

NYUNGAR STORIES ABOUT THE WAAKAL

THE NYUNGAR RAINBOW SERPENT

By Sandra Harben BA

Whadjug and Balardong Nyungar

When I was a young *Nyungar yok* (young girl) I didn't dwell too much on my Nyungar heritage and culture because I was too busy playing sport such as tennis or netball or playing hopscotch or skip the rope with my friends and *moort* (relations). However, one of the things I do remember well as a *yok* were the times my Grandfather Tom Bennell, a Balardong Nyungar Elder (RIP) would spin us some Nyungar stories using Nyungar language intermingled with English words. These stories usually revolved around the little *wudartji*'s or *mummarie*'s (sort of like little bad spirit men), telling these sorts of stories is the Nyungar way of making sure the *Koorlungar* (kids) stay close to the family campfire's and don't go wandering off into the bush or do something that would bring the little spirit men to our camp or homefires. These little spirit men are supposed to lure us away into the bush and eat us all up or play with our minds until we are found. Some Nyungar *moort* who have been taken by them can never remember what happened while they were "lost in the bush". The Nyungar who were looking for them knew what had happened! Well one thing I can say that as a result of these Nyungar stories, I was one of the best behaved kids on the block because there was no way I was going bush with these little devils.

Some of Pop's other Nyungar stories revolved around the Nyungar Rainbow Serpent, the Waakal. The Warkal [sic] is the giver of life, he made the rivers, swamps, lakes and waterholes, he maintains the fresh water sources."¹ Other Nyungar say that *Waakle*, is the ruler of the earth and the sky and whose spirit inhabits the deep waterholes, rivers and swamps. Nyungar say that without the *Waakle* the water will dry up. I can just picture Pop now with some of us kids sitting around the campfire talking and yarning with him. Another memorable moment I remember was when most mornings Pop would get up from his bed and stretch himself and he would call out "*kaya and a kaya and a kaya*"! I didn't even ask him what he was saying, I just thought it was a word he made up and used to call out to whoever was in earshot. I suppose subconsciously I knew it was a Nyungar word but what it meant I had no idea. I should have asked him! It is in fact a Nyungar greeting meaning hello or see you later, many years later I found out he was calling out to the Nyungar spirits to let them know he was around. This is one of our oldest customs but I am not around my old Nyungar people much now so I am not sure if there are any of them who still practice this greeting although deep down in my *koort* (heart) I hope there are.

Well let's move on and talk about the Waakal. Who is Waakal and why is he important to the Nyungar people. As a matter of fact it is one of our most important Dreaming stories. 'The Dreaming' is a term used to describe Aboriginal creation stories about

¹ Winmar, R

events within and beyond the living memories of Aboriginal people. The Dreaming shaped the physical, moral and spiritual world and continues to renew and sustain itself even today. For Nyungar, the Rainbow Serpent, the *Waakal* created the shape of the *boodjar* and gives our foundation to the meaning of life.

Many many Nyungar stories are being told today about the Nyungar Rainbow Serpent and these stories always depict the Waakal or Noongar Rainbow Serpent as fundamental to the Noongar Cosmology or our Dreaming. I just want to say at this point, that there are many spellings of the name of the Nyungar Rainbow Serpent, his name has been spelt Waakal, Woggal, Wogal and Waagle, these spellings are all correct and these names all refer to the one and same Nyungar Rainbow Serpent.

The Noongar people believe the Waagle, or Rainbow Serpent, dominated the earth and the sky creating waterways and people. It is a central figure in Noongar culture. Noongar people believe the Waagle gave life and sustenance to people who in return became custodians of the land².

