

THE MYTH OF THE WAWILAK WOMEN

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A BLACK CIVILIZATION

THE MYTH OF THE WAWILAK WOMEN

A. THE COMING OF THE TWO SISTERS FROM THE SOUTHERN INTERIOR

1. The two sisters and their children leave the Wawilak country and start toward the sea, naming the animals and plants as they go; but before they leave they have incestuous relations with their clansmen from which a child is born later in the Wawilak country.

It was the time of Bauman (the mythological period) when Wongar men walked about and modern men had not yet appeared. Everything was different. Animals were like men then! Those two Wawilak sisters had come a long distance. They were coming from the far interior to the Arafura Sea. They had come from the far interior Kardao Kardao country. This is a clan territory of the Dua moiety. They had come from the land of the Wawilak people for Kardao Kardao is their country. The wirkul (a young woman who has not had a child) was pregnant.

The gungmun (a woman who has had a child; literally, “the giver”) carried her own baby under her arm in a paperbark “cradle.” It was a male child.

The two women carried stone spears and hawks’ down and bush cotton. On the way, they killed iguana, opossum, and bandicoot for their food. They also gathered some bush yams (ippa). When they killed the animals, they gave them the names they bear today; they did the same for the yam. They gathered all the plants and animals that are in the Murngin country today. They said to each thing they killed or gathered, ‘You will be maraiin by and by.’”

When the two sisters started their journey they talked Djaun, later Rainbarngo, and still later Djinba; then they talked Wawilak, and finally Liaalaomir. They named the country as they went along. In the Wawilak country they copulated with the Wawilak Wongar men. These men were Dua, and they were Dua. This was very wrong and asocial.

The two women stopped to rest, for the younger felt the child she was carrying move inside her. She knew her baby would soon be born.

“Yeppa [sister], I feel near my heart this baby turning,” she said. The older one said, “Then let us rest.”

They sat down, and the older sister put her hand on the abdomen of the younger sister and felt the child moving inside. She then massaged her younger sister, for she knew her labor pains had commenced. The baby was born there. It was Yiritja, for its mother was Dua. The country was still a part of the territory of the Wawilak clan.

After the child was born the older sister gathered more bush food, then the two moved on toward the sea. They stopped at various places and gave all of them names. They named all the clan territories and the localities within their borders. They first rested at Djirri Djirri (quail place), then at Wakngay (crow place), Dung Dunga (fish spear place), Tarbella (white oyster place), and Katatanga (falling meteor place). All these localities were Dua and were within the country of the Wawilak clan. Although the Wawilak sisters went to almost all the clans of the Dua moiety they never walked on the country of the Yiritja moiety.

“Come on, sister,” said the older, “we’ll go quickly now.” They drank water at the last place and hurried on.

2. The Flight of the food animals.

They did not stop until they sat down at the great Mirrimina (rock python’s back) water hole in the country of the Liaalaomir clan. It is in the bottom of this well in the deep subterranean waters below the upper waters that Yurlunggur, the great copper snake, or python totem of the Dua moiety, lives. They called the country for the first time Mirrimina.

The older sister took her fire drill and made a fire. She started cooking all the yams and other bush food that she had gathered and all the animals that they had killed on their journey.

“Sister, you cook my food for me, too,” said the younger one.

“Be patient,” said the older. She then gathered some paper bark and fashioned a bed for her younger sister’s newborn child. As she did this, she said, “By and by, sister, we must circumcise these two small sons of ours.”

“Yes, sister,” said the younger.

As soon as they cooked the food each animal and plant jumped out of the fire and ran to the Mirrimina water hole and jumped into it. They all went into this Djunguan and Gunabibi well. The crab ran in first. When he did this, the two women talked Liaalaomir for the first time; before this they had talked Wawilak. The other plants and animals followed the crab. The yams ran like men, as did the iguanas, frilled neck lizard, darpa, ovarku snake, rock python, sea gull, sea eagles, native companions and crocodiles.⁵ Each ran and dived into the clans’ totemic well and disappeared from sight.

