

How koalas lost their tails*

David Unaipon†

I

Aboriginal folklore

Perhaps someday Australian writers will use Aboriginal myths and weave literature from them, the same as other writers have done with the Roman, Greek, Norse, and Arthurian legends. If there is anything in the scientific theory that our Aboriginals are descendants of the Dravidians (a very ancient Indian race)¹ then Aboriginal folklore may be among the oldest in the world.

The Aboriginals are great storytellers. The *mooncumbulli* (the wise old man) telling the story puts in every detail. He acts and dramatises every incident with gesture, with changed intonations he leads his hearers from point to point in the story. A little simple legend told to the tribe under primitive conditions would take all the evening to relate. The Aboriginals have a myth connected with nearly all the constellations and bright stars in the heavens.

* These lightly edited pieces are drawn from David Unaipon's original typescript in the State Library of New South Wales, 'Volume 2: Typescript of *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines* by David Unaipon, 1924-1925'. This work is under copyright and is reproduced with the permission of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, and courtesy of the copyright-holder, Ms Judy Kropinyeri. For the full published work, see David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, eds. Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker (Carlton: Miegunyah, 2006).

† David Unaipon (1872-1967) was a leading Ngarrindjeri thinker, inventor, preacher, and a pioneering Aboriginal writer in English. He was educated at the Point McLeay Mission School. He lived in South Australia, Australia.

Nearly all the tribes scattered about Australia have traditions of their flight from a land in the nor²-west, beyond the sea, into Australia. That land may probably be the ancient continent of Lemuria.² The traditions also relate that the Aborigines were driven into Australia by a plague of fierce ants, or by a prehistoric race as fierce and as innumerable as ants. Like the Israelites, the Aborigines seem to have had a Moses, a lawgiver, a leader, who guided them in their Exodus from Lemuria. His name is Ngurunderi.³

This mythological being, who now lives in the heavens, gave the Aborigines their tribal laws and customs, Aboriginal myths, legends, and stories were told to laughing and open-eyed children centuries before our present-day European culture began. These stories stand today as a link between the dawn of the world and our latest civilisation.

II

Belief of the Aborigine in a Great Spirit

The belief in a Supreme Being and in religious instruction, as well as religious ceremonies and worship, are not the experiences of the Jew and Muslim alone. Neither did it belong to one particular age or place, but it is universal and belongs to every age. This wonderful experience of a longing for something beautiful and noble, something spiritually Divine, lives within the bosom of the nations of the past as it does today.

Wonderful is the soul of man. A capacity for the Great Spirit of the Eternal God. Go back into those ancient civilisations and review the wonders. Those sensational discoveries in the valley of the Nile or in the jungles of Indochina, or let your mind be carried away to far-off Peru or Yucatan, or think of the grandeur that once was Rome's, the glories that once belonged to Greece. Amongst these ruins are monuments and fragments of magnificent temples erected to their gods. These are evidence that man is a worshipping creature irrespective of colour, language, or climate. The only difference is that a nation's conception of the Great Spirit alters its form of worship.

Synkrētīc

The Jews have their synagogue, where they find delight and satisfaction in the offering of sacrifice and the singing of psalms to God Jehovah. The Muslims have their mosque, where they love to bow in reverent attitude praying to Allah, their God, and to Muhammad the prophet. The Christian churches of today, churches of various denominations, have people worshipping, some within humble buildings, some worshipping in beautiful churches and cathedrals with towers and spires, artistic windows, decorated ceilings and walls, sculptured pulpits, altars, and fonts, with the genius of a Raphael and Michelangelo—as it was in the past, so it is today. People in every clime still bowing and worshipping their gods, material gods hewn and fashioned in rock and clay and wood. God’s animals, birds, and reptiles, these they believe possess the spirit of the Deity.

