

6

Healing

Australian Aboriginal societies, like their Western equivalents, have evolved ideas and practices to deal with the reality of illness, injury and associated suffering. These ideas and practices were of course, embedded in the wider notions about the cosmos and the place of human beings in it.

Making Healers

Traditional Aboriginal healers were regarded as being wise, clever and being of 'high degree'. They could be male or female, although most were male. Their abilities and powers were very extensive and the processes by which a person became a healer were complex and differed between regions across the continent. However, there were common identifiable stages.¹

Healers' powers were regarded as supernormal and usually super-sensory. They were derived from two sources: ancestral heroes and spirits who were particularly adept in the art of healing, and previous healers who had links back to these ancestral spirits.² Thus, the making of healers involved contact with the ancestral spirits, many of whom resided in the sky-world. The rituals that healers underwent bestowed on them powers to pass through the confines of death, permitting them to visit the sky-country at will, travelling there on cords or strings, rainbows or shooting stars or via large trees and conversing with the residential ancestral heroes and spirits. Their association with the sky-country was thought to put healers in regular contact with star creatures and their lore.

1 See Elkin 1945; Berndt 1946–7; Reid 1986.

2 Elkin 1945:46.

Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia

Wuradjeri healers of western New South Wales could specialise in particular aspects of magic, in obtaining rain, for example, which required a particularly skilled and clever healer going unharmed through the dangers which accompanied a journey to the world beyond the sky where the water-bags were kept. When it was deemed necessary and advisable to obtain rain, a healer would be chosen and a particular time designated when he would undertake his skyward journey. On the auspicious night, he would 'sing' all the members of the camp into sound sleep. Sitting away from the camp, he would then sing the clouds down so that they were close to the ground. Next he would sing out his cord and send it vertically up towards the clouds and, lying on his back, his head curled towards his chest, his legs held up above the ground, he would sing himself up. Suspended like a spider, the cord would lift the healer upwards past the clouds. When he reached the sky-country, the healer let his cord gradually return to his body. He would stand up and look around.

He could see the darkness of the night sky, and all the stars, which were the Ancestral Beings who had in the past climbed up here; being so close to them he could see their human forms, whereas from the earth they appeared merely as points of light of varying brilliance ... To pass into *Palima* (the place where the water-bags were kept), the doctor had to go through a fissure, through which the Ancestral Beings had passed when they left the earth. This fissure or cleft ... (had) two walls ... continually moving around ... On one side ... sat the Old Moon Man. He had a long beard which reached to his waist, while his penis was so long that he had to bring it up and wind it around his waist several times wearing it thus as a waist band. On the other side was the Sun Woman; she had protruding breasts, and sat in such a way that her large distended 'labia majora' revealed an extraordinary elongated clitoris, which covered the fire made by the sun and the daylight ... His (the healer's) actual journey was said to have taken no more than a few seconds.³

3 Berndt 1946-7:361-3.

Stars were instrumental in the making of healers in some instances, and were clearly associated with the activities of healers. In an initiation ceremony behind Mount Sugarloaf, near Lake Macquarie on coastal New South Wales, one of the healers presiding over a tooth evulsion ceremony was reported to have earlier been in the sky and had returned on a shooting star.⁴

Among the Wotjobaluk, Jupagalk, Mukjarawaint and Jajauring peoples of north-western Victoria, healers were made by a supernatural being known as *Ngatya*, who lived in the bush. *Ngatya* performed a ritual operation on the 'postulant' healer by inserting into the body magical objects such as quartz crystals. In these crystals, the powers of healing resided and when the operation was concluded, the wound was sealed without any scarring. Singing by the *Ngatya* took place and caused the 'postulant' to rise up. At the same time, it was believed, 'a star falls from the sky with the man's heart'.⁵

One particular supernatural creature associated with healers had a visible ancestor in the night sky. The ancestral spirit associated with Wuradjeri healers was a serpent-like creature known as *Wawi*. He lived in deep waterholes and made his den in mud banks. He could be contacted by healers who, having followed particular ritual practices, follow the rainbow after a rain shower to its end which rests over the waterhole.⁶ One of *Wawi's* ancestors is believed to be the black streak in the Milky Way near the Southern Cross (*Crux Australis*)⁷, known to Europeans as the Coal Sack.

Among the Anula people, a type of healer probably better understood as a sorcerer, was distinctly different from healers in other tribal groups. This particular profession was strictly hereditary, belonging exclusively to members of the Falling Star totem who were closely

4 Gunson 1974:51-3.

5 Elkin 1945:86.

6 Elkin 1945:100.

7 Mathews 1905:162.

associated with two unfriendly ancestral spirits living in the sky-world.⁸ The powers of these people were concerned with evil-doing and sorcery, thereby distinguishing them from healers in most other Aboriginal groups.

The Healing Process

Healing procedures and rituals were many and varied among Aboriginal groups. A shooting star could act as a signal to the successful completion of a healing process, as indicated, for example, on the Wellesley Islands of the Gulf of Carpentaria. *Malgri* was a culturally specific illness found only on these islands. The treatment for it involved anybody and everybody in the vicinity. Initially, a fire was lit beside the prostrate victim. From the gathered crowd of people, the healer emerges. Kneeling beside the victim, he massages his own sweat into the victim's body. A grass or hair belt is unravelled to provide a long cord. One end of it is tied to the victim's foot while the other end is run down to the water, in order to point the way home for the intruding spirit. The healer commences the song of exorcism. Its innumerable verses are sung all through the night, while the assembled people eagerly scan the sky for a shooting star. The shooting star is regarded as the incarnation of *Malgri's* eye. It dives from the sky to indicate *Malgri's* dispossession and banishment. Once this has happened, the string is snapped and the victim recovers.⁹

Around the Bloomfield River area in Queensland, falling stars, known as *gi-we*, were associated with moving firesticks, and when a person fell ill far away from his or her home country, a lit firestick was thrown into the night sky in the direction of the sick person's country to the accompaniment of a cry telling the *gi-we* which tracks to take. The family of the ill person would hear the cry, see the message and know their kinsman or kinswoman was sick.¹⁰

8 Spencer and Gillen 1899:488–9.

9 Cawte 1974:110.

10 Roth 1984 (5):8.

In the Boulia district of Queensland, the moon was associated with healing. The people believed that, in the past, the earthworm healed the foot of an ancestral turkey by boring into its swollen flesh and sucking out the putrid matter. Every month the earthworm sends up one of his numerous brothers to remind people of his healing powers. Each moon, like their earthworm-brother, 'bores his way out of the ground, rises up on high, sinks once more and dies'.¹¹

Bill Neidjie of the Gagadju people¹² describes the intimate connection which is thought to exist between the stars and the body:

Tree, grass, star ...
 because star and tree working with you.
 If you in city well I suppose lot of houses
 You can't hardly look this star
 but might be one night you look.
 Have a look star because that's the feeling,
 String, blood ... through your body.
 That star just e working there ... see?
 E working, I can see
 Some of them small, you can't hardly see,
 Always at night, if you lie down ...
 look careful e working ... see?
 When you sleep ... blood e pumping.
 So you look ... e go pink, e come white.
 See im work? E work.
 In the night you dream, lay down,
 That star e working for you.
 Tree ... grass ...

11 Roth 1984 (5):7.

12 Neidjie 1989.