Balardong Elder Pop Bennell said this about the Waakle:

*... the Noongar call him Waakal kierp wirrinitj. That means that carpet snake, he belongs to the water. You mustn't touch that snake; that's no good. If you kill that carpet snake noonook barminyiny that Waakal ngulla kierp uart, that means our water dries up - none. That is their history stories and very true too.*³ (Bennell 1978 b)

It is thought that the Wagyl created the Derbal Yiragan, (now known as the Swan River) which means, "where the estuary is filled up to by the winding river"⁴. Noongar believe that the Darling Scarp is said to represent the body of a Wagyl, he meandered over the land creating rivers, waterways and lakes. At the base of Mount Eliza is a sacred site where the Wagyl is said to have rested during its journeys.

Author and poet the late Dr Jack Davis, a northwest Aboriginal man who is related to the Davis and Wilkes families spent most of his life in the southwest, wrote the play *Kullark* (1982). The audience could hear Dr Davis's version of the local Whadjuck boordier Yagan's ceremonial chant which could be heard loud and strong as he pays tribute to the Warrgul [sic] for creating the Noongar universe.⁵

I know that Nyungar have rules to follow when they are around the Waakal's sacred waterholes. The stories that many Nyungar tell is that when the water is clear it is all right to take the water, but when it is 'dark or murky' the Waakal is swimming around and you must not take any water while he is there.

² <http://noongarcountry.mysouthwest.com.au/The%20Noongar%20Story>

³ Bennell, T

⁴ Kickett, E

⁵ Snell 1988, p.16

Another Balardong Nyungar Elder, Uncle Basil Winmar sat with me one day and we yarned about a whole lot of Nyungar stories and this is one of the things he shared with me about the Waakal. This is how our conversation went:

“Well they reckon that a certain spot I don’t know where it is but there was a certain spot where you go for a drink of water, if the water was very cloudy you might get very crook”.

“And that’s what your old Dad used to tell you, so if the water was murky, dirty did he say why?”

“They reckon something stirred it up, they reckon”.

The Wargyl?

“Probably”

Like if it’s dirty don’t drink it but what about if it was clean?

“Yeah that’s good that would be good sign yeah but that’s just what a lot of Nyungar people told me these things”.

Balardong Elder the late Ralph Winmar tells us in his book *Walwalinj – the Hill that Cries*:

At York you can see where the Warkarl (water snake) left a track when he came over the hill. The Warkarl made the rivers, swamps, lakes and waterholes. He came over the hills at York, and his tracks can still be seen. He came down the Avon River to the nanuk (neck) of the river at Guildford, where there is a bend. When he finished he went to a great underground cave in the river. He did not go on because the water further on was salty. The Warkarl is very important to us Noongar because we believe in the Dreaming.⁶

There are other Noongar language groups that sit outside of the Balardong Nyungar region but their stories also acknowledge the Waakle - Noongar Rainbow Serpent.

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⁶ Winmar, R

Waagle gave life and sustenance to people who in return became custodians of the land”.⁷

In Wilman Noongar budjar he is called the “hairy faced snake” or Ngunnunguddy Gnuditj. He created the hills and rivers.

*Long time ago the hairy faced snake came from the north to Collie coming down through Collie creating the hills and rivers. He came down through here to Bunbury and Australind. He went to Australind pushing his big body forming the estuary. Turning he came back up the Collie river to a place called Minninup Pool where he turned his body pushing out the people, the Noongar. To them he gave the Laws and Language. He spoke to them for a while and when he finished the Noongar all said goodbye by dancing and singing to him. Now the Hairy Faced snake or Wargle rests at Minninup Pool. When the moon is high at night you can see his spirit resting in the River. But before he lay he gave them one law, when they came to the river to fish they must grab sand and rub their armpit because everyone has their own smell, and they grab sand after wiping their armpit and throw the sand into the water so that the Hairy Face Snake can smell their ngarl (body odour), welcome them and know that they are his people. He now rests at Minninup Pool.*⁸

Noongar people believe that if you harm resting place of the rainbow serpent or his earthly beings at the place of water then the country would dry up and die⁹.

