Snakes in the Grass

Appendices 1 & 11

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**Appendix I**

**Australian Aboriginal narratives and images of the Serpent**

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…the rainbow-serpent is not confined in Australia to any particular ethnological province, but is very widespread and may very possibly be practically universal. In other words it is characteristic of Australian culture as a whole and not of any one part or stratum of it (Radcliffe-Brown in Buchler & Maddock 1978, p. 3).
Narratives

1. Katherine River: Jingana; creation/universality

The following two versions of the Jingana creation story were recorded by Kenneth Maddock in *The Rainbow Serpent: A Chromatic Piece*:

She was at Man-bolung-gorang (a place in the vicinity of the Katherine headwaters) too heavy with people to walk. She tried to crawl, but was too heavy. The people she carried inside her body weighed her down. Djigbei and all the other birds tried to kill her that the people might come out from inside her, but she was like stone and their spears bounced off her body. The birds decided at last to fetch Left Hand. He was in another country. They asked him to kill Jingana so that the people could come out. When Left Hand came up to Jingana he found that she had turned red in colour and was wearing a headdress made from white cockatoo feathers. He took fright but managed to throw his spear, not high but low so that her anus was pierced. She jerked upwards and spewed out the people. Now she gave them their matrilineal dreamings (totems) and from there they spread out across the country” (Buchler & Maddock 1978, p. 103).

In this next version of the Jingana narrative the emphasis is on Bolungs universality:

Jingana is mother for white men, for black men, for everything. She made us (aborigines) black; she made other men differently (as whites). She carried everything at first: snakes, kangaroos, matrilineal dreamings, dogs, birds. She put some in water, others in the desert. Everything was in her, but she spewed it all out. All things were blackfellows at first. White fellows call her God, but I call her Jingana, Mother. She made us. She is Jingana. She is Bolung. She carried us in her belly. A little bird speared her in the anus and then we all came out of her mouth (Buchler & Maddock 1978, pp. 103, 104).
2. Dalabon, Northern Territory: nature and culture/creation

Kenneth Maddock also looks at a number of aspects of Serpent veneration in his essay *The World-Creative Powers*, chapter three of *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, published six years later:

Aboriginal cosmology supposes that nature and culture were formed at the same time, and it attributes both to powers who lived in the world during the Dreaming and are present in it still, though no longer generally visible for they have withdrawn from view. The theory is of the definition of space and time, not creation out of nothing. The earth and life are conceived to have been in existence when the powers began their work. Thus, the Dalabon [northern Territory] hold that the earth was an expanse of water, coloured as the rainbow, and that life was inside a serpent-like female [Charlesworth, 1984 #27, p. 85].

3. Murinbata, Darwin: creation/conflict/composite being/transfer of knowledge

The Murinbata [Darwin] name her Mutjingga (Stanner 1959-63:40-42) and say that she is *kale neki*, “the mother of us all”. Sometimes she is depicted as a grotesque being who is only part human. One drawing shows her as half woman and half snake. She is said to have swallowed some children left in her care while the adults went searching for honey. A man and a woman who were driven home by thirst discovered the loss and, noticing tracks leading to the water, gave the alarm. A chase ensued in which the All-Mother was overtaken and speared, her belly opened and the children pulled from her womb. They were washed and dried in the smoke of a fire, painted with ochre and returned to camp, where their mothers rejoiced to find them still alive.

W.E.H Stanner comments on this myth that Mutjingga was once truly human, but that she had primal authority, for what she did determined much of the later shape of things; that her death was and is thought of sorrowfully, and
that her act was wrong, but only wrong because premature, for she should have waited until the children grew up and were ready to be initiated. Because she is dead the men have the bullroarer instead. It takes her place, but only the initiated know this, because the rest of the people are kept ignorant (Charlesworth et al. 1984, p. 92)

In this next Murinbata story Narpajin is again described as half snake half woman. She makes the bullroarerers belonging to the Kunapi ritual, sings the sacred songs and possesses the sacred Larnja stone. She makes the laws and nominates the totems for the different clans. These have to be stolen by an old man, a tribal elder, who then distributes the bullroarer, knowledge and rituals to various tribes. This is an extract from a version that was told by Kianoo Tjeemairee, Murinbata Tribe, Fitzmaurice, and recorded by Roland Robinson in Aboriginal Myths and Legends (1966):

The old-man sneaked up and sneaked up. Then, coming down on the wind he heard another song. ‘Ah’, he said, ‘that is Krungarra, that is another “inside” song.’ The old-man sneaked up. The singing led him up to the big rock-hole Oolai. The old-man sneaked up on his knees. He crouched down. Through the slits in the paper bark he saw the Rainbow -Snake Narpajin. She was half-woman half-snake. Her head, her arms, her breasts and body down to the waist was woman. From the waist she was a snake. She was sitting down, coiled up hitting the song-stick and singing...

Now as Padorooch crouched there he saw the Rainbow-Snake making the bull-roarer Ngowaroo with a stone knife. The Rainbow-Snake cut the Ngowaroo with the design of the kangaroo dreaming, the palm tree dreaming and the yam dreaming. She cut the Ngowaroo with the design of the road of Narpalin, joining up the dreaming-places.

When the old-man Padorooch had seen this he drew back and back. He sneaked away. He went back to the camp and called up all the old-men.

There he gave them the song, the law, and the Ngowaroo of the Rainbow-Snake (Robinson 1966, pp. 71, 73, 74).
4. Warramunga tribe, Murchinson Ranges: creation/benevolent/malevolent being

The following narrative demonstrates the all pervasiveness of the Serpent as a creator spirit, though she herself is created by a prior creator being. The text does not elaborate on the identity of the being who created Wollunqua:

The wollunqua snake [Warramunga tribe, Murchinson Ranges, Central Australia], who was created with the other totemic beings during the early days of the world, did not, like them, die and become a natural feature. The wollunqua is still looked upon by the natives as a living creature, capable of either befriending or harming them. Throughout his wanderings during creation times, the wollunqua left behind at certain totemic places inexhaustible numbers of spirit-children, who have been, or will be, born as infants (Spencer & Gillen 1904, p. 399).