B. THE PYTHON’S SACRED POOL IS PROFANED AND HE SWALLOWS THE WAWILAK WOMEN

3. The profanement of the pool.

The older woman went out to gather bark to make a bed for her sister’s baby after it was born. She walked over some of the water of the Mirrimina well. Her menstrual blood fell in the totem well and was carried down the sacred clan water hole, where Yurlunggur, the Big Father, lives.

4. Yurlunggur raises himself to swallow the women; the rain comes and the flood commences covering the earth.

When the menstrual blood dropped into the pool Yurlunggur smelled the odor of this pollution from where he was lying in the black water beneath the floor of the totem well. His head was lying quietly on the bottom of the pit. He raised his head and smelled again and again.

“Where does this blood come from?” he said. He opened the bottom of the well by throwing the stone which covers its base out of the well on to the land by the women’s camp. (This stone is near the camp today and can be seen by those who go there. “It is now a snake’s head.”) He crawled out slowly, like a snake does, from the well.

5. One of the Liaalaomir leaders of the Wawilak ceremonies gave me the following list of animals and plants named and collected by the Wawilak sisters: “When they came from the Roper River they named iguana, bandicoot, opossum, snake, honeybee, fish, fresh-water fish and salt-water fish, shark, jabiru, shore birds, yam, big yam and little yam, water lily, water, salt water, fresh-water turtle and salt-water turtle, fresh-water snake and salt-water snake, all the different kinds of clansmen, lizard, small rat, brush turkey, and all the animals and things they saw.” It was evident that he was attempting to make a definitive list of all the plants and animals, and that he was using as a memory device the names of the things he directed the chorus to sing in the various ceremonies of the Wawilak constellation.

When he came out he sucked some of the well water into his mouth. He spat it into the sky. Soon a cloud about the size of a man's hand appeared from nowhere in the center of the sky. As Yurlunggur slowly rose from out of the bottom of the pool the totemic well water rose too and flooded the earth. He pulled himself up on the stone which he had thrown, and laid his head there. He looked around him. He saw the women and their babies. Yurlunggur was older brother to these women, and they were sisters to him. Their children were his wakus, and he was gawel to them.

Yurlunggur continued to look at them. He hissed. This was to call out for rain. There was no cloud in the sky until then, but soon the two sisters saw a small, a very small, black cloud appear in the heavens. They did not see the great python lying there watching them.

The cloud grew larger and larger, and soon the rain came down. The Wawilak sisters hurriedly built a house to be ready for the rain. They named the forked sticks they used as uprights. The women went inside the house. They did not know where this rain had come from; they did not know that the older sister's menstrual blood had defiled the Mirrimina water hole and had made Yurlunggur angry.

The Wawilak women went to sleep, but the rain poured down harder and harder and awakened them.

5. The sisters sing the rituals to prevent the flood and the snake's swallowing them.

The gungmun said, "Sister, where does this rain come from? There's no cloud in the north or south, and there is no cloud in the east or west, but over us is this huge black cloud. I think something is wrong. I think something terrible is going to happen."

She got up and went outside. The younger one stayed within the house and sang. The gungmun beat the ground with her yam stick; she knew now that Yurlunggur was going to swallow her, and she wanted to stop the rain. She sang, "Yurlunggur, don't you come out and swallow us. We are good, and we are clean." While she sang she danced around the house. The two sisters then called out the taboo names of the Mirrimina well.

While the older sister sang and danced around the house, and the younger sister sang inside it to stop the rain from coming down and to drive the great cloud away, they were being surrounded by all the snakes in the land. The pythons, death adders, tree snakes, black snakes, tiger snakes, iguanas, the blue-tongued lizard, snails, caterpillars, and all the Dua snakes came up around them in a circle, for they had heard the call of their father, Yurlunggur. It was night and the women did not see them.

The gungmun first sang all the songs now sung in the general camp. After this she sang all the songs sung in the general camp during the Gunabibi. These are the less powerful songs. She did this first, for she thought they would stop the rain, but it did not stop. She was afraid of this rain, for it came out of a

cloud she could not understand, because this cloud had come from nowhere.

