

Voices from the Dreamtime: The Aboriginal Vision & Western Culture

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We don't normally regard agriculture as a disastrous innovation in human evolution, but one day in Tasmania an Aboriginal elder named Uncle Bul made it strikingly clear to researcher Robert Lawlor just how profound an effect the decline of the old hunter-gatherer lifestyle and the advent of agriculture exacted on the Western psyche. The crux of the problem, the old man told Lawlor, is that through agriculture "white men have lost their Dreaming." That's a loss of major significance because according to the Australian Aborigines when "white men" – or any people, themselves included – lose their Dreaming, they've lost the crucial nexus that weaves together Heaven and Earth, women and men, Nature and humanity, and makes long-term cultural survival and true prosperity possible.

During trance vision, Uncle Bul sees a "web of intersecting threads" on which scenes of the physical world, dreams, and prophetic visions are hung like cinematic beads – an aspect of the original Dreaming that created our world, in other words. "But inner fears break that glimpse of an invisible webwork, leaving only a world of isolated things" – and inner fear *is* the psychological state of most of Western humankind.

"Some of the young Aboriginal men today talk and act very smart, but they no longer have the vision, 'cause they have the same fear inside as white fellas," continued the elder. They can't feed themselves off the land like Uncle Bul who knows the whereabouts of all the roots and berries. "Anyone who does not know how to find food and feed himself is always frightened inside like a

little child who has lost his mother and with that fear the vision of the spirit world departs.”

As we move further through the 1990s, the consequences of our loss of this life-sustaining vision are unarguable. Critics of Western agro-industrial culture are now legion; our environmental disasters are widely acknowledged; the shortcomings of our patriarchal religions are well-established; and we live with the unrelenting face of global crisis always before us. In this climate of necessary cultural self-reproach, the wisdom of indigenous peoples, whether they're native American Hopis, Alaskan Koyukons, or Peruvian Ayahuasceros, is increasingly being put forward as a model for a new approach to living collectively on Earth. People are turning to the elders of the land for guidance in a time of great turmoil.

So what more indigenous people can there be than the Australian Aborigines, whose Latinate name itself means “the very first, from the beginning, of the source” and whose myths establish them as the oldest surviving culture on the planet? Anthropologists credit them with a 60,000 year history, but according to Aboriginal elders their race is much older. “We have been here since the time *before* Time began. We have come directly out of the Dreamtime of the great Creative Ancestors. We have lived and kept the earth as it was on the First Day.”

That's a contention hard to substantiate and a state of mind almost impossible to conceive, yet the archaic consciousness of the First Day Aborigines may hold “a recollection of our origins, a guiding code, a potency, and a seed for the rebirth of Western culture in which land and spirituality are inseparable,” says Robert Lawlor. Lawlor, 54, is an American author who has lived in the wilderness of Tasmania (one of Australia's seven states) for 14 years, studying firsthand the ancient lifeways of these First Day custodians.

Clearly Lawlor doesn't endorse the predominant Western attitude about the Aborigines – a hunter-gatherer people who reject agriculture, architecture, writing, clothing, and the subjugation of animals – as a primitive, anachronistic culture. For him, the Aboriginal survival isn't an ethnologic curiosity for academic study, but a living message, "a crucial, long-ignored mode of intelligence" that speaks to the heart of a supermodern culture in the desperate throes of death and transformation. In what may prove to be one of the most insightful interpretations of native peoples to appear, Lawlor writes with passion and lucidity about their redemptively pristine world view in his new book, *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime* (Inner Traditions, 1991).

As Lawlor understands the Aboriginal worldview, those immaculate first days on Earth didn't include agriculture, either as animal husbandry or tilled crops. That wasn't because those ancient forebears didn't know about agriculture; the lack of any form of agriculture in Aboriginal Australia, even today, explains Lawlor, was a conscious choice. The Aborigines chose against agriculture because it profoundly contradicts the tenets of Dreamtime Law, the basis of their society.

"The activities and religion of agriculture began the externalization of human attention, which turned away from the Dreaming toward the physical manipulation of the material world," explains Lawlor. "With the adoption of agriculture, populations became increasingly geographically fixed, their survival dependent on regional fertility and weather patterns. The earth was seen as something to be cleared, exploited, and managed at will. Agriculture first encouraged then required a structured moral polarity to replace the deep empathic participation of the hunter-gatherers as the foundation of religious sensibility."