5. The Giant Eel, Northern Rivers NSW: Creation

This story was told to me by my mothers sister, Mrs. Della Walker (nee Laurie). In the Dreamtime there was a small stream that flowed into the sea at Yamba. Then out of a waterhole at Grafton a giant eel appeared and started to slowly wriggle its way down the stream towards Yamba. As it wriggled its huge body began to push back the banks of the small stream, making the hills at certain places and making the stream follow its winding path as it made its way to Yamba. When the eel reached Yamba, at the mouth of a small creek that is now the Clarence River, it turned around because the water there was too salty. As it couldn’t stay in this briny water, the eel went back up the river, but this time it travelled up from the north bank past Goodwood, and past Chatsworth before returning to the river. It then proceeded up the south arm of Woodford and back to Grafton to its own waterhole. It is said that this giant eel from the Dreamtime formed Goodwood, Chatsworth and Woodford islands on its way back from the point where the Grafton Bridge now stands (Heron 1993, p. 40).
6. Clarence River: creation of people

Uncle Ron Heron explained to me that the following text is a very simple version of the story, and that it is a complex narrative, different aspects of which are only revealed to the appropriate people. While we are not able to access the many deeper layers of the myth the outline given here is enough to demonstrate the Serpents role as creator being:

In the Dreamtime, before there were people, there was a giant serpent that came from the sea. It came through the mouth of the Clarence River and started to make its way upriver. Every twenty miles or so it would shake off some of the small barnacle-like creatures that were attached to it’s body. The further it went up the river, the smaller it became as it shook these barnacles off. These small barnacle-like creatures became the different tribal groups: the Yagir people at the lower reaches of the Clarence, the Gumbayngir people in the Grafton area and the Bundjalung people upriver at Baryulgil and Tabulam. By the time the serpent reached Tabulam it was too small to go any further (1993, p. 40).

7. Northern Rivers Serpent: names/myths/boundary marking/association with the moon

Ron Herron did not give the name of the Serpent in the above narrative. In 1984 Steel documented a number of versions of the Serpent in the Northern Rivers area, and the many names s/he is known by:

As in most parts of Australia, rain is associated with the rainbow serpent, known in this region as warrajum, or a similar name as listed in table 1 [on pp. 6, 7.] Radcliff Brown, who renders it warzam, was informed that the rain djurebil was the most important one in the Woodenbong region, but he could not locate it precisely. A more recent informant has stated that the djurebil is at a place called Gibbumnye and consists of a large block of stone in the bed of the Richmond River which has a natural mark on it suggesting the figure of a snake in abstract. He said that this djurebil is on the boundary between
Gidabal and Galibal clans. An associated legend can be pieced together from these two sources. The rainbow serpent was a snake of the kind called banyara (bagar = brown snake) with wings, who flew from the Tabulam area and settled on the mountain called Banyara which Radcliffe Brown suggests may be Dome mountain. He may be seen in his present form as a real snake, red in colour, at his djurebil in the Richmond River. The rock Gibbumnye gets its name from a belief that it was brought back from the moon (Gibbum) by a “man” whose strength waxed and waned with the phases of the moon. The link between the rainbow serpent and the moon is not clear, but there was a belief in the Brisbane area, said to be universal, that at the time of a total eclipse of the moon the “devil” (the rainbow serpent) used to eat the moon; the rock therefore would represent either regurgitated food or droppings of the rainbow serpent.

“Wathumbil” Mountain is probably to be identified with the Warrazambil Razorback (Black Hand Mountain) at the head of Warrazambil Creek. The name means “the abode of Warrajum, the rainbow serpent” (Steele 1984, pp. 38, 39).

The word Warrajum is found in various forms, some of which Steel lists in table 1. The meanings given should not be accepted as the only interpretation, they are anthropological records, which may not fairly represent interpretations from different people. As stated previously the Serpents meaning is found to be multi layered and plastic.

Table 1. Forms and meanings of Warrajum, the rainbow serpent:

<table>
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<th>Version</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
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<td>bunyip, in waterholes</td>
<td>Logan River</td>
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<tr>
<td>warrajum</td>
<td>bunyip</td>
<td>Beaudesert</td>
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<tr>
<td>woorajum</td>
<td>shark</td>
<td>Coomera district</td>
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<tr>
<td>warrajamba</td>
<td>mermaid</td>
<td>Moreton Island</td>
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8. The Rainbow Serpent Myth in South East Australia, Radcliffe Brown: conflict/disease/control

In the 1930 volume of the anthropological journal *Oceania* are four articles about the Serpent in Australian mythology by Radcliffe Brown, Ursula McConnel, P Elkin and Ralf Piddington. Following are excerpts from these articles. The authors tell what they have learnt rather than transcribing directly from informants.

In the article by Radcliffe-Brown are some interesting details regarding the Serpent in Victoria. From this description of the myth, and the supporting information, the Serpent is considered to be able to be influenced by tribal elders from the mob in whose territory s/he lives; the Min-nie Brum-Brum, and that these men may therefore, through the Serpent, have some control over surrounding territories:

Myndie has several little creatures of his own kind, which he sends out from time to time to carry diseases and afflictions into tribes which have not acted well in war or in peace. These little ones are very troublesome, but their visits are not so much dreaded as the visits of Myndie himself, who is very large,
very powerful and from whom no one can escape. All plagues are caused by
Myndie or his little ones. When Myndie is known to be in any district, all the
blacks run for their lives. They stop not to seize their weapons or bags or
rugs. They stop not to bury their dead. They set the bush on fire, and run as
fast as they can. Some, as they run, are afflicted by Myndie, and become sick,
and lie down, and some die. Some, when they are made sick, attempt to rise,
but they fall down again. Those that run swiftly and escape are always quite
well and never suffer from sickness. Mun-nie Bru-Brum can arrest and put
back the Myndie with a wave of his hand or a movement of his finger; but no
one knows his secret. No one can arrest Myndie but Mun-nie Brum-Brum.

The being described here as Myndi is evidently the rainbow-serpent. An
interesting point is that he is said to be under the control of Pundjel (Brough

In the footnote Radcliff-Brown sites Howitt, from Native Tribes of South-East Australia, who gives Pundjel as the eagle hawk, and the deity of the Woeworung tribe situated near Melbourne. This group call the rainbow Binbeal, the son of Bunjil (-Pundjel). Mountford gives Pundel as the supreme creator, and says that the Myndie could do nothing by himself but must be told by Pundel (Radcliff-Brown 1930, p. 346).

The following gives a good indication of the level of belief invested in the Mindie:

A sorcerer, celebrated as a man possessing great power, a very old black, and
a member of the same tribe as that to which Mun-nie Brum-Brum belonged,
was a prisoner in the Melbourne Gaol many years ago. He had committed
some depredations on the flocks of the settlers. The news of his arrest was
carried to near and far off-tribes – to tribes more than 200 miles from
Melbourne. The men were greatly distressed. Telegraph fires were lighted,
and night after night these could be seen in all directions. Messengers from
seven tribes were sent to my blacks. My Blacks importuned me day after day
to liberate the black stranger. Finding that I would not liberate him they
urged me and all the settles with whom they were friendly to leave the district
and go to Van Diemen’s Land or Sydney. Some hundreds of blacks of many different tribes were in Melbourne when the man of the tribe of Mun-nie Brum Brum was imprisoned, and they all fled, exhibiting the greatest terror, as they expected that the captive would move Pundjel to let Myndie loose. Myndie they believed would spare no one. None of the people returned until the prisoner was set at large, which was some months after the first gathering and flight (Wm. Thomas's MS in Radcliff-Brown 1930, p. 346)

9. The Rainbow Serpent in North Queensland, Ursula McConnel: danger/healing

In areas where the Serpent appears in North Queensland the information is scarce due to the destruction/dispersal of the people and their culture. In her article Ursula McConnel sited the Upper Daintree River and Adeline Creek tributary of the Daintree as areas where this had occurred.

