

## Bahloo the moon\*

*Peter Hippai, Hippitha,  
Matah, Barahgurrie, Beemunny,<sup>†</sup>  
Katie Langloh Parker,<sup>‡</sup> Jane Singleton<sup>§</sup>*

### I. Bahloo the moon, and the *daens*\*\*

Bahloo the moon looked down at the earth one night, when his light was shining quite brightly, to see if anyone was moving. When the earth people were all asleep was the time he chose for playing with his three dogs. He called them dogs, but the earth people called them snakes, the death adder, the black snake, and the tiger snake. As he looked down onto the earth, with his three dogs beside him, Bahloo saw about a dozen *daens*,<sup>1</sup> or black fellows, crossing a creek.

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\* These oral history accounts were collected and published in K. Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales: Folklore of the Noongabburrahs as told to the Piccaninnies* (Melbourne: D. Nutt, 1896). This work is in the public domain.

† Peter Hippai (c. 1835-1904) was a Yuwaalaraay Senior Law Man of the Noongabburrah or Narran tribe and stockman whom Katie Langloh Parker cites as an oral history source. Hippitha, Matah, Barahgurrie, and Beemunny, also from the same area near the Narran River which crosses Australia's Queensland-New South Wales border, are also sources.

‡ Katie Langloh Parker (1856-1940) was a South Australian writer and ethnographer. She notated the Yuwaalaraay language and oral history while living on Bangate Station near Goodooga, New South Wales, Australia.

§ Jane Singleton is a journalist who worked at the *ABC*, *The Age*, *The Financial Times*, and *The Economist*. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Melbourne and has taught journalism. She lives in Sydney, Australia.

\*\* Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, 8-11.

He called to them saying, 'Stop, I want you to carry my dogs across that creek.' But the black fellows, though they liked Bahloo well, did not like his dogs, for sometimes when he had brought these dogs to play on the earth, they had bitten not only the earth dogs but their masters; and the poison left by the bites had killed those bitten. So, the black fellows said, 'No, Bahloo, we are too frightened; your dogs might bite us. They are not like our dogs, whose bite would not kill us.'

Bahloo said, 'If you do what I ask you, when you die you shall come to life again, not die and stay always where you are put when you are dead. See this piece of bark. I throw it into the water.' And he threw a piece of bark into the creek. 'See it comes to the top again and floats. That is what would happen to you if you would do what I ask you: first under when you die, then up again at once. If you will not take my dogs over, you foolish *daens*, you will die like this,' and he threw a stone into the creek, which sank to the bottom. 'You will be like that stone, never rise again, *Wombah daens!*'

But the black fellows said, 'We cannot do it, Bahloo. We are too frightened of your dogs.'

'I will come down and carry them over myself to show you that they are quite safe and harmless.' And down he came, the black snake coiled round one arm, the tiger snake round the other, and the death adder on his shoulder, coiled towards his neck. He carried them over. When he had crossed the creek he picked up a big stone, and he threw it into the water, saying, 'Now, you cowardly *daens*, you would not do what I, Bahloo, asked you to do, and so forever you have lost the chance of rising again after you die. You will just stay where you are put, like that stone does under the water, and grow, as it does, to be part of the earth. If you had done what I asked you, you could have died as often as I die, and have come to life as often as I come to life. But now you will only be black fellows while you live, and bones when you are dead.'

Bahloo looked so cross, and the three snakes hissed so fiercely, that the black fellows were very glad to see them disappear from their sight behind the trees. The black fellows had always been frightened of Bahloo's dogs, and now they hated them, and they

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said, 'If we could get them away from Bahloo we would kill them.' And thenceforth, whenever they saw a snake alone they killed it. But Bahloo only sent more, for he said, 'As long as there are black fellows there shall be snakes to remind them that they would not do what I asked them.'

### II. Mooregoo the mopoke, and Bahloo the moon\*

Mooregoo the mopoke<sup>2</sup> had been camped away by himself for a long time. While alone he had made a great number of boomerangs, nullah-nullahs,<sup>3</sup> spears, neilahmans,<sup>4</sup> and opossum rugs. Well had he carved the weapons with the teeth of opossums, and brightly had he painted the inside of the rugs with coloured designs, and strongly had he sewn them with the sinews of opossums, threaded in the needle made of the little bone taken from the leg of an emu. As Mooregoo looked at his work he was proud of all he had done.

One night Bahloo the moon came to his camp, and said: 'Lend me one of your opossum rugs.'

'No. I lend not my rugs.'

'Then give me one.'

'No, I give not my rugs.'

Looking round, Bahloo saw the beautifully carved weapons, so he said, 'Then give me, Mooregoo, some of your weapons.'