The Aborigines say no to agriculture because it severs their profound participation in the Dreamtime – and that’s the pith of their existence. If there’s one word from Aboriginal culture that’s already marched into Western culture it’s Dreamtime or the Dreaming, what the Pintupi tribes call *tjukurrjtjana*. The material, living, perceivable world, called *yuti*, comes from the formative Dreaming which is a fluid, creative state of astral lucidity. It’s “the absolute ground of being or the fundamental universal continuum from which all differentiation arises,” explains Lawlor.

“In Aboriginal cosmology the universal manifesting field is consciousness, which simply externalizes or dreams the world of thoughts, forms, and matter.” In the beginning was the Dreaming and the entire world was created by the Ancestors during this timeless epoch of *tjukurrjtjana*, say the Aborigines. The Ancestors travelled across the barren, inanimate vastness of Australia hunting, skirmishing, making camp, fighting, loving, creating, “and in so doing they shaped a featureless field into a topographical landscape.” Their dreams and adventures created the witchetty grubs, emus, kookaburras, wallabies, wombats, kangaroos, lizards, snakes, wattle, banksia, and humans of that primordial world.

“Everything was created from the same source – the dreamings and doings of the great Ancestors.” The phenomenal world appears as the “external objectification” of the dream visions of the Ancestors; all life forms are differentiated aspects of the original dream of Light. The transcendent world of *tjukurrjtjana* is accessed again through the Wombat Dreaming, the Honey Ant Dreaming, through the dream memories eternally inscribed in the Aboriginal landscape. Song is the link, but song to the Aborigines means creative mantric sound.

The great ancestral beings were “vast, unbounded, intangible vibratory bodies” who spoke their dreams of the plants and animals by “naming” their specific vibratory pattern – making the Word flesh, as we say in the Christian West. “They created by drawing vibratory energy out of themselves and stabilizing this energy and by specifying or naming—the inner name is the potency of the form or creature,” explains Lawlor. Thus as the Aborigines see themselves as humans living *within* the projected thoughts of the gods; our world is the Dreaming of the Ancestors and “the interiority of the gods is our external reality.”

During the Dreamtime the physically animate world was sung into existence, or named – so if you want to remember these profoundly creative names, look to the landscape, listen to the *songlines* that maintain the mythopoeic connection between the ancestral Heaven and the human Earth. The Aboriginal songlines represent the primordial cosmogony of the dreaming Ancestors written intricately like a musical score in the landscape. The terrain remembers the Creation, so to disturb the topography in any way “is to obscure the meaning and history of humanity and reality.” Earth’s surface is a “ledger of cosmology,” as each Dreamtime story is designated and remembered by the place where it occurs – by the Dreaming tracks called songlines. “Everything in the natural world is a symbolic footprint of the metaphysical beings whose actions created our world. As with a seed, the potency of an earthly location is wedded to the memory of its origin. The Aborigines called this potency the Dreaming of a place, and this Dreaming constitutes the sacredness of the earth.”

That’s why the Aborigines insist on maintaining the Earth as they found it on the First Day, in its original perfection. That’s because the First Day is the epiphany of the Golden Age only vaguely recollected in Western myths. The landscape itself bears the direct imprint of the creative acts and meanings of the

world-creators and thus is the impression of the Golden Age itself. "The Earth to the Aborigines is the memory, a symbolic language, of the entire metaphysical dimension, its forms, processes, and thoughts. You don't disturb this imprint because it's like destroying the memory of the race."

Hence for the Aborigines landscape and spirituality are indissolubly bound and every moment is a revelation of the First Day. "This initial moment was thought to be the most vigorous and most potent," comments Lawlor. "The First Day was symbolic of the capacity of the world, humanity, and the cosmos to perpetually renew itself." Aboriginal ritual – in fact, all of Aboriginal culture – is a perpetual reiteration of the Dreamtime Creation. In their unflinching adherence to this mythic dimension, the Aborigines maintain their tribal sections of these journeying pathways that criss-cross the entire Australian continent "as a symbol and memory of the primordial Dreaming, of the invisible, metaphysical prototype" bearing its voices and seeds.

So seamless is the Aboriginal Dreamtime cosmogony that geomancy and animism are inseparable. In the West we're slowly growing acquainted with the ancient science of the energetic landscape called geomancy; meanwhile our anthropologists still regard animism – the notion that Nature is permeated with individualized spirits or conscious intelligence – as primitive and outmoded. But in the Aboriginal experience the landscape still bears the mythopoeic energy of the First Day and if they listen they'll hear the original songs of the plant and animal species – their Dreaming. That's why for the Aborigine place, or *ngurra*, is the basis of personal identity.

