

*Traditional Urban Aboriginal Religion*

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**Abstract:** This paper represents a group of Aboriginal people who claim traditional Aboriginal ownership of a large Australian metropolis. They have struggled for at least the last 25 to 30 years to articulate and represent their contemporary group identity to the wider Australian society that very often does not take their expressions seriously. This is largely because dominant discourses claim that 'authentic' Aboriginal culture only exists in remote, pristine areas far away from western society and that urban Aboriginal traditions, especially urban religious traditions are, today, defunct. This paper is an account of one occasion on which such traditional Aboriginal religious practice was performed before the eyes of a group of tourists.

**Keywords:** Urban Aboriginal religion, tradition, dendroglyph.

This paper concerns a group of people who claim traditional Aboriginal ownership of a large part of what is now a modern Australian metropolis in the era and context of native title and land rights. I need to protect the group's anonymity due to some complicated politics, so for now I will call them by the fictitious name 'Gwalan'. Gwalan have only emerged in the last thirty years or so as 'a people'. It might be argued that their 'ethnogenesis' was initially in response to land rights, native title, and other seemingly benevolent state policies concerning Indigenous Australians.

People who claim Gwalan heritage and identity today do so largely because of the genealogical research of biologist, Dr. James Kohen in the early 1980s. Prior to Kohen's work some of these people lived lives as either unspecified Aboriginal people living on the fringes of suburban life, or some may have considered themselves members of a post-contact group of 'Local Aboriginal People'. The vast majority of the people identified as Gwalan descendants by Kohen, however, did not identify as Aboriginal at all before and choose not to since his research.

Two or three hundred people have identified as Gwalan and continue to develop various ideas, values and philosophies about and expressions of their identity. For these people recent disappointments regarding most Indigenous Australians' access to remediations for past injustices such as native title have not, however, resulted in the demise of the various types of cultural renaissance and revival of Aboriginal traditions that characterise Gwalan (re)emergence.

But, as is common in such contexts, Gwalan expressions of identity are not singular. There are at least two groups of Gwalan. For the purposes of this paper I will call one group 'Gwalan Custodians' and they use 'revived' cultural performances including ceremonies of various kinds, dancing and painting to attract recognition of their difference by the dominant society.

The other group of Gwalan, who compete with Custodians for the attention of white authorities (henceforth referred to as Gwalan Tribals), have based their claims to authentic Gwalan identity and ownership on genealogies and on academic research on language, archaeological sites and historical documents. This research is used to make native title and other kinds of claims against the Australian state: a very different form of identity making from Custodians who make public spectacles of their cultural practices. These kinds of spectacles are not only not performed by Tribals, but are publicly ridiculed by them. It is a fact that many Gwalan Custodian expressions of identity are judged inauthentic by Tribals and the dominant society.

Before I go any further it is important that I explain what I mean by tradition as it is practised in a Gwalan Custodian context. Manning Nash (1989:14) insists that although tradition is mostly concerned with the past and is hence fundamentally backward focused, it does have a future dimension. This dimension involves the commitment of its carriers to preserve and continue traditional practices into the future. However, because of the radical, long term disruption of cultural practices as one of the first peoples to have contact with Europeans and because they have inter-married with whites and many different groups of Aboriginal peoples, Gwalan Custodians do not have one, common cultural tradition on which to draw. They consequently 'shelve' or 'sideline' all traditions other than their new Gwalan Custodian tradition. Everyone in the community is made part of the project of producing this 'new tradition' and commit themselves to preserving and continuing these traditional Gwalan Custodian cultural practices.

But how are 'we' members of the wider Australian society able to understand Gwalan Custodian cultural practices as traditional? Many of 'us', especially Federal Court judges hearing Native Title claims, cannot. Because Native Title claims are arguably the ultimate recognition of Indigenous 'authenticity' by the Australian state, many Indigenous Australians struggle to conform to its demands. According to the Native Title Act (Clth) 1994, claimants must prove that they are still 'attached' to a 'body of traditions, observances, customs and beliefs of Aboriginal people or a community or group of Aboriginal people, including those traditions, observances, customs and beliefs as applied to particular persons, sites, areas of land, things or relationships'. These demands, as Beth Povinelli (2002:39) argues, are difficult enough for any Indigenous group to prove, but are virtually impossible for people who live in long colonized areas as Gwalan do. Not only have peoples' traditions changed to the point of being unrecognizable from the early records of colonists, but they have become 'mixed up' with the traditions of other Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Many currently practised Gwalan traditions bear strong resemblance to practices described in the so-called traditional Aboriginal anthropological literature and belong to people other than Gwalan. Some are based on the memories, imaginings and dreams of older Gwalan descendants. Other Gwalan traditions

