THE GREAT RAINBOW SERPENT DREAMING TRACK: PART OF ONE OF THE GREAT RELIGIOUS BELIEF SYSTEMS OF THE WORLD*

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The now contentious site known as The Old Swan Brewery has been a part of the Aboriginal cultural belief system on the Swan Coastal Plain since before European contact.

Since 1829 Aboriginal people who have lived in the region and have had connections with this site have been subjected to continual domination and harassment by the authoritarian rule of the colonial invaders.

Despite this there has been recognition by these same authorities from the earliest times that the site was of cultural significance to Aboriginal peoples.

There exists in the historical literature many accounts by Europeans about the importance of the site and for them it was a matter of intense curiosity but probably not more that the type of curiosity which was aroused when exploring the cultural beliefs of so many other dominated aboriginal peoples elsewhere in the world.

For the invaders what was most significant was that these beliefs were not Christian, they were, so they thought, beliefs handled down from the devil, and that the believers were poor souls, placed here by God to be converted to Christianity. Only then could these people be expected to take their place in the civilised world, providing of course that they also disposed of all their other cultural practices which were so offensive to the Europeans.

The present State Government has gone to considerable lengths to discredit the beliefs of modern day Aborigines who have sought to preserve what remains of their cultural beliefs, not only at the Swan Brewery Site, or as I prefer to call it, The Waugal Site, but at places such as Yakabindie in the eastern goldfields, and at Marandoo in the Pilbara.

Such has been their concern that Aborigines have been coming to terms with complex legislation over these matters that they have, almost at the stroke of a pen, recently changed the legislation relating to the protection of Aboriginal sites, so that persons such as myself will have a more difficult time in fighting for their preservation.

The Waugal site in Mounts Bay Road is of significance to Aboriginal people, and in particular to a group which is known as the Swan Valley Fringe Dwellers, of which I am one.

The Swan Valley Fringe Dwellers comprise about 100 Nyungar persons and are probably living in what Europeans would call a semi-traditional lifestyle near the banks of the river at Lockridge, a northern suburb of Perth.

Nyungar is the collective name which describes the indigenous people of the South West part of Western Australia.

They are a unique group amongst the more than 10,000 Aboriginal people from many parts of Australia who now live in the metropolitan area, and endeavour to cling to their traditional custom in spite of incredible odds.

Their impoverished camp is established on what anthropologists call a “dreaming track”, that is to say it is located on a place identified with the passage of mythological ancestral spirit beings, and it is for their strong belief in this that these people do not live elsewhere.
The ages of the Fringe Dwellers range from 11 months through to over 80, and the elders have, as is the way with such societies been a primary source of many of the cultural beliefs which today many non-Aboriginal Australians scorn and attempt to undermine.

The scorn is encouraged by entrepreneurial developers and their hand in hand mates the politicians, who nowadays have no time for even their own espoused Christian aspirations let alone those of an alien culture.

The principal Aboriginal belief about the significance of the Mounts Bay Road site is its relationship to the spirit being Waugal.

I would like to read a definition of Waugal which may better explain to you what it is.

Waugal is the name of the supernatural spirit dominating the aquatic environment of the entire coastal plain. It especially resides in deep pools of water and exerts powerful influence on many aspects of Aboriginal life. Inexplicable occurrences such as illness or injury may often by attributed to this force having been previously offended by the individual or near kin. It also has the power of life and death over Aborigines and demands the respect due to it which is set out by custom. Waugal is connected with and is part of the spirit belief which envelops the entire Australian continent and manifests in names such as the "Rainbow Serpent".

In giving this definition I do not try to make people believe, but to understand.

Despite it being a spiritual being there are within the documented literature, accounts of physical manifestations, and some of these have been experienced by people who are still living today.

As with most such phenomena there is no shortage of "educated" skeptics who seek to find rational scientific explanations for these events, rather that to accept that for the peoples of a culture they are indeed rational and for them, the truth.

Significance appears to be something which is culturally specific, and in the western-orientated society which now dominates this region there are very few things of cultural significance unless they are linked to profit, and the exploitation of others. For many Europeans who live here now, culture is something which you go to see in a theatre, and more-often-than-not is some exotic group of performers who have come from outside of Australia.

Those who would deride this belief often distort the name into offensive pronunciations such as "The Snake", and they say that we are living in our own special kind of dreamtime.

They say that because when they drive past the site that because they cannot see some sort of ridiculous fire breathing dragon like creature poking its Loch Ness Monster like head from the waters that it does not exist.

It is as ridiculous as myself making an assertion that God is actually a large white man sitting on a throne atop some puffy clouds with a number of cherub like angels, also white, flying about his head and blowing trumpets.

I suppose that many of us who are gathered here today have our own religious beliefs and would appreciate the insult which is felt by the Aboriginal people who are seeking to defend what is left of their religion.

The Swan River region has some of the oldest human archaeological sites on the entire continent of Australia, about forty thousand years old at Upper Swan near Guildford, and one would expect that there would be a degree of rejoicing from those living adjacent to such a distinguished environment, but with the Europeans this is not so. I suspect that if they thought that these ancient sites represented their ancestors then the story in relation to the preservation of them and the oral tradition which surrounds them might be a very different one.

For some people, the mere acknowledgement of them seems to threaten the very core of the Christian religion. There are very few places on earth where it is reasonable to suppose that there has been a single culture enjoying a continuous process of volutinary development. Continuous that is until 1697 when the first Europeans, Dutchmen, rowed up the Swan River with the intention of capturing Aboriginal people for commercial exploitation.

The entire Swan River and its associated waterways is connected with the belief in Waugal, and for the Swan Valley Fringe Dwellers and many others the belief is alive and real. Any interference with the sites or ridicule of the belief is felt as a direct threat to Waugal, and in turn the believers.

Damage and destruction of sites of significance causes severe and usually irreparable damage to the well being and health of the peoples who associate with them, such is their importance, and the site at Mounts Bay Road is no exception. I have no doubt that if the government gets its way in this issue that there will be some very unfortunate results.

It will be just one more step in the genocidal action which has taken place in this country since 1788, and for anyone who doubts the use of the word genocide I suggest that they look at the United Nations definition.