Ngurra means "country, camp, or place," a landscape feature formed through the metaphysical activities of the mythic ancestors as they dreamed the world into being. To the Aborigines place is thus inseparable from meaning, from the original activities that gave it form, notes Lawlor. The landscape is

inherently sacred and meaningful and a part of each tribal member. “The question of identity, of *who* I am, is resolved in the Aboriginal consciousness by knowing the full implications of *where* I am.”

The Aboriginal forms her personal identity from a knowledge of her place of birth, by studying the landscape’s mythopoeic pedigree. “The first thing that happens after an Aboriginal birth is that a small hollow is dug in the earth and the infant is placed in it,” explains Lawlor. “That place marks her indissoluble relationship with the landscape for the rest of her life. She has certain responsibilities to perform with respect to that hollow because that’s the beginning of her identity and the center of her country. It’s a personalized *axis mundi* in a completely mythologized landscape, the exact point where she connects to the Heavens.” Each location is mythically alive – with its unique energy pattern, its precise sound, and with the Dreamtime totem signature of a single plant or animal specie.

Let’s say one’s place of birth is a site of Opossum Dreaming. This means some of the preformative energy that contributes to the spirit of that species emanated from this part of the landscape, says Lawlor. As part of your initiatic training, you revisit this site with your precision tool of natural magical science, the *didjeridoo* (a long hollow flutelike musical instrument) and recreate the vibratory essence or sound signature of Opossum Dreaming. Then through a process of synesthesia – in which your five senses intermingle and fuse and you hear colors and see sounds – “that sound of the *didjeridoo* allows you to enter into the essence of the place and the sound appears to you as the animal totem.”

You recognize the Opossum Dreaming as yet another aspect of yourself because in the Dreamtime, animal and human characteristics were originally combined in the proto-ancestral personalities. Each animal species represented a subjective emotional state of the gods. Only in the manifestation stage of *yuti*

were animals and humans distinguished. “At the completion of the Dreaming, the Ancestors disappeared into the earth as potencies and, at the same time, permanently separated their human and animal powers. Humanity’s internal psychological states and emotions are externally symbolized in the behaviors and bodily forms of animals.”

Through sharing the Opossum Dreaming as your geomantic totem, you automatically enter into kinship relation with all your brothers and sisters of this same specie. One clan is descended from the kangaroo-man Ancestor of the Dreaming, for example, which means all clan members have special responsibilities to the kangaroo, its stories, ceremonies, and multiple kangaroo Dreaming sites in the land. “The spirit of the species is believed to flow from the spirit world into the physical world at a particular site. This spirit of the species actually *possesses* the region, not the clan that represents it.” Aboriginal society is thereby woven together in a web of geomancy, animism, totemism, and initiatory experience – from birth.

So as a newly initiated Aborigine you inhabit your destined node in the web of songlines that weave the sacred landscape. The Aborigine recognizes this landscape as an extension of his body. “As they travel and expand their cultural knowledge, memory and the spatial world expand together as an extension of self. The songlines that criss-cross the landscape flow as his own veins and arteries. Like the human body, the country is considered nonsegmentable. Internalized mythic knowledge and its topographical image, painted on their bodies in initiations, are the only graphic maps of their countryside the Aborigines possess.” From the Dreamtime, then, comes the profound nexus of geomancy, animism, kinship, ritual, spirituality – and the proper role of women and men in society.

The innate propriety of gender roles derives from the three realms of the Dreamtime, according to Aboriginal cosmology. The Aborigines contend that existence is divided into three realms of Dreaming: the Realm of the Dead, the Realm of the Living and Dying, and the Realm of the Unborn. The result is what Lawlor calls a “cosmology of sexual energy.”

The Realm of the Dead is the celestial abode to which the deceased travel after physical death, say the Aborigines; this is the proper sphere of the universal Masculine. Male energy is correctly affiliated with the forces of death, hunting, killing, the taking of life, funerals, burial, ceremonies, initiation, and spirit communication with the ancestral Dreamtime voices, says Lawlor. “It’s directed toward the transitions that limit life’s uncontrolled expansiveness. Male energy restricts, directs, and gives shape to life by controlling the ceremonies of transition from the unborn sources of life and the terminating transitions to the realm of the dead. The male is in charge of rites of increase or decrease; he conducts energy between the realms, from the Unborn to the Living and from the Living to the Dead.”

