

## TWO WAY THINKING

"We have a gift we bin trying to give you, but you blocked from hearing us! Now we only got a little bit of time left ..." Bungal (David) Mowaljarlai 1996

How do we view those human and non-human organisms with different backgrounds, contexts and experiences from our own?

This is a profoundly important question because it relates to, not only culture and race, but also to beliefs and values, age, gender, nature and land.

What might be the impact of your personal views on others: individuals, families, communities, nations, and the natural world?

We might be tempted to think that, in the Big Picture of existence, an individual's opinions and views about others have very little impact, but this would be a grave underestimation of the power of collective thought, word and deed.

Ngarinyin lawman the late Bungal (David) Mowaljarlai OAM spent the better part of his adult life addressing these questions, because, as an Aboriginal person growing up and thinking in the hunter-gatherer tradition, he was on the receiving end of individual, community and national views that, as he said, 'blocked (you) from hearing us!'. Yet he and his countrymen and women had a 'Gift' that they wanted to give all Australians and the world. Their gift was, and is, of knowledge that he and his people have absorbed from living continuously in the natural world for tens of thousand of years. However, he and his countrymen of 'high degree cultural knowledge', the aging lawmen and law women of remote Australia, feel that their time is running out.

Mowaljarlai's plea raises some important, perhaps even uncomfortable questions. Are we too late to 'unblock' ourselves from receiving this knowledge? What 'knowledge' could traditional hunter-gatherers possibly give the rest of the world that we don't already have? After all, we might argue, the hunter-gatherer way of life has long been surpassed by more sophisticated agrarian, industrial, civilized and settler cultures everywhere on earth! We might be more inclined to think that we have much to teach them, to help them, to give them, so that they can take their equal place in the global community!

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

European settlement of the Australian continent began as a repository for British convicts in 1788, just 220 years ago. Because there was no recognised or recognisable 'civilisation' - nominally characterised by the existence of settlements, agriculture and industry and a unifying system of governance - the land was thought to be terra nullius, empty land. From the beginning, Aborigines and their culture were invalidated as contemporary modern humans. They were considered primitive, an unevolved form of human life, incapable of understanding or participating in any modern civilization. The gradual colonisation of the entire continent, and the policies drawn up to deal with

Aboriginal people were based on this assumption. This was not the exclusive belief of the British; many other European nations colonised remote parts of the world inhabited by hunter-gatherer and agrarian native peoples. These nations did so on the basis of their shared ontology, which was primarily the Protestant and Catholic Christian belief system. European and other empires had epistemologies or knowledge systems that considered there was a natural order in the world and in nature that presumed, firstly, that in God's template for creation, Man has dominion over Nature; secondly, that light coloured humans were more developed or evolved than dark humans, and thirdly, that civilisation as expressed by them was superior to all other human social organisations on earth. In addition, scientific and industrial developments were on the cusp of gaining unprecedented status and authority, being located above all other human endeavours.

The first British settlers to arrive at the continent's shores in 1788 looked at the coastal Aborigines of NSW with head-shaking disbelief. These travellers and emigrants came from a culture that could produce relatively reliable and safe ocean going ships, highly developed, intricately designed costumery and clothing, a complex written language, and the highly developed skill of turning raw materials into an enormous range of useful technologies,. In addition, they had sophisticated organisational, administrative and religious systems for governance, law and order and religious practices. In this new British colony they were confronted with a new reality of human beings: small groups of semi-clad or naked persons whose only weaponry appeared to be spears. It quickly became evident that they had no written language, no centralised system of governance, no settlements, no agriculture, and certainly no industry. Above all, they didn't even seem to have a proper religion. The colonisers' initially benign judgement was that these people represented a more primitive form of human life; above animals but not yet 'fully modern humans'.