She sang then the taboo songs of the Djungguan – “Ah! Ah! Ah! Kak Ye!!!” She sang the songs when the subsection names are called out in the Djungguan. She took the Dua subsections first.

The young sister sang like the leader of the Djungguan ceremony does today. She kept time with singing sticks. She said, “We’ll turn to the Yiritja subsections now. We’ll call out the Yiritja peoples [subsections].”

They sang the garma songs first, for they are not “strong” and belong to the camp of the women. Then they sang the songs of the Marndiella, for it is only a little more powerful, and its songs only slightly more taboo. Then they sang Djungguan and Ulmark.

The rain continued and came down harder and harder. They decided that they must sing something even more powerful, more taboo, and deeper within the ceremonial camp of the men.

6. Yurlunggur swallows the women, and the earth is covered with a flood.

They sang Yurlunggur and menstrual blood. When Yurlunggur heard these words, he crawled into the camp of the two women and their two children. They had suddenly fallen into a deep sleep from his magic. He licked the women and children all over preparatory to swallowing them. He bit the noses of each and made the blood come. He swallowed the old woman first, the *wirkul* next, and the little boys last.

He waited for daylight. When dawn came he uncoiled and went out a short distance in the bush, because he was too near the water. He wanted to leave the women in a dry place.

He raised himself and stood very straight.⁶ He was like the trunk of a very tall straight tree. His head reached as high as a cloud. When he raised himself to the sky the flood waters came up as he did. They flooded and covered the entire earth. No tree or hill showed above them. When he fell later, the water receded, and at the same time there was dry ground.

6. In some of the Wawilak stories the snake, after he has swallowed the two women and put his head in the clouds, flies over the country and names the various parts as he goes. “Wongar went on and on flying and flying and flying and naming and naming and naming with the young sister, the old sister and the children inside him.” This is told in a monotone. – “Then he came down in the same country again and spit them out. They were still alive.” When the snake flew over the country he also gave the people their various languages, according to some accounts. A Liaalaomir man is speaking: “I am a rock snake. I call Yurlunggur father and he calls me child. That snake flew over the country when he swallowed those women, and he talked my language. I talk that language now.” In other accounts, when the snake flew about in the sky he spat on the various clan areas. The ones usually named are the Liaalaomir and Perango totemic wells. It is said that he only spat there because these snakes (Liaalaomir and Perango totems) are large and the other snakes are smaller (not important).

While he was high in the sky and had the two women and children inside him he sang all the Marndiella, Djungguan, Gunabibi and Ulmark ceremonies.

7. The Dua clan snakes and Yurlunggur discuss what they have eaten and discover they have different languages but the same totemic emblems. They tell their language names, the names of their totemic water holes, and recite the list of their totems, and kinship is established .

The other Wongar Wirtits (totemic pythons) stood up too. They were all Dua, as Yurlunggur was, and none was Yiritja. Yurlunggur was higher than all the rest. He was the leader for those other snakes, and was more powerful than they.⁷

The Wessel Island python (Perango clan) raised himself. “What is your language?” he said.

“I am Liaalaomir. What is yours?”

“I am Perango Yaernungo.”

“What is yours?” Yurlunggur then said to the python on the Howard Island mainland.

“I am Liagaomir.”

“What is yours?” he asked the Banyan Island python.

“I am Karmalanga language. My country is Kolpaiyunala” [a tree from whose roots fiber string is made].

The Mandelpui, Wawilak, Boun, Djirin, Kalpu, Merango, Djapu, Djawark, and all Dua clans were asked by Yurlunggur what their language was, and each answered the language of his country (see pages 39 to 51).

The Mirrimina snake said then, “I see we all talk different languages. It would be better if we talked the same tongue. We can’t help this now. It is better then that we all have our ceremonies together, for we own the same maraiin⁸ [totemic emblems].”

They all sang out together then, and their voices were the thunder and roared all over the land and sea.

The python Wongars still stood on their tails high in the sky. The great Yurlunggur turned to a Daii Dua snake. He said, “What have you been eating?”

“I have been eating fresh-water fish” (Dua variety).

