

## **The Cultural Heritage of Ancient Australian Aboriginals and their Connections to the Skies**

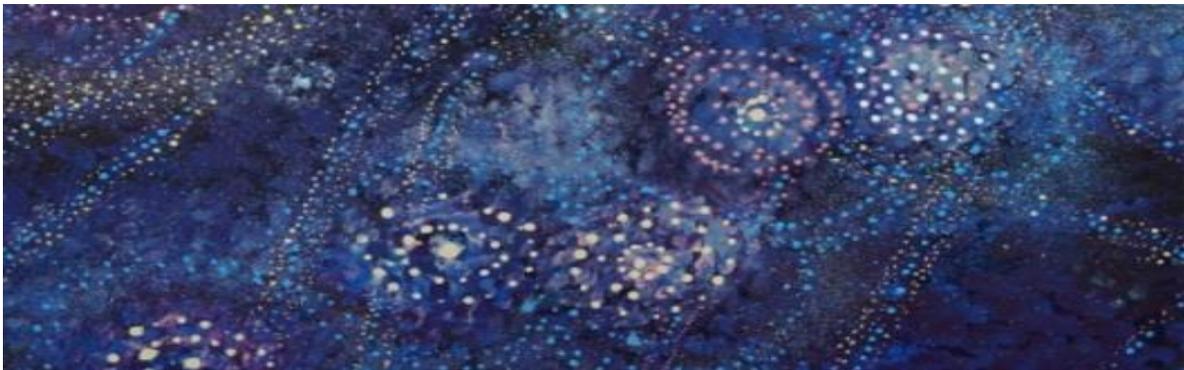
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With my inquisitive fascination of our southern night sky and the majesty of all those billions of bright lights shimmering above, creating a wondrous display, this newfound emergent knowledge of the ancient Australian Aboriginal connections and importance to the night sky brings with it so much more depth and interest to this relatively undocumented subject. “In the patterns of the stars, they saw fish, kangaroos, cockatoos, men, women, plants and animals. They projected their stories and folklore from the Earth to the sky.” (Bhathal and White 1991).

In this report, I endeavour to cover such topics as their seasonal connection, navigational skills, nutriment knowledge, and their traditional ‘dreamtime’ folklore through their astronomical understanding of the night skies. Due to western societies introduced diseases, and the missionary’s new laws forbidding their traditional song and dance, their cultural customs and lives were almost wiped out. Therefore, with their legacy of the rock art carvings and paintings, discovered in such places as Mount Yengo National Park, and prominent researchers through the generations, are endeavouring to interpret and reignite this significant part of history.

To the ancient Aboriginal people, described by many as “the world’s first astronomers”, the skies above linked in as a vital component in their physical and spiritual cultural existence. The significance of the sun, moon, planets and constellations, by day and night, provided them with the knowledge to determine such events as seasonal change, navigation, availability of food sources, and many more aspects of their dreamtime accounts articulated by the elders to educate their people from one generation to the next.



<https://japingkaaboriginalart.com/articles/star-dreaming-seven-sisters/>

Over a thousand years ago the ancient Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia, acquired an understanding of the land’s naturally occurring cyclic seasons created by the constellational shifts throughout the year. As hunters and gatherers, they formed their own seasonal calendar through their complex astronomical knowledge. In what has often been described as a harsh landscape, the Aboriginals awareness and connection to the land and the night sky provided them with the understanding to survive and live in harmony. Unlike the four seasons we know of today, the Aboriginals devised a more complex six seasonal calendar. Indicators of seasonal change may have come in the form of the heliacal rising of stars or certain positioning of planets. These specific stars and planets observed by the Aboriginal

people may for instance indicate one season was ending and a new one was commencing. According to Ray Norris, an astrophysicist studying the astronomy of Aboriginal Australians, "... the time when a star or constellation first becomes visible each year (the heliacal rising) tells people when it's time to move camp, to a place where a different food source is coming in to season." (Norris and Norris 2009) These indicators of seasonal change pertaining to certain plants or animal behavior was vital to their subsistence.



IMAGE: FISHING BY TORCHLIGHT (JOSEPH LYCETT/ COURTESY NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA)

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/joseph-lycett-convict-artist/6599240>

The ancient Aboriginals astronomical knowledge of each season connected them with food sources available throughout certain times of the year. They understood the fauna and flora of Australia, adapted to the environmental changes, would select particular ideal times for certain occurrences, such as breeding or fruiting. The Aboriginals knew when particular stars in certain alignments, whether rising or setting, would correlate with certain bird nesting cycles. The sacred sandstone

rock carvings and paintings of certain animals that the ancient aboriginals left as their legacy also align with the dream timing night sky figures. One such sacred carving, the Emu in the Sky, aligns when the emus are nesting, a time to harvest the eggs. An important food source for the hunters and gatherers.



*Sandstone Etching of the Emu at Yengo National Park, Laguna, NSW*

Part of the Australian Aboriginal culture was to teach each generation about their extensive knowledge of the land and skies. Known as their 'dreamtime.' Initiations and ceremonies would take place at certain periods, and all their wealth of knowledge would be handed down to future generations to keep their skills and knowledge alive. "...the night sky served as a periodic reminder of the moral lessons enshrined in the myths...it provided, in effect, an illustrated textbook of morality and culture, relaying the accumulated wisdom of the tribe." (Hayes 1996)

Unlike western society's textbooks, it was verbal and visual communication passed down through stories, rock art, cultural dance and song.

Unlike the modern GPS we utilize today, the aboriginals for thousands of years have been navigating by the stars. According to Bill Yidumduma Harney, a highly respected senior elder and well-known advocate for Aboriginal Australians.

“...grandparents living in the bush whenever you get lost, go out and you must use the stars to track you to where the waterhole is or where your camp is.”

<http://ydproject.com/index.php/lowernav/stars/> Many navigational routes carved out by the Aboriginals are today many main country roads. “...the Aboriginal people of Australia had a big part in the layout of the modern Australian road network. And in some cases, such as the Kamilaroi Highway running from the Hunter Valley to Bourke in NSW, this has been recognized in the name.” <https://theconversation.com/how-ancient-aboriginal-star-maps-have-shaped-australias-highway-network-55952>

My fascination now ignited by our southern night sky and her beauty shimmering above is a topic that needs more consideration. The importance of Aboriginal Astronomy, an extensive subject that I alone cannot cover in such a small frame of time. The Aboriginals seasonal connection and six cyclic calendar, navigational skills, and nutriment knowledge, is fascinating reading and I do wonder why there has been no implementation into our knowledge and way of life. Their traditional ‘dreamtime’ folklore through their astronomical understanding of the night skies will live on through the traditional communities still burning the candle and teaching their new generations this knowledge. However, it is with a heavy heart to find some of the tribes where lost through diseases or newly governed laws. With their remaining legacy of the rock art carvings and paintings, and new researchers opening up their almost lost world can research deeper into a subject that needs more exploration to reignite this noteworthy part of history.

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