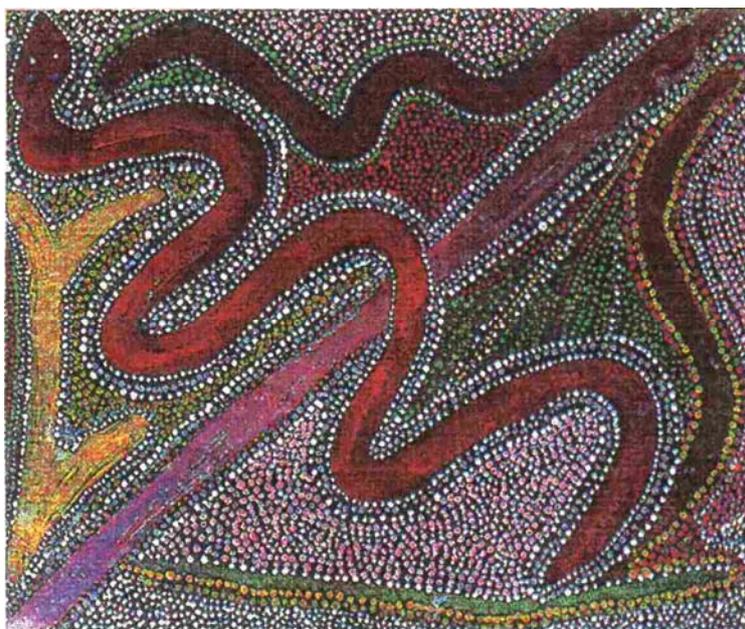


Images in Cultural Psychiatry

The Nymphs and the Rainbow Serpent

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INTRODUCTION In the course of the '80s I conducted two field studies in Australia. In one of these I was hosted at the Balgo Mission in the Walbiri territory in the Australian Central Desert together with Dr(s). Malcom Kidson (University of Melbourne), Andrew Horblow (Christchurch University) and Warren White (University of Melbourne). At the end of the stay, on the very eve of my departure, I saw some Aboriginal paintings laid out on the floor in a corner of the mission that were up for sale through the intermediation of the missionary priest.

The paintings were in the fashion of *pointillisme*, painted by dipping a little stick in cans of colors and then dotting any base available with an unlimited number of colored dots thus forming an image: in the Aborigin's bark painting tradition, the image was conceived so as to be seen horizontally, with the viewer, just like the painter, moving around the bark as it lay on the ground. I was particularly fascinated by two of these paintings, which I subsequently purchased. The first depicted a theme that is traditional to Aboriginal painting, namely a symbolic map of the territory. This is generally portrayed with circles (symbolizing ponds of water) interconnected by lines of different lengths (the paths to be followed), with clusters of U's scattered here and there, often signifying a squatting man (more specifically, the trace left by a man sitting on the ground) and symbolizing the place where they would stop to rest or to socialize. I purchased it out of a sense of scientific commitment. Then, once I had satisfied the pangs of science, I purchased the

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one displayed above for pure esthetic pleasure. The figure in the center was a snake and it was embedded in harmonious shapes and colors: despite the static nature of the masses of color, it was nonetheless possible to perceive a sense of slow and silent motion. The back of the painting disclosed the indication that I was seeking as the missionary's handwriting revealed the subject of the picture: «The painting represents the place of birth of Henry Polly Tjangala. The large serpent had to travel a long distance before slipping into the lake where it still lies».

On the night before my departure, the missionary confirmed what had not been difficult to infer: the snake was the representation of Henry's personal dreamtime, a sort of semi-religious portrayal of his soul. The missionary underscored the fact that the rainbow serpent (an association of the dreamtime) could not easily be referred either to our conventional religious beliefs or to the meaning that our Biblical texts attributed to the serpent in the Garden of Eden.

A supernatural dimension that falls short of sacredness

(The emic perspective)

Dreamtime is a noumenic dimension that Aborigines are reluctant to speak of, and when they do, it is only after having become acquainted with their interlocutor and having recognized some value in him or her.

