

RELATIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Much has been discussed about the concept of relational epistemology. This discussion is more about how a cultural 'outsider' can apprehend a view from 'inside' another culture's way of seeing (processes) that synthesize information and experience to produce knowledge and understanding of the universe. It asks a fundamental question. How do we know what we know? How do the Ngarinyin know what they know?

“We not milli mili (document/paper) mob ... we art mob.”

The most obvious understanding that can be drawn from this statement by Ngarinyin lawman Bungal Mowaljarlai is distinction he makes between the languages of the two cultures: written word versus visual image. The assumptions in his use of the term Milli milli include:

1. Whitefella culture presents its law and meaning in word language written on paper which become, among other things, documents of legal tender, that is, 'paper law', identity (birth certificates) accreditation (authority), and story (as in fiction).
2. Human persons (usually male) invent or create the paper, the words, the document, and the meanings embedded within. 'Man make that milli milli.'
3. Milli milli are ephemeral: they can be disposed of, either physically (as in burnt, or thrown out), while the words and their meanings can be added to, altered and/or erased, to change the intent and meaning of the whole. 'They don't stick, that milli milli.'
4. Milli milli have no reference point in the world; they are 'outside' nature, and are therefore illusionary records. The land doesn't have or produce milli milli in its being. 'Land (the natural world) tell us who we are, our belonging ... our evidence is fixed in the land.'

The assumptions in his use of 'we art mob' include:

1. Art (visual imagery) is the means by which Wunggud conceives itself, and projects itself into physical being. All art is therefore Wunggud, *of* Wunggud, and *in* Wunggud . The world (lands, waters, heavens, flora and fauna) is animate art.
2. Art includes *all* visual imagery including the substance of dream, visualization and memories, so-called rock art, body painting, ceremonial equipment, mind-mapping, hallucination etc, and spoken language.

3. Art implies a language of 'visual image(ry)' as opposed to 'written word'.

4. The term 'The Dreaming' (as opposed to Dreamtime) is often interchanged with the word Wunggud, although Wunggud implies more meaning than the English term.

In an animate world (that includes, and is *of* The Dreaming) there is no real distinction made between the physical world and its source in The Dreaming; they are indivisibly connected as in radical relativity (that is constituted by relationship, present in reality as relatedness). Likewise, there is no distinction made between the validity of information gleaned from 'seeing' in the world, and 'seeing' in the dream(ed). Both hold visual images of being-in-action - alive, real, functional, and present - that are 'captured' by the seer.

A 'dream' state can be induced or activated deliberately or involuntarily entered due to uncalled-for 'intervention'. In this state, called an 'altered state' by Westerners, (one can explore the implications of the word 'altered') the seer, sometimes called 'banman' or 'songman' (Bell on Scotty Martin 72,153), receives visual and auditory information. This can 'come in' as a song, dance, and painted image, but it is *always* a visual experience. In this state the seer is not self-consciously self-aware, that is, is not conscious being in his own body or identity as 'self'. He is 'other' – existing in a state of not-being-in-himself – for the duration. Yet he is able to describe fully, what he hears, sees and experiences when he is re-collected in himself. (Bell on cloud carrier mob P 152)) It is in this state that images are said to come into being in rock shelters and caves.

The painter is not necessarily an 'artist', in fact such a classification of industry did not exist until recent times. He is an 'out-of-himself' person through whom Wanjina 'becomes a painting'. The image does not come into being in just any suitably blank-or flat-walled cave. The site is quite specific. It has its own 'energy'; is part of a larger story mosaic in which it (the cave) represents the location of an action involving many relationships, human and non-human, here and not here, now and not now, all of which are reflected into being as Wunggud in the world in the form of an image. 'Images with energies ...' (Bell 91)

Ochres are collected from specific sites that are themselves a story and an action involving humans and non-humans; the ochre's are therefore also animate – blood (red ochre), 'possum piss' (yellow ochre), (white ochre). Painting implements are crafted from spinifex, sticks, glues, feathers, sinew, many materials each of which has its own story in the big picture. Ochres are ground in rock holes and combined with an adhesive, and thinned with local Wunggud water (also part of the Wanjina's story). Specific songs to invoke power and 'energies' are sung during this process, until the painting process is exhausted.

Here is a relational epistemology in which being and non-being are co-present sources and expressions of knowledge. In Ngarinyin ontology everything exists in relationship with everything else in a system or pattern of living they call wunan. Wunan is *in* and *of* the image of Wunggud, a system of 'radical relativity constituted by relationship, present in reality as relatedness'. 'Everything here for you in wunan.' Note that Ngarinyin do not use the expression, 'the wunan'. They use 'wunan' (and 'Wunggud') without the definite article as though to invoke its livingness as a dynamic power or energetic, something with movement and volition, like wind, breath, water, rain, cloud. (Ingold's point) Similarly, there is no distinction between the realities, existence, and experience, of the physical, non-physical and metaphysical domains.

From 'inside' this ontology, the (all-inclusive) world is in constant dynamic action, yet conforms to observable and applicable rules, or Law. Knowledge of 'the Law' derives from observation, imitation, and revelation in dream and out-of-self experience. When Ngarinyin want to apply knowledge to social circumstance, they 'read the country'. Through the physical senses – sight, sound, smell, touch and taste – and the intuitive senses, they 'read' the patterns of behaviours of and within, a mob of kangaroos, a hive of bees or ants, snake, goanna, scorpion or centipede, tree, spider web, wind, water, fire, rock, Milky Way, comet, (definite articles deliberately omitted). They 'know' that certain patterns, possibly all patterns, repeat themselves through 'everything standing up alive'. Behavioural patterns in the Milky Way are evident in the earth, and are therefore energetically connected in mutual reflectivity. In the same way, certain animal behaviours are adopted or manifested in human behaviours, for example male territoriality and marking territory with smell. Micro-patterns are reflective of macro patterns.