

From “archaeo” to “ethno”.

Action research into Boorong astronomy over the last decade.



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ABSTRACT

Everything on the ground in Boorong country is also in the sky; the creatures, the people, the landscape, the stories and the beliefs of the people. The Boorong are now gone, their language no longer spoken and their culture unrecorded but for this unique astronomical fragment.

That this legacy can be revisited and analysed means that the Boorong will not be forgotten and their culture can be understood and respected today. The problem arises as to how best to return this knowledge to descendants of their neighbours and others whose culture is likewise destroyed, but who can find in the past some elements of their cultural inheritance.

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Just a little over a hundred and fifty years ago an Australian Aboriginal family at Lake Tyrell in northwest Victoria (Australia) told William Stanbridge, a newcomer from England, something of their stories relating to the night sky. Some forty stars, constellations and other celestial phenomena were named and located. Stanbridge later gave an address to the Philosophical Institute in Melbourne on this topic. After reading his account in the early 1990's I looked for these celestial phenomena, found them, and have tried to ascertain the way the Aboriginal clan the Boorong may have seen them.

There are no people who identify as Boorong descendants today and I am unable to find any oral history to corroborate my deductions. I was lucky, however, to find a partial reconstruction of their language and some useful ethnographic details written by a nineteenth century surveyor whose articles were published in scholarly journals in Australia, Europe, the UK and the USA; one hundred and seventy in all.



David Mowbrake lives in Derby, in the far north of Western Australia. He was born in Koroorey Victoria in 1928. A naturalist, whose passion for the bird life of his native Victoria, he has written and published, mainly in Victoria of Aboriginals, 1961. He was an early member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australian Council and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and is an Honorary Cultural Consultant of the WA Museum. David Mowbrake was Aboriginal of the Year 1990, and made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1995.



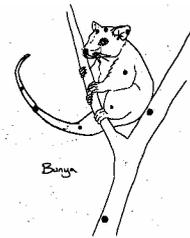
Jutta Makela, Sydney ethnographer, has travelled widely in the Pacific, incorporating Kula trading in the traditional Islands of PNG in 1976, and co-edited the book Aboriginals of Australia, 1982. She was the Kulinethy photographic project in 1983. She was the Aboriginal of the Year 1990. She has been a member of the Aboriginal Arts Board of the Australian Council and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and is an Honorary Cultural Consultant of the WA Museum. Jutta Makela was Aboriginal of the Year 1990, and made a Member of the Order of Australia in 1995.

I am also grateful to an Aboriginal elder and wise man from northwest Australia who explained that



"Everything under creation is represented in the soil and the stars. Everything has two witnesses, one on earth and one in the sky... Everything is represented in the ground and in the sky".

I realised then that even though the Boorong were no longer present and many creatures no longer lived in that country, it was possible to reconstruct some of their life on the ground by analysing what was in the sky. The four pages by William Stanbridge, unexamined for a century and a half, then became the source of great privilege and joy for me in finding the creatures and the people in the southern night sky. From my first revelation when I first saw the ring-tailed possum at the top of the Southern Cross, I realised how people could be excited by this discovery and I wondered how Aboriginal people would view the retrieval of this information.



I was also lucky that William Stanbridge was a keen observer, could name the European equivalents and wrote down these details as well as a cryptic explanation as to the meaning of each star or constellation. He wrote that the Boorong

"pride themselves upon knowing more of astronomy than any other tribe".

It is true to say that this part of northwest Victoria is more often than not a star-filled vista for most of the year. It is also true that the name for the lake in this locality is "Tyrrell", derived from the local Aboriginal word "direl" which means night sky or space. The lake has such reflective qualities that on a cloudless night with no moon or wind, to stand by the lake is like being in space with the stars above and the stars below, as reflected in the water.

It took a couple of years of searching to find most of the celestial panoply of the Boorong. There are still two items that elude me. As I had made an earlier study of anthropology it was not difficult to deduce some cultural meanings in these night sky images at the same time I was finding them. I have no way of verifying these deductions so my research is entirely hypothetical, though very satisfying all the same.

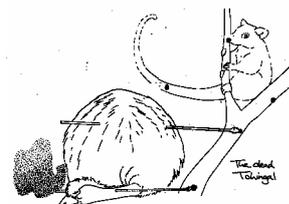
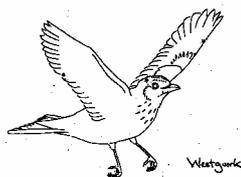
The invasion by the Anglos of that part of Australia, now called Victoria, was swift and decisive. The people were killed, diseased, removed or incarcerated at such a rate in the first two decades that by the mid 1850's there was absolutely no future for their several languages, their cultural memories and their identity. Today there is almost no written record of those ancient local Aboriginal cultures on which to base a substantive indigenous studies curriculum. There are volumes of information from Central or Northern Australia but virtually nothing in comparison in my home state. Thus the reconstruction of Stanbridge's memory of what the Boorong told him, is, I believe, an important artefact that is yet to be fully realised.

