

Contemporary Aboriginal Art: The Dreaming

The events of the Dreaming provide the great themes of Aboriginal art and are activated by ceremony and art. This essay discusses the *Lightening Men* figures in reference to the Dreaming, with historical and contemporary examples.

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Throughout Aboriginal history, art has and will continue to play an important role in representing their culture, making it a well known and an interesting subject for many viewers around the world. The Dreaming is a well used European term that Aboriginal people use ‘...to describe the spiritual, natural and moral order of the cosmos’ (Caruana 2003, 10). This term does not imply fantasy as such, but rather is said to indicate an unusual reality which goes beyond ordinary beliefs. The Dreaming is described as the beginning of creation and continuum of existence; it is the Aboriginal culture, spirituality and intimacy within the environment (Berndt and Phillips 1973, 31). Berndt, R., Berndt, C. and Stanton (1992, 21) discuss that the Dreaming is a term used to describe the existence from the beginning of time, and that it is just as relevant in the past as it is today in Aboriginal art and culture, it is also vitally important for the future.

Australia, being such a vast and unique land with many natural entities, has many figures and recordings of Aboriginal Dreaming. Some well known icons from the Dreaming are the Rainbow Serpents, Wagilag Sisters, Lightning Men and the Wandjina figures. Throughout this essay the legendary Aboriginal belief on the Lightning figures will be analysed and discussed, with reference to the Dreaming, rock art, ceremony and contemporary art. According to Stanner, The Dreaming is a poetic key to reality and expresses the philosophy of Aboriginal life. ‘The Dreaming determines not only what life *is* but also *what life can be*. Life...is the meaning of The Dreaming’ (Stanner 1979, 29). Therefore, The Dreaming is life and art is within life, so art became a way of explaining life in Aboriginal culture.

Aboriginal rock art is one of Australia’s historical motifs, which has been preserved throughout the centuries by Aboriginal generations; it is a living art tradition and reality. Many famous rock art sites are described as being significant illustrations of Creation

Ancestors or spirits, along with visual stories and pictorial records of certain events like ceremonies and hunting journeys. Throughout the Northern Territory rock art remains as significant places of historical Aboriginal traditions. Lightning ancestral beings are a common illustration in Northern Australia as they bring rain and life to the land. According to Drew and Harney (2004, 93) all lightning beings were brought down from the sky by a Creation Ancestor called Nardai.

The Dreamtime story told by Harney explains that all lightning beings were looking for food in muddy ground and performing ceremonies, but some perished with lack of water, so the remaining ones asked Nardai to bring water. Nardai then dug a hole in the ground and sang to bring rain. Two lightning lawmakers (fig. 1) in this country area then picked up the water and spread it across the land, also causing signals of sheet lightning to let everyone know enough water was provided. Some lightning beings however, would not accept this water, saying it was dirty ceremonial water. Two other lightning lawmakers, Yagdabula and Jabiringi (fig. 2), soon stopped the lightnings from coming closer and declared that they would be the ones responsible for bringing water to the area of Victoria River, Northern Territory. Jabiringi controls the heavy rains that are carried by cyclonic winds, which represent grasshoppers, and Yagdabula takes the lead in striking the ground, lighting grass and destroying trees (Drew and Harney 2004, 93-96).

Lightning brother characters, located in a cave near Delamere Northern Territory, are similar to the rock art at Victoria River however; smaller illustrations surround the larger figures making each form have significant identities. The location is a sacred rain-totem site that was preserved by an Aboriginal known as Emu-Jack. The two figures stand with striped designs that represent falling rain, similar markings are painted on the Aborigines when certain rituals are performed, scarification of the skin also represents the grooves in the rock art of Delamere that symbolise the falling rain (Study Guide 2009, 31). The heads of the Lightning Brothers portray gecko heads, which symbolise lightning, because it can walk upside-down, and the bodies are like goannas, representing strong, powerful creatures, but also good food suppliers (Berndt, McCarthy, Elkin, Mountford, Strehlow & Tuckson 1964, 42, 89).

