



THE FABLE, FOLKTALE, MYTH IN AUSTRALIAN ABORIGINAL LITERATURE-A STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The concept of an Aboriginal Literature Review may seem like a contradiction in terms! Aboriginal peoples traditionally passed most of their worldview. Aboriginal culture is an oral culture and for forty thousand years or more, it has been passed down from generation to generation. Aboriginal Mythology was expressed through legends and stories that visualize people's concept of the metaphysical world and give explanation to the differences found in shaping the landscape. In Aboriginal beliefs, every object and every creature on this earth has its own wisdom, spirit and language, whether it has life or not. Every object in this life is like a human being; it has its own conscious and its existing shape. They see this as an assured fact, not subjected to any controversy, and a realistic necessity in all their legends. Present review explores selected information regarding the Fable, Folktale, Myth In Australian Aboriginal Literature.

INTRODUCTION

"... Indigenous literature, if you want to use that label for convenience's sake, holds many if not all of the beliefs, philosophies, worldviews of Indigenous people; it holds a history. So I would think that Aboriginal literature really is the heart of Aboriginal being." – (Neal McLeod 2001)

Aboriginal literature may be a new field in academic study, yet the term designates a set of creative and communicative practices that reach into deep time, "time immemorial" as Aboriginal people sometime call it, while also having a vital and diverse presence in contemporary culture¹. Australian Aboriginal literature in English comprises a variety of works in all genres and styles. It also represents a variety of attitudes to the Aboriginal situation, urging us to approach it cautiously to avoid the common errors arising from over generalization. Holt's words introduce readers of Aboriginal literature to a world of debates, discussions, controversies, traumas and assertions, and most of all to differences, and to the need to avoid glossing over differences. Apart from all these, the above statement reminds us of facts in the history and lives of the Aboriginal people of Australia. Aborigines, as Holt (1970) says, were not a homogenous group. Before colonisation they comprised hundreds of tribes, spread all over Australia, with different languages and different cultures. Aboriginal writing is not simple, and it comes from living cultures that are subject to change like any other culture. To hear from Aboriginal authors and "experts" directly without meeting them personally, refer to published interviews or, conduct online discussions between the author and the students. Although these methods do not ensure contact with different community voices, they may help avoid misinterpretations of the literature that could perpetuate stereotypes.

In the period between the 1920s and the 1960s, most recording of Aboriginal oral traditions was carried out by social anthropologists as a by-product of their field research into social structures and religious rites. There were also a few linguists at work, mostly amateurs, with the exception of Gerhardt Laves who did



not publish his work and Arthur Capell, who was Reader in Linguistics at Sydney University and for some twenty years the only teacher of Aboriginal linguistics in an Australian university. Other individual researchers, such as Norman Tindale and Theodore Strehlow, both in Adelaide, recorded Aboriginal myths, tales, and song texts. However, Strehlow's most important work in this field, *Songs of Central Australia*, was not published until 1971. A number of texts were recorded during this period, particularly in the journal *Oceania* (1930-) and in the *Oceania Monographs* and *Linguistic Monographs Series*. One must mention particularly the work of the anthropologists Catherine and Ronald Berndt, who produced a substantial number of texts of Aboriginal oral genres both within anthropological works (e.g., 1942-45, 1951) and separately (R. Berndt 1951, 1952, 1976a and b; C. Berndt 1952-54, 1970). Between them, they have made a highly significant collection of texts, which they are now preparing for systematic analysis

Australian Aboriginal literature, once relegated to the margins of Australian literary studies, now receives both national and international attention. Not only has the number of published texts by contemporary Australian Aboriginals risen sharply, but scholars and publishers have also recently begun recovering earlier published and unpublished Indigenous works. Writing by Australian Aboriginals is making a decisive impression in fiction, autobiography, biography, poetry, film, drama, and music, and has recently been anthologized in *Oceania* and *North America*.

Aboriginal literature emerges as a multidimensional and interdisciplinary discourse as it explores and recreates the Aboriginal situation of both today and the past. Dozens of reports on Aboriginal issues released over several decades, making hundreds of recommendations for reforms, have concluded that education, in both their present and previous forms, have been used to ensure the cultural, economic, political, and social oppression of Canada's Aboriginal peoples²

Until now, however, there has been no comprehensive critical companion that contextualizes the Aboriginal canon for scholars, researchers, students, and general readers. This international collection of eleven original essays fills this gap by discussing crucial aspects of Australian Aboriginal literature and tracing the development of Aboriginal literacy from the oral tradition up until today, contextualizing the work of Aboriginal artists and writers and exploring aspects of Aboriginal life writing such as obstacles toward publishing, questions of editorial control (or the lack thereof), intergenerational and interracial collaborations combining oral history and life writing, and the pros and cons of translation into European languages³.