might have their origins in Indigenous cultures from other countries, reflecting a kind of global Indigeneity. The trouble is that because these traditions do not originate, or cannot be proved to have originated with Gwalan ancestors who lived in Gwalan country before 1788 they do not conform to the demands of native title and consequently do not conform to dominant ideas concerning Aboriginal 'authenticity'. But, regardless of how 'authentic' these practices are deemed to be by non-Gwalan, it seems these expressions of group identity that were adopted for whatever reasons in the past, have now become such values in themselves that they cannot and will not be relinquished.

As well as public spectacles including dancing, 'welcome to country' speeches and art exhibitions, Gwalan Custodians conduct private ceremonies meant for the benefit of their own members. Before I describe the burial tree ceremony, however, it is important that I provide some conceptual and historical background material to better explain the context of the ceremony and its significance to Custodians.

I would argue that the main reason for general reluctance to accept the 'authenticity' of Gwalan Custodian cultural practices is because it has been widely documented, represented and subsequently believed, in various discourses, that urban Aboriginal traditions, especially urban religious traditions are, today, defunct. Tench (1788) and Collins (1788) began the depressing tale of the social and religious obliteration of south-eastern Aboriginal societies which was picked up more recently by historians including Reynolds (1998,1989), Aplin (1988) and Goodall (1995); by sociologists and political scientists including Broome (1996), Rowley (1972) and Jacobowicz (1994); by linguists including Eades (1976), Troy (1990, 1993), and Walsh and Yallop (1993); by economists including Altman and Niewenhuysen (1979) and by anthropologists including Stanner (1968), Berndt (1962), Barwick (1962), Reay (1964), Gale (1977), Williams (1988), Rumsey (1994) and Sutton (2001) to name a few.

Until quite recently, accounts of urban Aboriginal practices in every discipline associated with Aboriginal Studies discount the possibility of surviving Aboriginal religious practices in cities or close to country towns. Recently, however, due largely to the crucial importance of being able to demonstrate 'tradition' and 'on-going connections to customs' in land rights and native title claims, anthropologists have been testing the waters of exactly what counts as tradition and on-going connections showing that legislation leaves a great deal to interpretation when it comes to these terms. Recent anthropological work in this area argues for ways to perceive culture and tradition by recognizing specific kinds of continuity in various urban and rural Aboriginal cultural forms which may have been previously discounted because they have changed over time. Among these new approaches are those of Luke Taylor (2005), the more recent work of Jeremy Beckett (1996), Francesca Merlan (2006), and Gaynor Macdonald(2004) as well as my own work. Newer ethnographies are set against discourse which has allowed Aboriginal tradition to be placed only in past practices which may only be continuous in areas remote from the polluting effects of western civilization and which are said not to exist in the modernity of western towns and cities.

It is undeniable that all Gwalan descendants are dislocated from their heritage. They are not, however, displaced from their traditional country and although they have been forcibly separated from religious systems which gave particular meanings to their connection to land, they claim today that some knowledge, rituals and stories have survived and are now being implemented in their contemporary quest to experiment with new ideas about spirituality and land. These ideas, as I will describe, are adaptations of past and present beliefs, histories, relationships and politics.

Do Gwalan Custodians have 'Dreaming'? In my opinion, what is important is that Gwalan Custodians themselves say that they do and that they perform ceremonies and tell stories which are connected with a spiritual world-view that draws from Aboriginal heritage. 'Having' 'Dreaming' also produces particular effects for Gwalan Custodians. Ceremonies associated with 'Dreaming' effect particular transformations, transitions and confirmations and assert and support culturally binding beliefs as the ethnographic example I describe below demonstrates.

