SEASONS WITHOUT NAMES

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For some two hundred years, the seasons of the tropics seem to have remained nameless, except for the very broad terms of "wet" and "dry". The average population thinks of their seasons as not "proper". Misconceptions, misreading and disappointment seem to have been characteristics of white Australian culture and its relationship to the land. Even before Australia was "discovered", its existence was believed to be necessary to balance the existence of the three great land masses in the northern hemisphere: Europe, Asia and Africa. However, successive voyages of exploration restricted the area within which the Great South Land might be found. When its northern and western coasts were eventually explored by Dutch seamen in the seventeenth century, they were profoundly dismayed by the apparent lack of possibilities for mercantile exploitation. Captain Jan Carstensz's report is typical. Landing on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, he proclaimed: "In our judgement this is the most arid and barren region that could be found anywhere on earth".[1]

Disappointment was not exclusively a Dutch experience, as John Campbell's travel writing of the 1770s confirms:

> As there are in all Countries some Parts more pleasant than others, so there seems good reason to believe, that within two or three Degrees of the Tropic of Capricorn, which passes through the Midst of New Holland, is the most unwholesome and disagreeable Part of this Country.[2]

When Australia was colonised by the English, journals and illustrations were eagerly awaited in England. Many of the descriptions of the Great Southland were carefully matched to the expectations of the audience in the Northern Hemisphere. The early convict artist Joseph Lycett, twice convicted for forgery, made a regular living out of this type of publication. He had no problem reproducing just that type of image that he knew would be well received in the "old country". For more contemporary settlers, disappointment translated into an unwillingness to see the intrinsic qualities of the Great Southland. This is clearly noticeable in the diaries of Lucy Gray, a member of one of the early pioneer families in the Kennedy district, near Cardwell:

> But you in England could not imagine any kind of wooded country so utterly ugly. The trees were the ugliest kind of gum trees, tall and bare, with just a few leaves on top... If the trees were beech, the copses oak and hazel it would be lovely, but they are not, alas![3]

Misinterpretations also led to the wrong decisions. Pioneers taking up the Valley of Lagoons in North Queensland stated at first:

> the whole tableland is beautifully grassed, of great extent, well provided with water...this country is a pattern for sheep and cattle stations and the elevation of it renders it cool and fit for sheep.[4]

But the truth of the northern seasons did not support the fantasy of regular rain evoked by the greens. The lovely green grasses were unsuitable for stocking with sheep in the Burdekin area. Much money was lost in the experiment. "On this country after the wet season the spear grass matures, presenting its barbed seeds. The sheep become covered with spikes... [which causes their] death... sheep cannot profitably be grown in this country."[5]

Further unwillingness to accept the country for its own quality are evident in the activities of "Acclimatisation Societies". In an effort to change this continent into a replica of the old country, they busied themselves by introducing exotic species and sending native flora and fauna from place to place, as the rules of the NSW Society make clear:

> The objects of this Society shall be the introduction, acclimatisation, and domestication of all innocuous animals, birds, fishes, insects, and vegetables, whether useful or ornamental; the perfection, propagation, and hybridisation of races newly introduced or already domesticated; the spread of indigenous animals from parts of the colonies where they are known to localities where they are not known...[6]

This reveals an insensitivity to climatic conditions and an ignorance of the balance of nature, and many of the worst pests of today can be traced to the efforts of these societies. This ignorance has resulted in environmental degradation and the proliferation of rural crises in the short history of

Australia, with many people crying "drought" or "flood", even now, within the span of a single year:

> Australian settlers... were warned of the dangers of flooding posed by the volatile east coast rivers... Governor Lachlan Macquarie warned of the "dreadful inundations" that could ensue from such rivers. He criticised new settlers for their "wilful and wayward habit of placing their residences within the reach of the floods..." Yet today, seven generations later, Australians are still making the same mistakes, still wilfully and waywardly living in the path of future floods.[7]

The Townsville floods and the speedy adjournment of the Black River hut settlement in to the sea are the most recent in this chain of examples.

