

4

Mythology

Star lore held an important place in Aboriginal mythology, philosophy, history, religion and metaphysics over all parts of the country. Myths or traditional narratives were often associated with the stars and planets, the night sky being but one aspect of the natural environment, just one stage in the ongoing theatre of mythological drama. The projection of belief and symbol onto parts of the natural environment and the subsequent investment of spiritual status in them is a significant and underlying plank of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander societies. In the words of W.E.H. Stanner, ‘most of the choir and furniture of heaven and earth are recognised by Aborigines as a vast sign-system ... [the Aboriginal person] moves, not in a landscape, but in a humanised realm saturated with significations.’¹

The particular myths of a group of people are part of a much greater oral literary tradition. Together, they represent a vast and dramatic panorama of energies which underpin and inform the chaos and variety of human experience, describing, sourcing and powering it and its connection with other life forms and matter. These fantastic and ongoing mythical dramas also describe the limitations on and within human experience.² They address the human condition: the human experience of simply ‘being’ in its universality as well as in its particular cultural context. They can, in certain instances, allude to and elaborate historical events in the past, offer a charter to foster socially valued behaviour and bring into societal consciousness the shared dreams and fantasies of individual and collective psyches.

Individual narratives, then, were part of a cultural whole, part of the ongoing story of a group of people. They were often told or enacted in

1 Stanner 1965:227.

2 ‘The maggots at the centre’ according to the Murinbata people in the Port Keats region of the Northern Territory (Stanner 1959:63–25).

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

a particular order, at a particular time in a person's life, in a particular season, in a particular setting, in a particular way. Some of the myths were known only to initiated men, or only to women. More often, they were known by all the adults within a community³ and children in many instances were well acquainted with at least the outline of the stories. A relatively simple story that was told to a child, for example, was given a more detailed and embellished rendering when told to an adult, taking into account metaphor, contradiction and paradox. Esoteric significance was not readily revealed because it was frequently linked with sacred ritual and ceremonial practices.

The night sky was not an unusual topic in narratives or myth cycles. It was an extension or specific elaboration of the landscape, deemed especially significant in places because many of the creative ancestral beings, having performed or enacted their dramas on earth, had withdrawn to the sky and were believed to be eternally represented there. However, sky-residing ancestral beings were intrinsically linked to earthly forms and vice versa.

Many of the narratives recorded actual events or activities, large and small, routine and extraordinary. Each area, clan and language group had its own, albeit interconnected, sets or cycles of narratives, each with its own songs, dances, rituals, art and decoration. So the stories that have survived and made their way into modern literary forms are but a few, not unlike fragmentary parchment papers long dispersed from ancient texts. They are parts of larger narrative cycles that sought not only to describe and record, but also to inspire, torment and comfort. They gave meaning, passion and significance to each and every life and life-form. They acted as analogy, parable and metaphor, their symbolic meanings changing, re-charging and re-forming with different contexts and settings. According to American cosmologist Harrison,

myths come to us as a legacy of priceless gems prized from their cosmic settings. Usually a myth has been recut and remounted more than once in the course of time. A full understanding of myth requires the reconstruction of the universe

3 Berndt and Berndt 1974:8.

in which it originated, even of the intermediate universes that modified and transmitted it, and an accurate interpretation is rarely if ever possible.⁴

Myths, like the people who inhabit them, also belonged to the environment or country from which they came. David Lewis describes how he became aware of this: ‘Travelling with Loritja (Luritja) in their own country ... practically every place had its Dreaming, its story, its associated subsections and appropriate ceremonials. Most rock formations and waters were stations on long mythological tracks. With Wintinna Mick in the Simpson Desert the position differed only in that his people had migrated eastward comparatively recently into what was, properly speaking, Aranda and Arabana country. He was reluctant to tell me the myths, and I find his choice of words revealing: I am Antikarinnya.⁵ The stories belong to the Aranda and Arabana *country* (Lewis’ emphasis). In other words, the myths were an integral part of the landscape itself.’⁶

Interpretation of myths or traditional narratives has been divided into four separate, although not necessarily incompatible or discrete categories by Australian anthropologist, Lester Hiatt.⁷ He suggests that myth can be viewed at least in part, as a kind of history, or charter, or dream, or as ontology. Indeed, a myth may encompass more than one of these categories, embracing two or even three interpretive ideas.

Myth as Charter

A myth acting as a charter puts out time-honoured notions as a guide to culturally and socially appropriate behaviour. Narratives in this tradition are seen as constituting ‘a conservative, socialising force whose

4 Harrison 1985:37.

5 Also ‘Andagarinja’.

6 Lewis 1976:276–77.

7 Hiatt has reservations about the suggested categories’ ability to comprehensively deal with all modern attempts to interpret the Australian material (1975:16–17, 20).

function is to sanctify existing institutions and to foster the values of sociality. They invest the social order with necessity by linking it causally to an apocryphal past.⁸ Nonie Sharp (1993) follows this tradition with her explanation of the vast constellation of the *Tagai*. The role of *Tagai* is to act as a source of instruction for the Meriam people. *Tagai*, a sea hero, represents a charter: 'I cannot walk the path that is *Usiam's* (the Pleiades) nor can I walk the path that is Seg's (Orion)⁹ ... 'for I must follow *teter mek*, the footprints made by my ancestors.'¹⁰ The Meriam people take this to mean that stars have their own course in the heavens, that is, each star has its own journey to make: everything has a place in the world and its own path to follow. This charter entreats the Meriam to follow their own cultural traditions that they inherited from their forebears and to pass them on, intact, in due course. As a corollary, they must not encroach on that which does not belong to them. It is a belief that attributes to each creature, a destiny or province in the cosmos, a time and a place. Accompanying this charter is a cycle of myths and rituals which centre around *Malo-Bomai*, two significant culture heroes of the Meriam people. The celebration of ritual cycles in tune with natural cycles assures the accretion of human wisdom, envisaged as moving like a loosely coiled spiral and resembling the pattern on a cone shell.

Myth as history

Myth as history sees the narratives as pertaining to real events of the past. Hiatt suggests that the past events represented in myths fall into three main categories; that of migration, social organisation and particular happenings in nature.¹¹

8 Hiatt 1975:5. The main exponents of this analytic framework in the Australian context are Warner (1937), Piddington (1950) and the Berndts in their earlier publications (1951, 1964, 1970).

9 Lawrie 1937:373.

10 Sharp 1993:71.

11 Hiatt 1975:4. Spencer and Gillen (1899), Roheim (1925), Tindale

The anthropologist Norman Tindale has recorded a myth which refers to an eclipse which purportedly occurred in 1793.¹² In 1836, at the time of the first white settlement, the coastal groups in the Eyre Peninsula in South Australia were on the defensive against groups moving south, probably because of a scarcity in food resources. The pressures brought to bear by starving people were embodied in myth belonging to the Ngadjuri people which identified and expressed this stress in the form of an old cannibal woman and her two dogs, one red, one black, who collectively killed and ate people they encountered on their way south down the peninsula. In the myth, two jew lizard men were appointed to stand up to the old woman and her dogs. They did so by killing the three. But as a result, the sun which had never previously set, so the story goes, went down in the west, and to the dismay of the people, stayed down. One of the jew lizard men brought the sun back by (unsuccessfully at first), hurling boomerangs north, west, south and finally east. Tindale regards this as a possible description of an eclipse of the sun and his consultations with a former South Australian government astronomer, G.F. Dodwell, indicated that at that time, the most recent eclipse which had passed over Ngadjuri tribal lands had taken place on March 13, 1793, in the late afternoon.¹³ 'It is possible,' concludes Tindale¹⁴, 'that the story either touches on historical happenings of that date or was given a fresh setting at that time.'