But, perhaps as importantly as effecting ritual transformations and affirming identity within the group, 'having' 'Dreaming' is also a primary marker of 'authentic' Aboriginality according to dominant discourses concerning what constitutes 'real' Aboriginal tradition. It cannot be a real Aboriginal painting if it does not have a Dreaming story. It cannot be a real Aboriginal dance if it is not a Dreaming dance. People are not really Aboriginal unless they 'have' Dreaming stories. So, if 'having' Dreaming contributes to the 'authenticity' of a given group of Aboriginal people, then the interpretation of what counts as Dreaming becomes less an analytical problem than a political one. That is, academic arguments including those of Rumsey (1994), Merlan (1995), Maddock (1988), Turner (1988) and Austin-Broos (1994) among others, concerning what, precisely 'counts' as myth and what constitutes history are less important in the context of Gwalan Custodians than the political advantage that Gwalan gain from calling their 'stories' Dreaming stories. In other words, if Aboriginal peoples can convince the wider Australian society that they have Dreaming, that is, that they are spiritual, they are thought to be 'authentic'. This is because the wider Australian society believe dominant discourses which 'essentialise' Aboriginality and conceptualise it as the binary opposite of westernness. 'We' western thinkers cannot escape our own traditions of thought which place 'real' Aboriginal people into the category of 'primitive'. Aboriginality is conceptualised as 'spiritual', while westernness is conceptualized as 'material' (or modern). This kind of binary opposition serves to substantiate the identity of Aboriginal peoples for the purposes of native title. The irony of this is that the Gwalan people I work with know that they cannot win a native title claim under current law because they have tried and failed. But 'we' whites can afford to believe in Gwalan Dreaming precisely because we are not threatened by it. The political advantage that Gwalan Custodians gain from 'having' Dreaming is that it affirms their claims to identity as difference and allows them to symbolically make land claims. They are narratives supporting claims to distinctive identity because they articulate the difference between Gwalan and non-Gwalan. It is precisely in their very different traditions which are articulated in their different stories where the difference between Aboriginal people and other Australians is situated.

The issue of what constitutes different types of narrative remains for academic debate, and of course, that does carry weight in the practical context of land for example. But, whether I call Gwalan 'stories', 'myths', 'narrative histories' or Dreaming stories does not *analytically* matter in this paper because they are both all of these things and none of them. These stories defy categorization. They do not fit into anthropological, historical or mythological analysis. They fail, necessarily, to live up to the criterion demanded to reach the status of 'myth' proper or Dreaming story. Yet they also, necessarily, perform the same kinds of effects. Thus, what *is* important, in my view is that one group of Gwalan call these stories Dreaming stories. Whether this is right or wrong from the point of view of anthropological theory, and whether anthropology can ever understand these stories better by calling them something else, does not affect the cultural and political power of these stories to articulate this particular Gwalan group's identity.

According to Gwalan Custodians, their Dreaming revolves around stories, beliefs and rituals concerning what is claimed to be a Gwalan ancestor figure, *Baiame*. The name *Baiame* is not arbitrary. The belief in an 'All-Father' inhabiting the heavens by Aboriginal peoples in south-eastern Australia was first documented in 1875 at Wellington Valley Mission. Here, the Reverend James Gunther says (in Swain 1993:127):

There is no doubt in my mind that the name Baia-mai ...  
Refers to the Supreme Being; and the ideas concerning  
Him by some of the more thoughtful Aborigines are a  
Remnant of original traditions prevalent among the ancients  
of the Deity.

*Baiame* and his cult as it was practiced late in the nineteenth and around the turn of the twentieth century is referred to in Manning (1882: 160-170), Cameron (1885:364-5), Howitt (1904:440-504), Mathews (1905) and Lang (1899:53) with later authors including Berndt (1947), Elkin (1975:143), Lane (1978:233), Kolig (1989:255-6), Maddock (1982:127) and Swain (1997) also making reference to the cult. But, apart from using the name *Baiame* there is only one current practice performed by the group I worked with that has any resemblance to those described in the literature. This practice is the carving of dendroglyphs: images or designs in the trunks of living trees. But although the group do carve images in trees, the form of the carvings and the rituals associated with them bear no resemblance to the cult of *Baiame* as it is documented in the literature.