Fables are short tales that usually feature animals (real or mythical) given human-like qualities to deliver a specific moral or lesson. Folktales also stem from an oral tradition, passed down by the 'folk' who told them. The term 'folktale' is often used interchangeably with fable, since folktales can have a lesson at the end. Folktales are different from fables because they feature people as their main characters, but often with a twist. The terms legend and folktale are sometimes used interchangeably with myth. Technically, however, these are not the same. How should we distinguish them? Donna Rosenberg, in her book *Folklore, Myth, and Legends: A World Perspective*, offers some useful guidelines:

A myth is a sacred story from the past. It may explain the origin of the universe and of life, or it may express its culture's moral values in human terms. Myths concern the powers who control the human world and the relationship between those powers and human beings. Although myths are religious in their origin and function, they may also be the earliest form of history, science, or philosophy...

Aboriginal Mythology was expressed through legends and stories that visualize people's concept of the metaphysical world and give explanation to the differences found in shaping the landscape. In these legends we can sum up values and beliefs similar to those found in other old cultures such as obedience, honesty, loyalty and self-sacrifice. On the other hand the mythology negotiates the eternal quest which was and still a great human issue: Death and Birth.



Myths are stories from every culture, that, for centuries, have explained natural phenomena and answered questions people have about the human condition: origin and creation stories, stories about life, death and life after death. Big picture stuff⁴. Myths are a gateway to a people's culture, customs and values. Students should use a think-pair-share approach to revise what distinguishes a myth from other types of stories.

The stories i.e aboriginal myths (are in general) very short and for someone who is not part of the culture they would probably stop at that: Myths.

David Unaipon (1872-1967)⁶ was an inventor, writer, musician, orator and the mouth piece of AFA. He was the first Aboriginal Australian to write published books. Born in Ngarrindjeri Aboriginal community, he took patents for 19 inventions that include a tool for shearing sheep, a new design for a wheel, centrifugal motor and a helicopter. He strived hard throughout his life to make life better for the Aborigines. He was encouraged by Aborigines' Friends Association (AFA) which became a formative influence on his life and career. He worked and travelled around south-eastern Australia for fifty years. He often gave talks in schools and churches of different religions about Aboriginal legends and culture, and about his people's future. He experienced discrimination and understood the problems of racism.

He was inquisitively religious because of Christian upbringing. His training in Latin and Greek made him comfortable with reading sermons of Thomas de Witt Talmage and Henry Drummond. Gordon Rowe in *Sketches of Outstanding Aborigines* (1956) says that Unaipon's acceptance as Aborigine depends on the Aborigine himself. Bestowing 'Coronation Medal' was a testimony to his wider acceptance. In an address to a Methodist gathering, Unaipon proved his point:

I am here to plead with you on behalf of my countrymen, the Australian Aborigines. It has been said they cannot be Christianized and uplifted. I am here to prove the contrary... my people are in a state of balance, both physical, moral and intellectual, and Dr. Lancaster says that the destiny of primitive races must be either stagnation, progress or retrogression... We made no progress during these thousands of years... hills, valleys and rivers provided us with food...we lived in the most primitive manner. In this state of balance, we were found when white people came here with their influence for good and evil. (Ramsland, John and Christopher Mooney)

It is observed that Unaipon in one his addresses, 'An Aboriginal Pleads For His Race' supported Aboriginal assimilation into white society. He was faithful to Aboriginal heritage and promoted the ultimate role of Aboriginal people through his legends and fables. The contemporary Aboriginal scholarship has drawn attention to Unaipon's work and provided an accurate critical appraisal of Unaipon's legends. The revaluation presented Unaipon's work as fascinating, complex and considered it as defying any kind of classification. A good example of his master craftsmanship is found in the short piece 'Totemism'. Unaipon explains the concept in an academic tone that Totemism is one of the ancient customs instituted by Primitive Man. The adoption of Totemism by Aborigines owes its origin to mythological conception. He recounts the interpretation of Aboriginal Totemic belief in a more philosophical way.

Unaipon tried to alter Aboriginal traditions to Christian tradition. His works became significant as they illustrated the honest and finest response of a brilliant Aboriginal man to the expectations of socio-political and religious system. His writings have explicitly portrayed the paradoxical situation of man who tries to move away from traditional Aboriginal society. This attitude of Unaipon proved to be a perfect prediction of the doctrine of assimilation which became a comprehensive mode of reforming the Australian society

Kinder Märchen include many ætiological myths, explanatory of the markings and habits of animals, the origin of constellations, and so forth. They are a savage edition of the *Metamorphoses*, and few unbiased students now doubt that the *Metamorphoses* are a very late and very artificial version of traditional tales as savage in origin as those of the Noongahburrah. I have read Mrs. Parker's collection with very great interest,



with "human pleasure," merely for the story's sake. Children will find here the Jungle Book, never before printed, of black little boys and girls. The sympathy with, and knowledge of beast-life and bird-life are worthy of Mr. Kipling, and the grotesque names are just what children like. Dinewan and Goomblegubbon should take their place with Rikki Tikki and Mr. Kipling's other delightful creatures. But there is here no Mowgli, set apart in the jungle as a man. Man, bird, and beast are all blended in the Australian fancy as in that of Bushmen and Red Indians. All are of one kindred, all shade into each other; all obey the Bush Law as they obey the Jungle Law in Mr. Kipling's fascinating stories. This confusion, of course, is not peculiar to Australian *Märchen*; it is the prevalent feature of our own popular tales. But the Australians "do it more natural:" the stories are not the heritage of a traditional and dead, but the flowers of a living and actual condition of the mind. The stories have not the ingenious dramatic turns of our own *Märchen*. Where there are no distinctions of wealth and rank, there can be no *Cinderella* and no *Puss in Boots*. Many stories are rude ætiological myths; they explain the habits and characteristics of the birds and beasts, and account in a familiar way for the origin of death ("Bahloo, the Moon, and the Daens"). The origin of fire is also accounted for in what may almost be called a scientific way. Once discovered, it is, of course, stolen from the original proprietors. A savage cannot believe that the first owners of fire would give the secret away. The inventors of the myth of Prometheus were of the same mind.