'No, I give, never, what I have made, to another.'

Again Bahloo said, 'The night is cold. Lend me a rug.'

'I have spoken,' said Mooregoo. 'I never lend my rugs.'

Bahloo said no more, but went away, cut some bark and made a *dardurr*<sup>5</sup> for himself. When it was finished and he safely housed in it, down came the rain in torrents. And it rained without ceasing until the whole country was flooded. Mooregoo was drowned. His weapons floated about and drifted apart, and his rugs rotted in the water.

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\* Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*, 68-69.

### III. How Bahloo warns of rain\*

It is to the legend of ‘Mooregoo the mopoke, and Bahloo the moon’ that we owe a black fellow’s reason for a halo round the moon. Ever since the storm in that legend when Bahloo built himself a *dardurr*, he has done so before rain. Seeing a halo the Blacks say, ‘Bahloo has built his *dardurr*, there will be rain.’

### IV. How Bahloo warns of frost†

I learnt that when the sun, as it sometimes does in summer, goes down like a fiery red ball, it is the reflection of wattle gum on it that makes it so bright. After such a sunset, if [the Noongahburrah tribe] go out for gum, they are certain to find quantities; they say. The gum they melt in water, making it into a half liquid jelly which they eat with relish, and which they say has great strengthening properties. [They say] that when the moon looks very yellow after it has risen on a winter’s evening, it is a sign of frost. ‘The Meamei<sup>6</sup> have told Bahloo they will send frost tonight. He is going to keep himself warm; look at his bright fire,’ they say.

### V. An excerpt from Jane Singleton, *What Katie Did*‡

Katie Langloh Parker was a white woman who notated the Aboriginal language Euahlayi<sup>7</sup> and collected the *Legends from the Noongabburrahs* in the later decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But her publication of the *Noongabburrah Legends* is controversial. There have been both critical and supportive critiques of her work, but little on the woman herself who accomplished something extraordinary as a 19<sup>th</sup> century squatter’s wife in the outback.

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\* Langloh Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1898), xv.

† Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales*, xii.

‡ Jane Singleton, *What Katie Did: How a white woman in remote Australia notated an Aboriginal language and legends in the 19<sup>th</sup> century* (2020).

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While there needs to be a thorough examination of each of the *Legends* Katie retold in her *Aboriginal Legendary Tales (Legends)* first published in 1896, and their successors, that is to be done by those with the authority, the cultural knowledges, and permissions to do so which I do not have. There needs to be a similar examination of her *The Euahlayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia (Study)* which was first published in 1905.

I shall not attempt to explain or interpret the content of the actual *Legends* she collected and published, or the *Study*, in any way or to comment myself on their content.

This is a story of a remarkable woman and how some of the descendants of those who lived on and around Bangate in north-western New South Wales and others with Euahlayi heritage, think of Katie and her work. With interest, with distress or as useful? It covers much of what has been written about her and her publications and further and importantly, whether those with the appropriate knowledges believe the *Legends* should have been published at all, as their publication may have broken sacred or esoteric law with catastrophic effect. It also looks at the ambivalence of Katie's description of Aborigines<sup>8</sup> as my 'darkie fiends', versus her understanding that she had settled on 'their land'.

Bangate Station was big. 215,000 acres (87,000 hectares) that included 38 kilometres of river frontage to the Narran River, which is doubled by the loop it took within the property. Despite the current drought there was still some water in it when I visited in July 2018 and the year before. In Katie's day it had invaluable Mitchell Grass pasture and in a good season was an excellent run. It still can be when the season is right.

Katie collected the *Legends* from the Noongahburrachs living on Bangate and working for she and Langloh. (Later she widened her work to other tribes further afield.) She was painstaking in her research and tested and retested her understanding of their language, Euahlayi. Her versions of the *Legends* were first published in 1896 as *Australian Legendary Tales*.

The 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century comments on the *Legends* were often dismissive. The actual legends were described as fairy tales

and even Andrew Lang, the well-known English folklorist cum anthropologist who was one of Katie's earliest supporters, described them as mostly 'Kinder Marchen': fairy tales, or, more specifically, children's fairy tales. 'Children will find here the Jungle Book, never before printed of black little boys and girls. And the grotesque names are just what children like'. Nevertheless, he wrote long introductions to *Aboriginal Legendary Tales* and *More Aboriginal Legendary Tales* and *The Euablayi Tribe: A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*. Katie, however, put folklore before children's tales. 'I have written my little book in the interests of folklore. I hope it will gain the attention of, and have some interest for children, Australian Children' (K. Langloh Parker, 1978).

