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FOREWORD

The Rainbow Serpent is the principal culture hero among the Aborigines of north Australia. The Serpent is both male and female, thus embodying certain aspects of the mother-womb and father-phallus. As the regenerative source of life, the Rainbow Serpent is responsible for the renewal of all creatures, great and small. It lives in waterholes, and is also responsible for the creation of rivers at the time of the Dreaming.

The Aborigines revere this spirit-being above all others. Cave walls throughout the north are daubed with its image, and major ritual cycles embodying the feminine aspect of the Great Snake are performed each year in its honor, these being made up of hundreds of songs, many dances, and a host of stories about the serpent. Participating in these rites is, for boys, an important step on the way to fully initiated adulthood. Broadly speaking, the Great Snake is regarded as female among the tribes of north Australia. In the desert regions, and in the Kimberley of northwest Australia, the Rainbow Serpent takes on a more specifically male aspect, though in all cases gender characteristics remain ambivalent.

Its sexual duality means that in many regions of the country the Rainbow Serpent is also known as the Great Mother or Kunapipi. As Kunapipi, she is believed to have created men and women, determined their kin groups (totemic), and given them the sacred law. Her incarnation is the incarnation of the Eternal Feminine which unfolds in the history of humanity as the history of every individual woman.

The Rainbow Serpent is nearly always associated with water. So ancient is its lineage that it predates the many-breasted Diana of Ephesus, the goddess Nut in Egyptian cosmology, and the Indian goddess Kali. In the Great Snake male and female are united: her avid womb attracts the male and engulfs the phallus, which then resides as a potentiality within herself.

The Rainbow Serpent's invisible presence is often associated with the sound of the bullroarer (a length of wood attached to a cord and whirled around the head), which is said to send forth "flashes of lightning like the tongue of a snake." In one depiction of the Rainbow Serpent myth, Djangawul, who like Kun-man-gur is the masculine aspect of the Great Snake, engages in incestuous activity with two of his sisters at the time of the Dreaming. He regularly places his hand in their wombs in order to draw forth the ancestors of the Aborigines, so that they may populate the land.

As a culture hero, the Rainbow Serpent acts as a bridge to the realm of the Dreaming itself. The Dreaming is a metaphysical condition wherein the world was created. Aborigines acknowledge that, prior to this moment, the world was "without form" – was in fact a flat,

featureless plain. Culture heroes like the Rainbow Serpent emerged from the earth to begin the process of world-creation, and so created Australia.

The Dreaming, however, is not an event that occurs “in time.” According to the Aborigines, the Dreaming is ever-present - men and women participate in it each time they enact the sacred rituals. *Lalan* or *Alcheringa*, the Aboriginal words for the Dreaming, both mean the “time of ancestors.” Thus the Dreaming describes that pristine moment when humankind enters into a stage of (self)-consciousness, while preserving a sense of the ever-renewing nature of life itself.

All of the many Aboriginal myths recording the world-creation by the culture heroes celebrate the events of the Dreaming. The entire continent of Australia is one vast “storyline,” being a series of narratives that detail the progress of the Rainbow Serpent across the earth. It is possible to follow one of these storylines and so recreate the Dreaming for oneself - provided, of course, that one is in the company of an Aboriginal elder who can sing the songs along the Dreaming track.

At another level, of course, Kun-man-gur is a genuine avatar. Not only has he helped to create all that appears in the world, as a figure from outside the world, but he is also responsible for the creation of Aboriginal value systems. Beneath the surface of the Great Snake’s often paradoxical activity we see the generation of tribal ethics and values. In this sense he is avataric.

Children are introduced to the reality of the Rainbow Serpent at an early age. More often than not they are taught its fearful aspects so that when they attain the age of puberty, they know their encounter with the Great Snake during initiation ceremonies will have a powerful effect on them. In a sense, the Great Snake represents the invisible aspect of deity made manifest.

In this story of Kun-man-gur we see the Rainbow Serpent as world-creator extend his efforts to selecting the different kinds of food eaten by flying foxes, as well as separating individual animal species - in this case bats and flying foxes. (Aborigines regard bats and flying foxes as being different from one another.) We are also introduced to the regenerative power of the Great Snake. It is both womb, depicted by a fishing net, and phallus, depicted by a bamboo rod, to the people nurtured in its watery cavern.

It must also be emphasized that, while the myth speaks of animals, we are in fact dealing with anthropomorphic figures. The bats and flying foxes are not only animals but also the antecedents of the Aborigines, since the Aborigines, through their totemic affiliations, believe themselves to be derived from individual animals at the time of the Dreaming.

The Kun-man-gur myth was first related to Roland Robinson (*Aboriginal Myths and Legends*, Sun Books, 1968) by Kianoo Tjeemairee of the Murrinpatha Tribe, Port Keats, Northern Territory, Australia. We are grateful to the Murrinpatha people for giving us permission to interpret their myth.

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