

Anthony Redmond

# Indigenous Australian Dreams about Whitemen

(Cultural warning for Indigenous Australian readers: this article contains images and names of some deceased people.)

Dreams, “the royal road to the unconscious” as Freud famously put it, provide a hallucinatory stage on which the intimate effects of violent colonial relationships may be played out.

In the mid-1930s, Mura, a Murinpatha man from the Daly River region of the Northern Territory told the anthropologist, William Stanner, that “white man got no Dreaming”. Mura was using the term Dreaming here to refer to the “Everywhen,” the ever-present cosmogonic moment in which travelling ancestral beings create the world and all within it. While seen to be devoid of Dreaming themselves, Whites have certainly been a powerful source of dreams for Indigenous men and women. Indeed, in 1938, some contemporaries of Mura in the northern Kimberley region of Western Australia, complained to the visiting German anthropologist, Andreas Lommel, that the colonial invasion of their country meant they now suffered from “too much dreaming about white men.” They said that as a result they were finding it much more difficult to dream into existence the spirits of their future children as they had in the past.

## Interpersonal Dreaming about Whites

All social relationships become intensified in dreams. This is where the psychoanalytic view that the diverse personages in dreams represent aspects of the self resonates with the interpretations made by my Aboriginal friends and colleagues. Indigenous dream interpretations often take strangers to be disguised familiars with whom they share bodily essences. Kimberley Aboriginal dreams about Whites can elicit identifications with European power, as well as a radical repugnance to it. These kinds of serial identifications also appear in dreams about close and more distant kin.

Aboriginal people, then, have always had a schema through which to interpret their relationships with dangerous strangers—namely their beliefs about the realm of the dead and the transactions, mediations and maintaining of distances which are possible with spirits from that realm. These mediations are seen as constitutive of the identities of the living.

The association made between dangerous European strangers and the spirits of the recently dead is evident in a number of the dreams collected from Aboriginal residents at a remote government station

in 1938. The collector of these particular narratives was Patrick Pentony, a young scholar on the Frobenius Institute’s expedition to the West Kimberley in the immediate pre-World War II years. In quite a number of the dreams, a White aggressor is either paired with, or is a mask for, a Black aggressor. In one of these dreams a man told how:

“I saw a rifle lying on the ground. Then I picked up the rifle and put it inside a house. A white man whom I did not know was talking to me. Then I went back to camp. I awoke.”

[Dreamer’s]Comment: The policeman will come today. The rifle belongs to the white man. A blackfellow will come in too, because there was a white man in the dream. This blackfellow will be the tracker [native policeman] (cited in Pentony 1938).

My Indigenous colleagues were well aware that systematic encryptions shape the dream-work. For this reason, dreams were not to be taken at face value but required careful socialised interpretation by the dreamer and their kin. What Freud called the principle of “representation by an opposite” in the dreamwork for example, was articulated by one man in his eighties with whom I worked closely for many years. He told me that if he

dreamt of a White man persecuting him, this usually meant “blackfella just disguising himself really, it blackfella coming after me”. Similarly, if he dreamt of a woman threatening him in a dream this, he said, usually represented a man in disguise.

In one of his dreams, this kind of reversible imagery poetically drew upon matters of race, gender and age so that in a radical inversion of his diurnal reality, seniority and Blackness become associated with femininity while youth and Whiteness symbolised masculine power.

“Jimmy (a young kinsman) gave me a white shirt but when I took it out of the packet I saw he gave me a black skirt instead of a white shirt.”

Our initial conversations about this dream indicated that his dream had creatively reworked the phonological similarities between *shirt* and *skirt* in English (which was far from being his first language) but to what end? I note here Freud’s remarks on the labile nature of the word-image in dreams.



Paddy Jaminji, *Cyclone Tracy* (1985)

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“It is noteworthy how little the dreamwork keeps to the word-presentations; it is always ready to exchange one word for another till it finds the expression which is most handy for plastic representation.” (1984:236)

In other words, what matters most with words in dreams is not their descriptive qualities but their capacity for transformation through the associations they carry. These associations gain ascendancy when the dream is narrated by the waking dreamer. This metaphoric process allows the sounds of the words, their palpable qualities, to at least momentarily reconfigure their meaning-bearing quality.

In the days leading up to his dream, we had been discussing his time as a young man travelling back and forth between the government settlement which was presided over by a “cruel” and autocratic “whitefella boss.” B.’s associations around the dream imagery suggested that he had oscillated between identification with a powerful white maleness signified by the white shirt, as well as with the young Aboriginal kinsman who gave him what turned out to be a rather poisoned present (i.e. he felt the young relative was “mocking him” with the gender-reversing gift).