In the Upper Daintree the Serpent “was said to inhabit a large rock on the side of a hill which connected with the river by an underground spring. The natives avoided this place, as the yero was felt to be dangerous...Another yero was reported at the waterfalls in Adeline Creek” (1930, p. 347).

McConnel was able to find better material among the Koko-Yalunyu people on the Bloomfield, who had as yet suffered less interference from Europeans:

It is believed to inhabit the long deep waterholes which connect the many waterfalls and rapids of “The Roaring Meg,” which stream rises in a rugged mountain of some thousand feet called Peter Botte, and flows into the Bloomfield. It is considered dangerous to swim in these waterholes and stories are told of men who, attempting to do so, were pulled under and tugged this way and that by the yero (obviously by the strong undercurrents). Here also the yero is described as being like a huge eel or serpent, which is not deadly, but just dangerous, i.e., it does not usually eat people. It has a large head with red hair, and a big mouth out of which the rapids are
said to emerge. Its body is striped with many colours, and it has healing properties for those who belong to the locality and who if sick may swim in the water to regain their health (1930, pp. 347, 348).

10. The rainbow Serpent Myths in North–West Australia, A. P. Elkin: control of tides/ transfer of power/ transfer of knowledge/creation

In the Forrest River District, to the west of Wyndham and Cambridge Gulf, the rainbow-serpent is called Brimurer or Unger, and the rainbow is said to be made by a great water-snake when stopping rain. This snake lives in big fresh-waterholes, but he is also identified with Lumiri, a large salt-water snake who makes the tides by emitting the water from his inside, and causes them to recede by swallowing the water….

Further, the rainbow-water-serpent is the ultimate source of a medicine-man’s powers. A medicine-man is “made” by a fully qualified practitioner. The latter takes the postulant up to the sky. One way in which he does this is to take on the form of a skeleton and to fasten a pouch on himself into which he places the postulant who has been reduced to the size of a very small child; then sitting astride the rainbow-serpent, he pulls himself up with an arm-over-arm action as on a rope. When near the top, he throws the postulant out of the pouch onto the sky, thus making him “dead.” Having reached the sky, he inserts into the young man some little rainbow-snakes, Brimurer, and some quartz crystals which are called Ungur, the older term applied to the rainbow-serpent (1930, p. 349).

The country watered by the rivers flowing into Walcott Inlet is inhabited by the Unigarinyin tribe, some of the north-eastern hordes of which are known to Forrest River natives. The Ungarinyin say that the rainbow, malada, is Wondjad (Wondjina) or Ungud moving about, and that Wondjina or Ungud is also a large edible water-snake. The word Ungud is obviously the Forrest River Ungur.
In Ungarinyin thought Ungud also denotes the long-past creative epoch in which the sanctions for present day rites and customs are found. To say that a practice or belief, creature or object is Ungud is to say that it has existed since that time, that no other explanation is required. So it is with the rainbow-serpent. He is Ungud. But further, he is also called Wondjina which, like Ungud, is a term applied to the strange rock-paintings found in the western part of Northern Kimberley (Elkin 1930, p. 350).

Elkin describes the Kimberly rock paintings as “increase sites” and the retouching of the Wondjina paintings as a ritual practice that brings rain and spirit babies:

...again, Ungud, the rainbow-serpent, makes and brings down spirit-babies in the rain to the waterholes where a father always “finds” his child in a visionary way (dreaming or hallucination), unless he “sees” it coming down in the rain. Such a waterhole from which a person is thus derived is his Ungud-place, his spirit home, which, as Ungud, associates him with both the rainbow-serpent and the past Ungud time. Thus, in Ungarinyin beliefs, the rainbow-serpent is associated with the coming of rain, the increase of natural species and the continuance of mankind (Elkin 1930, p. 451).

La Grange District
Passing south to the Karadjeri tribe in the La Grange district, I was informed that Maiangara, the rainbow-serpent, which is of a reddish colour, drinks an enormous quantity of water during rain, and then, causing a great wind to pass from its body, stops the rain and, as it does so, makes the rainbow. Strangely enough, Maiangara is the name of a secret bullroarer amongst the Ungarinyin and other northern Kimberley tribes, though not amongst the Karadjeri.

A couple of Karadjeri myths seem to refer to the rainbow-serpent. Thus, one recounts that Pulang, the water-snake, was speared in the eye by one of the great old-time heros at a boggy place called Djoani-djoani, where he died. His eyes, of which one is shut, can now be seen in the sky. A similar snake
“makes” the medicine-men by blowing water over them. Now Pulang is also said to make the rain and the wind. It is therefore most probable that he is the same mythical creature as Maiangara. They are both water-serpents connected with the rain and the wind which accompanies the tropical storms (Elkin 1930, p. 351).

11. The Water Serpent in Karadjeri Mythology, Ralph Piddington: creation of nature and culture

In contrast to Elkin, Ralph Piddington reports of the Serpent Bulain as in no way connected with the rainbow, even though the being corresponds with the Rainbow Serpent in other parts of Australia:

The bulain enters into several myths, and in addition several mythological characters are said to have become, at death, bulain. Of these the most important are the Bagadjimbiri, two culture heroes who arose in the country of the Nangamada, and after travelling north through Karadjeri territory as far as Broome, returned to Nagamada country and died: their bilyur (spirits) went up to the sky and became the Magellan Clouds, while their bodies became bulain. The Bagadjimbiri created all natural phenomena and social institutions, the mythology connected with them being a secret among initiated men. All other myths in which bulain occur are not secret and may be told to the women (Piddington 1930, pp. 352, 353).

12. Graham Walsh: creation/composite being/environmental allegory/control of tides/ceremony

The following are excerpts from Australia’s Greatest Rock Art, researched and written by Graham Walsh. The colour plates are brilliant, Walsh gives oral versions of mythic narratives portrayed in some of the art, and at the front of the book lists the Aboriginal communities who assisted in the collection of images and narratives. He does not give the names of individual narrators:
Victoria River Headwaters:
The word ‘Ungud’ is used for rock paintings of Serpents, and for the ancestral being in the myths in west and central Kimberlys. The physical manifestation of Ungud is a large edible freshwater snake, or in coastal areas a saltwater snake named Lu, Lumuru, or Lumeri. An aspect of Lumeri is S/he creates the tides in the Cambridge Gulf. “Here the male and female serpents are said to have emerged from the sea at Lacrosse Island to commence their creative trails.” Walsh quotes Father E.A. Worms for translations of terms associated with the Serpent…”Ungur and Ungud meaning ‘belonging to water’, Ungud can be singular and plural, male, female or bisexual. It can take physical form yet be the explanation for intangible things. Ungud has existed from the Dreaming (known as Lali or Bugarara in the Kimberly), and represents the Dreaming itself, past and present.” The Serpent frequently appears with the attributes of animals and plants including kangaroo, emu, crocodile, barramundi and waterlily, horns and are commonly found as attributes in many parts of Australia.