The energies of the universal Feminine in contrast are pre-eminent in the world of the Living and Dying, in the tangible realm of Nature, birth, life, nourishment, growth, and development. Women are born from nature but men are made by culture, say the Aborigines. “Earthly nature, or the physical phase of existence, is the domain of the birth-giving power of the universal Feminine. Womanhood establishes itself readily in the natural flow and continuum of life.” Responsibility for the Realm of the Unborn – “the world of potential energies that crowd along the boundary of life, pushing for entry” – is shared by women and men.

The harmonious interplay of the three realms through fulfilling the proper gender responsibilities results in a stable culture – something like 60,000 years of

Aboriginal continuity. The roles of both men and women are necessary for the continuation of the embodied world, says Lawlor. But when women and men deviate from this cosmologically mandated delegation of priorities and predominances, through patriarchy and agriculture, the results are usually disastrous.

“The Western patriarchy is about men trying to impose their capacities and domination on the feminine realm, the material world,” comments Lawlor. “They inappropriately bring the procedures of death and the disembodied mentality of time into the world of the living.” And when male-female relationships become skewed, the human relationship with Nature and the planet also becomes dangerously unbalanced, contends Lawlor. “The way a society treats the Feminine is how they treat the Earth. In my view the Western environmental crisis is based in our sexual relationship patterns.”

Lawlor isn't the first modern commentator to serve up Aboriginal sexuality to Western intellectual culture. Back at the dawn of this century when Sigmund Freud argued that subconscious sexuality underpinned much of Western psyche and culture, Freudian enthusiasts like Geza Roheim in *The Gates of the Dream* rushed to interpret Aboriginal culture as the classic example of a well-preserved infantile sexuality, as an antecedent phase of European civilization. But what was a pejorative for Roheim is now some 80 years later grown worthy of emulation, suggests Lawlor.

How remote after all are these Aboriginal views from the leading edge thoughts and speculations of our own time? Aren't the morphogenetic fields of biologist Rupert Sheldrake just another form of the polymorphous Dreaming of the Ancestors? The extravagant popularity of Findhorn and its nature spirit communications put animism back on the Western cultural map in the 1970s as a metaphysically legitimate concern. The planetary event called Harmonic

Convergence in 1987 catapulted the forgotten science of geomancy and its catalogue of sacred landscape sites into widespread public awareness. The interwoven philosophies of deep ecology, ecofeminism, and engaged Buddhism uniformly advocate extending personal identity to include the plant and animal world in a new identity called the Ecological Self. And many of the most abstruse Aboriginal concepts correspond strikingly with a major current in 20th century Western esoteric thinking called Anthroposophy, formulated by the Austrian spiritual scientist Rudolf Steiner.

None of this should really surprise us, advises Lawlor. The primal mind, the archaic consciousness of the First Day, so long dormant in the land and psyche, is sprouting again. The Dreamtime still preserves precious seeds of cultural rebirth and it's as if the Western subconscious has been calling out for them for the last 30 years at least and probably for the entire century. "Everything in Aboriginal life defines a world view utterly different from ours yet urgently relevant to our need to transform the way we exist in the world. The spirit of Aboriginal culture provides eyes through which we may view, as if from the outside, our deteriorated and purulent condition."

Sensitive Western readers by now have grown weary of the endless litany of our "deteriorated and purulent condition." Many will find Lawlor heavy-handed in his moralistic Western-bashing. In his view the whole of Judaeo-Christian agricultural and industrial history is an unmitigated catastrophe. Cultural evolution and material technology are an illusion that's led only to environmental and psychic despoliation. Only the extant native peoples of the world now have a clue how to survive this difficult period. In a sense Lawlor's rallying cry is *noble savage redioivus*, an odd kind of resurgence of the romanticization of the indigenous primitive that swept through European culture in the mid18th century. But despite Lawlor's own ethnologic biases, his

Aboriginal voices are prescient, and the *quality*, but not necessarily the content, of their lifestyle could usefully be translated to the West.

Our re-acquaintance with the Aboriginal Dreamtime, that “pure process of consciousness and image of wholeness” may “free us to dream the dreams of the next cycle in which humanity is reintegrated with the earth and the beauty and spirit of the natural world.” And what more plausible region in the world for us to begin this redreaming process than Australia, argues Lawlor – “with its vast uninhabited areas of land and the living presence of the oldest indigenous culture yearning for its renaissance?”