“How did he taste?”

“Oh, he was very good. Nice and fat.”

“What are you going to do, now that you have eaten him?”

7. There is no doubt that all peoples in the area recognize the leadership of the Liaalaomir python. He is the highest in the sky and the deepest in the well. His clan leaders always lead the Djungguan ceremony when they are present, even if the other clan leaders who ordinarily lead this performance are present .

8. See glossary of Native Terms.

“I’m going to spew him up and look at him and eat him again for the last time.”

He was going to do what the live pythons do now; they eat something, swallow it, spew it up, lick it, and eat it again. It does not come up again.

Yurlunggur now asked the Djapu python what he had eaten, “I ate a wallaby [Dua moiety]. I’m going to let him out.”

He inquired of the others. The Merango snake had eaten a small plains bird; the Kalpu, a sand crab; Djirin, a green sea turtle; Naladaer, a small shellfish; Wawilak, a bird; Mandelpui, a fresh-water fish; Karmalanga, honey. All of the snakes of the Dua clan were asked. Wessel Island snake was asked last. He is second highest and only lower in rank than Mirrimina snake.

“What have you been eating?” the Liaalaomir snake asked the Wessel Island one.

“I won’t tell you.”

“Come on, tell me. I’ve heard lightning and thunder and wind in your country. Something has happened there.”

“You give me something and I’ll tell you.”

“Come on, you and I are brothers. Remember I call you brother.”

“If I tell you ,you must tell me, because I call you wawa [older brother] and you called me yukiyuko [younger brother] just as you said.”

“I’ll tell you. I’ve eaten parrot fish.” “What color?”

“Blue.”

“What kind of teeth?” “White.”

“What you have eaten is ,no good. Why didn’t you eat iguana or stone kangaroo?”

“But what did you eat?” replied the Wessel Island snake.

“I won’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

The Mirrimina snake raised itself higher and higher into the sky. He laid his neck and head on a cloud. His eyes shot lightning. He felt ashamed.

“Come on and tell me, my big brother,” said the Wessel Island snake again.

The Wessel Island snake continued to insist, and his head came closer and closer as his body writhed across the clouds toward the Mirrimina python. He was very angry.

After a long time Yurlunggur said, “I ate two sisters and a small boy and girl.”

8. The fall of Yurlunggur and the decline of the flood when the southeastern wind blows.

When he said this the southeastern monsoon started blowing from off the land. As it did this the head of the

Wessel Island snake hurriedly pulled back to its own well. The wind had stopped him from coming farther; he wanted to make a waterway from Wessel Island to Mirrimina. Yurlunggur roared and fell to the ground at the same time.

When he fell, he split the ground open and made the present dance ground at the Liaalaomir ceremonial place. He lay there on the ground and thought, "Those two sisters and their children are dead inside me now."

Yurlunggur started cleansing his mouth with his cheeks and tongue. He spat several times. He said to his sons, "I'm going to spew." He regurgitated the two women and the little boys.⁹ They were dropped into an ants' nest.

The Wessel Island snake, when he heard what Yurlunggur said, was disgusted. "You've eaten your own wakus and yeppas," he said. This was a terrible thing.

9. The totemic trumpet, appears and Yurlunggur goes back to the Mirrimina water hole where he gathers all the snake creatures, returns, and reswallows the women and once again falls and the flood is ended.

The Wongar Yurlunggur crawled slowly back to his water hole. He went inside but kept his head up to watch. At this time the Yurlunggur totemic trumpet came out of the well and lay beside him. No one brought it out and no one blew it, but it sang out like it does now.

The Yurlunggur trumpet blew over the two women and their two sons. They were lying there like they had fainted. Some green ants came out then and bit the women and children. They jumped.

The trumpet continued to walk around, while the Wongar Yurlunggur looked on. The women and children were alive again, and he had thought them dead. He picked up two singing sticks (bilmel) and crawled out of the water hole. Before he emerged he called all his sons, who were in the well, and put these true snakes, lizards, and snails on his head and neck.

He hit the mothers and their babies on their heads with the sticks and swallowed them again. He meant to keep them down this time.

