

PART A.

CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN MYTHOLOGY

1. SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

Since religious concepts presuppose a belief in the existence of supernatural beings, let us first consider the nature of the latter in Central Australian mythology. Throughout the Aranda-speaking area it was generally believed that both the sky and the earth were eternal, and that each of them had its own set of supernatural beings. The Western Aranda believed the sky to be inhabited by an emu-footed Great Father, (*kn̄aritja*), who was also the Eternal Youth (*altj̄ra ṅđitja*). This Great Father had dog-footed wives, and many sons and daughters - all the males being emu-footed and all the females dog-footed. They lived on fruits and vegetable foods in an eternally green land, unaffected by droughts, through which the Milky Way flowed like a broad river; and the stars were their campfires. In this green land there were only trees, fruits, flowers, and birds; no game animals existed, and no meat was eaten. All of these sky dwellers were as ageless as the stars themselves, and death could not enter their home: the reddish-skinned emu-footed Great Father of the sky, whose

blonde hair shone "like a spider web in the evening sunlight", looked as young as his own sons, and all the women who lived above the stars had the grace and the full-bosomed beauty of young girls. C. Strehlow found a similar belief among the Kukatja (whom he calls Western Loritja) and Matuntara (whom he calls Southern Loritja), who had traditions about a Sky Being attended by a wife and a small child; and Gillen, before beginning his collaboration with Spencer, reported² that among the Aranda of his acquaintance "the sky is said to be inhabited by three persons - a gigantic man with an immense foot shaped like that of the emu, a woman, and a child who never develops beyond childhood". Since Gillen did no work among the Western Aranda, it seems as though the Eastern Aranda group of Alice Springs had a belief similar to that found among the Kukatja.

Although I have not recorded any traditions about emu-footed or dog-footed sky dwellers outside the Western Aranda territory, it is nevertheless true that everywhere in the Aranda-speaking area a firm belief was held that the power of death was limited to the earth, and that men had to die only because all connections had been severed between the sky and the earth. Traditions about broken "ladders" were found at many ceremonial sites. Among the Lower Southern Aranda, for instance, there was the story of the huge "casuarina" tree which had stood, at the beginning of time, at *Akār' Intjōta* in the Simpson Desert, and had touched the sky with its topmost branches. Another "casuarina" tree several miles away, which was leaning against it at a convenient angle, could have provided a suitable ladder for the human beings of later days to climb from the earth into the sky. But the tree had been chopped down by a party of *Ṭāṅka* Blood Avengers, and the bridge to unending life had thus been destroyed for ever. The Upper Southern Aranda myth which relates how the two *Ntjġkantja* Brothers, after pulling up the spear on which they had climbed into the sky, pronounced a death-curse³ upon all earth dwellers, has been quoted in "Aranda Traditions" (p.78). The Brothers then turned into the two Magellanic clouds.

These two *Ntjikantja* Brothers, like the sun, the moon, the Seven Sisters and the evening star, had once emerged from the earth and wandered about on its surface like all other earth-born totemic ancestors. But the totemic ancestors who remained on the earth after completing their labours finally grew old, returned into the ground, and sank back into everlasting sleep. Their fellows who rose into the sky, on the other hand, changed into ageless celestial bodies that knew neither decay nor death.

While these earth-born celestial bodies (like the rest of the totemic ancestors) continued to influence the fortunes of mankind, the original sky dwellers took no interest in anything that happened on the earth beneath them. Hence the true sky dwellers were not honoured in song or in ritual:⁴ men might look up at the sky with regret or with envy, but they placed neither their hopes nor their fears upon it. Only the earth mattered to them – and those celestial bodies that had once emerged from the earth.

It is clear that it would be impossible to regard the emu-footed Great Father in the sky of Western Aranda mythology as a supreme Being in any sense of this word; for neither he nor his family ever exerted any influence beyond the limits of the sky. As I have written in "The Songs of Central Australia":

They (i.e. these sky beings) had not created the earth, nor any of its landscape features, nor any of its plants and animals, nor any of its human inhabitants. They had not brought the totemic ancestors into being, nor had they controlled any of their actions. They had no power over winds, clouds, sicknesses, dangers, or death. They were not even interested in anything that went on below. If any crimes were committed, the evil-doers had to fear only the wrath of the totemic ancestors and the punishment of outraged human society.

