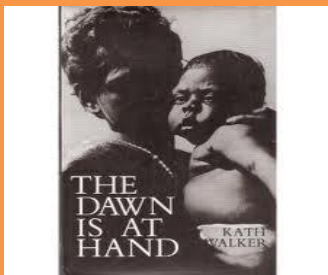
To be continued ...

- If you cannot wait for Bunna's return and want to wander about in the Australian outback, here is a recent DVD and a book for you :
- BBC Ray Mears Goes Walkabout : he tours the Australian outback



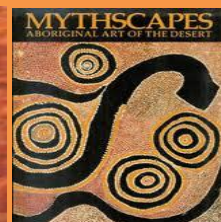
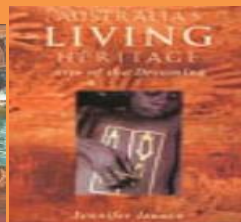
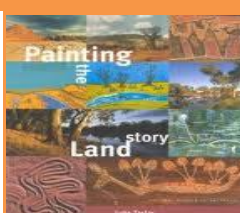
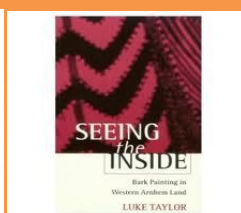
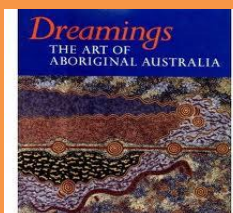
- If you want to read some of Kath Walker's poems :

- The Dawn is at Hand
- My people
- The Rainbow Serpent



Kath Walker (1920-1993) was the first Australian Aborigine to publish a book of verse. Some of her poems denounce the injustices suffered by her people, others preserve the legends from The Dreamtime, also referred to as « the time before time began » by the Koorie tribe she belonged to.

- Her children's story book : Father Sky and Mother Earth
- Here are some reference books on Aboriginal art :



- Dreamings : the Art from Australia by P. Sutton, Vinking
- Seeing the Inside : Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land, by L. Taylor, OUP
- Painting the Land Story by L. Taylor, National Museum of Australia
- Australia's Living Heritage, Arts of the Dreaming, by L. Taylor, Lansdowne Press
- Mythsapes : Aboriginal Art of the Desert by J. Tyan, National Gallery of Victoria