Dendroglyphs seem to have been carved exclusively in the south-east of the continent and are described by Lane (1978:233) as highly abstract geometric designs although some depicted European things such as trains, ships, horses, cattle, pigs and effigies of Europeans themselves. Lane suggests that these carved trees may have served to represent *Baiame's* camp and gifts. Regardless of conjecture about the form and significance of dendroglyphs in the past, those made by Custodians are emblems for the group. *All* these dendroglyphs are images of turtles. This use of turtle emblems is not totemic by any definition because Gwalan society is not segmented through a kinship system and relations between different groups of people are not represented by different emblems.

The carving of the turtle image into the tree is part of a ceremony which is believed, community members tell me, to facilitate the transport of the spirit of a recently deceased community member from this earthly realm into the spiritual realm in the sky which is presided over by *Baiame*. Everyone I asked claimed that *Baiame* and his cult belong to the group and that it is their Dreaming.

### **Having Dreaming and Being Catholic**

Yet, when asked, the vast majority of community members say that they are Roman Catholic. There is a strong connection between the community and a Catholic Centre in an outer suburb of the city. This link is an extension of long term associations many people have through family histories involving Catholic missionisation. Of those who do not have a history of missionisation, many do have a history of intermarriage with English and Irish Catholic convicts and free settlers. However, I do not think that this history is all that makes Gwalan Custodians claim to be Catholic now. The Catholic Centre has become very much a community focus because some important community ceremonies such as weddings, funerals and Christenings are performed there. Many Custodians are recipients of Catholic welfare through the centre. The Centre also provides transport, a venue and programs which allow community members to engage in social interaction with each other and other local Indigenous peoples. In other words, the Centre and Catholicism provide Gwalan Custodians with much valued resources. Arguably, the most valuable of these resources are potential new members of the community. The Centre is an important source of new membership because it facilitates contact between Gwalan Custodians and other Indigenous people who now live on what is claimed as Gwalan land. These Indigenous people from other places may be searching for culturally appropriate ways to make more meaningful connections with that land.

It may seem that being Catholic and having Dreaming might be an impossible contradiction. But clearly Gwalan Custodians do not recognize a contradiction. The group routinely include reference to *Baiame* in their Catholic rites. One example was a Christening I attended at The Centre, which, although presided over by a Catholic priest, included ceremonies and prayers associated with *Baiame*. It seems that the political and social value of having Dreaming is equal to the political and social value of being Catholic. Both are indispensable to the survival of the community. Having Dreaming authenticates Aboriginality and Gwalan claims. It also provides important symbolism relating to Gwalan Custodian identity. Being Catholic provides valuable material resources, and arguably even more importantly, precious new members without whom the community would have a hard time reproducing itself over time due to its small numbers.

### **The Burial Tree Ceremony.**

It had been six weeks since Uncle Sam passed away and the community had done their crying. Uncle Sam had been a Vietnam veteran and a high ranking police officer and a state funeral had been performed in the days after his death. The funeral had been attended by some community members, but their attempts to have in-put into 'Indigenising' the event

had been thwarted by officialdom. The only signifier of the deceased's Aboriginal identity were the little ribbons of red, yellow and black that his sisters wore pinned to their jackets. There had been considerable disgruntlement in the community since that day. Many people told me that they thought it was disrespectful that the deceased was not honoured with an 'Aboriginal funeral'. When I asked what constituted an Aboriginal funeral people were quite confused, but the sentiment was perhaps most eloquently expressed by an old Uncle when he said:

Well, we get to do it our own way.

Fieldnotes 04/05

'Aboriginal funerals' in the Australian state are not autonomous affairs. 'Traditional' funeral rites are only permitted in so far as they are legal. Consequently, 'Aboriginal funerals' are conducted within the parameters of legal requirements concerning the disposal of the body. Ritual practices surrounding the burial or cremation, however, vary enormously according to the desires, beliefs and values of the people conducting the proceedings. Some people in the community were upset that Uncle Sam's funeral, although an honour bestowed by the state, was also a denial of his Aboriginality and his contribution to the state as an Aboriginal person was not recognized.

The performance of a Burial Tree ceremony gave Gwalan Custodians the opportunity to redress what may have been considered, by some, to be state intervention in community business. It also had the effect of affirming group identity by articulating the Aboriginal identity of the deceased. Gwalan Custodians can usually arrange an 'Aboriginal funeral' for deceased community members, but Burial Tree ceremonies are performed in addition to other ceremonies.