In another of B.’s dreams from around the same time, he was back in the leprosarium where he had spent some years in the 1950s, lying on his back in the dormitory room. He felt himself get up and as he neared the door he looked back and saw his bodily self still lying there “dead asleep”. He thought to himself, “I must be my spirit, moving—all right.” He moved outside and walked towards the bush behind the dormitories. There he saw a lot of people he knew sitting on the ground with heads down looking towards the ground. There was only one man he didn’t know. This man pushed him towards a hole in the ground where a fire was burning. B. got worried then and as he was pushed over the fire he kicked his legs together and flew up to the branches of a tree overlooking the cemetery. From there no one could touch him. He then walked back to the dormitory and his body was still there lying asleep. He then fell on top of his own sleeping body at which point he awoke. He didn’t tell anyone about this as he suspected that some people were jealous over his relationship with a woman from a far-away settlement.

B. said that the man he didn’t recognise also dressed similarly to the white manager at the government settlement, notorious for his iron fist, and that this dual personage was encouraging the persecution of B. by the older men at the leprosarium. B. interpreted his dream as revealing the secret

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In 1975, an artist of high renown, the late Rover Thomas, received a dream visitation from an aunty who had been killed on a flooded road crossing during the cataclysmic Cyclone Tracey which destroyed the city of Darwin on Christmas Day 1974. Mr Thomas’ dream visitor told him that the cyclone was a punishment inflicted by the Rainbow Serpent in retribution for the colonial damage to Aboriginal life and law. These events became commemorated in the new ceremonial performance, Gurirr Gurirr, which spurred an East Kimberley cultural renaissance throughout the 1980s.

Garlooroony, the Rainbow Serpent, is particularly associated with the more dangerous aspects of cyclonic rain and lightning. While most concentrated in the permanent waterholes of the area, its body underlies the entire continent in a diffuse way. Landscape features, especially rocky islands in permanent fresh water sources, are believed to be visible undulations of the Snake’s body, literally islands of its presence, in which its skin patterns are reflected in the terrain it travelled through and parts of its body became deposited in the landscape.

machinations of some older men to kill him despite their outward expression of being a friend.

M., an older woman who lived near to me, told me a dream in which an equivalence is drawn between White power and dangerous *argula*, rock-devils who are really ghosts of dead kin. In this dream a motor vehicle pulled up to her camp, the doors opened but no-one got out of the vehicle. She concluded that “*argula* got out” and she said that when she tried to get up from sleep she “had no power ...*argula* take my power.”

Two days later when we were fishing on different parts of the river we had heard M. cry out in terror “*argula, argula*.” We rushed to where the screams were coming from to see two tall male German tourists wearing wrap-around sunglasses looking very worried and confused by M.’s outburst.

We reassured M. that they were only tourists and she then berated herself for mistaking the masked-eyed tourists for devils and repeatedly told the story of her own alarm, announcing “Oh, next time I know.” Clearly, she was still metabolising the dream of *argula* from a couple of days before.

## Public Dreamings about Whites

From the early 1930s a number of new dream-derived religio-political movements emerged throughout the Kimberley. These rituals explicitly framed colonial political power in terms of Aborigines’ desire for access to White goods.

In one dream from Pentony’s recorded repertoire, a man told how “when one sees a strange blackfellow in a dream it means a white man will come according to Janba law.” (Pentony 1938) The Janba figure was the major protagonist in one of these new post-colonial religious movements in the Kimberley saturated with symbols of European power. Janba was said to live in a house made of corrugated iron and hunted game with a rifle and demanded tea, sugar, and bread from his fellow ghosts. He was also able to spread the newly emerging epidemics of leprosy and syphilis.

While opening new opportunities for accessing White power though western consumer goods some of these new political movements imagined a destructive vengeance on Whites in dreamt songs which “re-assembled” disparate historical events into a single destructive mytho-ritual time frame.



Rover Thomas paints while chatting with Diana McCarthy, 1994.

The Kimberly Aboriginal ceremonial performances of past violent events use dreamt imagery which conflates multiple historical persons into a single or dual personage and multiple historical moments into a single frame.

One such ceremony re-enacted the 1912 sinking of the MV Koombana, a State-owned supply ship which frequented the Derby wharf in the course of servicing the colonial infrastructure in the region. This dance performance overlays earlier ship sinkings upon events occurring a full generation later—specifically the WWII Japanese bombing of Broome during which many ships were destroyed in the harbor.