He felt sick again, for once more he had swallowed Dua people. He decided to stand straight up.

When he raised up the Mandelpui snake shouted, "What did you eat?" "Bandicoot," he lied.

"You do not tell the truth."

"Two Dua women and two Yiritja boys."

When he said this he fell again. This time he made the Gunabibi and Ulmark dance grounds by his fall (as the

9. In some accounts a boy and girl are swallowed, and usually also regurgitated; but in many of the stories told by the older Liaalaomir men the children are male, and not spewed up by the snake.

first time he fell he formed a Djunguan place). After his fall, he crawled into the Liaalaomir well and went down into the subterranean waters. He put a stone over his entrance and stopped the flood of water that had been coming out. He swam in the underground waters to the Wawilak country, for he wanted to take the mothers and children back to their own country; here he spat them out for the last time. He left them there and came back to his own country. The two women turned to stone and one can still see them in the Wawilak country today. Yurlunggur kept the boys inside him, for they were Yiritja and he was Dua.

The two women did not circumcise their two sons as they intended, because Yurlunggur had interfered before they were ready. It was because they so intended, and said for other people to perform this act that people cut their sons today.

C. MAN LEARNS THE SECRETS OF THE CREATOR SISTERS' RITUALS

10. Man learns the secrets of the Wawilak women and at this time starts the use of these rituals by modern men through using the women's blood and the ritual paraphernalia brought with them to Mirrimina. Man is warned by the women in a dream to continue to practice these ceremonies forever.

While all this great drama, was being acted in the country of the Liaalaomir, two Wawilak Wongar men had heard the terrible noise of the snake's voice (thunder) and they had seen the skies fill with lightning and felt the downpour of the rain. They knew something was the matter, so they followed the two women's tracks. It took them many days and nights to get there. They finally saw the snake track.

"I think the sisters had trouble," said one. "I think that maybe a crocodile or python has killed them."

They arrived at Mirrimina. They had followed the Guider River down. They saw all the ants walking around everywhere, like they smelled some. thing that was dead and they wanted to eat. They then found all the snake tracks. The well water shone like a rainbow. When they saw this they knew there was a snake in there.¹⁰

They went farther in the bush and saw the ceremonial ground where Yurlunggur's fall had made the dance places.

"Wongar python has been here," they said.

When they looked carefully at the stone, they found blood from the heads of the two women and boys.

"What will we do?"

10. Cf. Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. "The Rainbow Serpent Myth of Australia," Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, *Journal*, London, 1926, Vol. LVI, pages 19-25.

“Run and get some paper bark and make a basket,” said the older Wawilak man.

They gathered two baskets of blood, and went to the dance grounds.

They made a bush house on part of the ground that represents the snake’s tail.

“You take all the hawk’s feathers, bush cotton, and this blood, and we’ll paint ourselves. You do this, and I shall go cut a hollow log and make a Yurlunggur trumpet.”

Each did his task. The hollow ridgepole from the Wawilak sisters’ house was used for the trumpet totemic emblem of Yurlunggur.

The sun went down. They left the blood till morning. They slept, and while they were in a deep sleep they dreamed of what the two women sang and danced when they were trying to keep Yurlunggur from swallowing them. The Wawilak women came back as spirits and taught the two men the Djungguan songs and dances that are for the outside general camp, and the inside ones that are for the men’s camp. They told the men the way to do the Marndiella, Gunabibi and Ulmark ceremonies. They sang Yurlunggur and Mit. The men slept on and dreamed that Yurlunggur brought out all the iguanas from the Mirrimina well. (See Djungguan ritual, pages 283 to 284.)

The two sisters said to men, “This is all now. We are giving you this dream so you can remember these important things. You must never forget these things we have told you tonight. You must remember every time each year these songs and dances. You must paint with blood and feathers for Marndiella, Gunabibi and Djungguan. You must dance all the things we saw and named on our journey, and which ran away into the well.”

After the men danced the new dances and ceremonies for the first time they went back to their own country. “We dance these things now, because our Wongar ancestors learned them from the two Wawilak sisters.”