Another story from PopTom Bennell:

*If they come down here to Mindjarliny, the old Noongar call that Minjarliny, noonook Minjarliny koorl nyininy, Noongar wam, Waakal carrunyiny - that means that carpet snake is going to get savage. Mulgariny Waakal koorliny noonar mar yirawal billariny see - they reckon that carpet snake could make a storm come. Make it rain for them. Mandiakan, that's a spring pool down west of Beverley. They call that Mandiakan, that is a wirrinitj kierp for djinangany noonook barlung. It is fresh water, just like rainwater.*¹⁰ (Bennell 1978 a)...

These stories are just a few told by Noongar maaman (men) and yorga (women). We Nyungar do believe that the Waakal is the giver of life because of its role in maintaining fresh water sources. Belief in the Waakal and its control over the fresh water is as relevant today as it has been since time began.

⁷ <http://noongarcountry.mysouthwest.com.au/>

⁸ Northover, Joe

⁹ Williams, Jack

¹⁰ (Bennell 1978 a)

A lot of Nyittiyung's (white people) have written about our Nyungar Rainbow Serpent. Since I became more immersed in our Nyungar history and stories I have come across a lot of written material in the history books and archives from around Australia. One of those stories I found about the Waakal was written by Moore (2004) who said that 'In the south west of Western Australia the woggal or wawgal/rainbow serpent was revered as the guardian of sacred landscapes. It was sometimes regarded as a healer, but it could also cause sickness and mete out punishment for broken laws¹¹. The powerful snake spirit was invariably described as feathered, finned, maned and or horny. An old nyittiyung yorga (woman) named Daisy Bates wrote this in 1925, ... (Waakal) was considered an arbitrator of life and death and "omniscient and omnipotent amongst the Bibbulmun"¹² (tribe). The term 'rainbow serpent' can refer to both the water elemental being that is a major culture hero who formed landscapes in 'the Dreamtime'.¹³

Residing in certain springs, pools, hills, caves, gorges and trees the woggal could also be an unfriendly and fearsome guardian spirit. The woggal's stations were 'winnaitch' taboo, and any game seeking refuge in them was left unmolested. When passing near its home fresh rushes were sometimes strewn by people, or a piece of cooked meat would be placed at the foot of a sacred rock or on the edge of Woggal's pool, to propitiate it¹⁴. (Moore 2004).

Another fellow by the name of Elkin (1938) provides an insight into the power of the Rainbow Serpents connection to man through ritual ... coming with showers and storms, which fall from above on a thirsty land, the Rainbow Serpent is credited with a causative role in rain and depends on it¹⁵.

The Perth Gazette 1836:

the "waugal" is an aquatic monster ... (which) inhabits most deep waters, salt or fresh, and almost every lake or pool is haunted by one or more such monsters...¹⁶.

Again Daisy Bates wrote this, (of course the Noongar told her our stories) ... that if an ordinary person was to ask ... about the 'woggal' (mythical snake), who lived in a particular tree or cave in his or her Noongar budjar, the Noongar would more than likely tell him, "Oh, that woggal big fellow; he make beela (rivers), kata (hills), boorna (trees) everywhere; Noongar said its place of abode was to be avoided otherwise he would create vengeance upon anyone who disturbed him¹⁷.

¹¹ Moore, G 2004

¹² Bates, D in Bridge

¹³ Moore, G 2004

¹⁴ ibid

¹⁵ Elkin, 1938

¹⁶ Perth Gazette, 1836

¹⁷ Bates, D in Bridge

Furthermore, she recorded the Noongar belief:

“woggal lives in the sea, in the hills and rocks; but his favourite camping grounds is the deep waterholes. He is able to carry swamps and bulrushes (for his bedding) on his back, for he has enormous strength. No djaaja must be cut near a woggal winnaitch place, or the woggal will smell the daaja (meat) and will come up and eat daaja and yoongar (Noongar)¹⁸ .

