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Jukurpa: The Dreaming or Dreamtime



'They talk about rainbow serpent — snakes — in Dreamtime they were human. They would travel around the countryside making songs and stories where the water is.'

### What is Jukurrpa?

Jukurrpa is that concept referred to in English as the Dreaming or Dreamtime. It refers to the time of creation but also transcends time as we know it. During the Jukurrpa, ancestral beings, both animal and human, moved across the country creating land features, plants and animals; performing ceremonies, singing, marrying and fighting. Their journeys crisscrossed the desert and left lines of travel that marked their activities. At the end of their journeys ancestral beings returned to the earth, where they often still reside. Places where the ancestral beings returned to the earth, such as hills, rocks, waterholes and salt lakes, are special/sacred sites and hold great power. Some beings left the earth to take their place among the stars. But where they were part of significant events at various places throughout the Western Desert, these places are also sacred.

During their journeys the ancestral beings established the moral, practical and spiritual laws that govern all things. The tracks that crisscrossed the physical world of the desert also formed the basis of an intricate network of stories or 'songlines' that contain the laws and rituals on which desert society is based.

These Dreaming lines also articulate the territorial bounds of the Country they cross. These boundaries demarcate the exclusive territories of language groups, and crossing them without the cultural approval of custodians is a contravention that can result in death.

Central to this law is the role humans play in both the maintenance of law and the maintenance of Country. Knowledge of these laws is held collectively by initiated senior people and is often shared by members of several groups. Some of it is restricted and can only be known by those to whom it belongs, and often the knowledge is fragmented with different parts being held by different people. For example, senior men hold men's secret/sacred law and senior women hold women's secret/sacred law. Other stories may be sacred but can be shared as they are laws everyone needs to follow.

Jukurrpa is also a concept that relates to each individual. It links people to place and provides people with identity and responsibilities towards the place that is part of their Dreaming. When a child is born it is believed to have an association with the ancestral realm. Sometimes this association is symbolised by a 'totem', which could be an animal, plant or physical feature. The 'totem' is an expression of personal ties to Jukurrpa. As children grew, learning about the Jukurrpa was as much a part of daily life as learning to locate water and find food. Learning respect for places of significance, how to look after sacred sites and perform rituals, and how to maintain a relationship with the spiritual and natural world, was an essential part of growing up in the Western Desert. It is just as important today.

Jukurrpa is a lens through which the Aboriginal people of the Western Desert view their world. It encodes the cooperative triangle of ancestral beings, Country and people in social and personal terms.

'After the Dreaming' was (is) an idea that would have been (is) not only irrelevant but unthinkable.

### How does Jukurrpa relate to places in the Western Desert?

#### Jila

- 1 *In living water there is a quiet snake. Sometimes he rises up, but we sing him down. Sometimes he can travel and bring rain.*

Jarran Jan Billycan, 2007

In the Great Sandy Desert permanent springs are 'living waters' known as *jila*. Some are the resting places of powerful ancestral beings and the stories of these sites are recorded in songs and dances across the desert country.

- 2 The ancestral snakes that inhabit *jila* are also called *jila* and *kalpurtu*. In the creation time of the Jukurrpa *jila* were men who made rain, shaped the features of the land and introduced law and rituals associated with rainmaking to this Country. When the *jila* men finished their journeys they entered the *jila* waters and transformed into snakes. *Jila* sites are of great importance and must be treated with great respect. People do not camp close to the *jila* but keep a respectful distance. Men must ceremonially clean the *jila* before women can approach. People then approach the *jila* with care and respect.



1 *Kiriwirri*, 2008, by Jan Billycan, Yulparija Artists, National Museum of Australia



2 *Nyilangkurr*, 2007, by Donald Moko, Yulparija Artists, National Museum of Australia

*When we go in different area people show us, 'This is the main jila [spring], or even jumu [soak]. At night that people gotta sing that song and tell you that story, how that place been come, and then you're in the picture. You can't just go anywhere, we gotta wait for people to show.*

**Joe Brown, 2008**

### **The story of Kurtal**

*A big rain came. After the rain, grasses started to grow. From the grass Kurtal turned into a man.*

*Kurtal travelled to Jintirripil, a jila near the sea, who asked him to stay for good. Tricking him, Kurtal agreed. Jintirripil told Kurtal to find Paliyarra jila, who had stolen his sacred objects.*

*Paliyarra knew that Kurtal had come to steal back Jintirripil's objects. He told Kurtal he didn't have them, but Kurtal could see the lightning flashing inside him. Paliyarra set his dogs onto Kurtal. Badly bitten, Kurtal tripped over Paliyarra, who spilled the objects on the ground. Kurtal kicked them towards his jila.*

*Kurtal stole more objects from other jila, then went to visit his friend Kaningarra. Kaningarra asked Kurtal to stay with him there forever. Tricking him, Kurtal agreed, saying, 'You lie down over there and I'll lie down here'. Kaningarra went into the ground, turning into a snake, and Kurtal took off for his Country.*

*Getting weak, Kurtal crawled inside his waterhole with all his stolen objects and turned into a snake.*

3

*That's the song Kurtal wanyjurla wanyjurla we sing. He sent up a kutukutu [rain-bearing cloud] like the ones I made at Kurtal.*

**Ngilpirr Spider Snell, 2007**

Ngilpirr Spider Snell is the senior custodian of Kurtal *jila* and its songs and dances. In the 1940s he left the desert to work on cattle stations but he is still intimately connected to the place that gives him his power.