Varieties of Creation Ancestors and Lightning beings exist in different areas of the land, making each one responsible for the different types of weather patterns and controlling specific areas with rain (Welch 2006-2010). Caruana (1993, 22) states that many of the Dreamtime stories originated in one particular area and travelled across the regions, gaining wider significance in different places and associating Creation Ancestors to the types of landscape. A famous rock art site known as the Anbangbang gallery in Kakadu National Park is explained as being a cultural significance with three main figures that signify important characters in Aboriginal culture (fig. 3). This particular rock art was repainted around 1963 by a local Aboriginal artist known as Barramundi Charlie or Najombolmi (DEWHA 2008). He was a highly respected artist who followed the ancestry practice of repainting illustrations and preserving art that existed in the natural and original sites (Caruana 1993, 23). This job was particularly important to Najombolmi's culture and ancestry, as he wanted to paint life and spirit back into his country.

The largest character (fig. 3) is known as the Creation Ancestor, Namondjok. The character on the right is Namarrgon, another Creation Ancestor, known as the Lightning Man, who travelled from the Coburg Peninsula, leaving remnants of his power as he went along and finally settling under a rock shelter in Anbangbang. It is said that while Namarrgon travelled he looked out from a high cliff at Namarrgondjahdjam, plucking out one eye to watch and wait for the stormy season. The Lightning Man is believed to be the one responsible during the wet season of powerful thunder storms in far northern Australia. This figure has a joining band that starts from his ankles and arches over his head, thus representing a bolt of lightning. His pose symbolises the action of how he splits the dark clouds and uses stone axes to create the lightning (DEWHA 2008).

Barrgini is the Lightning Man's wife, depicted as the evident female character located below Namondjok. The children of the couple are the Alyurr; illustrated as being the orange and blue insects, later described as the rare Leichhardt grasshoppers, usually seen during the wet season. It is believed that during the time of creation, the Alyurr gave the local Aborigines their unique language, beliefs and establishment of society.

Below these prominent characters are male and female figures adorned with stripes, which seem to be performing a ceremony, perhaps giving respect or honour to the Creation Ancestors who gave them rain, language and constitution (DEWHA 2008). Ceremonies are still an important part in the Aboriginal culture; some performances are to ensure that the Ancestral Beings supply them with good food and rain (Welch 2006-2010). Dancing, singing, chanting and body decorations are all a part in the tribal performances to honour Ancestral spirits (Berndt and Phillips 1973, 34-35).

Simple patterns or marks of lines and shapes have long since been a trademark and continuing style in Aboriginal art, communicating a unique language with significant meanings and symbols of subjects like food, landscape, weather, life and identity (Berndt & Phillips 1973). A reproduced design of a spear-thrower (fig. 12) tells a story of how the rain falls from the storm-clouds, turns into floods, thus lifting organic matter in creek-beds. These similar markings are found within the rock art paintings of lightning figures and also contemporary Aboriginal designs. Sometimes sacred boards were created with a variety of marks or symbols and then stuck into ceremonial ground as part of a background performance and significance to the ritual (Berndt et al 1964, 44-59).

Although these rock painting figures are ancient, they are still regarded as important beings in Aboriginal art and culture. In 2001 Bill Harney created the *Lightning Dreaming* (fig. 4), which portrays two lightning brother figures similar to the rock art in Victoria River (fig. 2). Paddy Fordham Wainburranga also reproduced the characteristic lightning man (fig. 5), which depicts similar markings to traditional and contemporary artworks. Pam Vovola also creates multi-dimensional art on gypsum board that portrays ancestral figures from Aboriginal rock art sites. Acrylics and natural pigments of clay, dirt, nuts, tea and wild berries are often used for natural appearances (fig. 6-8). *Narrangem and Ngaldalu* by Wally Mandarrk (fig. 9) is another example of the lightning spirits. These two figures are also considered as the responsible ancestors, for the curtains of lightning and flooding rains up north (Caruana 1993, 39). Mandarrk's figures also resemble the markings and form of goannas, as do the rock art of the Lightning Brothers (fig. 1-2).

Another replication of Namarrgon was painted on bark by Mick Kubarrkku (fig. 10), which has similar relations to the lightning man rock art (fig. 3), having stone axes protruding from his joints. Stone axes were obviously an important tool in the Aboriginal culture, thus representing it as a powerful device that makes loud sounds, such as thunder and sparks of fire like lightning (Mundine 2008, 42). Mundine likens the stone axes to tools that cut or make cutting marks. ‘The *cut* is always a moment of realisation—for it forces a break. It disrupts’ (Mundine 2008, 43). Axes were used to split trees rather than chop them, just as lightning splits trees. Anchor Wurrkidj also represented *Namarrkon, lightning spirit* (fig.11) but no axes can be recognised however, the whole image still evokes the lightning spirit’s unique form.

