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### The Fall of the Sky-Dome

Ideas about the Aboriginal cosmos clearly changed and evolved over time. However, European invasion and settlement provided an impetus to change, in catastrophic proportions. The cosmologist Harrison has suggested that all universes conceived by humans are ‘impermanent conceptual schemes’ rising, flourishing and then declining over time to be finally superseded.<sup>1</sup> Their decline and fall were usually due to one of four reasons.<sup>2</sup> The first cause was assault by an alien culture; the second was because startling new discoveries produced new notions; the third was because old problems re-emerged, refusing to stay submerged; and the fourth was because there was a relentless shift in public opinion. Yet, throughout history, in all cultures, there is and has always been a conviction by participants that a particular cultural conception of the universe is *the* Universe, their particular mask the true face. According to Harrison:

Each universe or mask presents a conceptual scheme that organises human thought and shapes human understanding. Generally, within each universe, the end to the search for all knowledge at last looms in sight. Each universe, in its day flourished as an awe-inspiring, self consistent scheme of thought, yet each is doomed to be superseded by another and perhaps grander scheme.<sup>3</sup>

Harrison identifies the Australian Aboriginal universe, before white contact, as being a ‘magico-mythic universe.’<sup>4</sup> The sudden arrival of

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1 Harrison 1985:13.

2 Harrison 1985:2.

3 Harrison 1985:vii.

4 In the ‘magicomythic universe’, the world possessed exalted spirits which reflected not only the characteristics of human beings, but also

Europeans in the landscape had to be made sense of by the Aboriginal occupants.

The arrival at first sparked more curiosity than fear. It provoked 'intense and often prolonged debate as to the true nature of the white men, their origin and objectives.'<sup>5</sup> There was a pervasive idea across the length and breadth of the continent that Europeans were returning spirits of the dead. Because the cosmos of the Aborigines was geographically limited, all people known to any individual were regarded as kin or potential kin. So the white strangers were initially perceived as kin and in many cases, not just reincarnated souls, but actual identifiable countrymen (and occasionally women). The whiteness of skin colour appeared, at least initially, to support the view of the return of the dead because white was a colour widely associated with death and used extensively in mourning rituals.<sup>6</sup>

In an account by the explorer, George Grey in 1841, he reports how he was perceived as the reincarnated son of an old Aboriginal woman:

A sort of procession came up, headed by two women, down whose cheeks tears were streaming. The eldest of these came up to me, and looking for a moment at me ... 'Yes, yes, in truth it is him;' and then throwing her arms around me, cried bitterly, her head resting on my breast; and although I was totally ignorant of what their meaning was, from mere motives of compassion, I offered no resistance to her caresses ... At last the old lady, emboldened by my submission, deliberately kissed me on each cheek ... she then cried a little more, and at length relieving me, assured me that I was the ghost of her son, who had some time before been killed by a spear wound in his breast ... My new mother expressed almost as much

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those of the institutions of their societies. Through the intercession of these exalted spirits, humans could gain some semblance of control over their world. (Harrison 1985:28).

5 Reynolds 1983:30.

6 Bates 1992:169; Lawrie 1970:323; Roth 1984 (5):16; Reynolds 1983:31-2; Strehlow 1907:16.

delight at my return to my family, as my real mother would have done, had I been unexpectedly restored to her.<sup>7</sup>

Because of this perception, which fitted the social and physical order of their worldview, the Aborigines were initially curious and friendly to the Europeans,<sup>8</sup> and castaway mariners and escapee convicts, such as Morrell, Buckley and Thompson, were accepted and taken in, even if treated as simpletons as a result of their cultural ignorance and naivety. The Aborigines also expected the whites to return from whence they came: they certainly did not expect a permanent and ongoing, extended visit, let alone occupation.

To explain the presence of these returned spirits, Massola<sup>9</sup> reports a story which grew out of these perceptions held by Aboriginal people and the particular historical circumstances. This version of the story originated among Aboriginal groups in Victoria:

The solid vault of the sky was believed to rest on props placed at the extreme edges of the earth. The eastern prop was supposed to be in (the) charge of an old man who lived on the High Plains. Berak, the last of the Yarra tribe, stated that when he was a boy news came to his people by way of the Ovens River and Goulburn River blacks, that the eastern prop was rotting, and that if presents were not sent to the old man in charge, he would not repair it, the sky would fall, and everybody would be killed. He stated that this news filled the land with consternation, and that many possum rugs and stone axes were sent eastwards. This incident is also mentioned by Buckley, the escaped convict. He affirmed that the people he was with on the Barwon River, told him they had passed the news on to other tribes along the coast, and that many presents were sent. A similar message was passed from tribe to tribe along the Murray River. The Wotjobaluk believed that the sky rested on props which not only held it

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7 In Reynolds 1983:34.