So, what is this legacy?

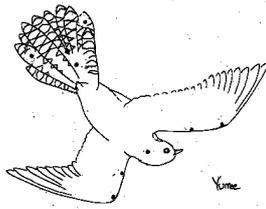
The first creature I saw was Bunya, a ring tailed possum that dropped his spears and climbed to the top of the tree (Crux) to escape the clutches of Tchingal, the man-eating giant emu. For his cowardice, Bunya is condemned to live forever in the treetops. Two heroic brothers Bram in α and β Centauri are called by War the crow (Canopus) to come and save the people. After a pursuit that lasts

several days over territory occupied by this language group, several key aspects of the landscape are created and the quarry is eventually cornered and finally killed by a young woman. The moral of the story is multiple:

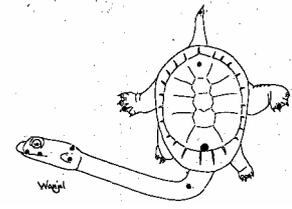
'Don't be a coward'; 'Follow the example of the heroic brothers coming to the aid of the harassed community'; 'Incorrect behaviour is excused as it contributes to the solution of a community problem'; and finally 'Eating people is wrong and punishable by death'.



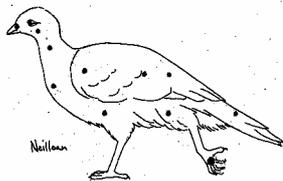
It has been observed that oral memory works effectively with heavy characters – persons whose deeds are monumental, memorable and very public. Colourless personalities don't survive.



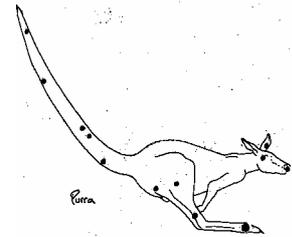
The anthropological term for the way the Boorong lived is hunter/gatherer. As well as the Brothers Bram there are two other hunters in the Boorong night sky and several other constellations who



remind us of the gathering function. The other hunters are Yurree and Wanjel who are based on Castor and Pollux. Yurree is a bird, the fan-tailed cuckoo; and Wanjel is the long-necked tortoise. Together they hunt Purra the red kangaroo, based on Capella. When we see the malleefowl Creator Being Neilloan, based on Lyra, we are reminded of the gathering function because

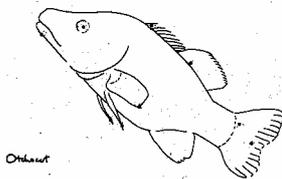
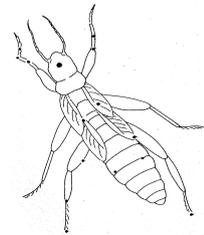


the malleefowl lays up to thirty eggs during the summer months; eggs that are mostly yolk, very tasty and highly nutritious.



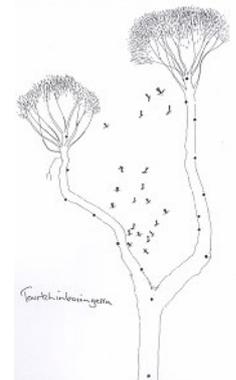
Aboriginal people made good use of this food resource.

Marpeankurrk, centred on Acturus, is the giant ant in the sky who tells the Boorong when to find the termite larvae. The 'bittur' is a valuable source of protein available at the time of the year when game is scarce.



Otchocut, the giant codfish, is included in this procession of food sources across the northern sky and is known to westerners as Delphinus.

When out hunting or gathering in the dry country, a precious water source may be found in the rotting fork of a tree where rainwater has collected. This water source is available when surface water has been entirely absorbed or evaporated. Coma Berenices represents a vertical fork of the tree and the smaller stars inside the fork are little birds flying around after insects that have bred in this reservoir. Tourtchinboingerra is the name given by the Boorong to this image of survival knowledge.



Knowledge transfer from generation to generation is also present in our northern sky and is a singularly important function in oral cultures. Painted bodies singing and dancing to percussive rhythms and oft repeated songs and chants provide the basic elements for memorising huge tracts of knowledge. The Pleiades for the Boorong is Larnankurrk, the young woman beating time on her rolled-up possum skin cloak. Alderbaran is the sighting star for Gellarlec, the song man, whose memory is so sure and who acts as choreographer and

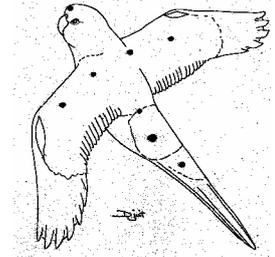


master of ceremonies. Two young men dance in the scabbard and belt of Orion, known to the Boorong as Kulkunbulla.



In Australian Aboriginal society, public knowledge is secular knowledge. Sacred knowledge is only for the initiated male or female. The Boorong would not have passed on anything secret or sacred to William Stanbridge. Of the twenty brightest stars in the sky, fifteen are evident in the Boorong pantheon. The other five do not figure. I have to assume that they were known and used but probably had secret significance.