The Australian historian, Henry Reynolds has reported a situation which occurred in the early nineteenth century around Adelaide and beyond, when the appearance of a comet¹⁵ convinced South Australian Aborigines that powerful northern sorcerers were about to destroy the

(1938) and more recently Sutton (1988) are proponents of this interpretive tradition.

12 Tindale 1974:135.

13 Any earlier eclipses had occurred before 1600.

14 Tindale 1974:135.

15 It was probably the comet of 1811, which had a coma larger than the disc of the sun, as viewed from the earth.

town. The explorer, Edward Eyre commented at the time, that he was told the comet was 'the harbinger of all kinds of calamities, and more especially for white people. It was to overthrow Adelaide, destroy all the Europeans and their houses'.¹⁶ This particular comet was seen as signalling the destruction of Adelaide because a senior man of one of the Aboriginal groups had been imprisoned in the local gaol. The narrative grew out of actual events.

Myth as Dream

Myth as dream sees the traditional narratives as shared fantasies attempting to rationalise the wish-fulfilment content of dreams.¹⁷ An interesting version of this analytic view is discussed by the anthropologist Isobel White (1975) and concerns the open star cluster, the Pleiades. White asserts that in Central Australian myths the Pleiades are perceived as mythological women, variously described as the Seven or Many Sisters. They are invariably being chased by mythological men or a man. Their similarity to Greek mythology is worth noting, as the Pleiades were regarded as the seven daughters of old Atlas and Pleione. Their names were Alcyone (*Eta Tauri*), Electra, Merope, Maia, Taygete, Celaeno, and Asterope. These seven sisters were constantly pursued by the hunter, Orion, and escaped by turning themselves into doves or rock-pigeons.¹⁸

16 In Reynolds 1983:89.

17 Hiatt 1985:7. These myths lend themselves to dream analysis, chiefly undertaken in the Australian context by Freudian-influenced anthropologists including Roheim (1925, 1945), Meggitt (1966) and Hiatt (1971). Roheim analysed myths from Central Australia and argued (1945) that myths about the Milky Way are concerned with projections of the so-called 'primal scene' (parental coitus) onto the night sky. The struggles in the stories are representations of separation and the ensuing anxiety this process necessarily entails (for males in Roheim's analysis).

18 Allen 1963:395. In China, the Pleiades were also seen as young

In Australian myths, much further afield than the Central Australian context, the women of the Pleiades are similarly pursued.¹⁹ They spent much time running away from the unwelcome and usually illicit advances of a male (or males), who is (are) usually represented as the constellation of Orion, although there was some variation in precisely which celestial object was assigned the role of the assailant:

- Orion or certain stars in Orion²⁰
- The moon (-man)²¹
- The Gemini twins Castor and Pollux (*Alpha and Beta Gemini*)²²

women, the Seven Sisters of Industry, and were honoured particularly by girls.

19 In Arnhem Land, the men of Orion do not pursue the Pleiades women. The stars in Orion are three fishermen, with the Pleiades being seen as their wives. This is the case on Groote Island (Mountford 1956:482), in Millingimbi (Mountford 1956:493) and at Yirrkala (Mountford 1956:490–98).

20 Documented among the Wailman in south-western Australia (Hassell 134:237); among the Ngadadjara people around Warburton in Western Australia (Tindale 1936:169–185; 1978:158–9); among the Anyamatana in northern South Australia (Mountford 1939:105, Roberts and Mountford 1974:74); among the Walbiri of Central Australia (Meggitt 1966:131–38); in western Central Australia (Mountford 1948:155, 167, 1976b:477–81); among Victorian groups generally (Smyth 1878:434), in particular, the Boorong of the Victorian mallee country (Stanbridge [1857] in MacPherson 1881:71), and the Wotjobaluk and Kulin (Massola 1968:108–9); among the Andagarinja at Yalata (Buckley et. al., 1968:113–24), at Indulkana (Buckley et. al., 1968:113), and at Ooldea (Berndt 1974:12); amongst the Pitjantjatjara people (Tindale 1936:176, Robinson 1966:91–93) and Anyamatana people in South Australia (Mountford 1939:105, Roberts and Mountford 1974:74), and at Cape Bedford in Queensland (Roth 1984 (5):8).

21 Documented on the east coast of New South Wales (Ridley 1875:145–6), Turbet 1989:123); among some east Arnhem Landers (Bozic and Marshall 1972:125–27) and at Ooldea in South Australia (Berndt and Berndt 1989:221–223).

22 Documented in the Western Desert (Mountford 1937:9).

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

- The Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*)²³
- Aldebaran (*Alpha Tauri*)²⁴
- The Morning Star²⁵
- Canopus (*Alpha Carinae*)²⁶
- an unspecified night sky residential ancestral hero.²⁷

All these celestial objects, individual stars and constellations of stars, rise after the Pleiades, and follow their path across the night sky (see Diagram 3).

Amongst the Wongutha people originally from the eastern Goldfields region, subsequently Mount Margaret Mission in Western Australia, the Seven Sisters were pursued by men, one sister being temporarily caught, but it is unclear in the legend which star group represented the pursuers.²⁸ It was probably Orion given its prevalence as a pursuer in nearby areas.

White had the opportunity of observing the acting out of the Seven Sisters myths several times by Andagarinja women from Yalata and

23 Known as the Eaglehawk in the Kimberley region (Kaberry 1939:12).

24 Documented as being *Bunjellung* of the Clarence River of New South Wales (Mathews 1899:29, Mathews 1994:57); among the Kamilaroi of New South Wales (Peck 1933:215–224); among many Queensland groups (Peck 1933:215–224) and amongst the Wotjobaluk of Victoria (Massola 1968:108).

25 Documented as *Tjakamarra* among the Kukatja (Gugadja) people of the Kimberley (Green et al 1993:34–36; Berndt and Berndt 1989:281–282).

26 Known as *Waa* among western Victorian groups (Dawson 1981:100).

27 Documented among the Dieri (Howitt 1904:787) and among groups in New South Wales (Parker 1953:105–9, 125–7). His death in New South Wales was marked by the appearance of a meteorite (Parker 1953:113).

28 Groups who lived on the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia also saw the Pleiades as women (*Jakulyukulyuwarnti*) but it is not clear that they are pursued (Lowe and Pike 1990:110). Among the Adnyamathanha (Adnyamatana) people of the Flinders Ranges, the Pleiades are also seen as a group of women (*Artunyi*), but it is also unclear whether they too are pursued by men (Tunbridge 1988:16). Amongst the Aranda and Luritja

Indulkana in South Australia. The myth was associated with the Seven Sisters ceremony and the celebration of a girl's first menstruation (*men-arche*) performed by women for a girl during her seclusion away from the main camp. She was told a version of the story around a campfire by the designated 'boss' of the ceremony, who was also the acknowledged ritual leader of the women. Because she was older and past menopause, this woman took the part of the man in the performance of the Seven Sisters ceremony. In the version recited and mimed by the boss, *Njuru*, represented by the constellation of Orion, chased the seven women, the Pleiades, who came from the north-west. *Njuru* chased them across the (Western Australian) countryside, through Meekatharra, Wiluna, Laverton and Kalgoorlie to Cuneelee, where they went and hid in a cave to escape from him. However, *Njuru* caught one of the women (who it turned out, was his classificatory father's sister), and raped her. Because of the nature of this relationship, it was deemed an incestuous act and the woman subsequently became ill and died. The other six women continued on with *Njuru* in hot pursuit. When they stopped to camp at Anmanggu in the Musgrave Ranges, he stayed close by and became excited by the sight and smell of one of the women urinating. He sent his penis underground in order to rape her. Angered, the women set their dogs on to the penis. As a result, it is severed and becomes *Jula*, a separate entity.