In contemporary Victoria River Dreaming mythology, Kurayij is claimed to represent the rain which, with the sun, had human form in the dreaming. The sun in its present form lives in the sky where its daily heat provides the strength from which all life grows. The rainbow Serpent, in its rain form, lives in permanent waterholes. The two represent balancing forces, hot and cold, wet and dry. When the sun becomes too powerful and begins to burn the earth, the Rainbow Serpent’s rain becomes too powerful and floods the land, the wind breaks its back, the sun burns it, and Kurayij returns to the waterhole. So the cycle recommences (Walsh 1988, p. 170).

The serpents created the Pentecost river before moving west to crawl inland and form the Drysdale River. Leaving this at the Allymarr waterfall the pair formed the Theda River before travelling south via several major art sites to the Woonginjin waterhole in the Hann river, and then on to a major art gallery
in the Caroline range. This is the key site of the Munda clan territory within the Ngarinjin peoples lands.

This site is known to people of the far north as Loomari (place of the snake), a title referring to its content and place in mythology...One panel contains 42 snake head paintings from 300-700mm long depicted in a spectacular concentrated formation...This represents the male Rainbow Serpent Goodmat Mooru, his wife Anolin, and their children. The larger Wandjina head represents Oondeyera, and the smaller example is Nyoourndondot, who travelled with the snakes and helped them. A 1050mm wide secondary panel, lower right in plate 200 shows a small figure standing within a serpents coils. This represents a Rai (spirit child), created by the Rainbow Serpent and sent to earth in rain or with lightening to live in waterholes. An Aboriginal man would ‘conceive’ a spirit child in a dream or see it falling in rain. In due course it would be born.

Serpent paintings were regarded as very powerful and associated with rain, and ‘if touched by a boy it would rain too much’. Four 300m long waterworn stones on a rock ledge below the paintings are the serpent’s eggs. These were rubbed against the paintings as part of rainmaking ceremonies (Walsh 1988, p. 172)

13. Buchler and Maddock: names/sex/relationships

As to the Rainbow Serpent’s name, Kunmanggur, and Kanamgek, are used interchangeably. Sometimes he is called Kulaitj, ordinarily an adjective meaning “older” or “eldest” (hence he can be thought of as The Oldest One). As to number, sometimes it is said that there were two brothers Kunmanggur, and that Kanamgek is Kunmanggur’s son. As to gender, the name Kulaitj sometimes seems to refer instead to a female or, if referring to Kunmanggur, to mean that “he” was bisexual. Even those Murinbata who affirm Kunmanggur’s maleness say that he had a woman’s breasts. Different versions make him look like a huge snake with a hooked tail, a scorpion, a
Huge person, and a figure reminiscent of the northwest-Australian *wondjina* images. There is no unanimity about his relation to rainbows: thus the darkest band is variously identified as Kunmanggur, Kulaitj, Kuirindilyin, and Ngamur; and sometimes the top and bottom bands are distinguished as Kunmanggur and Kanamgek. As to family relationships, Kulaitj, Kirindilyin, Ngamur, and Walumuma are given as names of Kunamanggur’s wives, but there is no agreement on how many he had or what all their names were; Walumuma furthermore, is given sometimes his daughter (compare the ambiguous Kanamgek) (Buchler & Maddock 1978, pp. 5, 6).

14. Serpent Mounds: Murray River/ Bulgeraga creek/ NSW

Mr. E. M. Curr thus refers to a raised earthen figure formed by the aborigines in the county of Karkarooc, Victoria: “The work was described to me as a mound about 100 feet or yards long, I forget which, made to resemble a huge snake. Its locality was close to the Murray river, some 20 miles below Euston, but on the other side. It was said by the blacks to have been made to charm away the smallpox which raged about those parts probably about 1820 or 1830.” (Mathews 1898, p. 186).

Fig. 7 and 11

Fig. 7 –This drawing, …[Wiradjuri tribe, Boora ground near the left bank of Bulgeraga creek, parish of Wullamgambone, county of Gregory, NSW] represents a legendary monster, called Wahwee by the natives of the
Castlereagh, Macquarie and other rivers. It is supposed to have its abode in very deep water-holes, and devours human beings. The figure shown here measures 59ft. in length and a foot across the body at the widest part; it is formed by a nick or groove, about 3in. wide and 2in. deep cut in the turf along its outline; it has a head and neck like a large snake, and was delineated with its tail coiled round the butt of a sapling which was growing at that spot (Mathews 1898, p. 186).

Fig. 11 represents the Kurrea, a fabulous monster inhabiting lagoons and other large sheets of water, who is feared by the blacks of the Macintyre, Culgoa, and other rivers. The drawing reproduced in the illustration measured 39ft. in length by about a foot in width, and was outlined in the turf like Fig. 7. (Mathews 1898, p. 186).

Earthworks were also recorded by Radcliff-Brown in the anthropological journal Oceania in 1930:

The most interesting point, however, is that a cult of the wawi or karia was often an element of the Bora or initiation ceremonies of the New South Wales tribes. Many of the sacred Bora grounds had a representation of the Serpent in the form of a sinuous mound of earth up to 40 feet or more in length. In preparation for the ceremony the serpent was painted. A ceremony took place at the spot and the beliefs about the rainbow-serpent were explained to the younger men who were attending the initiation (Radcliff-Brown 1930, p. 343).

15. Transfer of knowledge/magic/cultural development/association with quartz

In many Australian texts there is a relationship between Serpents and the gaining of knowledge. This may involve direct teaching and learning from elder to initiate, and at other times it involves magic and meditation:

A Serpent able to shape shift and alter its size from several centimetres to hundreds of meters is manifested in the Milky Way near the Southern Cross...
and is believed to live in deep waterholes around Wentworth. The Wawi is credited with teaching Wiratjuri medicine men ceremonial songs and dances. It is the wawi who teaches the medicine men all the songs and dances for the new ceremonies. When a medicine man decides to visit the wawi, he paints himself entirely with red ochre and waits until there is a thunderstorm. He then follows the rainbow until he finds a deep waterhole at its end, the home of the wawi. Here he is met by the mythical serpent, who takes him under the water and teaches him the new songs and dances. The medicine man repeats the complete ceremony many times to be sure he has learned it and then returns to his people…According to the men of the Wiratjuri tribe it is by this means that they acquire their ceremonies (Buchler & Maddock 1978, p. 59).