In M. Kidson (1990, p 291), in the chapter entitled Space Time and Dreamtime we can go deeper into the topic: «The English words “dreaming” and “dreamtime” as used by Aborigines are widely misunderstood but fundamental. They are synonymous and do not refer primarily to dreaming as such but to a dimension of existence, present in the beginning but flowing in parallel with all time, past, present and future’. M.J. Meggit, who has extensively studied *Walbiri* cosmology, refers to a noumenal-phenomenal distinction in the thinking of this desert people. Meggit puts it thus: “The dreamtime is not seen merely as a discrete period of activity that occurred once, it is also an enduring level of being which continues as noumenal ground that parallels and sustains the ongoing flow of phenomenal existence”. The people describe as dreamtime or as ‘dreaming’ anything that extends into this noumenal space. The sacred boards or *Tjurunga* – icons or emblems of totem lodges – are thus dreamings. Actual dreaming during sleep facilitates contact with the dreamtime dimension and, therefore, gives access to the dreamtime in the Aboriginal sense. Much Aboriginal art, rock art, grounding drawings, and ceremonial body painting is identified as dreaming. Much but not all of this is secret. As far as it concerns the Desert religion, a representative view is that only the earth and the sky have been eternal. Embryonic life essences had existed within the earth. Life began with the emergence of the original ancestors, supernatural beings, who moved about the earth creating its shape and features».

K. Maddock (1984, pp.85) defines Dreamtime as follows: «The powers of the Dreaming formed the physical and animal world and also laid a way of life for humans [...]. The theory is of the definition of space and time, not of creation out of nothing. The earth and life were conceived to have been in existence when the powers began to work. Thus, the *Dalabon* hold that the earth was an expanse of water, coloured as the rainbow, and that life was inside a serpent-like female. The *Aranda* hold that the earth was a level and featureless plain, impregnated here and there with life potential. The Dreaming is seen as a period in which enduring shapes were made, enduring connections established, and repetitive cycles initiated, the material so moulded having hitherto been inert, amorphous, or in flux [...] The Rainbow Serpent, a pervasive figure in Aboriginal cosmology, bridges the distinction between totemic and transcendental powers. It is a zoomorphic expression of a vital, yet destructive force». The painting perfectly mirrored all these presuppositions: its content is expressed in such a way as to give an amalgamated vision of the lake, of the land surrounding it and of the serpent: the Nature that we would call inanimate (the

water and the land) does not differ from what we would define as animate (the serpent) or even from the noumenal.

Moreover, the painting's iconographic subtlety fully respects Aboriginal tradition. For Aborigines, images are not made to astonish, attract or lure the esthetic sense of the viewer: «Since all Australian Aboriginal art is basically utilitarian, designed to have some direct or indirect purpose or effect, this blurs the usual distinction between craft and art [...] Creative sense is restricted and conservative, rather than directed toward experimentation[...]. They do not, as a rule, want an exact photographic representation, of such a kind that almost anyone anywhere will be able to recognize it for what it is [...] People who come into contact are usually those who share very much the same mythological and ritual background, who can communicate with one another even though they do not always speak the same language [...] There is a preference for curves and roundness, including dots, rather than for angles and straight lines» (Berndt & Berndt, 1982; pp 411, 423).

The difference between the iconography of the Aborigines and the representational techniques used in Western sacred painting is enormous. In the latter, religious iconography is characterized by a clear-cut separation of space into three parts: the Underworld or the sinful and mortal earth, the sky as the medium in which to communicate with the divinity and, perched high above all else, the gods themselves, unreachable in their blinding light. As V. Stoichita (1995, p 28) points out, in the Seventeenth Century, the goal of religious painting was to facilitate a visionary experience in the viewer: «[...] it was a crucial *topos*: at this time a number of artists sought to include in their paintings both the vision itself and the visionary saint at the moment of ecstasy. Further, they explored ways of implicating the beholder of the work as a privileged witness to the 'reality' of the event represented, and also of means to make the work itself serve as a vision-inducing agent». And, further on, Stoichita states: «The problem of unifying immanence and transcendence was taken up by Counter-reformation art precisely in this spirit of the dramatic verticalization of the visionary experience. Splitting the levels of reality – as practised in vision paintings – facilitated the move from one area to the other. The paintings can be divided into two distinct but intercommunicating zones: one terrestrial, the other celestial».

On the contrary, the viewer is not intended to find any moral message in Aboriginal paintings, no hell or paradise, but a cross-generational story chanted (Chatwin, 1987) in a worldly encounter.

Furthermore, the homogeneity of the figures reflects the cosmogonic theory of the Aborigines: the world has always been an amalgam of its components, showing no discontinuity between Nature, life and the gods. So, what I ended up taking home was actually no sacred painting but the portrayal of the birth-place of Henry Polly Tjangala, a representation of his specific dreamtime, practically a snap-shot of his life at the very moment of his birth, that he decided to sell because, for Aborigines, only the *Churinga* is sacred. The rainbow serpent and the water pertain to his dreamtime, which mirrors both his cultural identity and the act of birth, an act pertaining to physical fertilization, as asserted by M. J. Meggit (1962, pp 271-2): «I have already pointed out that the *Walbiri* postulate the existence, not of spirit-children, but of *guruwary* spirit-entities, which are by no means the same thing [...]. All the older men with whom I discussed the matter held that copulation and the entry of a *guruwary* into the woman are both necessary preliminaries to child birth [...] The women, on the other hand, were emphatic that coitus is the significant antecedent of parturition; the entry of the *guruwary* is a secondary event that identifies the child formed of the menstrual blood. Indeed, many of the women were surprised that my wife and myself had to ask such self-evident information».