But man, helplessly subject as he is to age, decay, and death, seems always to have felt the need to look

beyond his own meagre death-limited existence for some assurance that his life, unlike that of the animals, is not purely a matter of temporary physical existence in an uncertain world governed purely by blind chance, and that his purposive labours, unlike the largely reflex and instinctive actions of the animals, have some meaning and value even beyond his own death. One of the main purposes of religion everywhere has been to bring man into advantageous contact with supernatural Forces and Powers that are also immortal and eternal. The eternity motif may indeed be regarded as perhaps the most vital single element of the many that are blended together in any human religious system.⁵

2. LIFE ON EARTH

Nowhere were the links between human Time and changeless Eternity stronger in religious thought than in Central Australia; and, paradoxical though it may sound, it was the very *strength* of these links that explains the complete absence of formal prayers and sacrifices for the propitiation of deities that stood completely outside the world of humanity.

For an explanation of this statement in Australian terms, let us turn to the religious concepts and sacred ritual found in the Aranda-speaking area. In this area it was believed that the earth, like the sky, had always existed, and that the earth, like the sky, had always been the home of supernatural beings. At the beginning of time the earth had looked like a featureless, desolate plain. No mountain ranges, sandhills, swamps, or river courses existed on its barren surface. It was covered in eternal darkness, lit only dimly by the distant fires bordering the Milky Way; for the sun, the moon, and the Evening Star, too, were still slumbering under the earth's cold crust. No plants or animals could, of course, exist under such conditions; but a vague form of human life existed in the shape of semi-embryonic masses of

half-developed infants, all joined together in their hundreds, lying helplessly at places which were later revealed as saltlakes or great waterholes. These "infants" were not merely joined together in their hundreds: their hands and toes were also drawn together by webs, their eyes, mouths, and noses were closed, and they could not move any of their limbs. They could therefore not develop into individual men and women. But neither could they grow old, decay, or die. For if life in the accepted sense of this term was unknown on the surface of the world, so was death. Only below the surface of the earth did life already exist in its fulness, in the form of thousands of uncreated supernatural beings that had always existed; but even these were still slumbering in eternal sleep.

Time began when these supernatural beings awakened from their sleep. They broke through to the surface of the earth; and their "birthplaces" became the first sites on the earth to be impregnated with their life and power. The earth was flooded with light for the first time: for the sun too rose out of the ground and cast its warm rays over the night-cold earth. The supernatural beings that "had been born out of their own eternity" (*altjīraṇa ṇāmbakāla*) varied greatly in appearance. Some rose in animal shapes, resembling kangaroos, emus, and the like. Others emerged in human guise, looking like perfectly formed men and women. Both sexes were represented among them: for the female ancestresses already formed "a second sex" in their own right, and were not merely inferior, imperfect editions of the males. In most of these supernatural beings there was an indivisible linking between elements found in animals (or plants) on the one hand and in humans on the other. Those beings that looked like animals, for instance, generally thought and acted like humans; conversely, those in human form could change at will into the particular animal with which they were indivisibly linked. Only plant shapes were unknown in this assembly: since plants cannot move or speak, the ancestors and ancestresses linked with them were invariably visualized as being human in form. Their

food, however, consisted exclusively of the plants that formed their totem. Finally, there were a few sacred sites which had given birth to human-shaped supernatural beings that were linked with neither plants nor animals, though they were in all other respects the equals of the earth-born totemic ancestors.

After emerging from their eternal slumbering places, these supernatural beings, commonly labelled "totemic ancestors", moved about on the surface of the earth. Their actions and their wanderings brought into being all the physical features of the Central Australian landscape. Mountains, sandhills, swamps, plains, springs, and soakages, all arose to mark the deeds of the roving totemic ancestors and ancestresses. In the scores of thousands of square miles that constitute the Aranda-speaking area there was not a single striking physical feature which was not associated with an episode in one of the many sacred myths, or with a verse in one of the many sacred songs, in which aboriginal religious beliefs found their expression. The sacred songs were accepted as compositions by the supernatural personages themselves. Similarly, all ritual in which totemic ancestors were revealed in later times by their human reincarnations was believed to have been instituted by the supernatural personages honoured in them. Hence among the Aranda, the sacred songs sung on ceremonial occasions, the body decorations worn by the actors impersonating the totemic ancestors, and all sacred ritual, were regarded as eternal and unalterable.