The greater implication, though, is spiritual. Nature is a constant reminder of forces greater than ourselves, and has been a source of awe as well as reassurance about the cycles of life and death. Due to urbanisation, all of humanity is loosing touch with the natural world, resulting in an alienation between humans and other living creatures and the " draining away of the numinous dimensions of the world".[8] It is also easier to exploit and destroy something we don't love or associate with the greater life force. We may just look, for contrast, at a text about this land from an Aboriginal source:

> I feel it ... my body same as you... Places for us, earth for us, star, moon tree, animal, no-matter what sort of a animal, bird or snake... all that animal same like us. Our friend that... This story e coming through you body, e go right down foot and head, fingernail and blood... through the heart.[9]

White culture did, and still does, know some sort of numinous connection with the natural world, expressed in literature, art and philosophy; but it is largely about the temperate zone of the northern hemisphere. Since ancient Greece, cultures of the northern hemisphere have found solace in the cycle of their seasons and the intelligible signs and cues of renewal. In Greek mythology, Hades, the God of the underworld, brought about the seasons by abducting Persephone, the daughter of Demeter, the corn goddess. Demeter's grief at the loss of her daughter caused the withering of plants and eventually their death: winter. When a bargain was struck with Hades to return Persephone to her mother for part of the year, Demeter decorated the earth with flowers, giving the world spring. She started to grieve again when her daughter departed in autumn. Thus we have four seasons sculpted around the way the cycle tends to work in those parts of the world!

Plotinus saw nature as a reflection of the intangible world of the Platonic "ideas". Plotinus' view is quite nature-friendly, seeing it as a manifestation of the divine. Likewise, Theophilus of Antioch reminded those who did not believe in the resurrection that God had placed signs "in the reach of Man in the realm of natural phenomena; the cycle of the seasons, of the days and the nights". It is perhaps the hallmark of a truly indigenous culture to have this connection with its land.

In ancient times, all over the world seasonal feasts were important events in the year: from the corroboree cycles of Australian aborigines to the Celtic solstice festivals. It was rightly observed that everything was subject to change and renewal. This is the basis of the Chinese *I Ching* or "Book of Changes", where change was seen as more typical of nature than permanence. In a discussion of culturally entrenched ways of expressing seasonality, Japanese Haiku poetry, with its requisite inclusion of a seasonal reference, cannot be left out. We may also remember the Northern Indian tradition of Ragamala painting, popular between the 17th and 19th centuries, inspired by poetry, music and the moods and colours of certain times of day and year.

Generally speaking, the manifestation of the cyclic return of new life gave people spiritual sustenance and "a feeling of oneness with the rest of creation, a belief in a vital force which linked all matter in a great rhythm of becoming."[10] I remember from my European childhood (even though I grew up in an urban environment) masses of common sayings associated with changes of seasons, and was surprised that none existed in North Queensland.

Townsville, the location of my project, is close to the Pacific nations, where people derive happiness, quality of life and a sense of belonging from their closeness to nature. Yet we, a patch of Western culture, seem to have lost that affective dimension, barricading ourselves in man-made boxes with artificially cooled air and interior decor that evokes different parts of the world, mainly England or Europe. Few people know much about the rudiments of the surrounding wildlife, the names of plants or animals. It is as if we do not belong here, as if we have just arrived and don't know our way around.

The facts of the tropical climate are as follows: unlike the temperate zones where there are two extremes per year – a mid-winter and a mid-summer – the sun in the tropics moves overhead twice; once on its way down to the nearest Tropic and once when it is on the way back to the other Tropic. The two times are roughly mid November and mid January.

This has various effects. For those expecting a more gradual coming and going of the source of warmth, the sudden increase in heat in November comes as a surprise, and people will complain, "It is really hot already, and it's not even Christmas yet!" On the 18th of November in 1996 (the day of the perpendicular position of the sun) the Townsville Bulletin's front page carried this headline: "Heatwave has North gasping for relief". Loaded language, as is "reeling under a five day heatwave"; "Queensland Ambulance Service officers urged people to take precautions"; and "families should check that elderly relatives had not locked themselves in overheated houses or flats", all emphasising that the natural phenomenon is seen as an unnatural state of tropical existence.

Given the inclination of the press to create sensation, this is still something of an over-reaction to what should be a widely known facet of this climate. Most people still work with a model that puts Christmas at the peak of something, in this case summer. But in fact, in Townsville the sun is somewhat off the vertical at Christmas. A similar surprise comes when the sun passes over during January, when the general comment is, "It is still so hot!". This effect is especially noticeable when there is a minimal wet season. Only the gradual movement of the sun towards the other side of the world leads to a proper "mid-winter", the time when the sun is furthest away, on the twenty-first of June.