This European belief was further reinforced with the advent of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, (1859) and a subsequent theory of evolution that confirmed white or light civilised humans at the top of an imaginary evolutionary ladder, while hunter-gatherers were, not only at the bottom, but in the minds of many, may even represent the missing link between monkeys and humans. (To his credit, Darwin never claimed this, and did his best to stay away from such appalling claims). Darwin's theory later developed into 'evolutionism', then morphed into what is now called 'social Darwinism'.

In his five-stage model of the evolution of consciousness anthropologist Jay Earley explains,

In Stage 1 (35000 - 8000 BC) people lived in small bands, gathering food and hunting for subsistence. During this era, *participatory* consciousness prevailed. People felt a deep sense of belonging—to the tribe and to the natural world. They were fully alive to sensual and spiritual reality in a way that most of us today have lost. ... They experienced themselves as an integral part of the natural world...

During stage 1, people believed in magic, and often tried to influence the weather or the hunt through symbolic activities and rituals such as the rain dance. Their primary mode of understanding was vastly different from ours. **They didn't step back and analyze the world to calculate linear cause and effect relationships. Instead, they related to reality in an inclusive and metaphoric way, through story and symbol** (my emphasis).

They were not split as we are between thinking and feeling, observing and experiencing, doing and being. This is because **they didn't engage in nearly as much reflexive thinking or objective observing or long range planning as we do** (my emphasis).

**(The Social Evolution of Consciousness**

[http://www.earley.org/Transformation/social\\_evolution\\_of\\_consciousnes.htm](http://www.earley.org/Transformation/social_evolution_of_consciousnes.htm))

Earley's five stages go on to describe how, over the next 8000 years, human consciousness evolved through agricultural, industrial, technological and abstractive states to become the modern civilised, aware people of today. Other social anthropologists like Tim Ingold (ref ....) challenge this view, while most modern governments decry it on racial discrimination grounds. Yet the belief continues to find strong echoes in modern Australian society's political, legal, economic, education and social institutions and policies relating to Aboriginal culture and peoples.

### **What is the problem with this way of identifying the evolution of consciousness?**

1. First, there is the presumption that the hunter gatherer tradition and peoples do not exist in the modern world, when quite clearly, they do.
2. Second, there is the presumption that hunter gatherer peoples somehow stopped evolving some thousands or tens of thousands of years ago at Stage 1 (35,000 - 10,000 years ago) in the evolution of human consciousness, while those societies that went on to develop written languages, agriculture, industry, evidentiary science and technology under systems of centralised governance, represent clear evidence of continued evolution. If this were so, then modern hunter gatherers would have had to mysteriously defy all known laws of nature, while every other form of life on earth, including civilised humans, continued in their dynamic process of adaptation and change as full participants in and expressions of an evolutionary process. This presumption, that modern Aborigines are locked into a pre-civilised, primitive past, is a widely held belief in modern society. Again, echoes of this belief are to be found in much Australian policy and program delivery.

### **What evidence exists about the ontology and epistemology of Australian Aborigines living in the hunter gatherer tradition?**

The truth is, in the public arena, very little first hand or primary evidence exists. Academic research conducted in field locations over the last 50 or so years, offers most of the current store of information, but this is largely shaped by the focus of inquiry of researchers. There are canons of stories published in books and cartoons, a few historical documentaries, stored witness evidence from land claim court hearings, and a limited resource of literature for school and university curricula. But these are overwhelmingly presented in languages familiar to Western culture, and do not reflect or relate the Aboriginal way of knowing. All Aboriginal knowledge is offered in the media and means of Australia's dominant culture. Mowaljarlai's publications, speeches, workshops and paintings try to create a bridge between traditional knowledge in its tribal context, and the broader, English-speaking, literate community. In some instances he endeavoured to explain concepts and meanings, but for the most part, he stuck with the traditional ways of imparting knowledge; these include story, song, dance, and direct experience in country.

This raises another important question. How can a person raised in one knowledge system and means of conveying knowledge adapt to 'hearing' another's way of communicating? For those of us who have grown up in the Western way of learning and knowing, can this be suspended in order to understand and acknowledge that the same knowledge can be presented just as validly in a completely different kind of narrative? This is the crux of two-way thinking.