There is a very widespread association of quartz-crystals with the rainbow-serpent, and throughout Australia quartz-crystals are amongst the most important of the magical substances used by the medicine men…So far as our present knowledge goes there is only one region in Australia in which this belief seems to be absent. Mr. Hart was unable to find any trace of it in the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Islands. The Tiwi also appear to have no medicine men, and thus to be unique amongst Australian tribes (Radcliff-Brown 1930, p. 342)

In all the tribes mentioned it was believed that the medicine-men derived their power from the rainbow-serpent. A man who had already obtained some magical power would go into the pool inhabited by the serpent. I was not able to obtain any account of what was supposed to happen to him there (Radcliff-Brown 1930, p. 343).


Rachel Kohn from ABC Radio National interviewed Frances Bell-Parker and two of the judges for the Blake Prize, 2000; Artist Ross Mellick and theologian Fr. Anthony
Kelly. This interview touches on some of the key issues around the meeting of Christianity and Indigenous culture in Australia and the images/concepts embedded in these traditions.

Kelly came straight out and asked Bell-Parker what the Rainbow Serpent represents for Aboriginal people in the third question of the interview. Other questions seek out Bell–Parker’s personal connection to the imagery in her work.

**Rachel Kohn:** Well the central image is the rainbow serpent, and it crawls vertically up in the centre of the painting. Can you tell the story of the Rainbow Serpent, just what he represents in Aboriginal spirituality.

**Frances Bell-Parker:** The rainbow Serpent is similar to God in the way that it is the creator of this land and the creator of the people of this land. The Aboriginal people see it as their God, and now what I have done in my painting, you said that the crucifix was in the Serpent’s mouth, but I see it as coming from the tongue; the tongue is forming the crucifix.

**Rachel Kohn:** The tongue of the serpent actually forms the crucifix?

**Frances Bell-Parker:** Yes, it blends from the tongue to the crucifix; the tongue makes the crucifix.

Bell-Parker talks about the painting as representing her personal journey, starting at the tail of the Serpent, her cultural heritage, into the contemporary world in which she lives with churches and...”God as we know him.” ‘The Journey’ also represents this journey for other Aboriginal people. Her work directly recognises an interface of European and Aboriginal theology.

“I wanted to help people understand that God and the Rainbow Serpent are exactly the same things, that what God means to Aboriginals is what the serpent means to Aboriginals as well, it’s just how you perceive it, that’s how it will come across.”

In speaking about the painting Ross Mellick skirted direct religious interpretation and did not look for content embodied in the two symbols of serpent and crucifix.
She cites Kandinsky and his expression of …“a sort of sense that the spiritual [that] rests or lives behind religious traditions”…“and that it permeates the world, and that it is a common basis for so many of the great religious practices of original peoples and our Aboriginal brothers and sisters.”

Fr Tony Kelly calls ‘The Journey’…“an ideal choice on our part for the Blake prize, especially at this juncture of our history.”

(Kohn 2000)
Images

1. Conflict scene-Deaf Adder Creek
Site 6. All figures in the panel are in faded red except the hand stencils, which are of a darker shade. It underlies the ‘early’ Mimi figures and extends beyond the panel illustrated for about 3 m. (Brandle 1982, p. 47)

2. Rock painting Magela creek, Western Arnhem Land
The Rainbow Snake, ‘objects’ and an anthropomorphic being. Mimi art. The single and double lines extending from the neck are common in images of the Rainbow Snake at Deaf Adder Creek (Brandle 1982, p. 76)

3. Deaf Adder Creek/Kolondjorluk
87cm (Brandle 1982, p. 74)

4. Cadell River
Painted in faded red. 48cm (Brandle 1982, p. 7)
5. Mundinbarry
Painted in faded red. Part of the design is missing, reconstructed section represented by broken line (Brandle 1982, p. 78).

6. Deaf Adder Creek
Rock painting on ceiling of a small grotto with spring. Red lines on white base 140 cm. (Brandle 1982, p. 154).

7. Cadell River
Rock painting, on the ceiling of a small shelter, about 5m up from the ground. Purplish red lines on white base-silhouettes 203cm (Brandle 1982, p. 155).
8. Wollunqua Totem
Final Ceremony in connection with the Wollunqua Totem, Warramunga Tribe (Spencer & Gillen 1904, p. 246).

9. Preparing the Wollonqua Mound
Warramunga Tribe (Spencer & Gillen 1904, p. 323).
10. **Spider Murululmi**  
Bark painting of Borlung the Rainbow Serpent (Brandle 1982, p. 144).

11. **Mandarg**  

12. **Mundagnaardi Rainbow Serpent Site**  
Loomari (place of the snake) Central Kimberly  (Walsh 1988, p. 173).
13. **Ungud Rainbow Serpent site**
West Kimberly. The two Serpents Waiwangari (upper serpent) and Lirindindi (lower serpent) (Walsh 1988, p. 275).

14. **The Serpent Kurayij**
Victoria River Headwaters (Walsh 1988, p. 171).
15. Dawidi Liyagalawumirri
Wagilag Creation Story around 1969
Ochres on eucalyptus bark
110x50.0cm. (Basinski 1987).

16. England Bangala Gunardba
Untitled around 1925
(Basinski 1987)

17. Aboriginal Doctors riding the mythic Rainbow Snake Birrundudu
Central-Western NT
Drawn at Birrundudu, 1945, by Dlanbu Lefthand, Ngari language, for Munguldjungul whose dreaming it is – that is, Walbiri Language (Berndt & Berndt 1982).
18. Ginger Riley, Ngak Ngak-Ceremony Time, 1988
(Ryan 1997, p. 47)

19. Ginger Riley, Limmen Bight Country, the story of creation, 1993
(Ryan 1997, p. 90)

20. Frances Bell-Parker, The Journey, 2000
(Kohn 2000)
Bibliography


Appendix II

Mesopotamian narratives and images of the Serpent

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Until the true source from whence it sprang can be reached and understood, its nature will remain as mysterious as its universality, for what man could see in an object so repulsive and forbidding in its habits as this reptile, to render worship to is one of the most difficult problems to find a solution to. There is hardly a country in the ancient world, however, where it cannot be traced, pervading every known system of mythology (Unknown 1889, p. 1).

The second great deity, and to us in this civilised and wholly changed state of existence, strange and ever horrible deity, is one still most prominent—the anguis in herbâ or mysterious “stranger in the grass,” who overcame with honied words the fabled mother of us all, and who, to the astonished gaze of the primitive race, overcame by god-like power, man, as well as the strongest beast of the field. That as a mere reptile he was “subtler,” as the story says, than every other creature, has not since appeared, but his subtle mode of approach, his daring and upright dash, was pictured as god-like, and in nearly all Eastern countries he is still not only feared but worshipped as “the God of our Fathers” and the symbol of desire and creativity (Fergusson 1873, p. 93)
Narratives

1. Anu, Enlil and Ninhursagga creating mankind:

“As for my human race, from its destruction will I cause it to be […].
For Nintu my creatures […] will I […].
The people I will cause to…. in their settlements.
Wherever (?) he may build cities, I will cause him to rest in their protection.
Let him lay the brick(s) of our houses in hallowed place(s)”
…. he made straight for him;
The sublime commandments and precepts he made perfect for him.
When Anu, Enlil, Enki, and Ninhursagga
Had created mankind,
The…. of the earth they caused to produce (?);
The animals, the four legged creatures of the field, they ingeniously brought into being.
(Heidel 1951, p. 72).