Not so with the Aborigines of Australia. We build no place of worship, neither do we erect altars for the offering of sacrifice, but, notwithstanding this lack of religious ceremonies, we believe in a Great Spirit and the Son of the Great Spirit. There arose among the Aborigines a great teacher, Ngurunderi; he was an elect of the Great Spirit. And he spoke to our forefathers thus:

‘Children, there is a Great Spirit above whose dwelling-place is Wyerriwarr. It is His will that you should know Him as Hyarrinumb; I am the Whole Spirit and ye are part of the whole, I am your Provider and Protector. It has been my pleasure to give you the privilege to sojourn awhile in the flesh state to fulfil my great plan. Remember (*porun*) children (*wukone illawin*) your life is like unto a day, and during this short period on earth you are to educate yourself by your conduct to yourself as a part of Myself and your conduct to others, with the knowledge that they are part of Myself. Live as children of your Great Father. *Nol kal undutch me wee*, control your appetites and desires. Remember, never allow yourself to become slaves to your appetite or desire, never allow your mind to suffer pain or fear, lest you become selfish, and selfishness causes misery to yourself, your wife and children and relations, and those with whom you come into contact. Selfishness is not of the Great Spirit. Cultivate everything good, moderation in food and pleasure,

be generous to others, develop a healthy state of mind and body. Body and mind ought to be governed by good and pure morals with kindness for others, remembering that they are a part of that Great Spirit from whence you came.'

This knowledge develops the soul, which is a part of the Whole Spirit, to a state fit to become a companion to the Great Spirit. To this end, the little boys and girls are placed in the hands of the elders with their wives to be educated. The children's first education is the control of their appetites. During this training, they travel from one hunting-ground to another for years.

The children endeavour day by day to control their appetites. They do this by their moderation in taking food and their conduct to those who may be weaker in body or mind, and their moral behaviour to either sex. The children also submit themselves to the test of whether they are able to control pain. The first test may be the knocking out of their front teeth by a blow from a stone axe, and the cutting of their bodies with flint knives and the sprinkling of ashes into the wound (ashes burned from a particular shrub or tree) which intensifies the pain, yet also has a healing effect.

They lie upon live fire coal or stones heated red-hot for a moment. Youths submit themselves to having their beards plucked like you would a dead fowl or turkey, or to sitting in a bull-ants' bed. All kinds of cruel methods are adopted to test and train the children to experience what pain is like and how to control it.

There are stages of inflicting great pain every day, and the mind and body develop accordingly. The last training is that of the control of fear. Night after night, men are selected to make up some terrible story of great and ugly monsters. Monsters like the mythological Bunyip and the Muldarpi, a demon that disguises itself in all kinds of forms like a kangaroo, wombat, or waterfowl to trap the hunter, or a butterfly with beautiful colouring such as children like to capture. And at night, during a thunderstorm they relate ghost stories, and the children sit and listen. After the story, the elder will lead them to their camp selected during the day.

'Children you are to sleep in the burying ground of your forefathers.' They spend the night in the cemetery, and at sunrise present

Synkrētic

themselves to the elder, showing no sign of a disturbed night. By this act, they prove to the elder the control of fear.

Then, on a particular day, all members of the tribe meet upon a sacred spot set aside for the purpose, and an elder, in the presence of the congregation, will declare that the boys and girls are men and women. And all men of the congregation stand, and the female portion will sit with head bowed, the men alone with faces turned and with spear and nulla⁴ pointing to the setting sun shout, ‘*Kay kay!*’ meaning:

‘Well done children, you have already fought the battle of life and have conquered. Manhood and womanhood is complete in you. The Great Spirit is pleased. He is now awaiting your presence in Wyerriwarr, the Home of the Spirits.’

III

The voice of the Great Spirit

It is interesting to learn how all races of men have wrestled with the problem of good and evil. The Australian Aboriginals have a greater and deeper sense of morality and religion than is generally known. From a very early age, the mothers and the old men of the tribe instruct the children by means of tales and stories. This is one of the many stories that is handed down from generation to generation by my people.