Aboriginal culture and art lives on throughout Australia, and continues to bring amazement and interest to the world. Aboriginal art continues to be a living reality (Berndt R. Berndt C. & Stanton 1992, 20); it is the life of the Aboriginal people and their cultural existence, which will go on to be a thriving historical documentary to future generations. Just as the Dreaming was an important subject and belief in centuries gone by, it still remains an essential significance for the future in Aboriginal culture. The Dreaming belief and illustrations of the Lightning Spirits will remain as significant ancestors that electrify the sky and bring drenching rains to a meaningful and fascinating landscape.

Images



Figure 1: Rock Art, Lightning Brothers at Delamere N.T. (Berndt et al 1964, fig. 38).



Figure 2: Rock Art, Lightning Brothers *Yagdabula and Jabirinji* at Victoria River N.T.



Figure 3: Rock Art, Anbangbang Gallery (Lightning Man) at Kakadu N.T. (Department of EWHA 2008).



Figure 3 detail: The Lightning Man at Kakadu, N.T. (Department of EWHA 2008).



Figure 4: Bill Harney, *Lightning Dreaming*, 2001, acrylic on Galicia linen (Culture & Creation 2008).



Figure 5: Paddy Fordham Wainburranga with his work titled *Lightning Man* (Aboriginal Fine Arts 1996–2010).



Figure 6: Pam Vovola, *The Lightning Man*, prepared gypsum board with carving and pigments (Pam, Ethereals)



Figure 7: Pam Vovola, *Lightning Man*, prepared gypsum board with carving, pigments and clay (Pam, Ethereals).



Figure 8: Pam Vovola, *The Lightning Brothers*, prepared gypsum board with carving and pigments (Pam, Ethereals)



Figure 9: Wally Mandarrk, *Narangem and Ngaldaluk, Lightning Spirits*, 1986, painting on bark (Caruana 1993, 39).



Figure 10: Mick Kubarrkku, *Namarrkon, lightning spirit*, 1973, earth pigments on bark, 61.1 x 50.1 cm irreg. (Mundine 2008, 42).



Figure 11: Anchor Wurrkidj, Namarrkon (lightning spirit), c.1970, ochres on bark, 77.7 x 37.5 cm. (Mundine 2008, 193).

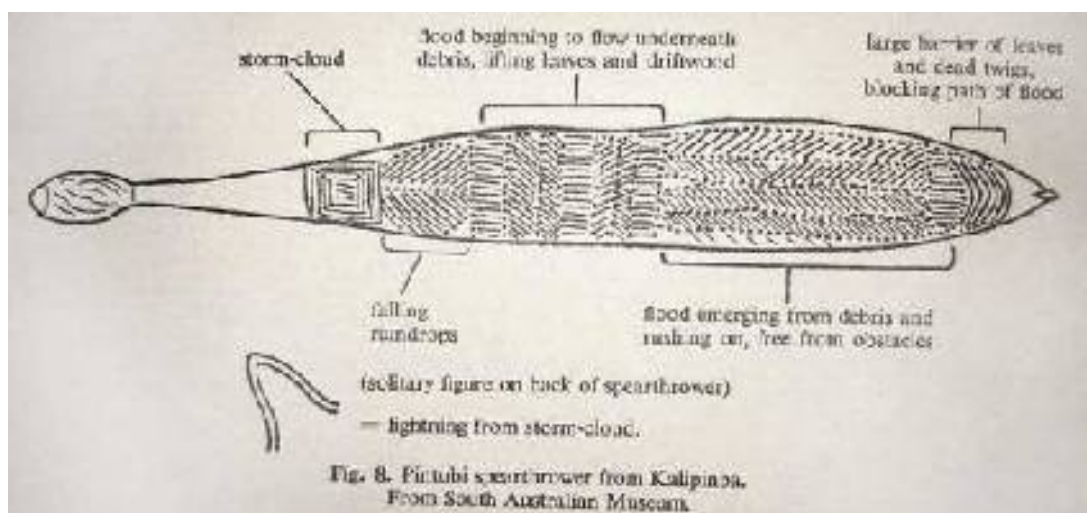


Figure 12: Spear-thrower design from South Australian Museum (Berndt et al 1964, 59).

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