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ADELAIDE ABORIGINAL COSMOLOGY

Philip A. Clarke

Introduction

In this paper I provide an account of the cosmological beliefs of the Adelaide Aborigines, based on information derived principally from early historical and ethnographic sources. This paper forms part of a larger study by this researcher on Aboriginal relationships with the Adelaide landscape. An account of the nature and form of the geographic knowledge of the Adelaide Aborigines will be published elsewhere.¹

The historical background

The information concerning the Adelaide Aboriginal people that is presented in this paper was recorded mainly by European missionaries, administrators and others during the early phases of European colonization. The most detailed data comes from the two Lutheran missionaries, Teichelmann and Schurmann, who were very active in recording the culture of their intended Aboriginal converts. Their various published works, mostly dating to the period from 1839 to 1846, were essentially studies of the Aboriginal language, although they also included much valuable ethnological data. Several other early sources, such as Williams, Gell and Wilhelm², acknowledged Teichelmann and Schurmann as their main sources of information. The account by Wyatt, the Protector of Aborigines from 1838-9, provides some useful data, but was recorded much later as a reminiscence.³ Information collected by Tindale comes mainly from an elderly Adelaide Aboriginal woman living on Yorke Peninsula in the late 1920s.⁴

The Heavens

Throughout Aboriginal Australia, the sky was generally considered to be an extension of the lower terrestrial landscape.⁵ There were widespread beliefs that ‘clever men’ or sorcerers/healers could visit this upper landscape and there acquire knowledge. In some regions novices would be ritually taken to this celestial region as part of their initiation. Many Aboriginal groups across Australia
considered the Heavens or Sky-world to be where their spirit, or a part of it, travelled to after death. I argue that the terrestrial spatial behaviour of the Adelaide Aboriginal people was influenced by their perceptions of cosmic relationships and events.

Teichelmann stated that the Adelaide Aborigines:

consider the firmament [Heavens] with its bodies as a land similar to what they are living upon ... It is their opinion that all the celestial bodies were formerly living upon earth, partly as animals, partly as men, and that they left this lower region to exchange for the higher one. Therefore all the names that apply to the beings on earth they apply to the celestial bodies, and believe themselves to be obnoxious to their influence, and ascribe to them malformation of the body, and other accidents.6

The description of the cosmology that follows in this paper will show the existence of human-type kinship systems involving many of the celestial bodies (see Fig. 1).

Monaincherloo: Sun-father man

Monaincherloo or Munaintyerlo was described as the "highest creature".7 He created all things in the visible world. No-one made or created him and he was believed to have power over life and death. According to one account he had always been in the Heavens above, although others state that he did live on the lower landscape once.8 An alternative name for Monaincherloo was Teendo Yerle, literally "Sun-father" or Tindojertimejo, literally "Sun-father man", suggesting a father/son relationship between Monaincherloo and the Sun. Monaincherloo had several wives, probably planets, who were considered to be benevolent. However, he also had a pair of evil sisters who were described as being "long"; Schurmann believed that the latter were probably comets.9

Monana

The being next in rank to Monaincherloo was Monana or Munaina.10 Wyatt said that Monana was believed to have been a mortal who had accomplished immortality. Wyatt recorded that Monana:

was one day throwing large spears in various directions, east, west, north,
south; when, having one thrown upwards, it did not return to earth. He threw another, and another, and so continued throwing; each spear sticking fast to the former one until they reached the ground, and he climbed up by them to the sky, where he has ever since remained.\(^{11}\)

Schurmann's account is similar to that of Wyatt's but differs in suggesting that Monana is a group of beings rather than a single being.\(^{12}\)

**Kakirra; the moon**

The first celestial body to leave the lower landscape was *Kakirra*, the Moon, who was considered to be male.\(^{13}\) *Kakirra*, after ascending to the sky, persuaded all the other beings to follow him so that he would have companions there. The Moon was generally benevolent and had no particular influence on human affairs. *Kakirra* kept a great many dogs for hunting, each dog having two heads and no tail. These dogs are represented by stars. The Moon was called *Kakirramunto* when full.