8 Willey 1979:50–1.

9 Massola 1968:105.

up, but also allowed the sun to pass underneath the lid, to light and warm the earth.<sup>10</sup>

The danger in all these stories was seen as coming from the east, the direction from which the invaders had initially come, and were continuing to come. There was a clear inference in these stories that the eastern support had rotted and given way and the sky had fallen down.<sup>11</sup> As a result, the spirits or reincarnations of all the Aborigines who had ever lived had broken through from the spirit world and were swarming over the land. Death and catastrophe were indeed imminent. The anthropologist, Kenneth Maddock, has remarked that: 'Given the unity of society and their cosmology, it is not to be wondered at that the impending ruin of their social order should be prefigured in the fear that the cosmos was about to collapse upon them.'<sup>12</sup>

Another story in the same vein has surfaced. Mudrooroo Nyoongah tells the story of *Djangan*, the greatest hero of the Nyoongah people of south-western Western Australia. One day, *Djangan* was sitting near a causeway (now Fremantle), fishing. Europeans (*watjelas*) were around and were regarded with great fear as they were seen as ghosts (*djangara*) who were particularly troublesome because they were head-hunters. Europeans trapped *Djangan*, shot him and then hacked off his head with a tomahawk. 'One, two, three blows and it was off at his neck. Then, they smoked it, just like you smoke a ham. They sent it off to England to add to the collection they had there. It was part of their magic, part of their empire, collecting skulls.'<sup>13</sup> For many of the Aboriginal people, the sky of their world really did fall down.

Much of the traditional lands of the Aboriginal people was gradually taken over for white settlement and, consequently, accessible places known to be good for hunting, fishing and gathering were greatly

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10 Massola 1979:55

11 Roberts and Mountford 1974:55.

12 Maddock 1974:55.

13 In Noonuccal 1990:177-8.

diminished.<sup>14</sup> The Aboriginal people of the northern Kimberleys attributed the resulting severe food shortages to the immense powers of their creator spirit, *Galalang*, an all-father creator spirit, who lived in the dark spot between the European constellations Centaurus and Scorpius.<sup>15</sup> Before he departed for the sky-world, *Galalang* gave the Aboriginal people ‘the best country, the most beautiful language, a long life and monogamous marriage’. Apparently offended by the way people were behaving, *Galalang* dried up a lake of good water where fish and turtles had been in abundance. With a tree trunk behind him,<sup>16</sup> he dug a canal and let the daily food of the Aboriginal people escape to the sea. Presumably, he then returned to his dark patch in the Milky Way.

Sally Morgan, a contemporary Aboriginal writer and painter,<sup>17</sup> has cast a rather whimsical eye over the coming of whites. In a story of her own making,<sup>18</sup> she suggests that the first white man came about as a result of an Aboriginal boy turning white with fear after he disobeyed tradition and his mother’s warnings in particular. A giant fish called Munka regularly terrorised a lake between the hours of midnight to dawn, and the boy ignored his mother’s injunction:

When darkness falls and the sky is black,  
And the stars all blink with fright,  
Munka comes up with his open mouth  
In the middle of the night.  
‘Food!’ he screams. ‘I want food! Any child will do!  
I’ll snap him up and crunch his bones and grind him into  
stew!’

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14 The resulting severe food shortages are well documented by Reynolds (1983).

15 Worms 1986:129.

16 Perhaps, suggests Worms, an allusion to the iron plough introduced by the Europeans.

17 Born in 1951 in Perth.

18 Morgan 1992:85–89.

## Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

The boy was swallowed whole by *Munka*, who fortunately gagged and vomited him up. To his dismay, the boy discovered he had turned white with terror.<sup>19</sup>

Gradually, the Aboriginal view of their cosmos was forced to take greater account of modern European and Christian ideologies. And too, traditional narratives underwent modifications and change with these influences, dogmas and images. Daphne Nimanydja from Arnhem Land, for example, retells an old story about the moon, *Ngalindi*, with a new twist. *Ngalindi* had two sons, who went on a successful fishing expedition, but on their return they refused to share the catch with their father. The moon put the two boys into a canoe, paddled out to the deep and threw them in. The mothers of the boys returned from gathering yams and, believing their sons to have been at least harmed in some way, or even killed by their husband, they ‘belted him up’! The moon, trying to escape their wrath, climbed higher and higher up a tall tree.

It’s (the) same thing that when Jesus died on the cross, he rose again, the same way that *Ngalindi*, when he dies, he comes back, you know, he came back in the (full) new moon—same thing happened for *Ngalindi*, like Jesus died on the cross and he rose again. And that’s the story we use, for the community at Millingimbi.<sup>20</sup>

Attempts by the surviving Aboriginal people to explain the European invasion and its continuing, all pervasive influence have been ongoing. Why Hermannsburg (Ntaria) was chosen to be the particular site of the first German Lutheran missionary activity, for instance, is the subject of much local speculation. Aranda narratives of the Lutheran encounter include the notion that a shooting star designated the place. This star motif links the Aranda people to the (Christian) star of Bethlehem, and

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19 Perhaps white men are a personification of Aboriginal fear. A version of this story is reported by Roth (1984 (5):16 from the Pennefather River area in Queensland. The monstrous creature in this case was a huge brown serpent and the boy escaped the serpent’s belly by being excreted. The loss of his skin resulted in him becoming white.

20 In Davis and Hodge 1985:99–100.

so explains and fixes their particular 'Church of Bethlehem'.<sup>21</sup> There is, even today, a representation of the star in rock markings on a hill near Palm Valley.<sup>22</sup>

As we move into the twenty first century, the cosmologist Harrison makes a timely observation<sup>23</sup>: 'Adrift like shipwrecked mariners, in a vast and meaningless mechanistic universe, we are found clinging for life to the cosmos wreckage of ancient universes.'

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21 Austin-Broos 1994:140.

22 According to Austin-Broos, stories about the falling star may also involve associations with a Deamtime story about a star which fell to earth in Palm Valley.

23 Harrison 1985:117.