This particular version of the myth extends from areas west of the Warburton Range in Western Australia, over the Rawlinson, Mann and Musgrave Ranges, reaching Glen Helen in Central Australia, in the country of the Western Aranda people.²⁹

groups of central Australia, the Pleiades are also seen as a group of women associated with male circumcision ceremonies (Strehlow 1907:24). In addition, Mathews (1905:81) has recorded that along the Darling River in New South Wales, from Bourke to Louth, the Pleiades were also seen as a group of young women who went out in search of yams. A whirlwind came and carried them up into the sky. It is unclear if a man was in pursuit.

29 According to Mountford (1976b:462), 'at some point between the

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

In myths told by men and those told by both men and women, sexual relations consist of sexual conquest and submission including rape, incest, adultery and seduction, whereas in myths told by women, sexual intercourse, though less violently represented, is met with considerable resistance and a degree of ambivalence. White interprets these differences as symbolising ‘the desires or fears of the dreamer³⁰: the men’s dreams are represented mythologically in violent and illicit sexual encounters, whereas the women’s desires are shown as more ambivalent with sexual desire being accompanied by a fear of consequences.

White suggests that these myths, as dreams of wish-fulfilment, reflect the open as well as the covert hostility and antagonism between the sexes in a culture whose values are primarily male dominated. She suggests that the myths have the effect of rendering violent rape in the everyday lives of these people infrequent and unnecessary. Male dominance as a value is validated and reinforced by both men’s and women’s myths and rituals.

This analysis could be extended to cover many Australian groups as myths based on the Pleiades, as pursued women, form part of a much larger group of myths concerned with gender relations.

Myth as Ontology

Myth as ontology views narratives in conjunction with ritual and symbols as expressing ideas about the nature of reality and in particular, the human condition.³¹ The views of anthropologist Kenneth Maddock (1975) about emu myths fall broadly into this perspective.

Petermann and Mann mythical route, the name of the man of Orion was changed from *Jula* to *Nirunja*, and that of the Seven Sisters from *Kunkarunkara* to *Kunkarangkalpa*. From accounts by Tindale (1959 in Mountford 1976b:462), this particular version extends south to Ooldea and north to Haasts Bluff and Yuendumu.

30 White 1975:138.

31 Stanner (1959–63) based on the working assumptions of Eliade

The emu among many Aboriginal peoples presents a taxonomic problem: its inability to fly, despite its bird-like appearance and behaviour (feathers and egg-laying) makes it somewhat anomalous. Anomalies defy boundaries and present problems about meanings: about the nature of human as opposed to non-human; about 'us' as opposed to 'them'; about what constitutes and delineates 'other'. To explain the anomaly, many emu myths tell of injury and consequent diminution of the emu's power. Or the inversion of this, the enhancement of power by other birds having formerly been like the emu. As a result of the injury, often by being burnt, the emu escapes, sometimes to the sky and is represented there.³²

In a myth told to Daisy Bates³³ probably at Ooldea, Emu (*Wej*) was married to Native Cat (*Jootetch*) reputed to be a great hunter. One day while *Jootetch* was out hunting, Wombat (*Wardu*) visited the camp and asked *Wej* to have sexual intercourse with him. *Wej* agreed to do so, but as dusk descended *Wej* entreated *Wardu* to leave. Before doing so, *Wardu* decorated *Wej* in red ochre. *Jootetch* returned from a successful hunt and seeing *Wardu's* tracks asked *Wej*, where the ochre had come from. *Wej* initially lied, but eventually told her husband about the misdemeanour. *Jootetch* ordered *Wej* to make a fire and when it was burning fiercely, he caught hold of her and threw her into it. But *Wej*,

(1960, 1973) and Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1967) are the main exponents of this analytical tradition in the Australian context.

32 Bhathal and White (1991:10) place an emu in the European constellation of Orion but the Aboriginal source of this equivalence is not documented. It probably refers to the account by Spencer and Gillen (1966:499) in which the Aranda are reported as seeing Orion as an emu. The Southern Cross is also represented as an emu among some groups, namely the Kulin and Ya-itma-thang of Victoria (Massola 1968:18) and the Yaoro from the Broome area in Western Australia (Durack 1969:238). Among the Wailwun of northern New South Wales, the emu is represented by the Coal Patch (Smyth 1982:286).

33 Ker Wilson 1977:50–60.

her arms burnt, escaped and flew up into the sky to become *Wej Mor*, the dark patch in the Milky Way.³⁴

Another version of this myth is documented by Mountford,³⁵ in which Emu, *Waitch* is married to Wild Cat (*Chudic*). *Waitch* is seduced by *Coomal*, an Opossum. *Chudic* lights a fire to burn *Waitch* in retribution. But a strong wind created by the blaze of the fire sweeps *Waitch* up to the horns of the new moon. After a few nights the moon becomes so fat that it pushes the emu out. The stars whose task it is to hold up the sky-dome, agree to let *Waitch* camp near the Southern Cross if she will assist them in their task. *Waitch* spreads her wings to take her share of the weight. As a consequence, thunder is thought to be *Waitch*'s grumbling when her load is too heavy. On the occasions when she makes too much fuss, the sun-people create clouds filled with lightning and darken the sky, frightening *Waitch* until she quiets down. Because she is frequently frightened, she cries, her tears falling to the ground as rain. *Waitch* shares the task of supporting the world.

Maddock³⁶ has suggested that emu myths are frequently associated with fire and the vexed question concerning its correct possession and ownership. Emu myths attempt to resolve the emu's anomalous position by positing antagonism between the emu and a bird, implying that emus are associated more closely with birds who fly than with other creatures. Although flying and flightless birds belong to the same family, differences among them are akin to differences within a family. 'Differentiation usually is brought about by the emu's diminution.'³⁶ Categorisation and the casting of boundaries about the nature of reality is thus resolved through myth.

34 Which particular dark patch this might be is not further elaborated.

35 Maddock (1975:118) also notes that emu myths show a feminine emphasis among groups where the major transcendental power is seen as male (the All-Father) and a masculine emphasis in areas where the major transcendental power is female (the All-Mother).

36 Maddock 1975:119.

The Oral Tradition

There are many myths concerning the stars and the night sky in the rich, complex oral literature of Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. This oral literature consists of narratives, tales, children's stories, song cycles, ritual chants, poems and more recently, short stories. Collectively, they demonstrate a great awareness and knowledge of the night sky and indicate the deep interconnectedness that the Australians had with it, as with other aspects of the natural environment. While there is a great deal of regional variation represented in this tradition, a few generalisations can be made.