In the beginning, the Great Spirit used to speak directly every day to his people. The tribe could not see the Great Spirit, but they could hear his voice, and they used to assemble early every morning to hear him. Gradually, however, the tribe grew weary of listening to the Great Spirit and they said one to the other: ‘Oh, I am tired of this listening to a voice. I cannot see whom it belongs to. So, let us go and enjoy ourselves by making our own corroborrees.’²⁵

The Great Spirit was grieved when he heard all this, so he sent his servant Ngurunderi to call all the tribes together again once more. ‘The Great Spirit will not speak again to you, but he wishes to give you a sign,’ said Ngurunderi. So, all the tribes came to the

meeting. When everyone was seated on the ground, Ngurunderi asked them all to be very silent.

Suddenly a terrific rending noise was heard. Now, Ngurunderi had so placed all the tribes that the meeting was being held around a large gumtree. The tribes looked and saw this huge tree being slowly split open by some invisible force. Also, down out of the sky came an enormous *thalung* (tongue), which disappeared into the middle of the gumtree, and then the tree closed up again.

Ngurunderi said to the tribes: 'You may go away now to your hunting and corroborrees.'

Away went the tribes to enjoy themselves. After a long time, some of them began to grow weary of pleasure, and longed to hear again the Great Spirit. So, some of them asked Ngurunderi if he would call upon the Great Spirit to speak to them again.

Ngurunderi answered: 'No, the Great Spirit will never speak to you again.'

The tribes went to the sacred burial grounds to ask the dead to help them, but, of course, the dead did not answer. Then they asked the great Nebalee (the same as the English Nebulæ), who lives in the Milky Way, if he would help them, but there was still no answer, and the tribes at last cried aloud. They began to fear that they would never get in touch with the Great Spirit again.

The tribes finally appealed to Wyyungguree, the wise old black-fellow who lives in the South Cross. He told them to gather about the big gumtree again. When all were there, Wyyungguree asked: 'Did you not see the *thalung* go into this tree?' 'Yes,' answered the tribes.

'Well,' said Wyyungguree, 'take that as a sign that the *thalung* of the Great Spirit is in all things.'

Thus it is today that the Aboriginals know that the Great Spirit is in all things and speaks through every form of Nature. *Thalung* speaks through the voice of the wind; he rides on the storm; he speaks out from the thunder. *Thalung* is everywhere, and manifests through the colour of the bush, the birds, the flowers, the fish, the streams. In fact, in everything that the Aboriginal sees, hears, tastes, smells, and feels there is *Thalung*.

IV

Nhung e umpie

Human nature is the same in the Australian Aboriginal as it is in the white, brown, or yellow man irrespective of nationality, language, and religion.

We may presume that it makes no difference if we go back to distant ages, to earlier periods the evidence of which our ancestors have placed on record. We find there, in the remains of ancient civilisation of the great Nineveh, Greece, Rome, and Egypt, great walls and fortune as a defence against the enemy who attempted to invade their cities. Writing and carving clearly demonstrate this point; it was an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.

Now, amidst the rising and falling of King and Emperor, there arose mighty men who caught a higher inspiration and were filled with knowledge and wisdom. They endeavoured to raise their people to lofty ideals and to instil into the hearts and minds of their respective races a spirit of brotherhood and good will. Now, it is not necessary for me to mention those noble and inspired characters of every age.

The Buddha, Muhammad, and Christ, these men have established religions and teachings to knit the bond of the race in love and sympathy. The question arises: Have these religions and teachings fulfilled all conditions for the benefit of the human race? Now, each nation may accept and follow the teachings of a Buddha, a Muhammad, and Christ. Each was a great man in his time and their influences are felt, and they are with us, today.

Now, there arose among my people a man who claimed to be (as others did) also sent by God with a message and teaching and we speak of him as Ngurunderi. He was a sacred man who—like all Prophets, Teachers, and Philosophers—found that he was confronted by a great social problem of his race. How was he to overcome the vile nature of the human race? Spears, nulla-nullas, boomerangs, pointing sticks, and bone witchcraft could not allay this cankerous disease.

