

INTERVIEW

The legendary David Unaipon's tale

*Stephen Muecke**

Professor Muecke, you have researched Aboriginal storytelling since the 1970s and still write on it in your latest book.¹ What drew you to this field?

Back then, narratology was a trending field. And, after reading Tzvetan Todorov, Roland Barthes, Milman Parry and Albert Lord, I became interested in both narrative structure and the formulæ of oral composition.

I had heard the Aboriginal Elder Paddy Roe tell stories about his fieldwork around Broome, North-West Australia. I'd later have the enormous pleasure and privilege of doing further work with him.²

Aboriginal literature written in English was burgeoning at the time, and the idea of Aboriginal oral storytelling *as literature* was unheard of. Further to that, my training in sociolinguistics made it clear to me that non-standard varieties of language were just as valid and poetic as “the Queen's English”.

Your book *Ancient & Modern* (2004) is one of the top Google results for “Aboriginal philosophy”. In it, you parody the idea that Aboriginal thinkers need to be as detached as Western scholars to be true philosophers.³ This made me think of the time Socrates'

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wife emptied a chamber pot on his head to snap him out of a daydream.⁴ Is Aboriginal thought about action?

Yes, I think there is a Western tradition fixated on cognition and interiority, as in the brain and the soul. But Aboriginal thought is externally oriented and, as you say, pragmatic. It has to be if it is to be situated in specific places, relating to multiple ontologies, and articulated with kinship.

If, as Aboriginal thinkers assert, Country is alive and specific places have power, then I think I am right to say that people *attend to* these powerful life forces. People don't have mastery over Country, its laws, and Dreamings.⁵ Country will guide them. In this sense, Country is philosophising as well.

Aboriginal Dreamings point to a world rich in ontologies. Dreamings are as real as a snake, a tree, or a song.

Finally, kinship is reciprocal, situated, tying human beings to specific kinds of animals and plants, and to the wider seasons and patterns of this world.

Children learn their kinship rights and obligations from a young age, and much time is spent discussing this complex system. Intergenerational and multispecies kinship could be said to be a central topic in Aboriginal philosophy.

Ngarrindjeri man David Ngunaitponi (Unaipon), who is depicted on Australia's \$50 bill, may be the first Aboriginal person to be called a philosopher.* Praised as a polymath, Leonardo-like, a Renaissance Man, some meant by this that an Aboriginal philosopher was 'a contradiction in human terms'.⁶ Unaipon must have had a thick skin to write when he did.

Yes, he must have had amazing resilience and energy to be doing that intellectual work back in the 1920s, buffeted on all sides by en-

* See David Unaipon, 'How koalas lost their tails', *Syncretic* №1 (Feb. 2022): 133-144.

Synkrētic

trenched racisms, and condescension at best. I was attracted by the fact that this first great Aboriginal scholar was neglected.

I was interested in the emergence of Aboriginal literature in English, whose beginnings people often associate with Kath Walker (Oodgeroo), Jack Davis and Colin Johnson (Mudrooroo) writing in the 1960s. So, I was amazed by what Unaipon had done forty years earlier.

His personal qualities are unfortunately more elusive. His would-be biographers have come up against a scant archive. Hopefully his letters will be discovered some day.

Curiously, philosophers feature as protagonists in some of Unaipon's tales.* Was he using terms like "philosopher" to explain Aboriginal concepts?

Analogy is the key rhetorical term for him. I think his writings, lectures, and scientific demonstrations were performances designed to convince a sceptical audience that his people were "as good as" white people.

Because he used this trope, his writings about his own people weren't anthropologically realistic. The social sciences were in their infancy at the time and his was an insider account. He drew on whatever he could from his wide readings.

In one story,† Unaipon shows young Indigenous people having their flesh mortified as a rite of passage. This was also practised by the Stoics, Cynics, Buddhists, Hindus, and Christians. These traditions also share the idea that philosophy is a thing you physically *do*. Is Aboriginal thought like that?

I think you're right. The idea that knowledge comes as easily as reading books and remembering some of their content seems like a weak version of knowledge acquisition.

* See 'How Teddy lost his tail', 141-143.

† See 'Belief of the Aborigine in a Great Spirit', 134-137.

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But when it comes to being initiated into knowledge, with the marks literally inscribed on one's body, and the knowledge becoming inalienable and repeatable, there is clearly an epistemological price to pay.

There may be something like this pain in the process of writing a PhD, but we moderns tend to downplay the ritual aspects of this transformation process—even though we dress in mediæval gowns for graduation ceremonies.

Right. I hadn't made the connection between ritual and learning before.

Pierre Hadot's *Philosophy as a Way of Life* speaks to this idea.⁷ In my reading, a ritual substratum also runs through the Western Judæo-Christian tradition. But it has been suppressed by the emphasis on the rational individual and on cognitivism.

Pragmatism is also evident, I think, in Aboriginal traditions, where learning by example is stressed. A boy follows his mother's brother in the pre-initiation journey. Rather than pestering him with questions, he learns to attend to what he does and how he does it.

Logos is perhaps not central to this tradition.

Western philosophy is often called a series of footnotes to Plato.⁸ That's interesting when you consider that Plato wrote stories and myth. Is that to say that the European philosophical tradition, too, is rooted in myth?

This would be true for certain kinds of Western philosophical schools, those that read Michel Serres for instance.⁹ Or those who agree with Wittgenstein that 'an entire mythology is stored within our language.'¹⁰ I am sympathetic to this line of enquiry. I think it is richly poetic and describes the cosmos better than logical-symbolic formulæ ever will.