The Milky Way

The Milky Way was significant to all groups of Aboriginal people across the country, and many artistic representations about it have been made (see *Bark Paintings 1*). It was most often represented as a celestial river.³⁷ How the celestial river was sourced or whether it led into its earthly counterparts is unclear. But there were exceptions.³⁸

37 This is the case for Arnhem Land generally (Roberts and Mountford 1974:136, Maymuru 1978, Wells 1973:13–20, 1964:25–34), documented specifically on Groote Eylandt (Mountford 1956:479), at Oenpelli (Mountford 1956:487), at Millingimbi (Mountford 1956:491, 496–8); and at Murinbata (Worms 1946:121). It is also the case among North Queensland groups (Worms 1986:118) and Queensland, New South Wales and northern South Australian groups generally (Howitt 1904:432; Smyth 1972:286). It is also documented as being the situation among the Aranda and Luritja people of Central Australia (Maegraith 1932:19, Robinson 1966:84). It is noted specifically occurring among the Kamilaroi (or Euahlayi) (Parker 1905:95 in Mountford 1956:503); Murray River groups (Smyth 1878:434) and among western Victorian groups generally (Dawson 1931:99). Furthermore, the people of Central Australia, according to Mountford (1976b:450), saw the Milky Way as a creek 'with myriads of luminous stones on its surface'.

38 Elkin (1971 in Maddock 1975:112) notes that in some places across

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

Ritual practices were associated with the Milky Way, as among the Walbiri³⁹ in Central Australia. *Gadjari* rites involved a withdrawal from the company of women by the men, in order to perform ceremonies that re-enacted the original cutting up of the Milky Way by ancestor heroes to form the individual stars. The actors wore body decorations of white down to represent the stars. The initiation of young boys involved the manufacture from acacia wood of a number of slender bullroarers. From these, two were selected to form the basis of a string cross. The cross was soaked with arm-blood and, on completion, blood, charcoal and white down were used to decorate its surface with a star dreaming design. The initiate fixated on the string cross while he was being circumcised. It was believed that an old woman, having a relationship of mother's father's sister to the initiate, lived in the Milky Way. She kept watch over the initiate to ensure he came to no harm.⁴⁰

the continent, the Milky Way is seen as sparks from fire, (the emu being associated with and frequently originally owning fire); it is also seen as the great creative spirit, the Rainbow Spirit in the Northern Kimberleys (Worms 1986:96, 127), among the Karadjeri and among the people from Roper River (Worms 1986:129); it was seen as flying foxes by some (Roberts and Mountford 1974:323); as mythical men among the Tiwi (Roberts and Mountford 1974:70) and as a large mythical canoe among the Lower River Murray groups in South Australia (Berndt and Berndt 1977:203, Berndt and Berndt 1993:224, 227, 243). Around Encounter Bay in South Australia, the Milky Way was a 'row of huts' amongst which were heaps of ashes from which smoke ascended (Meyer 1916:12). The Djuan of Central Australia also saw it as smoke, but originating from the world campfire of a respected and well-loved ancestor (Ellis 1991:119–121).

39 Recorded by Meggitt (1966:126).

40 It is interesting to contrast these views with other culturally inspired views of the Milky Way. According to Jaki (1973), the ancient Egyptians as methodical store-keepers of grain, for example, saw it as the work of the goddess, Isis, who spread large quantities of wheat across the sky; the gold-loving Incas saw it as golden star dust; the Arctic Eskimos saw it as a snowy band; Far Orient fishermen saw it as a school of fish frightened by the hook of a new moon; the Great Lakes Indians saw it as a muddy creek stirred up by a swimming turtle; and the Polynesians saw it as a

The Pleiades

The Pleiades were distinguished by all Australian Aboriginal groups and were mostly represented as a group, usually seven in number, of related women. In the majority of stories they are eternally pursued by men variously represented by Orion, the Southern Cross, Castor and Pollux, the Gemini twins, the Moon, Aldebaran (*Alpha Tauri*), the Morning Star (Venus), or Canopus as elaborated and discussed previously.

In Arnhem Land and on Groote Eylandt, the Pleiades women were seen as partners of their fishermen-husbands, who are represented as stars in the constellation of Orion (see Bark Paintings 2 and 3). The Arnhem Land constellation of *Tjirulpun*, in which the fishermen figure so prominently, takes in the European constellations of Orion, the Hyades, the Pleiades and many of the bright stars north and south of these groups.⁴¹

The Seven Sisters myth traverses thousands of kilometres of country as several separate narratives. Hundreds of localities feature in great song cycles which are still maintained and performed regularly in the Central and Western deserts. One Seven Sisters Dreaming track for example, passes just north of Warburton in Western Australia, and another just southeast of the town. Catherine and Ronald Berndt insist that the Seven sisters is a 'basic section of a myth-story that is on the fringe of more complex religious affairs'⁴² Versions of the story have been collected from a myriad of places covering the length and breadth of the continent. In most versions, the core motif is the pursuit of unwilling or at least ambivalent young women by a man or a pair of men (who may be two manifestations of the same man). The man (or men) catch up with one or more of the women and there ensue scenes

cloud-eating shark. Over and above these local representations, comments Jaki, it is generally seen as a Way or a Road, the symbol of a journey.

41 According to the Northern Hemisphere-oriented Mountford (1976b:460), 'this beautiful constellation covers the largest part of the winter [sic] sky'.

42 Berndt and Berndt 1989:399.

of rape or attempted rape. The women finally escape into the sky and are transformed into the star cluster known as the Pleiades.

An interesting variant of the myth of the Pleiades as women pursued by a man or men is the narrative told by the Pirt kopan noot people of Western Victoria. According to this account, the Pleiades are the six attendants of a 'Queen' called *Gneeanggar* who is a wedge-tailed eagle represented by the star Sirius (*Alpha Canis Majoris*). Canopus (*Alpha Carinae*) is a crow called *Waa*, who fell in love with the majestic woman. She refused his advances. *Waa* did not give up. Hearing that the woman and her attendants were going in search of white grubs, *Waa* turned himself into a grub and hid in the stem of a tree. As the attendants thrust their hooks into the hole bored by *Waa* into the stem, *Waa* broke the hook-points. Then the woman thrust a bone hook into the hole and *Waa* allowed himself to be drawn out and assumed the form of a giant. He then ran off with her.⁴³

In western New South Wales, the Seven Sisters (*the Meamis*) flee their male tormentor, *Wurrunuh*, and escape into the sky to become the Pleiades. Later the *Berai-berai*, the *Meamis*' lovers, follow the women into the sky, becoming the constellation of Orion.⁴⁴

There are a few instances in Australia where the Pleiades were not seen as young women. As previously discussed, they were seen as (male) members of *Tagai's* disloyal crew on the islands of the Torres Strait. On Melville and Bathurst Islands, they were looked upon as a mob of kangaroos pursued by the stars of Orion, which were seen as a pack of dingoes.⁴⁵ They were viewed as a number of gum trees under which the spirits of the dead shelter on their way to their eternal resting place.⁴⁶ Among the Kurn kopan noot and Mara peoples of western Victoria,

43 Dawson 1981:100. His use of the word 'Queen' is inappropriate in this particular context.

44 Parker 1953:105–109, 125–127.

45 Mountford 1976b:460.

46 Mountford (in Roberts and Mountford 1974:74) does not indicate the location of this notion.

the Pleiades are a flock of female cockatoos,⁴⁷ and among the Wailwun people of northern New South Wales, they are *worrul*, a bees' nest.⁴⁸