Now, as if inspired, Ngurunderi instituted the custom of *nhung e umpie*.⁶ Now, *Nhung e umpie* is a portion of the navel cord at birth from mother and child. Now, the gut or intestine is treated in a way that preserves it, for it is kept for a considerable time, then placed within a roll of Emu feathers, and then wound round with fibre from the bark of the tree or mallee.⁷ This makes it safe and transferable from one hunting ground to another, and when it is sent on a long mission as a bond of friendship.

Now, it is only the privilege of a certain female member of the tribe to be selected to give the gut. She must be the daughter of a mother who also was selected for a navel gut. These mothers must come from a direct line of noble womanhood, being of good and pure moral character. She submits the gut to a *mooncumbulli*, that is to the Philosopher of the tribe, and it remains in his possession until he sees fit or thinks it proper to present it to a tribe.

But supposing there were a break in the line of these women, then the woman who is the next of kin on the mother's side would take up this great and important position. This is a coveted position among the women, with each girl, when they are educated to become good, striving for this position. No one knows that, from some one of them, a selection will be made.

I would like to call your attention to the Christian faith. In Luke 1:42, one of the Gospels, you will find these words: 'Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.' In Luke 1:46-48, 'Mary said, My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed.'

Now, the gut or part of the intestine linking mother and child has a great significance to us. We look upon it as coming from that part of a woman within which dwell all good wishes of pity and sympathy.

There are two parts embodied in this one gut. First, that of the well-trained moral of perfect womanhood, which is recognised with a great deal of reverence. Secondly, there is that portion of the children's innocence and purity which offers itself for a great

Synkrētic

development of life. Through challenges, it shows itself capable of developing to prove it rightfully inherited its mother's qualities. Thirdly, the navel cord is symbolic of a string that binds the peculiarities of mother to child. As a mother and child are linked to each other before birth, so the *nhung e umpie* must be linked as mother and child.

The navel cord is a physical reality so *nhung e umpie* should be so: true love, true fellowship, true pity. Let this symbol so bind you. Now, we look upon the navel cord with reverence, just as the Christian reveres the house of God, its fount, Altar and Sacrament. It is an all-powerful custom that can bind any two tribes in a bond of good fellowship and brotherhood. Distance makes no difference to whether it is conveyed and submitted to a tribe. It is accepted with honour. It is a law in itself.

V

How Teddy lost his tail

Once upon a time, long long ago, before the animal, bird, reptile, and insect life came to Australia, they occupied the many islands that existed in the ocean Karramia, a place of the beginning of day, where all is peace and rest. The Kangaroo tribe lived upon one island, the Eagle-Hawk tribe upon another, the Iguana tribe upon another.

Now, upon one beautiful island with high and lofty mountain peaks, reaching into the sky and with deep valleys clothed with great, giant gumtrees, there lived the Teddy Bear⁸ with his tribe. The Teddy Bears were a wise and intelligent tribe. The elders would take the young Teddy Bears up into the mountains and instruct them in the knowledge of astronomy. One night, as they were gazing into the sky, their attention was drawn to a streak of light away in the south.

'That is strange,' said the elder of the tribe, staring at the light in the south. Then he looked to the north and saw another light shining against the northern sky. Night after night, the elders of the Bear tribe would climb to the mountain top to hold consultation as to the

source of this mysterious light that appeared at intervals during the night. The elder of the tribe, a venerable old bear, eventually felt convinced that he had arrived at a solution of the mystery, and he said:

‘Children, tomorrow, just as day breaks, let every man bear, woman bear, and child bear gather and carry to yonder mountain a bundle of sticks. This must be done for seven sun risings.’

So, every bear able to work began the tedious labour of carrying sticks to the mountain top. On the evening of the seventh rising sun, everything was in readiness. The great Philosopher Bear gave instructions that all the bears should attend and watch, and they all congregated on the mountain where the sticks were stacked. Then the Philosopher with another elder of the tribe sat upon the mountain to watch the result. At sunset everyone was awaiting instructions.

Presently the small voice pierced the air: ‘Fire the wood heap.’