At some birthplace centres large numbers of totemic personages were believed to have emerged from the soil: these were regarded as major ceremonial centres, and were spoken of as *pmāra kūtata*. ("everlasting homes"). Other birthplaces, whence only one or two personages had emerged, were normally ranked as minor sacred sites. Usually only a short set of verses and a small number of ceremonial acts were associated with the latter, and they were regarded in much the same way as the various

camping grounds where the travelling totemic ancestors had rested only temporarily. These minor sites were, naturally, much more numerous than the major *pmȧra kùtȧta* .

Some of the totemic ancestors assumed the functions of "culture heroes". Among the most important of these were the personages who first liberated the semi-embryonic masses of humanity into the fulness of life, and then taught the separated individuals the most important things necessary for their survival as mature men and women. C. Strehlow, also Spencer and Gillen, have related how some of the supernatural beings sliced massed humanity into individual infants, then slit the webs between their fingers and toes, and cut open their ears, eyes, and mouths. Other "culture heroes" taught men how to fashion spears and shields, how to make fire, and how to use it for cooking food. Numerous other non-sacred traditions existed about these "original" human beings;⁶ but few of them had any currency beyond the local group areas which formed their geographic setting. Moreover, their form was not fixed, since they were only non-sacred traditions. They had much the same force for the Western Aranda that the apocryphal writings have for orthodox Christians.

After the earth-born supernatural beings had accomplished their labours and completed their wanderings, overpowering weariness fell upon them. The tasks that they had performed had taxed their strength to the utmost. They had found the earth a barren and desolate land of darkness, and had turned it into a land of life and light by their supernatural creative powers. The world which had sprung up in their wake was that mythical Golden World about which their later human reincarnations were to dream ever afterwards. For the totemic ancestors were free from the multitude of inhibitions and frustrations that inevitably obstruct all human beings who are living together in organized communities. Nor were they accountable for their actions to any superior Power. For they were personages living in a world where the human notions of good and evil had but a shadowy

meaning: they wandered around "beyond the borders of good and evil", as it were. This must not be taken to mean that the world of the totemic ancestors was completely beyond the reach of all moral laws. The slaughter of the grim Eagle Brothers of *Alkúṭṭama* by the Mice Men, and the annihilation of the bloodthirsty and cannibalistic Bat Men of *Imānda* by a single honest champion who lived at *Aṭóṭa*, in the northern wastelands of the Simpson Desert, were only two of the myths which showed that even in a world where every totemic ancestor and ancestress could do what was right in his or her own eyes – a world upon which the great Emu-footed One looked down from the sky with complete and carefree indifference – there still existed some undefinable, nameless Force which was capable of bringing about the final downfall of even the most powerful supernatural beings that had believed themselves superior in strength to all possible opponents.

There was one further limitation to the might and power of these earth-born totemic ancestors: unlike the Sky Beings, they were subject to age and to decay. They could be hurt and wounded, and they knew the meaning of pain. But while they resembled mankind in their subjection to many of the ills of the flesh, they differed from it in one vital respect: they were immortal, and even those of them who had been "killed" by other totemic ancestors, still lived on in the form of *tjuruṅa*. All of them, however, in the end sank back into their first state of sleep (*börkerama*), and their bodies either vanished into the ground (often at the site where they had first emerged) or turned into rocks, trees, or *tjurunga* objects. The sites which marked their final resting places were, like their birthplaces, regarded as important sacred centres, and were called by the same name – *pmāra kúṭaṭa*. Both kinds of *pmāra kúṭaṭa* could be approached only by initiated men, and only on special ceremonial occasions. At all other times they were places that had to be avoided on pain of death. Before the final disappearance of the totemic ancestors from the surface of the earth, Death had been brought into the world by the acts of some of these supernatural

beings.⁷ The sun, the moon, and the rest of the earth-born celestial bodies now rose to the sky; and the world of labour, pain, and death that men and women have known ever since came into being.