Judith Johnston argues

that, while Katherine Langloh Parker gives way to pressure from the publisher and allows her work to go forward as designed primarily for the children's book market...the work had a far more scholarly focus. The very fact that her Preface first proposes her translation work as useful to the student and only subsequently of interest to children, indicates that for Parker this has been both an intellectual and a scientific process.<sup>9</sup>

An even more damaging put down than Lang's 'Kinder Marchen' was published in the widely read and prestigious *The Bulletin*. Critic A.G. Stephens wrote that the *Legends* have 'ethnologically little significance...seem to have been invented at a comparatively recent date'.<sup>10</sup> He suggested at the very worst that Katie may have confected them, and at the very least that the *Legends* were not ancient stories but recent and fed to a gullible white woman. Or that she was to be appeased as an inquisitor, however well-meaning, who held a position of power as employer, was white, and of the invader race.

Stephens dismissed her informants' culture as well as Katie's work, writing that 'the Noongahburrachs are evidently as happy in their thoughtlessness as all their kindred. The undoubted value of the collection is chiefly that of a literary curiosity ...the prattlings of our Australia's children, which even in their worthlessness must have charm for a parent'.<sup>11</sup>

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Katie firmly refuted this, writing: ‘A dark skin is certainly a mask to most people, and so those who have it are little known.’ She continued:

I can safely say that every idea in the *Legends* in my books is the idea of a real Black—I am very careful to get them as truly as I can. First I get an old, old Black to tell it in his own language (he probably has little English) I get a young one to tell it back to him in his language; he corrects what is wrong, then I get the other one to tell it to me in English. I write it down, read it, and tell it back again to the old fellow with the help of the medium, or though I have a fair grasp of their language, I would not, in a thing like this, trust to my knowledge entirely...<sup>12</sup>

John Strehlow, the grandson of Carl Strehlow and Frieda Keysser who were contemporaries of Katie’s,<sup>13</sup> more generously wrote of her work that ‘while Western thought was trying to push Australian Aborigines down the scale of humanity, Lang and Parker were pushing them up.’<sup>14</sup>

Although Lang’s fairy tale descriptor can now be seen as rather belittling of the *Legends* and of Katie’s work, it is true that fairy tales were a highly regarded literary mode in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Lang, a leader of the folklore movement and well connected to her first publisher, David Nutt, most likely helped her get the early books published.

Lang was much more generous in his comments about her *The Euahlayi Tribe* published in 1905 than about the *Legends*. ‘Mrs Parker’s new volume, I hope, will prove that she is a close scientific observer, who must be reckoned with by students. She has not scurried through the region occupied by her tribe, but has had them constantly under her eyes for a number of years’.<sup>15</sup> ‘Mrs Parker’s book,’ he continues, ‘appears to deserve a welcome from the few who care to study the ways of early men, “the pit whence we were dug”’. The Euahlayi are a sympathetic people, and have found a sympathetic chronicler.’

In correspondence three years after he provided the introductions he says, ‘It seems to me, from the account, that Mrs Langloh Parker’s method of acquiring information is [as] good as it can be’.<sup>16</sup>

Much of this correspondence centred on the nature of Baiame, the overarching spirit or god she described and whether Baiame was a response to Christian influence or one purely pre-Christian or traditional, as she contended. Baiame, she argued, ‘was a worshipful being revealed in the mysteries, long before missionaries came, as my informants aver.’<sup>17</sup>

‘Certainly, she writes elsewhere, ‘I have been fortunate enough in my experience of Blacks to have had to do with those free from mission taint.’<sup>18</sup> In the introduction to her *Study*, she writes that the ‘nearest missionary settlement was founded after we settled among the Euahlayi and was distant about one hundred miles (160 kilometres) at Brewarrina. None of my native informants had been at any time, to my knowledge, under the influence of missionaries.’<sup>19</sup>

No armchair expert herself, she was very critical of the species. She wrote with acerbity about ethnography and anthropology and their practitioners of the time.

I dare say little with an air of finality about black people; I have lived too much with them for that. To be positive, you should never spend more than six months in their neighbourhood; in fact, if you want to keep your anthropological ideas quite firm, it is safe to let the blacks remain in inland Australia, while you stay a few thousand miles away. Otherwise, your preconceived notions are almost sure to totter to their foundations; and nothing is more annoying than to have elaborately built-up, delightfully logical theories, played ninepins with by an old grey-beard of a black, who apparently objects to his beliefs being classified, docketed, and pigeon-holed, until he has had his say.<sup>20</sup>

Katie’s work was at the forefront of one of the key anthropological discussions between two of the best known ‘scientific’ anthropologists, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown and A.P. Elkin. She also engaged with the writings of Howitt, Spencer, Muller, Mathews, Henderson, N.W. Thomas and, in respect of religion, Ridley, Tylor, Gribble and more. Anthropologist A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, working later than Katie and 30 years younger, did venture to Bangate, and in a letter to the editor of *American Anthropologist* discusses her and Adolphus Elkin’s work. His trip is undated, but the letter appeared in the 1954 edition of that journal. He determined to compare Katie



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Langloh Parker, whom he said implied the existence of matrilineal local groups in her *Study* in 1905, with Elkin's and his own theories.