## TWO WAY THINKING

Two-way thinking brings together, side-by-side, two very different ontologies (belief systems) and epistemologies (knowledge systems). I have chosen particular subjects in order to challenge Western assumptions about the 'stage' in the evolution of consciousness of people living in the hunter gatherer tradition as outlined above, in that these examples reveal highly developed knowledge at least equivalent to, and sometimes more sophisticated than current Western scientific knowledge. Second, these stories reveal a profound cosmology (worldview: way of seeing and being in the world) that the rest of modern society is gradually and increasingly coming to.

## EXAMPLE ONE: ORIGIN OF THE MOON

Below are two narratives about the origin of the moon, each offered in its own culturally specific way. The first passage is a 2004 report that reflects the Western scientific tradition of research (often referred to as evidentiary based, 'good science'). In its full length, the article describes the four theories of the origin of the moon, culminating in the most recently devised (1975) and widely accepted 'giant impact' theory. In essence, it suggests that, unlike all prior theories, the giant impact theory demonstrates how a particular sized planet hit the earth, and sent a body of material into space that finally coalesced into the moon.

How did the moon form? According to the "giant impact" theory, the young **Earth had no moon**. At some point in Earth's early history, a rogue planet, larger than Mars, struck the Earth in a great, glancing blow. Instantly, most of the rogue body and a sizable chunk of Earth were vaporized. The cloud rose to above 13,700 miles (22,000 kilometres) altitude, where it condensed into innumerable solid particles that orbited the Earth as they aggregated into ever **larger moonlets, which eventually combined** to form the moon.

(Subsequent research (2008) has revealed that there are minute amounts of water in moon rocks, which reinforce the theory that the moon was formed from Earth's surface.)

[http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/07/0714\\_040714\\_moonfacts.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2004/07/0714_040714_moonfacts.html)

The Ngarinyin narrative reflects knowledge presented in the form of a story that has been passed through uncountable generations spanning many hundreds of years. It also posits that the moon derives from earth, and was shot out into space. However, as with all Ngarinyin knowledge, this event reflects their ontology, and is woven into an entire knowledge system where essential forces work together in interconnected ways. The following passage demonstrates this worldview.

*(HRB): Mowal, in my culture the sun is symbolically male or masculine and the moon is female or feminine. The Greeks had Sun God and Moon Goddess. Maybe because sun is really powerful with its heat, moon is same as woman's menstrual cycle, I dunno. You fellas have this other way around – Sun is 'she' and Moon is 'he'.*

*(Mowaljarlai): That's why.*

*(HRB): That's why? What you mean?*

*(Mowaljarlai): That's why! Moon is 'he' for woman's cycle.*

I didn't get it at the time, but after years of absorbing Ngarinyin thinking I eventually saw that the vast, unspoken knowledge was infused in all daily activities, relationships, protocols, even diet. The gender example includes an assumed familiarity with the stories telling how the sun and moon came into being, and their functions; that Daughter Sun brings sublime light and joy and seasons for

nourishment and growth, and male Moon, shot out into space from the female Earth (in Creation time), is in a kind of yang relationship with all the fluids of the yin Earth including women, governing their cycles – tidal, menstrual, diurnal. This is how masculine and feminine balance is ordered and sustained. Mowaljarlai also presumed that I would know that this balance is the core condition within the whole of creation, that ‘there are always two’: masculine and feminine, which are in constant dynamic relationship in order to maintain balance. The language for abstract conceptualisation and intellectual discussion is virtually non-existent in Ngarinyin. Knowledge is acquired by observation and participation, reinforced in story, dance, song and painting. It’s as though the old Ngarinyin law people download story directly into understanding, bypassing the entire abstract language process.

(Storymen P 88)

#### EXAMPLE TWO: HOMEOSTASIS

In the second example, modern scientific knowledge is revealed in another Ngarinyin story. It should be noted that these traditional stories date back generations.