Lawlor speaks with authority here – with the authority of his experience and lifestyle grounded in the Australian landscape. Since the late 1970s he’s lived on a remote 228 acre spread on Flinders Island (population 900) off the coast of Tasmania. He knows Aboriginal culture from the inside- out, from having lived and travelled with contemporary tribal elders, and from the outside-in, as a Western scholar investigating their cultural heritage. “I love the light and spaciousness of Australia. I love the unencumbered, open, native beauty of the Aboriginal life, too. It’s that quality of life that fires me to discover what is their thinking, the unseen energy that provides the basis for their life – to look at the face of humanity they represent and see dignity, harmony, deep empathic connectivity with the universe.”

In a true biographical sense, Lawlor has been travelling towards the archaic mind for the last 35 years, ever since his first brushstroke as an abstract expressionist painter in the Greenwich Village of 1960’s New York City. He took an MFA from Pratt Institute then departed the urban artistic scene for the East in the mid-1960s, hitchhiking through Syria and Jordan to arrive in Pondicherry, India, in 1968. Lawlor spent seven years with the now world-famous Sri Aurobindo ashram and utopian new age city called Auroville. But Auroville’s

core attraction for him was not its progressive ecumenical vision of the future, but the chance to live an authentic preagricultural life with his pre-Vedic matriarchal neighbors, the Tamil villagers.

“I had a real unwinding and separation from Western culture. I adapted so well to the Tamil way of life that after a while people often mistook me for a native Indian villager. This was my first contact with the archaic consciousness, with a style of bodily existence prior to the introduction of agriculture. I began to contact a presence, a lineage, a consciousness, by mixing with these Dravidian villagers, learning their language, eating their food, living without electricity or running water, that started me on the path to the Aborigines. Each of my life’s researches has carried me further back into the life and mind of the archaic.”

After India Lawlor shifted focus to Western esotericism and the sacred geometry of the great Egyptian scholar R.A. Schwaller de Lubicz. Lawlor lived for several years in France studying de Lubicz’ revelations about temple design and geometry and translating some of his key texts into English. Eventually Lawlor formulated his own thoughts in his highly serviceable handbook *Sacred Geometry* (1980). He lectured widely in America in the early 1980s as part of William Irwin Thompson’s travelling roadshow of new age savants, the Lindisfarne Fellows, but he always kept returning to that “open, austere emptiness” of Australia. In the mid-1980s Lawlor’s honest considerations of Aboriginal sexuality prompted him to write *Earth Honoring: The New Male Sexuality* to bring their gender model to a sexually confused West. And he still lectures in America on a regular basis, often calling in at New York’s Open Center.

Lawlor may hail from Schenectady, New York, just north of Albany, but his heart is permanently established in Aboriginal Australia. Lawlor is an emigrant to the archaic consciousness. Years ago he dug his own little hollow in

Aboriginal ground and erected his *axis mundi* to the cosmos from Down Under. These days on Flinders Island, when he's not writing screenplays about contemporary urban Aboriginals or living with the Tiwis near Darwin in the north, Lawlor lives simply, writes, studies, walks, reflects – and listens.

Flinders Island, the Tasmanian Aborigines tell him, is the sacred abode of their deceased ancestors, the place where the souls of the Aboriginal dead go in their journey into the Realm of the Dead. Anthropologists suspect that Tasmanian Aboriginals may be the oldest human culture on the planet, far older than proposed African or mid-Eastern progenitors, going back some 400,000 years to the dawn of *homo sapiens*. "They are the oldest people of Australia, which is the oldest land," says Lawlor, for whom oldest and first also mean "the form that holds the most potential, that preserves the Law in its greatest purity and simplicity as a symbol of the primordial archetype." Since Tasmanian Aborigines were known to once inhabit Flinders Island, Lawlor is well-situated to catch echoes of this ancient heritage, to listen to these voices of the First Day.

In his island hermitage, which he shares with his "companion in spirit and love" Joanna Lambert, an Australian from Queensland, Lawlor listens "to the spirit imbued in the dark green mountains; to the mist-combed, granite pinnacles; to the long, pure, beige, open beaches;" to the windstorms, the cockatoos and dolphins, the seas and trees of this land outside of Western time.

"It is within this listening above all that I have felt connected to the most ancient, enduring, and nature-integrated culture of human history." And it is from Lawlor's assiduous listening that life-affirming seeds of cultural rebirth for the West might very well come precipitating among "white men" a new epoch of Dreaming.