The Seven Sisters star cluster is also regarded as a place of exile. In an Alawa myth from the Roper River area in the Northern Territory, a boy attempted to commit incest with his grandmother. When she refused, the boy bit his grandmother's clitoris. The grandfather banished both of them to 'the *gomerindji* constellation' (the Seven Sisters). The spirits of the woman and the boy entered the *gomerindji* constellation and remain there today, stuck together, the boy still biting his grandmother's clitoris.⁴⁹ The Seven Sisters are not always on the run from a man (or men)!⁵⁰ In western Arnhem Land, the men of Orion paddle their canoe along the sky river, the Milky Way, whilst their wives seated in the stern catch fish in its waters. In north-eastern Arnhem Land, whilst Orion represents a canoe-load of men, (*the Tjirulpun*), their wives, represented by the Pleiades, are seated in a separate canoe. Both groups, so the story goes, have caught many fish, but a heavy storm in the ancestral past swamped both canoes and all the occupants were drowned. The Aboriginal people of Groote Eylandt, however, view the main stars of

47 Dawson 1981:100; Massola 1968:18.

48 Smyth 1982:286.

49 Berndt and Berndt 1989:283–284.

50 There are instances in the stories where, for example, they make a barrier to stem flood waters (which subsequently form the Southern Ocean) caused when two brothers quarrel. One brother jabs the water-bag of the other, spreading water over the land, eventually drowning them both. Their spirits subsequently went to the sky to become two stars on the western side of the Milky Way (Berndt and Berndt 1989:44–45). The Seven Sisters are also responsible for circumcising the mythical ancestral being Nyirana and are thus associated with male circumcision ceremonies documented amongst the Adnyamathanha people of the Flinders Ranges (Tunbridge 1988:6) and the Aranda and Luritja groups of Central Australia (Strehlow 1907:23–4). Groups from around the Clarence River area of New South Wales saw the Seven Sisters as being exceptionally clever, owning special yamsticks (Buchanan 1992:73–74) with charms inserted to protect them from enemies (Mathews 1994:57).

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

Orion as the three fishermen (the *Burum-burum-runja*), the small stars nearby are their children, and the so-called 'sword' of Orion represents the fish that have been caught. The wives (the *Wutaranga* women) of the fishermen are the Pleiades, but they are believed to be resting in their hut.⁵¹

The Pleiades star cluster, in combination with other single stars and constellations, is clearly very significant throughout the country.

The Magellanic Clouds

The Magellanic Clouds were distinguished and named by most Aboriginal groups (see Bark Paintings 4). The Clouds, which are very prominent in southern night skies, are small galaxies in their own right and most frequently represent the camps of sky-people.⁵²

Some Aboriginal groups saw them differently. Among the Karadjeri, they were seen as two snakes who represented two sky-heroes. Among some Victorian and New South Wales groups, the Large Magellanic Cloud was often represented as a short-nosed bandicoot, with the Small Magellanic Cloud being a kangaroo-rat.⁵³ They were seen as fish by the Lunga people of the Kimberley region,⁵⁴ as camps of the

51 Mountford 1976b:460.

52 This notion is documented as occurring on Groote Eylandt (Mountford 1956:484, Roberts and Mountford 1974:10), among the Aranda (Spencer and Gillen 1899:566, Mountford 1956:504) and in Western Desert areas (Mountford 194:156); in western New South Wales (Parker 1905:970) including the Njangomada (Worms 1986:134). However, among the southern Aranda, as well as being seen as the camps of two great men (nearby stars, known as 'two Gland-Poison Men' (Strehlow (1907) in Nilsson 1920:122), they are perceived as being endowed with evil, having the potential to choke people at night when asleep (Spencer and Gillen 1946:55).

53 Mathews 1905:79.

54 Kaberry 1939:12.

Eaglehawk by the Wolmeri also from the Kimberleys⁵⁵ and as spirits of the dead among the Kamilaroi in northern New South Wales.⁵⁶ In the Western Desert,⁵⁷ sky-heroes resided in the Clouds and dealt with the good and bad spirits of Aboriginal people. Among western Victorian groups, the Large Magellanic Cloud was seen as a gigantic crane, who was also regarded as a male companion; the Small Magellanic Cloud was a female companion.⁵⁸

The Dark Patches (Dark Nebulosity)

The dark patches that lie along the Galactic Equator of the Milky Way are important in Aboriginal versions of the night sky. Whereas Europeans distinguish and name only one dark patch, the Coal Sack (or Soot-bag in earlier times) near the Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*), Australian Aboriginal groups distinguish and name quite a few of them. On Groote Eylandt, the Coal Sack was seen as a rock cod,⁵⁹ as a plum tree in Oenpelli⁶⁰ and as a string cross used in initiation ceremonies among the Walbiri⁶¹ and Aranda/Luritja groups.⁶² Among western Victorian groups, the Coal Sack was known as *torong*, a fabulous animal, said to live in waterholes and lakes and known by the name for a bunyip.⁶³ Among other western Victorian groups, the Coal Sack was seen as a waterhole surrounded by celestial ancestral heroes, who

55 Kaberry 1939:12.

56 Berndt and Berndt 1977:413.

57 According to Mountford 1948:168; 1976b:454–455.

58 Dawson 1981:99.

59 Mountford 1956:485–487.

60 Mountford 1956:487.

61 Meggitt 1966:128.

62 Strehlow 1907:29.

63 According to Dawson (1981:99), it was so like a horse, ‘that the natives on first seeing a horse took it for a bunyip, and so would not venture near it.’

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

were represented by the large stars around it. They were said to have come from the southern end of the celestial river, The Milky Way. These ancestral heroes were reputed to chase the smaller stars into the great river, where they set about spearing them.⁶⁴

The dark patches were seen as the home of a creative spirit among the people of the Western Kimberleys, as the home of an evil spirit who abducts the broлга dancer among the Mandalbingu people of Arnhem Land,⁶⁵ as a totem board among the Ngadadjara of South Australia,⁶⁶ as a bullroarer among the Lunga of the Kimberleys,⁶⁷ and as an emu among the Wailwun of northern New South Wales⁶⁸ and the Nyulnyul people from Beagle Bay in north-western Australia.⁶⁹

The sun and moon

The sun was represented, with very few exceptions, as a woman amongst Aboriginal groups and she was usually envisaged as wandering across the sky spreading warmth and light (see Bark Paintings 5). So important was she, that all groups have myths about her origin and continuity (see Appendix 1). The exceptions to this view were held by the Needwonee people from Tasmania's Southwest and people from the Murrumbidgee River area,⁷⁰ both of whom saw the sun as being male.

The sun, however, was not everywhere perceived as the source of heat. According to Manning, an Aboriginal man of his acquaintance from New South Wales thought such a notion to be ridiculous: 'If the sun makes the warm weather come in summer-time, why does he not

64 Dawson 1981:99.

65 Rule and Goodman 1979:36–45.

66 Rule and Goodman 1979:36–45.

67 Kaberry 1939:12.

68 Smyth 1972:286.

69 Charles 1993.

70 Plomley 1966:118 and Peck 1933:55–64 respectively.

make the winter warm, for he is seen every day'? He believed that the influence which produces heat accompanies the Pleiades.⁷¹

The moon is nearly always a man and is frequently associated with death (or change of form and substance at death), menstruation and pregnancy (see Bark Paintings 6 and 7). As a consequence, staring at the moon is often deemed to be taboo, as for example, in the Mowanjum story about two boys being turned to stone⁷² or being glued together⁷³ because they stared at the moon. There is also a story from Millingimbi about the moon's ability to kill if stared at,⁷⁴ and a report from Daisy Bates,⁷⁵ that if women looked at *Meeka*, the Moon Man, he would not give children to them.