**Tindo; the Sun**

The Sun, known as *Teendo* or *Tindo*, was said to be female and, along with her several sisters, was believed to have a negative influence over human affairs.\(^{14}\) One of the afflictions caused by the Sun was a very painful and often fatal cough. Wyatt reports that *Kakirra*, the Moon, taught the Adelaide people that a person afflicted in this way could offer up some coughed-up phlegm to the Sun as a form of appeasement, so that he or she might recover. However, if not properly appeased, *Tindo* would say "*Noortne oornte, wirrilla pallone ningko*" which translates as "Be off and die".\(^{15}\) The Sun apparently exerted the same evil influence on the Moon. Wyatt noted that the Moon was believed to be old and suffering from a bad cough. *Tindo* was easily able to defeat *Kakirra* every month and cause his death but *Kakirra* was able to revive again each time. Wyatt recorded that the Aborigines believed that "*Tikkan teendo, wandeen oite, karkara tatteen, boora pallon*" i.e. "The Sun rests or sleeps at night while the Moon climbs and eventually dies".\(^{16}\) Schurmann added that at night the Sun sat in her wurley and ate fish.\(^{17}\) It is likely that the observable difference in the relative strength of illumination between the Sun and the Moon is a factor in this perceived Aboriginal dichotomy of strength and weakness.
Wodliparri; the Milky Way

The Aboriginal cosmic landscape was dominated by the Milky Way. It was considered by the Adelaide people to be a large river, along the banks of which reeds grew.\textsuperscript{18} The dark spots within the Milky Way were lagoons in which Yura, a "magnificent animal" or "monster" lived. These lagoons were known as Yurakauwe, literally "monster water". Yura was generally believed to be a single being but one account suggests that Yura was a group of monsters.\textsuperscript{19} The Milky Way was called Wodliparri, literally "hut-river", perhaps a reference to it being the home of the Yura. The monster was believed to be very dangerous and would swallow people who did not hide from it. Yura lived in the sky with Paiya, another dangerous monster. When Yura appeared an abundance of water was created. Yura introduced the rite of circumcision and taught the practice to the ancestors of the Adelaide people. He was thought to punish those who neglected the practice. Schurmann noted that women and children were not permitted to know anything of Yura; this knowledge was apparently restricted to the initiated men.

It is possible that Yura is equivalent to the Akurra, the huge, mythical water snake of the Flinders Ranges.\textsuperscript{20} The Akurra was a single being, but could be many places at once. The latter ability may help to explain how, in the Adelaide area, beings like Yura and Monana could be conceived of as existing as both singular and plural manifestations. The similarities between Yura and the Australian-wide belief in the Rainbow Serpent and other water-bringing snakes, are also significant.\textsuperscript{21}

Ngakallomurro; the Magellenic Clouds

The Magellenic Clouds were known as Ngakallomurro, literally "parakeet ashes".\textsuperscript{22} They are white and represent the ashes of the Blue Mountain Lorikeet or Rainbow Lorikeet (Trichoglossus haematodus). In Aboriginal belief, these birds were assembled there by one of the constellations and then treacherously killed and roasted.
Mankamankarrana; the Pleiades

The Adelaide people considered the higher landscape to be organized in a similar fashion to the lower in that the celestial bodies were believed to obey the same laws and habits as humans and animals upon the earth. For example, the Pleiades, known as Mankamankarrana, were thought to be girls who gathered roots and other vegetables which can be seen around them in the sky.23

Tinniinyarra; Orion

The stars of the constellation Orion were called Tinniinyarra or, in one account, Kurku, and were believed to be youths who hunted kangaroos, emus and other game on the great celestial plain, called Womma.24 The mother of the Tinniinyarra was a red star called Madletaltarni,25 probably Betelgeuse, and their father was a star known to the Aborigines as Parnakkoyerli.