Why have we no festivals to celebrate this double feast of light? Why do we not celebrate the mid-winter solstice? Why do we crave winter clothes at a time of year when going to the beach is pure pleasure? Several reasons spring to mind. A mobile population in the urban areas brings the "proper models" from temperate zones, and finds the reality wanting. Barrages of advertising preach fashions of heavy coats and cuddly woollies. There is no significant children's literature in the curriculum collection at James Cook University, one of the main educators of teachers in the North, that gives any information on the characteristics of tropical seasons.

But apart from these minor arguments, could there be overarching causes for this blind spot? There are two possibilities, which are related to name and number. What is in a name? Language, it is argued does more than describe reality. It actually defines it. Perhaps it is true that a lack of proper nomenclature and iconic images prevents any knowledge from becoming enculturated. Seasonal nomenclature was deemed a profound enough influence on cultural perception for the French to change the names of the months after their revolution.

What's in a number? The division in fours is entrenched in our culture, too. Not only do we speak of four seasons, but also of four temperaments, four ages, four elements, four winds, four directions, Four Rivers of Paradise, Four Evangelists, Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, etc. Whilst the waxing and waning of the life force in nature during the year remains a powerful metaphor for life and death, the division of the year into four is not necessarily natural, and remains a cultural construct. For example, in ancient Egypt three seasons were recognised, based on the flooding of the Nile. But North Queensland was not colonised by a culture with a history of rain-fed rivers and periodic drought.

It is interesting to compare the situation in North Queensland with that in the Northern Territory, where the Kunwinjku, traditional owners of the Kakadu National Park, divide the year into six seasons. Not all seasons are of equal size. Gudjewg stretches over January, February and March; Bang-gerreng is mainly March; most others span two months, but Gunumeleng embraces most of October, November and December. The cycle follows a pattern of heavy rain and violent storms, preceding a period of flowering and fruiting, a gradual drying out and cooling to a completely dry season. This is when burning off and food sources from the marine environment, such as turtle eggs, become vital. After this, there are patchy showers and mixed winds, a flat sea and a gradual increase of rain, heralding the proper arrival of the wet season.

Some of this knowledge is finding its way into Northern Territory white culture. A couple of years ago I was asked to design a mosaic for the Centre City Mall. I decided to make a progression of six seasons: a beginning, middle, and end of the Wet and the Dry. Information about birds, animals and plants was gathered from observation and by talking to naturalists.

But for me, the gradual change of colour of the landscape became the key. The crisp blue sky at the end of the wet cycle is entirely free of impurities, and gradually turns a dusty smoky pink as the landscape dries out and reveals its reds between the fading grass. Then there are the first storms and the building up of moisture and heat, the skies becoming a heavy and oppressive grey. The atmosphere is punctuated by the sound of the rainbird and the smell of ripening mangoes. The actual rain, if and when it comes, is quite cathartic, and the moist cycle is echoed in the night chorus of frogs and toads. The late wet cycle is a season of abundance: trees flower and fruit at the same time. Pond water is full of fish and birds. It is festival time, a time of renewal: the true spring! When I travelled to the Northern Territory some years later, I was pleased to see my vision to some extent confirmed by the Aboriginal view of the seasons.

To further facilitate a process of acculturation, I put an installation in the Regional Gallery which included six large fresco panels, which reflected my vision of the cycles expressed mainly in texture and colour. These were juxtaposed with a series of emblems which signified various cultural memories and elements. On the backs of these panels I projected sequences of 35 mm slides taken at the time of year relevant to he face of the panel, almost as though I was presenting evidence to support my case. The public was invited to suggest names and write comments by immersing themselves in the projection and write on the backs of those panels.

The whole gallery was circled by a frieze of 365 photographs, taken at the same time every day, of the hills outside my place. The comments were overwhelming. The photos convinced people more than anything, many hardy believing the differences conveyed by this systematic approach. Most people had held the view that nothing changed throughout the year and that it was always hot and dry.

Many people have since commented that it was because of this exhibition that they now notice the hills going pink, and the dark skies making the edges of the hills look light; the flowering of Umbrella trees against the grey: and the yellow grasses, and smoky sky in August. I have also recently heard the term No-shadow Day for those two dates that the sun passes overhead. My intention to produce a text which outlines the ideas at a popular level.

At a recent party someone said to me, "I've heard that the sun comes overhead twice; is that true?" I was delighted. Things had come full circle. To develop a sense of belonging, we must realise that we are here and not somewhere else; we must acknowledge Aboriginal cultural heritage and connect with our seasons. We need to link our sense of physical and spiritual renewal and well-being to the qualities of the seasons of the place we live in. Only then will we experience the "spirit of place".

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