There were more generalised taboos: in the tropical Bloomfield River area of Queensland for example, no-one was to stare at the moon for long because heavy rain was apt to fall. Children were forbidden to point at the moon with straight fingers, nor point to their own shadows in the moonlight, believing that these actions could bring death to their parents.⁷⁶ At Cape Bedford in Queensland, crabs caught at full moon were not considered good eating, a notion probably associated with the belief that at full moon, his belly was bloated and engorged after successful fishing expeditions.⁷⁷

There were exceptions to the ascription of male gender to the moon.⁷⁸ Because its form changed regularly, it was occasionally seen as being female and pregnant.

71 Manning 1882:155.

72 Lucich 1969:33–34.

73 Utemorra et al 1980:78.

74 Isaacs 1980:150.

75 In Isaacs 1980:150.

76 Roth 1984(5):7.

77 Roth 1984(5):7.

78 For the people of Tasmania's Southwest, the moon was *Vena* the wife of the sun (Plomley 1966:118). Among the Karruru people of the Nullabor

Aboriginal Constellations

Aboriginal constellations and their mythical representations do not match European constellations. Nor should one expect them to do so, as they arise directly from Aboriginal cultural life. Even the most recognised of the European constellations—Scorpius, the Southern Cross, Orion—rarely have a direct single equivalent. They are seen in combination with other star patterns and celestial phenomena, and are linked together by myth and narrative. Appendix 1⁷⁹ gives examples of stars and constellations, the outline of their associated mythical narratives and the many and varied places across the continent from which they come. It is worth noting that the myths and stories are taken out of their proper cycles and contexts, environmental and ritual, but they demonstrate the variety of star arrangements used. They translate

Plain the moon was also female:she was the wife of the Morning Star (Venus) and her mother-in-law was the Sun-woman (Isaacs 1980:49–51). Among the Jaralde (Yaraldi) of South Australia, the moon was a woman who became thin from so much coitus until she became pregnant and full every month (Berndt and Berndt 1993:232–3). The people around Encounter Bay in South Australia had a similar belief (Meyer 1846:11–12): ‘She (the moon) stays a long time with the men, and from the effects of her intercourse with them, she becomes very thin, and wastes away to a mere skeleton ... She flies, and is secreted for some time, but is employed all the time in seeking roots which are so nourishing that in a short time she appears again, and fills out and becomes fat rapidly’. On the island of Mabuig in the Torres Strait, the new moon is the ‘tooth moon’ and is unmarried; a little later she is termed ‘young’, then half-moon is married, next with child to full-moon, which is said to be ‘big one married’ (Ray in Haddon et al 1912 (4):225).

79 Appendix 1 is designed to show examples of the variety in pattern of celestial phenomena including the sun and the moon, used by Aboriginal people. It is not comprehensive in its coverage of myths and stars, and the Pleiades and the Milky Way are not included (except when they involve stories with other constellations) as they have already been discussed separately.

cultural heroes and heroines from their earthly context into the skies as was done by earlier inhabitants of Europe and Asia.

Wells has made an interesting observation about Aboriginal star narratives. She considers that they differ from other narratives in that star myths seem to divide into two categories.

On the one hand, some stars represent wise persons who once lived on the earth and now live in the sky, from where they send messages of guidance and inspiration to the people on earth. On the other hand, the stars may represent people who have suffered defeat on earth, and have found refuge in the peaceful reaches of the heavens.⁸⁰

A New Writing Tradition

As Australian Aboriginal people reassert their pride in and knowledge about their traditions, new forms are emerging. As well as recording their stories and traditions, some are writing histories, essays, poetry and short stories.

Modern short stories by the Aboriginal writer and painter, Sally Morgan, bring into a contemporary context the continuing fascination with celestial phenomenon, albeit post telescopes. 'Old Poker Face'⁸¹ satirises the moon's association with mystery. Morgan sees the moon as a serious self-important old bore in contrast to the more cheerful, less obnoxious planets. In the story, blue/green planet Earth is created and, as its shadow passes over the moon's face, he is left with a grin. With each involuntary smile, the moon's mysteriousness is diminished, a great relief to the other celestial beings.

In 'The Night Sky',⁸² Moonga, a young boy creates more light at night by dreaming that he can fly up to the cloud blanket and rip holes

80 Wells 1973:11.

81 Morgan 1992:8–10.

82 Morgan 1992:24–30.

in it. He manages to make stars! 'Gamin and Brush'⁸³ is the story of two child spirits who love to tease and play together. One day, they paint rings around Saturn. As a result, they are sent out to the cool blackness of outer space, where they meet a huge asteroid. The child spirits decide not to paint in spots, stripes, circles or rings, but in one colour. They choose red and splosh the bright red paint all over the huge asteroid. Once finished, they decide to move the huge red asteroid out of its orbit and present it as a gift to the Good Spirit. Just missing Saturn, the huge red asteroid collides with the Good Spirit. It explodes, leaving a small red core in orbit between Earth and Saturn and the Good Spirit covered in fine red powder. The red powder drifts towards Earth. Dusting himself off, the Good Spirit smiles, 'Mars' he says, pointing to the red core. 'The Red Centre of Australia,' he adds, pointing to the fine red powder on Earth.

Recent non-Aboriginal Writings on Aboriginal Astronomies

Three recent attempts to take account of Aboriginal astronomy have been made by Isaacs (1980), Bhathal and White (1991) and Haynes (1992). The possibility of star-mapping by indigenous Australians has been canvassed by Cairns (1993) and Cairns and Branagan (1992).

Isaacs presents a wide-ranging collection of Aboriginal myths, paying due respect to, and recognition of, the significance of the night sky in Aboriginal cultural life. She gives examples of narratives located around the sun, the moon, the planets Venus and Mars, and those major Aboriginal constellations which overlap with the most recognisable European ones, the Southern Cross, Orion, the Pleiades, Scorpius and the Milky Way. The myths that she has chosen display the great diversity of beliefs and cultural practices which characterise Australian astronomies.

83 Morgan 1992:37–42.

Bhathal and White give a short overview, 'Astronomy Dreaming' as a prelude to a white post-invasion history of scientific astronomy in Australia. In a brief summary, they recognise the astronomical knowledge of the Aboriginal people and its relation to myth, art, song and dance. The significance of varying seasonal activity signalled by the apparent movement of the stars is noted. Bhathal and White view the large body of myths associated with the night sky as simple charters used 'to transmit the morals of the society to the young, the night sky becoming a huge text book for the transmission of their oral culture'.⁸⁴ They conclude that Aboriginal astronomy is more concerned than modern scientific astronomy with social and moral relationships, and with practical observations 'for the survival of the tribe'.

In a more comprehensive account of Aboriginal astronomy, Haynes⁸⁵ concentrates on Aboriginal visual observations and their predictive and moral function in star lore and myth. She does not attempt to elucidate the cosmological underpinnings of Aboriginal astronomy, rather she seeks out equivalences.⁸⁶

Her view is that Aboriginal observations

were conducted not out of scientific curiosity—out of an interest in the stars for their own sake—but for essentially pragmatic reasons. Either they were an attempt to discover predictive correlations between the positions of the stars and other natural events important to the survival of the tribe ... or they provided a system of moral guidance and education in tribal lore—a function equally necessary to the continuation of the tribe's identity.⁸⁷

84 Bhathal and White 1991:11.

85 Haynes relies substantially on the work of Maegraith (1932), Mountford (1956, 1958, 1976), Tindale (1974), Elkin (1964) and MacPherson (1881).

86 Using the same European celestial phenomena as Isaacs, substituting Mars with the Magellanic Clouds and adding meteors.