I recorded a number of thematically related dreamt songs, including one in which the singer described to me as *dalabon jurnba* (“telephone jurnba”) in which the composer receives in his dream an urgent telegraph message from the MV Koombana’s sister ship, MV Koolama, as it is attacked by Japanese planes in 1942, midway between Kalumburu and Wyndham on the far northern coast. The singer said that he first heard this sung at a station far away in the eastern Kimberley where an infamous colonial massacre had taken place. He told me that *dalabon jurnba* referred to events in which “lot of black people been killed at Kalumburu by gardiya (Whites).” Again there is a condensation of separate spatio-temporal moments into a single dreamt event, taking a cue from the Japanese air-raid on Drysdale River mission station in 1943 in which a number of Aboriginal people had been killed.

This shamanic composer’s dream employs the power of telegraph transmissions, eliciting the idiom of *lunggun*, body “signals” (sometimes explicitly glossed as “telegraph”) produced in a person’s body by muscle twitchings which act as presentiments of kin either approaching the signalee or experiencing some kind of serious trouble.

It is significant that the sinking ships memorialised in these songs were also the vessels used to transport Kimberley Aboriginal prisoners to the State jails of Fremantle and Rottneest Island in the south of Western Australia. They also “removed” mixed-race children to draconian child institutions such as Moore River Settlement. In a number of these songs, the sinking of the ships is attributed to the agency of local Aboriginal *barnman* or “wish-doctors” exacting vengeance. One of these ceremonies invokes a storm whipped up by a “doctor man” invoking two destructive Wunggurr (Rainbow Serpent) snakes to sink a ship in order to punish miscreants on board (see below).



1998 Performance of *Dulugun* [ Realm of the Dead] – “The ship sinking from Two Snake. Whitefella ship in Wyndham”.

Ritual power reasserts itself here against all odds not just by evading White power but by incorporating it whenever possible by investing the doctor-man with an enhanced destructive potential derived from the new White technologies of radars, telegraphs, ships and aeroplanes.

Throughout this range of ritual performances there is a recurrent theme of Aboriginal people gaining secret ritual knowledge of, and then agency in, the sinking of the Whiteman’s ships. This secret knowledge was seen to be denied to Whites who are seen to lack the intuitive capacity to hear messages coming in dreams from the realm of the dead. Or as Mura put it, “Whiteman got no Dreaming.”

## Dream Enhancing



Some years ago, I observed by chance that a certain pressure on the eyes tends to improve remembering one’s dreams the next morning.

There is much more light by night in the summer in Stockholm, where I then lived, than further south, and in this case my bedroom was oriented to the east. That meant that the bright light already very early in the morning made sleeping more difficult, especially after going to bed relatively late. That is why I used a silk scarf to cover my eyes for more artificial darkness.

So indeed, we do see our dreams with our physical eyes...

Bruno Jacobs

## How to Induce Mock-Sleep

The trick is to accelerate the process of falling asleep through exaggerated comfort. This method requires a cold room—basically cold enough to make you uncomfortable without a blanket. If you have trouble getting drowsy, throw off any blankets and try for a few minutes to sleep in the cold. After a while you should feel sleepy but unable to fall asleep. Then pull the blankets back over you.

Also if you are noise or light sensitive and sleep on your side, you can pull a pillow over your head. Just make sure you can breathe. The weight will help relax you. Finally make sure your arm is also propped up on a pillow.

The initial voices or images will begin when you are adequately relaxed. Consider them, but if possible, do not be seduced by them. These are more often than not influenced more directly by the impositions of your conscious waking mind. Much better to watch them for a while. Let them hover, try to give them the once over. If you are looking for a voice, listen carefully and try to get caught up in the “conversation.” Likewise if you want an image, “look” with attention. Eventually you will feel your control over the situation slipping. A voice will call out. An image will burst apart or slither in. You will be surprised. At this point, get up. Your rational mind is needed to fix the image and contextualize it with language. If the intent is to record a voice, you may need to quickly make a decision as to its meaning, sound, or spelling, because alternatives can readily present themselves in the elaboration.

It will take some practice before you can force yourself to get up and not just pass out. But eventually you will get good at it. You can then provoke cycles of ongoing hypnagogic poetry for extended periods. If life will leave you alone, you can go on almost indefinitely, at least, that’s how pleasurable it is to learn new things... But the imperative to stop may come at any point. Where from, though?

If one actually falls asleep, the comfort of this method promotes an “oblivion” sleep that usually makes dream recall a little less frequent. For dreams, sleep either on your back or some side facing a light source. Oftentimes facing a door during sleep seems to encourage weird dreams.