*I am jila. I am one of his lightnings.*

**Ngilpirr Spider Snell, 2007**

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### **The story of Jarntu**

Many Jukurpa stories relate to sacred sites. One such site is Jarntu or Well 35 along the Canning Stock Route. Jarntu is a place so sacred that its true name (Kinyu) should only be used by people with close ties to the ancestral being that gives it its common name — Jarntu.

Jarntu is the ancestral mother dingo whose puppies inhabit the surrounding rockholes and soak waters, which are linked by a network of underground tunnels. Jarntu has healing powers, but she is also a fierce protector of her home and people. Aboriginal people enter the site ritually and with great respect, sweeping the ground with branches, announcing strangers and leaving food for Jarntu. Jarntu returns this generosity by ensuring successful hunting for her Countrymen and by protecting them from danger.

Like many sites in this country Jarntu is simultaneously an ancestral being, a story and a place.

*Jarntu is like a guide dog for the old people, a protector. It's the belly button of the Country. Right in the middle. The Canning Stock Route cut the body in half. Jarntu is like the veins of the body.*

**Morika Biljabu, 2008**

### **Kumpupirntily**

Kumpupirntily is a vast dry salt lake known in English as Lake Disappointment. Kumpupirntily is a place to be avoided as it is the home of cannibal beings known as the Ngayurnangalku (the name means 'will eat me'). They look like people except for large fangs and long curved fingernails. They live under the lake in their own world with a sun that never sets. If people come too close to the lake they catch them with their long fingernails and eat them.



3 Spider Snell dances on the Ngurra canvas, 1997



4 *Punmu*, 2008, by Mary Meribida, Yulparija Artists



5 **Kumpupirntily Cannibal Story**, 2008, by Yunkurra Billy Atkins, Martumili Artists



6 **Minyipuru**, 2007, by Muni Rita Simpson, Rosie Williams, Dulcie Gibbs, Martumili Artists

(front image) **Kunkun**, 2008, by Nora Nangapa, Nora Wompi, Bugai Whylouter and Kumpaya Girgaba, Martumili Artists, National Museum of Australia.

Although it is entitled *Kunkun*, there are 57 named sites in this painting, 11 of which are stock route wells. Many of these places are where ancestral beings left their power.

### 5 The cannibal Jukurrpa

In the Jukurrpa, when Ngayurnangalku (cannibal beings) were living all over the desert, they came together for a big meeting at Kumpupirntily (Lake Disappointment), and debated whether or not they should stop eating people. Jeffrey James continues the story:

*That night there was a baby born. They asked, 'Are we going to stop eating the people?' And they said, 'Yes, we going to stop,' and they asked the baby, newborn baby, and she said, 'No'. The little kid said, 'No, we can still carry on and continue eating peoples', but this mob said, 'No, we're not going to touch'.*

Jeffrey James, 2007

Following the baby, one group continued to be cannibals, dividing the Ngayurnangalku forever into 'good' and 'bad'. The bad people remained at Kumpupirntily, but the good were kept safe by ancestral 'bodyguards' who became landforms around the lake.

*The bodyguards were saving all the people. Sandhill in the middle of the lake separates good people and bad people.*

Jeffrey James, 2007

### 6 Minyipuru Jukurrpa (the Seven Sisters story)

In Aboriginal cultures across Australia, and in other cultures around the world, the Pleiades star cluster is associated with the story of the Seven Sisters.

Minyipuru Jukurrpa is the Martu version of this story. The Minyipuru began their journey from Roebourne as a big group of sisters and their mothers. At various places along the way, they lost members of their party until eventually only seven sisters remained. At Kalypa (Well 23) the Minyipuru met a group of Jukurrpa men; it was the first time either group had seen members of the opposite sex. The men tried to grab the women, but the Minyipuru chased them, hitting them with their digging sticks and leaving them lying there.

At Pangkapini the sisters met Yurla, an old man who had followed them from Roebourne. Yurla grabbed one of the women at Pangkapini, but her sisters tricked him and managed to rescue her. At another site further east, he tried to catch five of the sisters, but again they escaped, flying on to Marapinti.

Many of the sites on the Seven Sisters' journey through this country are now wells on the Canning Stock Route.

*Poor old fella, he had a rough time. He was trying and trying and trying.*

Jugarda Dulcie Gibbs, 2007

In Aboriginal communities today cultural knowledge is still owned collectively. Senior custodians for particular sites and rituals may be the keepers of sacred knowledge, but cultural decisions must be collectively negotiated. Young people defer to elders in all matters of culture and law, learning from them the stories and songs that are the basis of their world view.

*They know everything. They know the bush life. They got this knowledge. They know the Dreaming and boundaries, everything. They lived that life.*

Hayley Atkins, 2009

### Questions and activities to share with your students

1. Jukurrpa refers to important events that happened in the distant past but also to things that are important to Aboriginal people today. Discuss with students how this relates to their own religious beliefs.
2. Why are the journeys of the ancestors important to people today?
3. The creatures who inhabit Lake Disappointment are dangerous so people stay away. Why do you think this story is important for Aboriginal people to know?
4. The story of the Seven Sisters is told in many cultures. Have students do an internet search to see how many different versions of the story they can find.
5. Why do you think it is important that the old people pass these stories on to younger people?