2. The creation of Ulligarra and Zalgarra:

1. When heaven had been separated from the earth, the distant trusty twin,
2. And the mother of the Goddesses had been brought into being;
3. When the earth had been brought forth (and) the earth had been fashioned;
4. When the destinies of heaven and earth had been fixed;
5. (When) trench and canal had been given (their) right courses,
6. (And) the banks of the Tigris and the Euphrates had been established,
7. (then) Anu, Enlil, Shamash (and) Ea,
8. The great gods
9. (And) the Anunnaki, the great gods,
10. Seated themselves in the exalted sanctuary
11. And recounted among themselves what had been created.
12. “Now that the destinies of heaven and earth have been fixed,
13. Trench and canal have been given their right courses,
14. The banks of the Tigris and Euphrates
15. Have been established,
16. What shall we do?
17. What (else) shall we create?
18. O Anunnaki, ye great gods,
19. What else shall we do?
20. What else shall we create?”
21. The great gods who were present,
22. The Anunnaki who fixed the destinies,
23. Both (groups) of them, made an answer to Enlil:
24. “In Uzuma, the bond of heaven and earth,
25. Let us slay (two) Lamga gods.
26. With their blood let us create mankind.
27. The service of the gods be their portion,
28. For all times
29. To maintain the boundary ditch,
30. To place the hoe and basket
31. Into their hands
32. For the dwelling of the great gods,
33. Which is fit to be an exalted sanctuary,
34. To mark off field from field,
35. For all time
36. To maintain the boundary ditch,
37. To give the trench (its) right course,
38. To maintain the boundary stone(?)
39. To water the four regions of the earth(?)
40. To raise plants in abundance,
41. Rains(?) [...],
(Heidel 1951, pp. 68, 69, 70).
3. Ninhursag creating mankind:

1-2. *(destroyed)*

3. “What is little he shall rise to abundance;
4. The […] of creation (?) man shall bear."
5. The goddess they called, […],
6. The help (?) of the gods, the wise Mami:
7. “Thou art the mother-womb,
8. The creatress of mankind;
9. Create man that he may bear the yoke;
10. That he may bear the yoke […].
11. The … of creation man shall bear.”
12. Nintu opened her mouth
13. And said to the great gods:
14. “With me alone it is impossible to do;
15. With his help there will be Man.
16. He shall be the one who [fears] all the [gods].
17. Clay […].
18. Enki opened his mouth
19. And said to the great gods:
20. “In the mouth of substitution (?) and help,
21. Of the purification of the land (and) the judgment of its shepherd,
22. Let them slay a god,
23. And let the gods…..
24. With his flesh and his blood
25. Let Ninhursag mix clay.
26. God and man
27. ….united (?) in the clay.

(Heidel 1951, p. 67)
4. The Slaying of the Labbu:

Obverse

1. The cities sighed, the people.[…],
2. The people decreased in number.[…];
3. For their lamentation there was none [to….],
4. For their cry there was none [to….].
5. “Who [brought forth] the serpent (-dragon)?”
7. Enlil drew a picture of [the dragon] in the sky:
8. “(A stretch of) fifty double-hours is his length (and of) one double hour [his height],
9. Six cubits his mouth, twelve cubits [his….],
10. Twelve cubits is the circumference of [his] ea[rs];
11. At (a distance of) sixty cubits he [can snatch (?) the birds;
12. In the water nine cubits he drags;
13. He raises his tail […].”
14. All the gods of heaven […].
15. In heaven the gods lay prostrate before [Sin]
16. and hast[ily(?)] grasped the robe of Sin:
17. “Who will go and slay the labbu,
18. [And so deliver the wide land from him (?)],
19. And exercise kingship [over all(?)]!”
20. “Go Tishpak, slay the labbu,
21. [And so deliver the wide land [from him(?)],
22. and exercise kingship [over all(?)]!”
23. “Thou hast sent me, O lord, [to slay(?)] the creature of the river;
24. But I do not know the [….] of the Labbu.”

Heidel makes an analogy to the Enuma Elish, and presumes that Tishpak either does not take up arms against the Labbu, or fails in his attempt, and another god slays the dragon. The rest of the obverse and the beginning of the reverse of this tablet are destroyed, and the battle is already engaged when it becomes legible.
Reverse

1. [...] he opened his mouth and [spoke] to god […]:
2. “stir up the clouds (and) create (?) a storm;
3. The seal of thy life [thou shalt hold (?)] before thy face;
4. Shoot off (an arrow) and sl[ay] the labbu […].”
5. He stirred up the clouds (and) [created(?)] a storm,
6. The seal of his life [he held (?)] before his face,
7. He shot off (an arrow) and [slew] the labbu […].
8. For three years (and) three months, one day and a [night]
9. The blood of the labbu flowed […].

(Heidel 1951, pp. 141, 142, 143).

5. Marduk and Aruru creating peacefully together:

Marduk laid a reed upon the face of the waters
He formed dust and poured it out beside the reed.
That he might cause the gods to dwell
in the habitation of their hearts desire,
He formed mankind,
The Goddess Aruru together with him
created the seed of mankind.
The beasts of the field he formed.
The grass, the rush of the marsh, the reed,
and the forest he created,
The lands, the marshes and the swamps,
the wild cow and her young the wild calf;
the ewe and her young, the lamb of the fold;
plantations and forests...he bought into existence.

(L.W. King, The Seven Tablets of Creation, pp. 131-7 in Baring & Cashford 1993, p. 280).
6. The Epic of Gilgamesh:

You made him, O Aruru, now create his equal; let it be as like him as his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart for stormy heart...So the goddess conceived as image in her mind, and it was the stuff of Anu of the firmament. She dipped her hands in water and pinched off clay, she let it fall in the wilderness, and noble Enkidu was created (N.K. Sanders, The Epic of Gilgamesh, pp. 62-3, in Baring & Cashford 1993, p. 279).

7. Enuma Elish

This creation epic is over one thousand lines of cuneiform writing, recorded on seven clay tablets. The version in Alexander Heidels The Babylonian Genesis is pieced together from tablets found in King Arshurbanipal’s library at Nineveh, an Assyrian version from Ashur, a Neo Babylonian version from Kish, and another from Uruk, along with fragments of tablets from various antique dealers, the history of which is uncertain. The Enuma Elish is a creation epic dated at the first Babylonian dynasty c. 1894-1595 B.C.E. (Heidel 1951).