They began rubbing the sticks together until they kindled a spark and the wood heap was set ablaze. It made a huge bonfire, and the flames leapt up lighting the darkness for miles around and across the sea.

The Elder Bear, who was sitting gazing intently through the darkness, saw answering flashes around the horizon, north, south, east, and west.

‘The problem is solved,’ said the Philosopher Bear. ‘We shall discuss it further tomorrow.’

Next morning, all the bears rose early and sat around in orderly groups on ledges of rocks, on boughs of trees, and in every available place, awaiting the arrival of the Philosopher Bear. Then they started to chatter among themselves, and their voices gradually grew louder. One of their number seeing the Philosopher approaching, shouted: ‘Order!’ The Elder took his place among them and began to address them. There was an instant silence, as they strained their ears to hear what he was about to say.

‘Children,’ he said, ‘there are other lands like ours all around us, which are occupied by strange and queer people I am not able to describe, as I have never seen them; but I do say that there are other

Synkrētic

forms of life. Prepare your canoes, north, south, east and west, and scour the oceans and bring me information.'

The male bears dragged their canoes into the water and set out on their voyage of discovery. They paddled for a long time until they eventually landed in beautiful new countries, and they went about among the new tribes, noticing their customs and the kind of people they were, and when they had learned all they could of them they returned to the Elder. Each explorer told his story, one describing the kangaroo, one the emu, and another the iguana, the platypus, the eagle-hawk, the lyrebird, and so forth. And very wonderful the descriptions sounded to the people who had never seen any land but their own.

After a week, the Elder gave instructions to build many, many canoes, saying: 'We will paddle our way to the great new country.'

All the male bears set to work making canoes, some making as many as a dozen. At last, they were completed and they paddled across the sea till they reached Australia. The landing-place was at Shoalhaven. After they had lived in Australia for some time, wandering away into the Blue Mountains, and up and down the Paramatta, Hawkesbury, Hunter, and the great Murray Rivers, they thought it would be nice to ask the kangaroos, the emus, the eagle-hawks, the iguanas, and all the animal, bird, reptile and insect tribes to come down and share this wonderful country. So, once more, they set out in their canoes and brought them back with them, distributing to them various parts of Australia.

When they returned to their home at Shoalhaven, they met with stormy weather and paddled through the angry surf, their canoes being so tossed about that every bear fell out of the canoes and had to swim ashore. The hungry sharks followed them and bit their tails off, and that accident completely subdued the adventurous spirit of the Teddy Bears.

Notes

These notes are provided by Synkretic to clarify references and other details of interest.

- 1 The popular 19th century Dravidian Theory according to which Aboriginal Australians descended from this Indian tribe has been debunked. However, recent genetic and linguistic research supports the claim that Dravidian people migrated to Australia 4,000 years ago. Kumud Merani, 'The Story Untold - The links between Australian Aboriginal and Indian tribes, *SBS Hindi*, 10 July 2019, available at: <<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/audio/the-story-untold-the-links-between-australian-aboriginal-and-indian-tribes>>.
- 2 *Lemuria*, a hypothetical lost continent in the Indian Ocean, was popularised by theosophical and occult writers.
- 3 *Ngurunderi* (Unaipon writes *Narrundari*, also written *Ngarrinderi*) likely refers to one of the Ngarrindjeri people's Dreaming heroes who carried out great feats, including creating the River Murray by chasing a cod out of a stream.
- 4 A *nulla* (from *nulla-nulla*, also *waddy*, and *boondi*) is an Aboriginal Australian hardwood club or hunting stick.
- 5 *Corroborree* (from the Dharug language *garaabara*) refers to varied meetings involving Australian Aboriginal people.
- 6 *Nhung e umpie* is spelled *ngia-ngiampe* in modern texts.
- 7 *mallee* is a term, widely used in southern Australia, to describe shrubs or trees growing from an underground lignotuber. This growth habit is observed in *Eucalyptus* trees as a defence against fire.
- 8 *Teddy Bear* is Unaipon's term for the koala (*Phascolarctos cinereus*), which did once have an external tail, now lost.