It was explained to me that Uncle's spirit had used the time between death and ceremony to revisit all of its favourite people and places. The ceremony would put an end to the spirit's wandering this world and facilitate its movement into another realm. On a cold winter's morning I was invited to Euroka Clearing in Glenbrook National Park in the Blue Mountains, west of Sydney, to participate in the Burial Tree ceremony, which, it was said, would send Uncle's spirit to the 'sky people'.

Sky people, Gwalan Custodians tell me, are the spirits of ancestors who, before white people came to Australia, would have inhabited sacred places in Gwalan land. Now that these sites have been colonized by white Australia the spirits of Gwalan ancestors have been forced to relocate to the sky.

It is not possible to drive vehicles close to the site of the Burial Trees at Euroka Clearing. When I arrived at the closest car park, across a small dry creek bed from the site I had a clear view, however, of the six trees that, at that time, had already been scarred (sadly there are five many more scarred trees there now); of an open space (clearing) for camping; of the already burning fire in the middle of the clearing and of thirty or so Gwalan Custodian adults and about fifteen children. Adults were engaged in making and drinking tea, preparing food, chatting with each other and generally milling around. Many of the children

were busy chasing the numerous Eastern Grey kangaroos that have been introduced to the park and constantly haunt Euroka Clearing in the hope of finding food.

As I approached the site I was warmly greeted with the usual jokes and teases that I habitually trade with appropriate people and the more respectful greetings that are reserved for senior people. The general ambience was far from the somber mood that might be expected of a funeral rite. There was a general air of anticipation if not excitement—something was going to happen.

Gwalan Custodians themselves refer to all of their more formal gatherings as ceremony including social gatherings and they also claim that the Burial Tree ceremony involves ritual acts. These acts include the carving and grouting of a tree trunk. The performance of these acts are considered essential so that the spirits of the recently dead can pass from the earthly realm into the spiritual realm of the 'sky people'. Ritual must surely be understood in essence to be a specifically communicative action – an action that affirms culturally binding meaning and emotion. These acts, as I recount below, are also said, by Gwalan Custodians to achieve other transformations, transitions and confirmations such as the transformation of the tree into an emblem of Gwalan Custodian identity as dendroglyph.

The first 'ritual act' constituting the Burial Tree ceremony for Uncle Sam was the choosing of a tree which would serve as an appropriate focus for the ceremony by a group of elders, both men and women. Burial trees are always estimated to be older than two hundred years and are species known for their longevity. The tree for this particular ceremony was chosen within a grove of trees which exhibit the re-worked scars of earlier Burial Tree ceremonies. The first Gwalan Custodian engraving ceremony occurred thirty years ago. This ritual, some people told me, should be repeated twice a year, but has occurred less frequently in my experience. This may be because there has been at least one death every year in recent years and 'renewal' rituals have been incorporated into 'full blown' ceremonies for new trees. Never-the-less the designs are re-grooved and re-grouted with white ochre paste often enough so that the designs in the trees always look reasonably 'fresh'.

Gwalan Custodian' men were busy removing a large, oval shaped piece of bark from the chosen tree so that the turtle design, which would be carved into the 'flesh' of the tree would have a 'new', 'clean' space. When I asked a senior man whether the bark's removal would damage the tree he replied:

We never hurt trees ... Jes' look at hem other fullas [trees]  
What we done before. They's all lookin' good. I told ya before  
We choose these trees 'cause they older'n two hundred years.  
More'n whitefullas bin 'ere. They bin missin' us them oldfellas  
[trees], they bin missin'. They bin cryin' for us. Ceremonies.  
I tell ya what really hurts these oldfella trees. They bin taken  
Away from us – frum their own real people. Now we're back  
an' these oldfullas [trees] need to get that whitefulla stuff off them.  
We gotta clear a space for the old ways again.  
Got to take off the whitefulla bark. It don't hurt 'em.

VDO EC.

It seems that by removing the bark that 'belongs' to whitefullas, Gwalan Custodians 'open up' the tree to make a space for their own stories to be told. They make a symbolic 'clearing' on the tree, in time, in space in which to put their own story.