Initiation is hinted at, however, through the constellation centred on Antares. This is Djuit, the red-rumped parrot. Djuit is the son of Marpeankurk and it is possible that the red colour and its positioning is a reference to blood and therefore to circumcision.

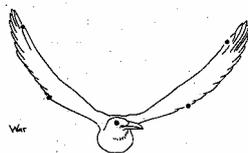
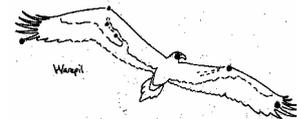


There are multiple references to kinship in the Boorong night sky. They include sexuality and lust, proper marriage and avoidance relationships, gender roles, husband and wife mutuality and longevity, and child rearing.



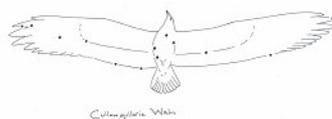
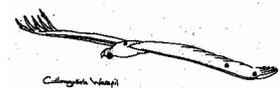
Canis Major Sigma is the eighteenth smallest star in Canis Major and here we find Unurganite, a small lizard with two wives; one of whom is lusted after by Mityan the moon. Unurganite behaves heroically in fighting off this sexually promiscuous predator and is given an honoured place in the Boorong celestial pantheon.

Interestingly, the brightest star in the sky, Sirius, is nearby and represents the largest bird on the Australian mainland – the wedge-tailed eagle, known to



the Boorong as Warepil. He is one of the senior elders of the Nurrumbunguttias, the Creator Beings. The smoke from their campfires is to be seen in Waring, the Milky Way. His brother is War the crow, based on Canopus, the second brightest star.

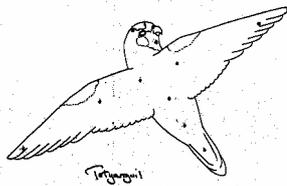
Both War and Warepil have their wives nearby. Warepil's wife is based on Rigel in Orion and War's wife is alongside him in Eta Carinae. At the time Stanbridge was



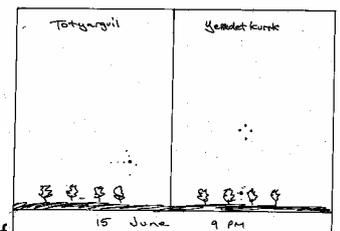
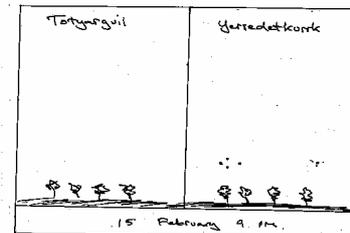
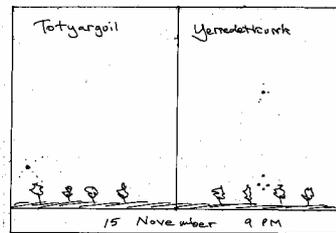
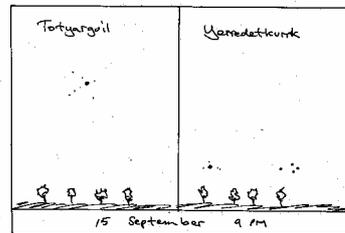
camping in the outback with the Boorong, Eta Carinae was much brighter and had a magnitude of -1 , as bright or brighter than her husband. Aboriginal women have a substantive place in the life of the family and the clan; they have their special places, their own rituals and their own secret knowledge. Men have their own specialist gender roles

and women have theirs. And just as eagle and crow mate for life, the expectation is the same for humans. Similarly, eagle and crow occupy defined territory, they rear only one child at a time and nurture it until it is old enough to fend for itself and find a partner of its own.

The last of the celestial aspects of kinship relates to proper marriage. In small populations of people it is very important that proper marriage is observed. Thus Yerredetkurrk, the totem for all women in southeast Australia, an attractive little owlet nightjar, demonstrates an avoidance relationship with the husband of her daughters. His name is Totyarguil and is based on Aquila in our northern sky, and is a mighty ancestral being who was responsible for the creation of the Murray River, Australia's largest waterway.



Yerredetkurrk is at the southern end of our sky based on Achernar. When she is high in the sky, Totyarguil is low. When he is high, she is down in the treetops. Thus their movement in the sky represents an age-old law of mother-in-law / son-in-law avoidance that prevents incestuous marriage and promotes genetic hygiene. The penalty for transgressing this law is death.



Carbon dates for human occupation in Boorong country are confirmed 28,000 and 35,000 years. This evidence, I believe, demonstrates the validity of this law. Were it not observed, the group would have died out thousands of years ago.

So much for the reconstructed anthropology and the astronomy of the Boorong. We are also asked to examine the role of the regional biophysical world. Each of these constellations represents a natural resource of significance to the people, and their passage across or around the sky often coincides with seasonal occurrences on the ground. I have created a chart that illustrates these correlations as they occur throughout the year.