Another yorga by the name of Wilson (1972) used the Nyungar knowledge about the Waugal in her book ‘A Bushman Born’¹⁹ . She recounts the story about Tommy Windich a *Njakinjaki* Noongar who had informed Forrest about Mount Stirling and Mount Caroline making up a part of a group of four rock-crowned hills known by the Noongar as the Mullean. ... The Noongar made known that this site was the place of Moulack. The elevated granitic domes of the area were said to be the “coils of this giant serpent. Not to have been wholly mythological, for Noongar told the early pioneers of a snake, different from the carpet snake, which lived at every permanent waterhole and must not be killed or the water would dry up”²⁰ . Lovell²¹ (1963) Hallam²² . (1975) further relates stories of the serpent legends. Hallam points to the location of Stanton Springs, which is a water source just south of York. Another early colonial wrote that the Noongar were very superstitious about the Spring. The older Noongar said that the Woggle (snake) lived there and that they were afraid to go there because they weren’t allowed to go there. They would not go anywhere near the Spring, “they flatly refuse to get into it and clean it out and are definitely frightened when anyone else does so”²³ . Another reference by Hallam refers to the:

“great snake Moulack, and of sacred snakes who lived in every lifelong waterhole, from the budjar eastward from York towards Kellerberrin²⁴” .

Further to this, Radcliffe-Brown recounted stories of the Serpent who resides in the water that he had been able to track the stories about the rainbow-serpent living in deep permanent waterholes... “from the extreme southwest at least as far north as the Ninety Mile Beach”²⁵ . Hallam (1975)²⁶ and Erickson²⁷ (1964) refer to the Royal WA Historical Society (Inc) 1927 Journal and Proceedings “Bolgart is situated at the head of the Toodyay Valley. Up until the late 1800’s the name was pronounced ‘Bullgert’ meaning magic and the suffix ‘ert’ refers to one or two place names where there are boggy springs of water. The Nyungar (the word native was used) legend of the Toodyay Valley is told

¹⁸ ibid

¹⁹ Wilson, 1972

²⁰ Wilson, 1981

²¹ Lovell, D 1963

²² Hallam, Sylvia 1975

²³ ibid

²⁴ ibid

²⁵ Radcliffe Brown

²⁶ Hallam

²⁷ Erickson 1964

by descendants of the earlier settlers about the huge magic snake which the Noongar believe live underground.²⁸

During the winter it lived at Bullgert. As the summer came on and the brooks dried up, it made its way to the deep Burlong Pool on the Avon near Northam and the signs of its passing were in the springs which break out in the dry bed of the Toodyay Brook late in every summer. The magic snake's return to the Bullgert Springs was heralded by the autumn thunderstorms which the Noongar with much shouting and noisy fear waved and directed towards Bullgert again. ... (as Moore noted in his Journal) "too Boolgart, a tract of several acres of rich ground covered with active springs, the grass rich and green" ... it was on this never-failing supply of water and green grass that Bolgart's fame was to rest until modern times²⁹.

I am so glad that I know more about my Nyungar heritage and culture today as a Nyungar yorga (woman) than I did as a yok. I love teaching people about our Nyungar history and stories. It is something I do because of my moort such as Pop Tom Bennell, my nana Muriel Bennell (McGuire), my mother Elizabeth and my dad Fred Collard. They were the most important influence on my life growing up as a young Nyungar yok. Me and my brothers and sisters had the privilege of being immersed in our culture, language, customs and practices. All of these things have helped to shape my identity and to define me as a person. It gives me the foundation to have belief in myself about what I know and what I teach to those who want to learn about Nyungar culture and history. Afterall, our stories have been passed on from generation to generation I know what my moort knew since the beginning of time.

There are many Dreamtime stories that we Nyungar have knowledge of. We know stories about the birds, the animals, the trees, the wirrin (spirits) and even the stars. Our katitjin (knowledge) about the Nyungar world is real, we live it, we breathe it and we taste it because after all we don't know any different.

Kaya

²⁸ Hallam, Sylvia

²⁹ ibid