Jason Abdelhadi

From the book *Nagogia – Hypnagogic Acquisitions from elsewhere* (see Dreamdew #32)

# Oneiric Food & Gastronomy

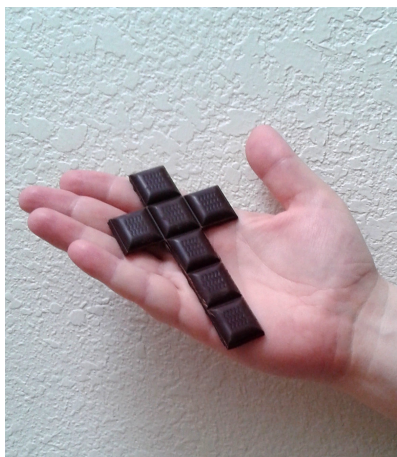
“It’s new, it’s special cornflakes,” R. tells me. The box reminds me of Eastern Europe. Inside there are huge flakes dotted with weird dark lumps. I get a serving as a test, and pick up a few of those black and brown food knots. These are thin, twisted worms of some kind of fibrous bran, each held in the pincers of a large plastic beetle; you have to break the beetle and chew the worm. I tried several of these hard novelties before the rather marine taste warned me that they were real dried worms.

Krzysztof Fijalkowski, dream of May 3, 2001

“Pirinoff fries” (before frying the potatoes, they are kept in cognac for a while).

Dan Stanciu, dream of August 1, 2010

I am in Paris visiting some ladies who used to be Ghérasim Luca’s neighbors. They have kept an object made by him: a cross carved out from a bar of chocolate.



Sasha Vlad, dream of May 25, 2013

Two thin pancakes are being refried with flour so they get crispy and get a stiff texture; two slightly loose fried eggs are being laid between them with melted cheese on top of the upper pancake, possibly even a little melted chocolate or Mexican mole.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of April 20, 2015

I am in a kind of village tavern. Behind the counter, a very friendly gentleman shows me a tapa that corresponds to my drink: it looks like a split headless fish that reveals a filling of reddish meat inside. I ask him what this is and he answers (literally): “It is horse mackerel blood sausage and it is eaten in a hemorrhoid.”

Jesús García Rodríguez, dream of December 18, 2015

There is a family dinner at my parents’ house, where we celebrate something—it might be Christmas, or a birthday. We are all seated at the table, which from my point of view has grown a lot in length, occupying two rooms in the house, and so I make it known. My mother brings a large tray of stewed or roasted meat, and we help ourselves to it. The person next to me—whom I do not recognize, because she is not from my family—serves me a piece of meat on my plate. With a mixture of amazement and a certain disgust I see that what is on my plate is the face of Santiago Carrillo \*, very gelatinous. Disgusted and even offended, I throw Carrillo’s face from my plate onto the tray, get up, and leave.

\* Leader of the Spanish Communist Party between 1960 and 1982.



Jesús García Rodríguez, dream of February 6, 2017

Two small pizzas on top of each others with the filling inside and with stewed spinach in between.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of June 5, 2017

Tortellini-like mint-filled soft dessert made of pancake paste, fried in olive oil and sugared.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of October 29, 2017

Somewhere in China, in a restaurant where I dine with some French and Chinese friends, and also my mother. We have already tasted many dishes displayed on the round table, when the waiter brings a large steaming dish which he places in the middle of the other dishes. Curious, I half get up to see what it’s all about: there are, side by side, a big carp whose head is that of a still alive snake and a boiled turtle with a translucent shell.

Guy Girard, dream of August 24, 2017

Sushi for 300 euros per person. The sushi pieces are placed on banana leaves on the flat underside of three upside-down elephant feet placed as a triangle. The elephant legs had been cut by the knees.

Bruno Jacobs, dream of January 4, 2018

I see on a table computer hardware covered in dark chocolate . I try to eat the chocolate part while avoiding to bite into all kinds of cables, adapters, etc.

Sasha Vlad, dream of January 16, 2018

A puppet show appears on TV. All the characters are giant puppet sushi with googly eyes. They start doing a mock police procedural drama. They interview different types of sushi in a “Law and Order” style. At one point a sushi-puppet turns to the tv audience and says “This goes on for three more hours!”



Jason Abdelhadi, dream of March 18, 2019

**GOOD NIGHT!** As the initiator of *Sundew*, subsequently *Dreamdew* together with co-editor Sasha Vlad, I am now leaving its editorial board. I can only wish my friend the warmest and very best luck regarding promising future issues. I'll be around! – Bruno Jacobs

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