Seasonal Stars

The star named Parnakkoyerli is probably another name for the star Parna. The appearance of Parna in the sky in early autumn indicated the change of season and was a sign that large waterproof huts needed to be built in the Adelaide foothills for the coming winter.26 Springtime was termed Willutti or Wiltutti and was under the influence of the constellation of the eagle Aboriginal Wilto.27 Summertime, or Woltatti, was governed by the wild turkey Walta.28

Unidentified Stars

Stars as a class were known to the Adelaide Aborigines as purli (or pou-lee).29 In the ethnographic sources there are several named stars that cannot be identified. One example is Njengari, who was once a mortal on earth.30 He had a happy nature and was often observed dancing. He created a smooth dancing spot on the coast at a place called Watbardok in the Normanville area, before being transformed into a star. This place later became a favourite fishing spot for Aboriginal people as nets could be drawn along the beach there without snagging. Njengari was a clansman of Tjirbruki, who was also a landscape-creating ancestor. Two constellations, Mattinyi and Kunomari, are referred to in the ethnographic sources but were not identified.31
Other Celestial Phenomena

As stated above, Monaincherloo, the Sun-father, had a pair of evil sisters who were "long", and Schurmann thought these sisters were probably comets. Schurmann stated that Aboriginal people considered any unusual cosmic phenomenon to be a "sure harbinger of death [which filled] them with awe and terror". For example, the so-called 'Great Comet' of 1843 so terrified some of the Port Lincoln Aborigines that they hid themselves in caves. Although many of the celestial bodies were linked to each other through kinship, meteoric lights were said to be "orphans". There were other celestial events that were perceived to be bad signs. In the Adelaide area, the Southern Lights foretold disease and eclipses were believed to cause death and destruction.

Discussion

The amount of cosmological knowledge possessed by the Adelaide people must have been considerable. Teichelmann recorded that with "the exaltation of almost every constellation they give the history of the attending circumstances, which the reasons of their present movements explain". However, there appears to have been many layers to this body of knowledge. Teichelmann wrote:

the opinions which the Aborigines of South Australia entertain about the visible world are limitedly known [by Europeans], as they carefully conceal them from Europeans, and even their own males are only at a certain age initiated into the knowledge of them. Indeed, Schurmann's informants guarded their secrets so much that he was only told about the cosmology on the condition that he did not tell any other Aboriginal person what had been divulged.

Perceived events and influences from the cosmic landscape had a significant role in the ordering of human life. Due to the fact that some of the celestial bodies were once earth dwellers, it is apparent that events on the lower landscape were perceived to have helped in the construction of the Adelaide cosmology. With the existence of a human-type kinship system linking many of the celestial bodies, it can be seen that the cosmos and earthly landscapes were in at least one sense reflections of each other.
Acknowledgements

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Endnotes
1. P. A. Clarke, Adelaide as an Aboriginal landscape (in prep.).
7. C. W. Schurmann, Diary 1839-40 (Transcript edited by E. A. Schurmann, copy held by Aboriginal Heritage Branch): 5-6 June 1839; Wyatt op. cit. pp. 166, 181. Also see Schurmann 'The Aborigines of South Australia' in South Australian Colonist, 10 Mar. 1840, pp. 23-4. Monaincherloo also refers to "a very remote time; ancient" (C. G. Teichelmann & C. W. Schurmann, Outlines of a grammar, vocabulary and phraseology of the Aboriginal language of South Australia spoken by the natives in, and for some distance around, Adelaide, (Adelaide 1840), pp. 2, 25).
9. ibid.
10. ibid; see also Wyatt, op. cit., pp. 166, 181.
16. ibid. Also see letter by Wyatt to Colonial Secretary dated 1 Apr. 1838 (PRO 69/1838).
17. Schurmann, Diary, 5 Jun., 22 Jul. 1839.


32. C. W. Schurmann, The Aboriginal tribes of Port Lincoln in South Australia; their mode of life, manners, customs, etc, (Adelaide 1846), p. 238.

33. ibid.


35. ibid.


37. ibid: p. 8.