#### Homeostasis

... the human body uses a number of processes to control its temperature, keeping it close to an average value or norm of 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. One of the most obvious physical responses to overheating is sweating, which cools the body by making more moisture on the skin available for evaporation. On the other hand, the body reduces heat-loss in cold surroundings by sweating less and reducing blood circulation to the skin. Thus, any change that either raises or lowers the normal temperature automatically triggers a counteracting, opposite or negative feedback . Here, negative merely means opposite, not bad; in fact, it operates for our well being in this example. Positive feedback is a response to change from the normal condition that increases the departure even more.  
<http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=what-is-homeostasis>

The main idea behind the Gaia hypothesis can be both simple and complex. Often, several similar examples or analogies concerning the bodies of living organisms are used to make the Gaia concept easier to understand. One of these states that we could visualize Earth's rain forests as the lungs of the planet since they exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide. Earth's atmosphere could be thought of as its respiratory system, and its streams of moving water and larger rivers like its circulatory system, since they bring in clean water and flush out the system. Some say that the planet actually "breathes" because it contracts and expands with the Moon's gravitational pull, and the seasonal changes we all experience are said to reflect our own rhythmic bodily cycles.

<http://www.scienceclarified.com/Ex-Ga/Gaia-Hypothesis.html>

The Gaia Hypothesis, originating in scientist James Lovelock's book ..... in 197?, became very popular during the 1980s and 1990s, and has led to radically different methodologies and processes in scientific research.

While Mowaljarlai's stories mythologised the land, they revealed extensive knowledge of earth sciences. One story tells how the didgeridoo came into being, but it also explains one aspect of the Earth's homeostasis. *The earth breathes through noseholes*, Mowaljarlai told Jutta Malnic as they discussed material for their book:

Jutta: You know these holes in the ground, *djambarra*, is that quicksand or are they holes that go really deep in?

Mowaljarlai: *Djambarra* is more where the Earth breathes. Man called Gulugulu, he blew from underneath. He is the one who first blew had a hollow wood. The holes are still there. The air-breathing place of the Earth.

As the wind blew, he heard this noise, like a little whistle. He invented the didgeridoo in this area where all those *djumbarra* are. Those people who totemise them, family of the earth. A man cut that wood because he heard the wind in that hollow branch; when the wind was blowing the branch was whistling. He said, 'Ah, it's whistling' so he cut it and tried to blow it. He worked that didgeridoo. *Djumbarra*, they right down deep. It's breathing, the Earth, the hot air. If it's blocked up, it'll blow up. Warm air blowing up. The wind that blow up goes back. It's an exchange.

J: Oh, it really breathes, it's an exchange. The air from the top breathes in and breathes out?

M: That's what it's there for. Noseholes of the Earth. Because it's alongside the river, the water, it cools it. Change of temperatures in the river. That's what it's there for. River is running like that. There is an air pocket under the river, it cools the air. It blows out hot air through the *djumbarra*. The Earth is fanning itself. It's like a fan.

From this extract it can be seen that Mowaljarlai connects the human body's homeostasis with the Earth's homeostasis. This view currently underpins most new scientific research as scientists from a wide range of disciplines coalesce their findings into an interrelated, holistic view of climate change. Perhaps the 'old knowledge' has something very significant to contribute to many of the dilemmas facing the world's scientific community today.

## CONCLUSION

This article started off with questions about how we view others from different backgrounds, and the impacts such attitudes might have on both. By exploring the historic views about Indigenous peoples, we can see how particular views can shape the ways in which we relate to others, and the impacts of pre-conditioned beliefs and attitudes on the way we behave. Had scientists listened to Aboriginal knowledge-holders in respectful, two-way thinking relationships decades ago, the world body of knowledge might have been much different today. We share the Earth, and people living in the hunter-gatherer tradition have a vast body of knowledge that is as modern and relevant as any being produced by contemporary scientists. Two-way thinking is about equal, respectful relationship in which different, shared knowledge is the bridge.