It's also true of Aboriginal traditions, in which storytelling facilitates intergenerational knowledge transfer. "Yarning"¹¹ is also a way to form a collective consensus. Stories can also illustrate traditional laws using myth.

Unaipon was the first Australian Aboriginal to write a book, publish it in English, research perpetual motion, design a helicopter, and invent mechanical sheep shears. But his biography is also a litany of injustices, among them that others profited from his shears. Most egregiously, until 2001, W. Ramsay Smith was credited as the author of a book actually written by Unaipon. How did this happen?

My co-author Adam and I recount the whole story in our introduction to *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*.¹² Very briefly, Unaipon was contracted to write the book but, when it was nearly finished, he missed a telegram relating to it.

The opportunistic Ramsay Smith intervened and secured the rights. Smith was the kind of guy who trafficked human remains back to England, so stealing Unaipon's IP would not have given him pause.

But we have to consider the historical context. An Aboriginal author in 1929 would have been an amazingly progressive move for a publisher, even though Unaipon had already published a few pamphlets.

The story of how Unaipon's rights were restored is incredible. I understand that you and your colleague Adam Shoemaker achieved this by re-editing *Legendary Tales*, and publishing it in David Unaipon's name for the first time. How did this happen, and how did it feel to right such a great wrong?

Well, we knew that the Mitchell Library in Sydney held the original manuscript. From there, it was only a matter of restoring it.

We collaborated with his descendant, Harold Kropinyeri, and met some of the other members of his family. We called our introduction 'Repatriating the Story' to symbolise the reversal of what Ramsay Smith had done.

And we made an occasion of it, bringing the book back and handing it over at a launching event at the Art Gallery of South

Australia. That felt good, as did the privilege of publishing with the prestigious Miegunyah imprint at Melbourne University Publishing.

In *Legendary Tales*, Unaipon looks forward to the day when 'Australian writers will use Aboriginal myths and weave literature from them,' just as they cite Græco-Roman myths.* There's a sad irony to this: the gift of his culture was stolen from his open hands. But his words are so full of hope.

Unaipon, like Paddy Roe, lived into his mid-nineties. These men saw massive changes, with their cultures taken to the brink of destruction, surrounded by insensitive invaders who treated their disappearance as inevitable. How could they have had any hope, one has to wonder.

Both men realised that white and black would have to live together, and Unaipon was a Christian who used writing and performance to forge a syncretic future for his culture. He avoided confrontation, seeking higher accomplishments in science, literature, and philosophy.

Are we getting close to realising Unaipon's vision for Australian culture?

No, Aboriginal myths have not yet displaced Græco-Roman ones in Australia.

I think we first have to get around monotheism to restore what the Græco-Roman and the Aboriginal share: the *paganism* of multiple spirits, with one for all significant landscape features like the winds, water, and home.

The singular god is too mobile and destructive, while spirits have to be respected and cared for in their places.

Unaipon says the Water Spirit 'is the most multiple Spirit of all,' and that 'Everything that exists has some life apart from itself.'¹³ These are profound ecological insights that have nothing to do with Christian thought.

Gems like these are scattered throughout Unaipon's work.

* See 'Aboriginal folklore', 133-134.

Notes

- 1 Stephen Muecke and Paddy Roe, *The Children's Country: Creation of a Goolarabooloo Future in North-West Australia* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2021).
- 2 Paddy Roe (c.1912-2001), also known as Lulu, was an Aboriginal Elder of the Goolarabooloo people, told the stories which Stephen Muecke transcribed in their ground-breaking collaboration, which was first published in 1983. See Paddy Roe, *Gularabulu: Stories from the West Kimberley*, ed. Stephen Muecke (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2016).
- 3 Stephen Muecke, *Ancient & Modern: Time, Culture and Indigenous Philosophy* (Sydney: NSW University Press, 2004), 111.
- 4 Diogenes Laërtius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, transl. Robert Drew Hicks (1929), Loeb Classical Library edition, Volume 1, published 1925, section 2.36-37.
- 5 *The Dreaming* or *Dreamtime* is a core concept in traditional Aboriginal cultures, one whose content varies across groups. R.M. Berndt defines it as a symbiotic view of life that places 'human beings within a preordained scheme or patterning symbolising a three-sided relationship between mythic beings, nature and people. Each was dependent on the others.' Cited in E.A. O'Keefe, 'Towards an Understanding of the Significance of "The Dreamtime" to Aboriginal People', *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education*, Vol. 12, Issue 4 (September 1984): 50.
- 6 Barry Judd, Rachel Standfield, Katherine Ellinghaus, 'Unaipon: Behind the Da Vinci Comparisons', *Pursuit*, available at: <<https://pursuit.unimelb.edu.au/articles/unaipon-behind-the-da-vinci-comparisons>>.
- 7 See Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault*, ed. Arnold Davidson, transl. Michael Chase (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 1995).
- 8 Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1969), 39.
- 9 French philosopher Michel Serres (1930-2019) described mythological figures like angels and Hermes as metaphorical concepts for communication. Michel Serres, *Angels, a Modern Myth* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995).
- 10 Duncan Richter, *Historical Dictionary of Wittgenstein's Philosophy* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2014), 145.
- 11 "To yarn", "to have a yarn", "to be yarning with" is an expression associated with Aboriginal English and rural Australians. It can mean to casually converse with a group, to have an intimate conversation with someone, or, especially in the Aboriginal context, to purposively strengthen social connections by telling and sharing stories.
- 12 David Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, eds. Stephen Muecke and Adam Shoemaker (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2001).
- 13 Unaipon, *Legendary Tales of the Australian Aborigines*, 53.