Birth and fertilization are in fact seen to be mundane events, matters arising from *guruwary* and the act of coitus. Spencer & Gillen (1904, p 490) in the Chapter titled: *Beliefs in Beings endowed with superior powers*, peremptorily exclude divine intervention in facts strictly concerning human beings: «...so far as we have been able to discover, there is no instance of any of them (dreamtime

ancestors or *Alcheringa* - note of the author) being regarded in the light of a ‘deity’. Amongst the Central Australian natives there is never any idea of appealing for assistance to any one of these *Alcheringa* ancestors in any way, nor is there any attempt made in the direction of propitiation [...]. The Central Australian natives have no idea whatever of the existence of any supreme being who is pleased if they follow a certain line of what we call moral conduct and displeased if they do not do so. They have not the vaguest idea of a personal individual other than an actual living member of the tribe who approves or disapproves of their conduct [...]».

This is the cultural tradition etched into Henry’s painting. If we accept the relativism of cultural traditions, we could say that the painting refers to what we would define as a noumenal dimension but, put more simply, we could just say that the painting is an excellent mediation between a supernatural dimension (serpent-dreamtime) and the material birth of the artist.

Art and the construction of the Self

(The etic perspective)

In this respect, the underlying question is: To what extent does the perception of the pictorial representation permanently affect the subjective cognitive scaffolding that every one of us uses in order to “internalize” the external world?

This question arises from the realization that there is nothing new in the concept that culture, by means of its physical and not-physical expression, influences the construction of the Self. Although human beings share a fundamental psychological structure, the psychology of the Self and its boundaries varies according to the socio-cultural background of the person concerned (Tseng, 2001). In non-Western populations, the normative functions of the Self are different from those of the peremptory individual Self that constitutes the groundwork of our culture (Hsu, 1985; Chang, 1988). In cultures that are not so technology-oriented, we may refer to an un-individuated or social Self that is fully incorporated within the community group of belonging.

By contrast, Western civilizations are characterized by a self-conscious, individualistic Self that is set against other Selves that are capable of splitting in two, so that one half can see what the other half is doing. In the light of an unending abstraction process, this kind of dual Self has earned itself Kleinman’s definition of *Metaself* (Kleinman, 1988). The emergence of a Western *Metaself*, a highly specialized meta-cognitive entity, might be considered to be one of the causes that have enabled Modern Man to develop mathematical thinking, computation skills and the capacity to subject human relations to extra-worldly interventions.

Nowadays, in technologically advanced cultures, the ‘uncouth’ traditional form of possession, typically triggered by a roll of the drums and by dancing in circles around a bonfire, has been superseded, in the course of time, by solitary mystical states of trance typical, for instance, among the great Italian saints. Later on also these overtly mystical experiences became obsolete and were replaced by passive and silent forms of contact with “the Absolute” through the revisiting of long-tested procedures capable of actively altering the ordinary state of consciousness.

While some cultures amply rely on theological indications in order to come into contact with God, others instead simply accept the notion that the world is put into action by a wide range of “intentions”, usually of human nature, rather than divine interventions. The fact that some cultures accept “incorporating in their Self-related experiences what is seen, heard and felt in dreams” (Hallowell, 1958). This enables these individuals to remain rooted in the ground or, at best, in the Dreamtime dimension, here depicted as an only partially noumenal dimension, hovering just above the terrestrial crust and characterized by a closely-knit cluster of ancestral and individual intentions that are more rooted in humans than in the divine.

By contrast, in monotheistic religions as, for example, Islam where people are essentially geared to a theocratic society in which the state and the individual are of value only insofar as they are

the servants of the revealed religion (Okasha & Maj, 2001), dreaming and the individualization of dream interpretation runs contrary to the general type of acceptance provided by Arab traditions. (El-Islam, 2001)

Painting the noumenal dimension as a serpent is inconceivable for the worshipers of the invisible monotheistic God. It is obvious that attributing a different significance to dreams and images and placing the locus of control in a different point in space, produces largely varying manifestations of the event experienced. Many of the so-called traditional populations show a tendency to suffer the momentary irruption of the “divine” and do not seek to actively engage in training themselves to manage a rapprochement to divine Agencies, as occurs in cultures rooted in monotheistic beliefs.