The National Park where Gwalan Custodians perform the Burial Tree ceremony is regularly visited by groups of international tourists and their local guides who can be confident of sighting wild-life including many bird species, goannas and kangaroos. The Burial Tree ceremony was in progress when a group of about twenty tourists accompanied by a tour guide unexpectedly encroached on the proceedings. These unwanted and unexpected on-lookers crowded about the tree as the men were carving. Yet, no matter how unwelcome such intrusion on Gwalan Custodian practices may be, the tourists were 'entitled' to be there. As part of a National Park, Euroka Clearing is 'public place', not Gwalan Custodian place. The tour guide, employee of a private tour company and unknown to Gwalan Custodians, proceeded to present an authoritative commentary to the tourists explaining (wrongly) that the carved trees delineated a prehistoric space for dance and claimed that Aboriginal ceremony is no longer performed by urban people. In other words, the tour guide denied the existence of Gwalan Custodian ceremony at the very moment of its expression.

The dismissive utterances of the tour guide, however, provided the opportunity for a senior Gwalan descendant woman and sister of the deceased to exhibit the ways in which Gwalan Custodian performance and Gwalan Custodian identity exists as that which is negotiated between Gwalan Custodians and non-Gwalan Custodians as well as between Gwalan Custodians. The Gwalan woman literally took the high ground by standing above the tourists on the high side of a slope. Below is a transcript taken from a video of what she said:

Excuse me. This is not a dance ground. This is a ceremonial ground  
And you mob are standing in it and watching a burial tree ceremony.  
This is the place where our people are taken by Baiame to be with the  
sky people. This is my brother. Over there is my mother. That one up  
there is me. We are [Gwalan] and we have always had ceremony here.  
It's jest that you don't know about it.

VDO EC03.

The Gwalan woman's words are a political claim to country and to relationships with country and other Gwalan Custodians past and present. It was an explanation of the proceedings which included an explanation of beliefs associated with the cult of *Baiame* which Gwalan Custodians call their Dreaming. The use of *Baiame* stories were revealed in this context, as political linkages to a tradition that is used as a claim to authentic Aboriginal identity in relations with non-Gwalan Custodians. They are, of course, more than that, the link to the cult of *Baiame* is inextricable from Gwalan Custodian ritual practice and from their emergent and emerging group identity. Links between Dreaming,

land, and authentic identity are made explicit. As the woman's final words reiterate: 'we have always told our stories and performed our ceremonies. 'Yous fellas jes' don't know about them'. The Gwalan woman's claims were a demonstration of how emergent Gwalan Custodian identity must, necessarily take shape against and within the very terms of denial that 'outsiders' assert. But, Gwalan Custodians take opportunities to mitigate negative judgments by affirming their identity in response to those negative terms. This was done in this case by asserting the difference between Aboriginal knowledge as Dreaming and western knowledge as denial.

When I asked a number of Gwalan Custodians what they thought about the tourists and their intrusion, however, their responses were mainly ambivalent. Most people saw the political necessity of explaining their presence and practices to whites, but no-one I asked was happy about what was considered a rude intrusion. One old lady's poignant response was:

Whitefellas never see what's in front o' their nose. They's jes' gotta be told. Nothin' else for it. Jes' gotta be told. But it's exhaustin'. Git tired o' tellin' 'em. Why can't they jest leave us be?

Fieldnotes EC0703.

## **Conclusion**

Gwalan Custodians claim that the Burial Tree ceremony involves acts, such as the carving of the tree, which are considered essential for the spirits of the recently dead to pass from the earthly realm into the spiritual realm of their ancestors, the 'sky people'. This enacts other transformations, transitions and confirmations including the transformation of the tree into an emblem of Gwalan Custodian identity as dendroglyph. Practices and stories related to the cult of *Baiame* invoke the ancestral spirits of Gwalan land and relationships between Gwalan and non-Gwalan and facilitate the relationships between Gwalan ancestors and Gwalan Custodians. As this paper demonstrates, this is sometimes done before the eyes of those who deny the authenticity of the acts and the reality of their effects. Gwalan Custodians are constantly reminded that they can only take their claims of custodianship of Gwalan land and culture as far as the dominant culture will allow.

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