Tiamat is both female and bisexual (Eliade 1978, p. 70), a creatrix who is often described as having serpentine attributes from whose body the universe is born. In the Enuma Elish s/he is slain by Marduk, who splits her in two... “with one half of her corpse he formed the sky, with the other he fashioned the earth, and he then established Anu, Enlil and Ea in their respective domains” (Heidel 1951, p. 9).

Kingu is celebrated in the text as among the first born of Apsu and Taimat. He is chosen by Taimat to carry the “tablet of destinies”, to have dominion over all the gods, to march at the head of the army, and to direct the forces. Upon slaying Taimat Marduk takes the “tablet of destinies” for himself, an act that gives him divine rule, and as such political hegemony. After he achieves all of this he goes on to create man, whose lot is the service of the gods. He kills the captured
Kingu, and creates mankind from his blood.

As the poem is very long, I provide several sections that are the most relevant to this study. In the first section Taimat is still recognised as “she who gave birth to them all”.

**Enuma Elish**

**Extract from tablet I:**

1. When above the heaven had not (yet) been named,
2. (and) below the earth had not (yet) been called by a name;
3. (When) Apsû primeval and their begetter,
4. Mummu, (and) Tiâmat, she who gave birth to them all,
5. (Still) mingled their waters together,
6. And no pasture land had been formed (and) not (even) a reed marsh was to be seen;
7. When none of the (other) gods had been brought into being,
8. (When) they had not yet been called by (their) name(s, and their)
destinies had not (yet) been fixed,
9. (At that time) were the gods created within them.
10. Lahmu and Lahamu came into being; they were called by (their) names.

(Heidel 1951, p. 18)

The narratives goes on to tell of the birth of another pair; Anshar and Kishar, who “surpassed them”. To this pair is born Anu, a sky god, who brings forth Nudimmud, in his likeness. Nidummud is another name for Enki, or Ea, a powerful god of wisdom, of the sweet waters and magic.

These younger gods “disturbed Tiamat and assaulted their keeper “Yea, they disturbed the inner parts of Tiamat, moving and running about in the divine abode. Apsu could not diminish their clamour”. Apsu and Mummu devise a plan to destroy the youngsters so that they may “have rest by day (and) sleep by
night!

Tiamat is furious.

Apsu is determined to carry out the plan, and the story takes a twist at this point where Ea steps into the fray, subdues and kills Apsu, takes his power and “on Apsu he established his abode”. After moving in ea and his wife Damkina “dwelt in splendor” and bring forth Marduk, and the Apsu is still referred to as holy. “Within the holy Apsu Marduk was born.” Marduk is described as a splendid and awesome being, who goes on to disturb Tiamat and upset the other gods:

**Extract from tablet I:**

109. The gods were not at rest, carrying on(?) like the storm(?);
110. They planned evil in their heart(s).
111. They said to Tiamat, their mother:
112. “When they slew apsu, thy spouse,
113. Thou didst not march at his side, but thou didst sit quietly.
114. He made…. Fear.
115. Disturbed is thine interior, and we cannot rest.
116. Remember(?) Apsu, thy spouse,
117. And Mummu, who were vanquished; thou dwellest alone.
118. Thou art [not a [mother], restless] thou runnest about.
119. […] thou dost not love us (anymore).

(Heidel 1951, pp. 22, 23)

Tiamat rises to the challenge and sets her heart on doing battle. She brings forth an army of demons as her host. Mother Hubur is another designation for Tiamat:

132. Mother Hubur, who fashions all things,
133. Added (thereto) irresistible weapons, bearing monster serpents
134. [Sharp of tooth (and) not sparing the fang (?).
135. [With poison] instead of blood she filled their bodies.
136. Ferocious [dra]gons she cl[othed] with terror,
137. She crowned (them) with fear-inspiring glory (and) made them like gods,
138. So that he who would look upon them should pe[rish] from terror,
139. So that their bodies might leap forward and none turn back [their breasts]
140. She set up the viper, the dragon, and the ,
141. The great lion, the mad dog, and the scorpion man,
142. Driving storm demons, the dragonfly, and the bis[on],
143. Bearing unsparing weapons, una[fraid of ba[tle].]
144. Powerful were her decrees, ir[resistible were they.
145. Altogether (?) eleven (kinds of monsters) of this sort she brought [into being].
(Heidel 1951, pp. 23, 24)

Tiamat chooses her first born, Kingu, as the leader of her host. She gives him the tablet of destinies, and fastens it to his breast giving him “supreme dominion”. Marduk is chosen by Anshar to lead a host against Tiamat, however Marduk demands the tablet of destinies as his battle prize:

Extract from tablet II:

123. If I am inde[ed to be your avenger,
124. To vanquish Tiamat and to keep you alive,
125. Convene my lot supreme.
126. When ye are joyfully seated together in the Court of assembly,
127. May I through the utterance of my mouth determine the destinies instead of you.
128. Whatever I decree shall remain unaltered,
129. The command of my lips shall not return (void) it shall not be changed.”
(Heidel 1951, pp. 29, 30)
Marduk and Tiamat meet, after exchanging accusations they enjoin in battle:

Extract from tablet IV:

86. Come thou forth (alone) and let us, me and thee, do single combat!"
87. When Tiamat heard this,
88. She became like one in a frenzy (and) lost her reason.
89. Tiamat cried out loudly (and) furiously,  
90. To the (very roots) her two legs shook back and forth.  
91. She recites an incantation, repeatedly casting her spell;
92. As for the gods of battle, they sharpen their weapons.
93. Tiamat and Marduk, the wisest of the gods, advanced against one another;
94. they pressed on to single combat, they approached for battle.  
95. The lord spread out his net and enmeshed her;  
96. The evil wind, following after, he let loose in her face.  
97. When Tiamat opened her mouth to devour him,  
98. He drove in the evil wind, in order that (she should) not (be able) to close her lips.  
99. The raging winds filled her belly;  
100. Her belly became distended, and she opened wide her mouth.  
101. He shot off an arrow, and it tore her interior;  
102. It cut through her inward parts, it split (her) heart.  
103. When he had subdued her, he destroyed her life;  
104. He cast down her carcass (and) stood upon it.  
105. After he had slain Taimat, the leader,  
106. Her band broke up, her host dispersed.

(Heidel 1951, pp. 40, 41)

After slaying Taimat Marduk takes the “tablet of destinies” from Kingu, splits Tiamat in two and...“with one half of her corpse he formed the sky, with the other he fashioned the earth” (Heidel 1951, p. 9). He also organises the cosmos, setting up stellar constellations that determine the calendar, builds gates in
the east and west for the sun to enter and depart, and fixes the zenith in the centre of the sky.