Australian Aboriginal myths (also known as *Dream time* or *Dreaming stories*, *songlines*, or *Aboriginal oral literature*) are the stories traditionally performed by Aboriginal peoples within each of the language groups across Australia.

For the Australian Aborigines, the sky was a textbook of morals and stories retold around campfires. They had their own zodiac made of birds, fishes and dancing men and it was the backdrop to their existence for tens of thousands of years.

In winter the bright stars we call Arcturus and Vega appeared and the Arnhem Land tribes knew that it was time to make fish traps. Also at that time, tribes in Victoria would look for the pupa of the wood ant. The appearance of the stars we call the Pleiades - or the Seven Sisters - was the sign of the start of the dingo-hunting season. Aborigines saw Magellanic clouds as an old man and woman. The Aborigines knew about the white, blue and red stars and had explanations for all of them. They understood the concept of circumpolar stars, that is, those that never dip below the horizon. Eclipses and exploding stars were never regarded as good or bad omens - they were merely part of nature. The Aborigines made bark paintings of the sky as well as rock carvings.

Extending deep into the caverns of humanity's oldest memories, beyond 60,000 years of history and into the Dreamtime, this collection of Australian Aboriginal myths has been passed down through the generations by tribal storytellers. The myths were compiled at the turn of the century by K. Langloh Parker, one of the first Europeans to realize their significance and spiritual sophistication. Saved from drowning by Aboriginal friends when she was just a child, Parker subsequently gained unique access to Aboriginal women and to stories that had previously eluded anthropologists.

In the stories, women tell of their own initiations and ceremonies, the origins and destiny of humanity, and the behavioral codes for society. Included are stories of child-rearing practices, young love in adversity, the dangers of invoking the spiritual powers, the importance of social sharing, the role of women in male conflicts, the dark feminine, and the transformational power of language. Wise Women of the Dreamtime allows us to participate in the world's oldest stories and to begin a new dream of harmony between human society and nature⁵.

On the whole the stories, perhaps, most resemble those from the Zulu in character, though these represent a much higher grade of civilisation. The struggle for food and water, desperately absorbing, is the perpetual theme, and no wonder, for the narrators dwell in a dry and thirsty land, and till not, nor sow, nor



keep any domestic animals. We see the cunning of the savage in the devices for hunting, especially for chasing honey bees. The Rain-magic, actually practised, is of curious interest. In brief, we have pictures of savage life by savages, romances which are truly realistic. We understand that condition which Dr. Johnson did not think happy-the state from which we came, and to which we shall probably return. "Equality," "Liberty", "Community of Goods," all mean savagery, and even savages, if equal, are not really free. Custom is the tyrant.

It is very difficult for a stranger to rightly understand the morals of their stories [...] And when you have learned all that language can convey, there are still a thousand images, suggestions and associations recurring to the Indian, which can strike no chord in your heart. The myriad voices of nature are dumb to you, but to them they are full of life and power.[7]

Among many aboriginal cultures, "storytelling" was normally restricted to the long winter evenings. The Cree were one culture with a strict belief in this regard: "During the summer, no stories founded on fiction were ever told; the Indians believing that if any 'fairy' tales were told during that season when they were supposed to use their time to best advantage, the narrator would have his life destroyed by the lizard, which would suck his blood." [8]

Aboriginal folklore and mythology are sometimes collected and studied according to language families, such as Algonquian, Athabaskan, Iroquoian, Kutenai, Salishan, Siouan, and others. Classification schemes for indigenous languages of the Americas can vary. Large language families can include aboriginal cultures in geographically distant areas, for example, the Algonquian language family includes the M'igmax of the modern-day Maritime provinces as well as the Odawa people of the Ottawa River region.

However, education and mass media are the major means by which the portrayal of Aboriginality can be disseminated throughout the world. Aboriginal literature is basically involved with the maintenance and extension of Aboriginal self-assurance and the feeling of self-respect. Three major elements come together in Indigenous Australian literature – THE FABLE, FOLKTALE, MYTH. Above all, the Aboriginal literature deals and fights for the identity, an impetus for many native literatures across the world.

All such myths variously tell significant truths within each Aboriginal group's local landscape. They effectively layer the whole of the Australian continent's topography with cultural nuance and deeper meaning, and empower selected audiences with the accumulated wisdom and knowledge of Australian Aboriginal ancestors back to time immemorial.[9]

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