It could be asserted that technologically advanced populations refrain from staging medieval-like possession trances but nonetheless disclose a considerable inclination towards wanting to experience a polymorphous, religious-type of “suspended states of consciousness”. Little does it matter if such states of Nirvana are achieved by means or techniques promoted by secular medicine with a view to eluding stress, or, simply to surrender to the fascination of an image painted on a church wall ; the aim is to transcend, however high the cost entailed might be.

Many non-psychiatric Authors like Dodds (1951), Rhode (1982), Vernant (1982) and Needham (1981) have tackled the diachronic analysis of the influence of religious images and beliefs (Bartocci, 2000) on the cultural configuration of individual existence in different cultures. In attempting to identify the driving forces that determined the transformation of a portrayable polytheistic religious universe into an unportrayable monotheistic one, Vernant found the most likely reason to be the “quest for transcendence”. Wulff (1991) too shared the same opinion to the extent that he suggested incorporating the “principle of the inclusion of the transcendent” into the methodology used in the psychological investigation of religious trance. If we decide to use this framework of reference, it then also becomes possible to envisage figurative images, especially if they are capable of facilitating a sense of abstraction from reality, as a way to reiteratively express extramundane beliefs through a visual representation capable of inducing an emotional resonance that will later consolidate in the viewer’s memory.

Let us not forget that among the elements that have been proven to have a considerable molding effect on the neural functioning of the brain, there are factors that are perceptually even more ephemeral than visual art: «As a result of enculturation, every individual learns a language, a religion, or other meaning systems....By the habitual act of thinking in a particular language, or believing in the forms of a particular religion, those thoughts assume a type of physical reality in the organization of neural networks in the brain» (Tseng, 2001). In other words, although still in line with the above statement, I suggest to attribute to specific visual techniques a “material” function in the internalization of cultural factors within mental functions.

CONCLUSIONS As we have already had the opportunity of saying, Henry’s painting represents a profane visitation of dreamtime¹.

Is it now possible to conclude by establishing a diachronic link between extremely remote mythological histories as the presence of Greek Nymphs in Delphi and, nowadays histories as the Dreamtime in the forlorn Balgo mission in the Australian Central Desert?

¹ This of course does not exclude that Australian Aborigines have their specific sacred art in the *Churinga* (or *Tjurunga*). Indeed, as we can find in A.P. Elkin’s book, *The Australian Aborigines* (1974): «Both wooden and stone sacred objects (the *Churinga*) are usually incised with concentric circles, U’s, arcs and parallel wavy lines». These symbolic geometric lines are the best possible representation of what is considered to be a taboo. The *Churinga* are unsettling not only artistically – because their concentric circles create the visual opposite of the amalgam of colours described up to now – but also clinically and legally because, if seen outside a ritual context, they can induce a state of acute psychogenic death or even issue a death sentence.

We all know the power that was attributed to the Delphic oracle of Apollo by ancient Greeks. Apollo chose Delphi because he found there a “spring of beautiful waters” surrounded by the coils of an enormous serpent, *Python*: «Well before Apollo, it had been the very serpent *Python* who performed mantic practices in Delphi». Delphi, therefore, was «[...] a place that was concomitantly a spring, a serpent and a Nymph [...]. We might say that the spring is the serpent but, as the spring is also the Nymph, thence the Nymph too is the serpent. What in *Melusina* will join to form a single body, in Delphi was split into three beings: *Python*, *Telphusa* (the Nymph) and the spring because what is prevalently Apollinean is that which phases and separates: the yardstick. Though the substance was one» (Calasso, 2005, p 31).

But what is this metaphoric transversal substance that unites the spring, the Nymph and the serpent?

Calasso (2005, p 32) tracks the answer to this question in an ancient text: «And sudden insight shall be given to us by an excerpt of a hymn to Apollo quoted by Porphyrius in *De antro Nympharum*, which states that Apollo received from the Nymphs the gift of *noeron hydaton*, of “mental waters”». Here finally mention is explicitly made of ‘the stuff the Nymphs are made of’. Nymphs are therefore the mental matter that enacts and undergoes the enchantment, something that is very similar to what alchemists will later define as the prime matter and that is echoed in Paracelsus when he speaks of a “nymphidic nature”.

Without knowing it Henry had painted, in the simplest of ways, a very ancient myth: the place and gift of *noeron hydaton*: “mental waters”.

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