87 Haynes 1992:128–29.

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

This strictly functionalist view of Aboriginal astronomies and culture would seem to deny Aboriginal metaphysics, philosophy and aesthetics, all of which are informed by a sense of irony, imagination and humour. Aboriginal culture is a complex of imaginative interplays with and within the natural world, which is not to deny the significance for some purposes, of the predictive nature of Aboriginal astronomies.

Myth can be cast, received and interpreted in different ways and at many levels. It can act as allegory and as metaphor, so to see it simply as a set of cautionary tales, as moral charter, 'an illustrated textbook of morality and culture ... like the stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals'⁸⁸ tends to exclude the constellations of meanings in Aboriginal contexts. According to Stanner,

these tales are neither simply illustrative nor simply explanatory, they are fanciful and poetic in content because they are based on visionary and intuitive insights into mysteries, and, if we are ever to understand them, we must always take them in their more complex context ... Aboriginal mythology is quite unlike Scandanavian, Indian, or Polynesian mythologies.⁸⁹

Aboriginal thought and philosophy, like that of the European, were imbued with 'the metaphysical gift' capable of contemplation on the nature of being, and thus able to attempt to make sense of human experience and its condition on earth.⁹⁰

88 Haynes 1992:129.

89 Stanner 1965:55.

90 Stanner 1956:55–56.

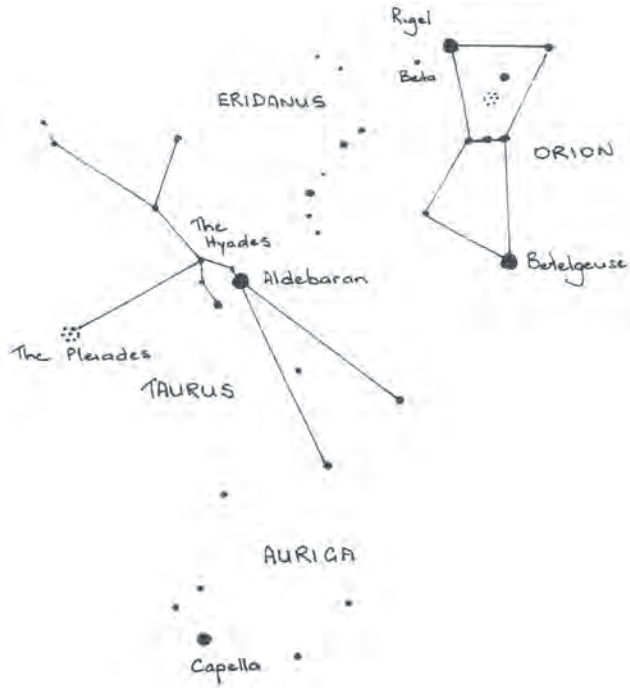


Diagram 1: Orion and Taurus

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

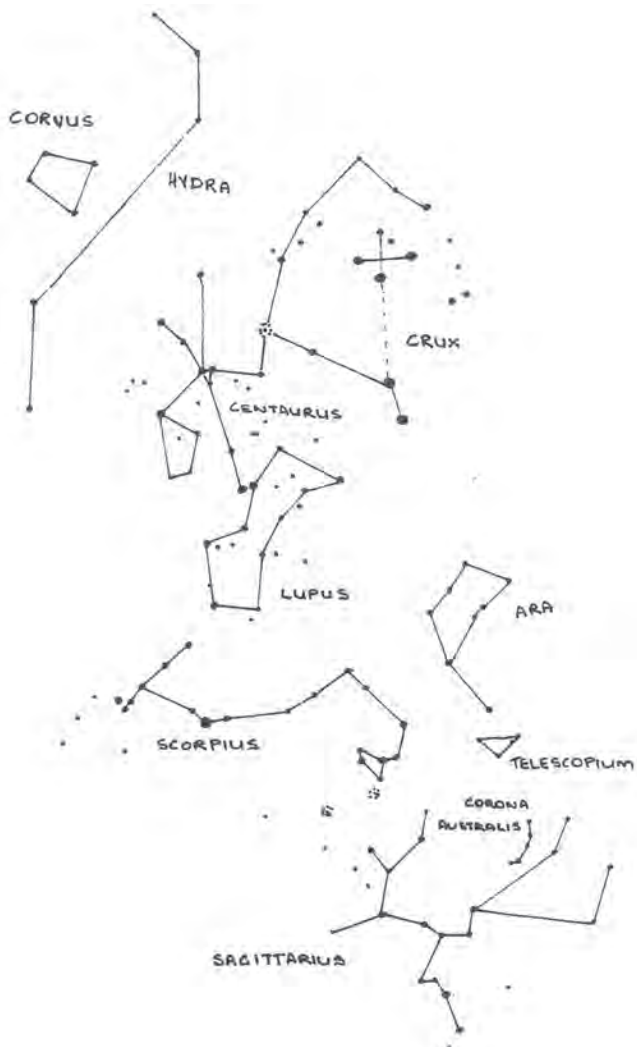


Diagram 2: Area of sky covered by the *Tagai*

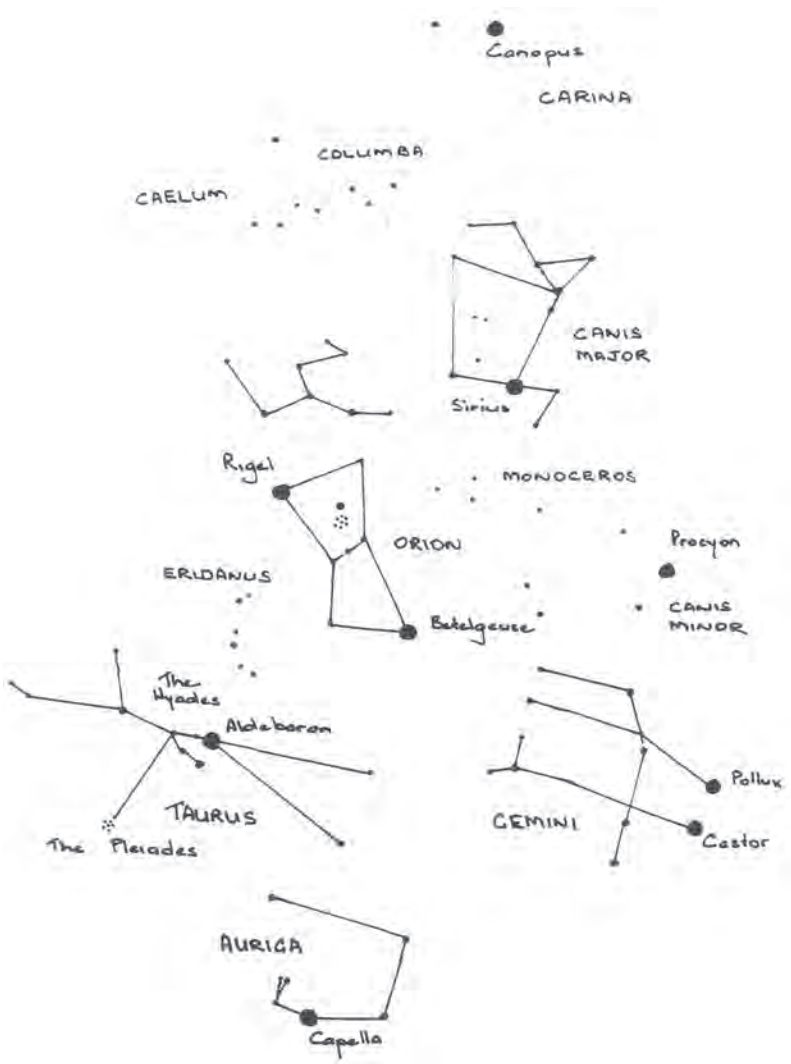


Diagram 3: Western Constellations involved in the Seven Sisters stories

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

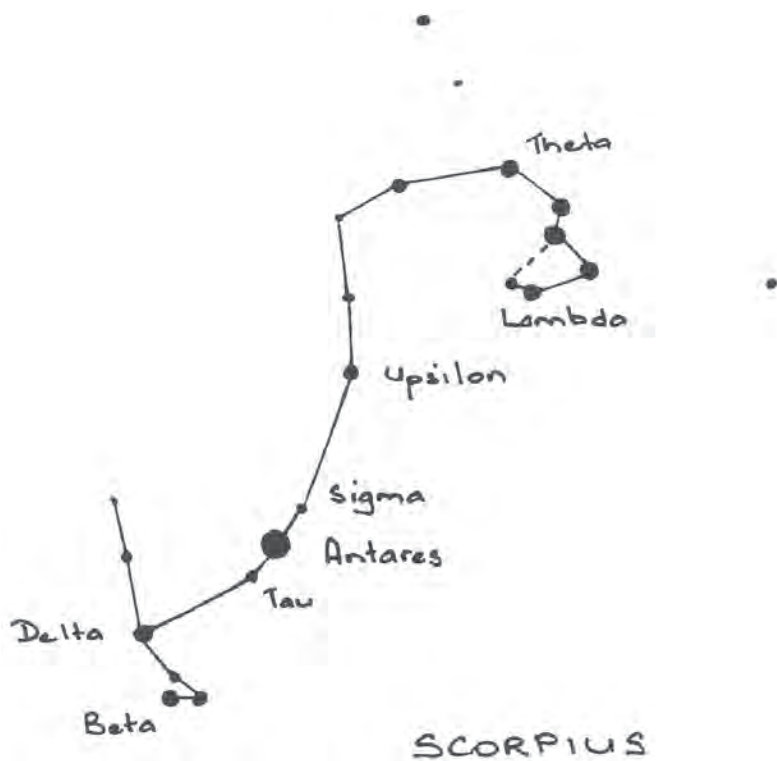


Diagram 4: Scorpius

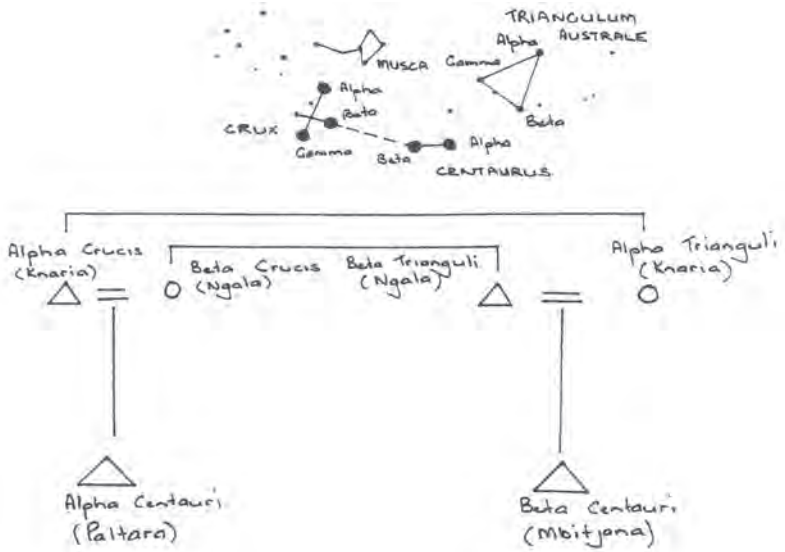


Diagram 5: Constellations and Kin Ties of Aranda/Luritja (N.T.) People

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

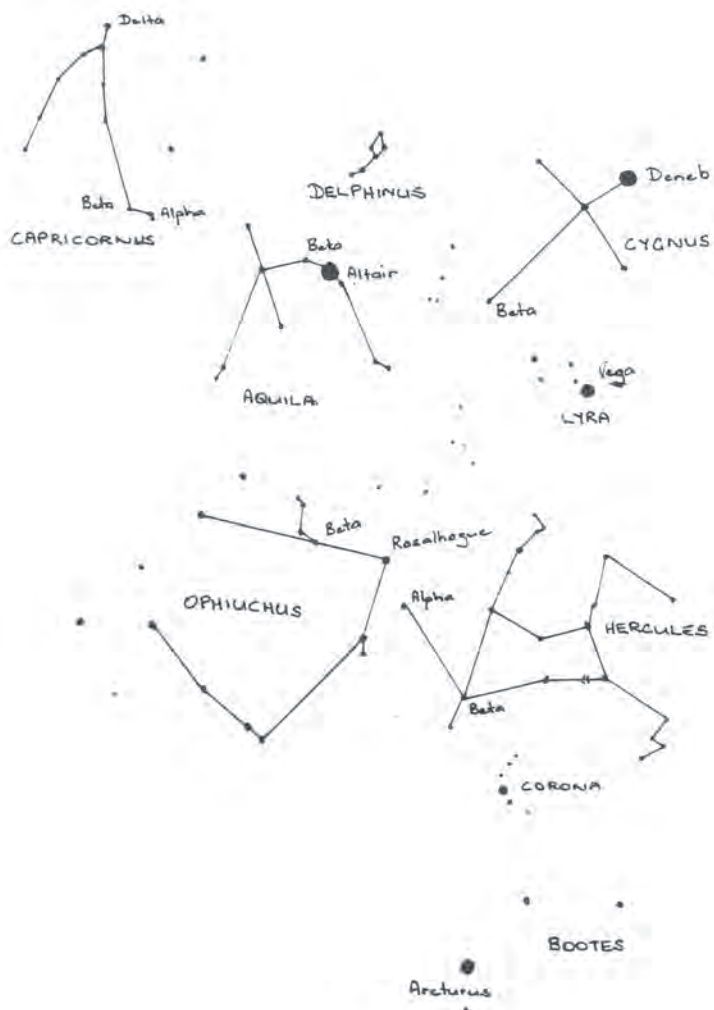


Diagram 6: Capricornus, Aquila, Cygnus, Lyra, Ophiuchus and Hercules

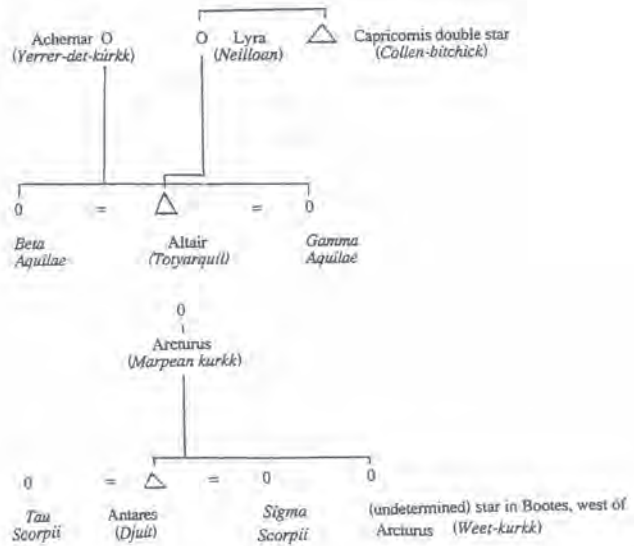


Diagram 7: Kin Ties represented by stars among the Booyong (Vic.) People