After he achieves all this he goes on to create man, whose lot is the service of the gods. He kills the captured Kingu, and creates mankind from his blood:

**Extract from tablet IV:**

129. The lord trod upon the hinder part of Tiamat,
130. And with his unsparing club he split (her) skull.
131. He cut the arteries of her blood
132. And caused the north wind to carry (it) to out of the way places.
133. When his fathers saw (this), they were glad and rejoiced
134. (And) sent him dues (and) greeting gifts.
135. The lord rested, examining her dead body,
136. To divide the abortion (and) to create ingenious things (therewith).
137. He split her open like a mussel(?) into two (parts);
138. Half of her he set in place and formed the sky (therewith) as a roof.
139. He fixed a crossbar (and) posted guards;
140. He commanded them not to let her waters escape.
141. He crossed the heavens and examined the regions.
142. He placed himself opposite the *Apsu*, the dwelling of Nudimmud.
143. The lord measured the dimensions of the *Apsu*,
144. And a great structure, it’s counterpart, he established, (namely) *Esharra,*
145. The great structure *Esharra* which he made as a canopy.
146. Anu, Enlil, and Ea he (then) caused to inhabit their residences.

(Heidel 1951, pp. 42, 43)
The creation of mankind

Extract from tablet VI:

1. As [Mar]duk hears the words of the gods,
2. His heart prompts (him) to create ingenious things.
3. He conveys this idea to Ea.
4. Imparting the plan [which] he had conceived in his heart:
5. “blood will I form and cause bone to be;
6. Then I will set up lullu, ‘Man’ shall be his name!
7. Yes, I will create lullu: Man!
8. (Upon him) shall the services of the gods be imposed that they may be at rest.
9. Moreover, I will ingeniously arrange the ways of the gods.
10. They shall be honoured alike, but they shall be divided into two (groups)
11. Ea answered him, speaking a word to him,
12. To make him change his mind concerning the relief of the gods:
13. “Let a brother of theirs be delivered up;
14. Let him be destroyed and men be fashioned.
15. Let the great gods assemble hither,
16. Let the guilty one be delivered up, and let them be established.”
17. Marduk assembled the great gods.
18. Ordering (them) kindly (and) giving directions.
19. The gods pay attention to his word,
20. As the king addresses a word to the Anunnaki, (saying:)
21. “Verily, the former thing which we declared to you has come true!
22. (Also now) I speak the truth under oath(?) by myself.
23. who was it that created the strife,
24. And caused Tiamat to revolt and prepare for battle?
25. Let him who created the strife be delivered up;
26. I will make him bear his punishment, be ye at rest.”
27. The Igigi, the great gods answered him,
28. The “king of the gods of heaven and earth,” the counsellor of the
gods, their lord:
29. “Kingu it was who created the strife,
30. And caused Tiamat to revolt and prepare for battle.”
31. They bound him and held him before Ea;
32. Punishment they inflicted upon him by cutting (the arteries of) his
blood.
33. With his blood they created mankind;
(Heidel 1951, pp. 46, 47).

8. The Deeds and Exploits of the God Ninurta:

Following a hymnal introduction, the poem begins the story with an address to
Ninurta by Sharur, his personified weapon. For some un-stated reason the Sharur
has set his mind against the Asag-demon, and therefore his address is full of
phrases extolling the heroic qualities and deeds of Ninurta, whom he urges to
attack and destroy the monster. Ninurta sets out to do as bidden. At first he
seems to have met more than his match, and he “flees like a bird.” However, the
Sharur addresses him once again with re-assuring words. Ninurta now attacks
the Asag fiercely with all the weapons at his command, and the demon is
destroyed.

With the destruction of the Asag, a serious calamity overtakes Sumer. The
primeval waters of the Kur rise to the surface, and as a result of their violence no
fresh waters can reach the fields and gardens. The gods of Sumer who “carried
it’s pickax and basket” – that is, who had charge of irrigating Sumer and
preparing it for cultivation – are desperate. The Tigris does not rise; it has no
“good” water in its channel.

Famine was severe nothing was produced,
At the small rivers, there was no “washing of the hands,”
The waters rose not high.
The fields were not watered,
   There was no digging of (irrigation) ditches.
In all the lands there was no vegetation,
   Only weeds grew.

Thereupon the lord put his lofty mind to it.
Ninurta, the son of Enlil, brought great things into being.

Ninurta sets up stones over the Kur, heaping them like a great wall in front of Sumer. These stones hold back the “mighty waters,” and as a result the waters of the Kur no longer rise to (the surface of the) earth. As for the waters which have already flooded the land, Ninurta gathers them and leads them into the Tigris, which is now in a position to water the fields with its overflow. In the language of the poet:

What had been scattered he gathered,
What of the Kur had been scattered,
He guided and hurled into the Tigris,
The high waters it pours over the fields.
Behold now, everything on earth,
Rejoiced afar at Ninurta, the king of the land.
The fields produced abundant grain,
The vineyard and orchard bore their fruit,
(The harvest) was heaped up in granaries and hills,
The Lord made mourning to disappear from the land,
He made happy the spirit of the gods.

Hearing of her son’s great and heroic deeds, his mother, Ninmah, is filled with compassion for him; she becomes so restless that she is unable to sleep in her bedchamber. She therefore addresses Ninurta from afar for permission to visit him and gaze upon him. He looks at her with the “eye of life,” saying:
“O lady, because you would come to the Kur,
O Ninmah, because for my sake you would enter the inimical land,
Because you have no fear of the terror of the battle
surrounding me,
Therefore, of the hill which I, the hero, have heaped up,
Let its name be Hursag (mountain) and you be its queen.”

Ninurta then blesses the Hursag that it may produce all kinds of herbs; wine and honey; various kinds of trees; gold, silver, and bronze; cattle, sheep, and all “four legged creatures.” Following this blessing, he turns to the stones, cursing those which had been his enemies in his battle with the Asag-demon, and blessing those which had been his friends (Kramer, 1956, pp. 199, 200).
Images

1. Boundary Stone of Melishipak
Louvre (Malrux & Salles 1961, p. 395)

2. Section, Boundary Stone of Melishpak

3. Impression from the ‘Temptation Seal’
(Mid third millennium BCE), British museum (Malrux & Salles 1961, p. 37).
4. Eridu- male figurine
(AL Ubaid period, 4th mill)
Bahgdad Museum
(Malrux & Salles 1961, p. 57)

5. UR- Female figurine
(AL Ubaid period, 4th mill) University
Museum Philadelphia. (Malrux & Salles
1961, p. 56)
6. Telloh—Gudea's Libation Goblet
22nd Century BCE) Louvre.
(Malrux & Salles 1961, p. 236).

7. Babylonian Boundary stone
12th Century BCE (Heidel 1951, appendix).

8. The slaying of a seven headed dragon
(Heidel 1951, appendix).
9. The God Marduk
(Heidel 1951)

10. Detail from cylinder seal, Akkadian period (Black & Green 1992).

10. Seal impression depicting a fight between a god and a dragon
(Heidel 1951, appendix)
Bibliography


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