He rather ill-temperedly writes '...when I was investigating these tribes I made *a long and tiresome journey* to the Station where Mrs Parker had lived and was fortunate enough to find still there one of her chief informants, Helen and some other old members of the tribe...having spoken with Helen who remembered her [Katie] and others I have satisfied myself by the most careful enquiries from these persons that the local groups of Yualarai [Euahlayi/Y-uwaalaraay] were patrilineal...I am quite certain of the accuracy of my account of these tribes in spite of Elkin's doubts'.<sup>21</sup>

With not a hint of Radcliffe-Brown's churlishness, anthropologist R.H. Mathews wrote in *Science of Man* in 1898 that 'I cannot conclude this article without expressing my appreciation of the labours of Mrs K Langloh Parker...she deserves the thanks of all who are interested in the folklore of the Australian Aborigines.'<sup>22</sup>

Finally, it is worth comparing Katie's method with Mathews' description of another self-taught anthropologist collecting stories a little after Parker. Whereas the latter extracted his information with 'long and patient hammering',<sup>23</sup> Katie's method involved patient listening and telling, listening and retelling, again and again, until the genuine narrative was found and agreed upon.

## Notes

- 1 *Daen*: An early transcription of the Yuwaalaraay word *dhayn* that refers to an Aboriginal man or person.
- 2 *Mopoke*: The southern or Australian boobook (*Ninox boobook*) is a common owl known as a "mopoke" in Australia.
- 3 *Nulla* (from *nulla-nulla*, also waddy, and boondi): An Aboriginal Australian hardwood club or hunting stick.
- 4 *Neilabman* (from *yilaman*, also hielaman): An Australian Aboriginal shield made out of bark or wood.
- 5 *Dardurr*: A humpy or temporary shelter made using tree branches and leaves, bark, or grass.

- 6 *The Meamei*: A local Dreaming story of the Seven Sisters, the stars known in Greek mythology as the Pleiades.
- 7 *Euablayi* has a number of English spellings. “Euahlayi” is the spelling used by Katie Langloh Parker and the spelling used by Jane Singleton in *What Katie Did*. “Yuwaalaraay” and “Yuwaalaraay” are now also used commonly.
- 8 In Jane Singleton’s *What Katie Did*, Aboriginal people of the region are described as “Aborigines” when that is how they were described in the original texts.
- 9 Judith Johnston, ‘The Genesis and Commodification of Katie Langloh Parker’s *Australian Legendary Tales* 1896’, in *Association for Study of Australian Literature*, Issue 4 (2005): 159-172.
- 10 Alfred George Stephens, ‘The Red Page’, in *The Bulletin*, No. 17, 9 January 1897.
- 11 Stephens, ‘The Red Page’, 1897.
- 12 Katie Langloh Parker, *My bush book* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1982); and Katie Parker and Andrew Lang, ‘Australian Religion’, in *Folklore*, Vol. 10, Issue 4 (1899): 489-495.
- 13 Belinda McKay, ‘Writing from the Contact Zone: Fiction by Early Queensland Women’, in *Hecate*, Vol. 30, Issue 2 (2004): 53-70.
- 14 Erica Kaye Izett, ‘Breaking new ground: early Australian ethnography in colonial women’s writing’, PhD thesis, University of Western Australia, 2015, 333.
- 15 Katie Langloh Parker, *The Euablayi tribe: a study of Aboriginal life in Australia* (London: Archibald Constable, 1905), x.
- 16 Parker and Lang, ‘Australian Religion’, 489-495.
- 17 Parker, *The Euablayi tribe*, 5.
- 18 Parker, *My bush book*, 172.
- 19 Parker, *The Euablayi tribe*, 2.
- 20 Parker, *The Euablayi tribe*, 141.
- 21 A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, ‘Letter’, in *Anthropological Society of Washington*, Vol. 56 (1954).
- 22 R.H. Mathews, ‘Folklore of the Australian Aborigines’, in *Science of Man*, Vol. 1, Issue 71 (1898): 69-70; 91-93; 117-19; 142-43.
- 23 Mathews, ‘Folklore of the Australian Aborigines’.