Bah’naga and Mun’dah

THE STORY OF HOW THE RED BELLIED BLACK SNAKE CAME TO BE

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Throughout the past two hundred years, society has come to regard the Koori Dreaming stories as something akin to the fairy stories they were told as children.

However, for thousands upon thousands of years, the stories in this book were used as a teaching tool to impart to the youngest members of the clans the laws which governed the cultural behaviour of clan members. The successive attempts to destroy the Koori culture and assimilate The People into the Euro-centric population were unsuccessful, and the Dreaming Stories were able to continue in their disguise as charming legends where animals became the heroes and the heroines.

Historians and anthropologists have studied the Koori culture since they first arrived on this continent, and have come to the conclusion that the D’harawal culture is dead. Of course, this has been done without reference to the descendants of that culture, and without even asking the proper questions. The D’harawal culture is not dead, it is a strong, living, vital culture of the Sydney and South Coast regions that just had to go underground for a while to be able to survive. Now that the right questions have been asked, we have the key to unlock a vast wealth of knowledge of this part of the country in which we live.

It is difficult to explain to a society based on commerce fuelled by the profit motive, that D’harawal culture is not based on the ownership of tangible things like land and dwellings and possessions, but it does have a very strong sense of ownership of information. That information, particularly in story form, was not traded, but could be given, and given freely, but its ownership was respected, those stories were not told or passed on by those to whom they had been given, but the knowledge in them was used by the receiver whilst ever they walked in the Land of the D’harawals, This Land.

It is hoped that our present society is now mature enough to be able to accept the Koori Dreaming stories as they were, as they are, and as they were always destined to be; tools to teach the Children of The People about living with Earth, the Mother, in peace and harmony.

Each story contains several layers of knowledge, the first of which are the secrets. Which can only be passed on or discussed with persons of the same level of knowledge or higher than the story teller. These secrets are never told within a legend, but are remembered separately from the legend itself. These are very important components of any legend, and it is the knowledge of the secrets which determines the level of the person’s worthiness to ownership of that story.

The next layer of knowledge within the stories was the law, or laws, to be obeyed. The laws of the stories were told and often repeated after the telling of each story, after which the laws were discussed and their application in life demonstrated in a variety of ways.

In this series of D’harawal Law Legends, there are many lessons to be learned. The D’harawals believed that children learned better and more quickly when they were encouraged to work through a problem, rather than be told the answer. By sharing the stories of our ancestors with you, it is hoped that not only will you recognise and learn the lessons and laws of the Peoples of This Land, but you will also come to understand and respect the culture of The People and our feelings and relationship with the land.

The stories do not in themselves act as an instruction manual - rather they point the way and encourage The People to think, to learn and to live. It is hoped that by sharing our stories, you too may be able to think, to learn and to live in This Land.

With understanding and respect for each other we can learn to more easily share This Land and live together in peace and harmony.

Frances Bodkin
A very long time ago, there lived a very, very bad tempered man. Now, most men can be cranky at times, particularly when you do something to annoy them, but this one was bad tempered all the time.
And because he had such a bad temper, they called him Bah’naga or Goanna man, because, as you know, Goannas a very bad tempered, and it is wise to keep away from them when yo come across them in the bush.

Whenever The People came across Bah’naga walking along the tracks in the bush they would step aside, because if they didn’t he would push them off the pathway, even old people and little children would be pushed off the pathways into the prickly bushes.

But, one day, Bah’naga found a poison bag, and as he walked along the pathways of This Land, he would wear the poison bag around his neck, ready to use it if The People did not step aside.

This worried The People, they did not want to be killed by being hit with the poison bag as they gathered food or hunted, so they called a big meeting to work out a way of how to steal the poison bag away from Goanna Man.

At the meeting The People formed a big circle so that all could see everyone else, and into the Big Circle came little Black Snake Woman. Now, Mun’dah was called Black Snake Woman because her skin was so black and shiny, and she was so slender. She sat down in the middle of the circle and waited for permission to speak.

But, before she could say anything, Eagle Man strode into the circle. Eagle Man was called Managa because he was the greatest and bravest warrior that ever lived.

“I am the greatest warrior that ever lived!” said Managa. “I will get the poison bag off the Goanna Man, and you will all have me to thank for it.”

The women all sighed with admiration for this brave man, and the men all secretly felt envious of him, wishing that they were even half as brave as he. They cheered him as he strode off into along the pathway that led to Bah’naga’s camp.
Managa had a plan. He planned to approach the Goanna Man just as the sun was about to set in the west.

He knew that if Bah’naga looked up at him he would not be able to see him because the sun would get in his eyes and they would water and be blinded for just so long it took for the Eagle Man to grab the poison bag and flee.

Poor Managa, he forgot one thing.

He forgot, that if you have the sun behind you, you have your shadow in front of you, and, of course, Bah’naga did not have to look up into the setting sun, all he had to do was to look down and see the long shadow of Managa.

And Bah’naga hit poor Managa with the poison bag, and the Eagle Man fell down dead.

Now, back at the circle The People were grieved with the news of Managa’s death, and poor little Black Snake Woman still waited in the middle of the circle for permission to speak.

One of The People remembered that Mun’dah had something to say, and was about to signal for her to speak when into the Circle strode Kangaroo Man.

Kangaroo Man stood proudly in the centre of the Circle. “I am now the greatest warrior in This Land.” He said. “I am also the fastest runner This Land has ever seen, and I have a plan to get the poison bag off Goanna Man.”

Kolbi, now an old man, got feebly to his feet and addressed Burra. “We hear what you say, Burra, but we ask you to be careful.”

Burra laughed. “Do not worry Grandfather. I shall be careful.”
Burra’s plan was to go a distance away from Bah’naga, and run as fast as he could towards the Goanna Man so that by the time he reached him he would be running as fast as he could go, and would grab the Poison Bag as he passed by.

Poor Kangaroo Man. He made one mistake. He forgot that as he ran his feet struck the ground, and Goanna Man heard his footsteps approaching and was ready to hit Kangaroo Man with the poison bag as he passed by.

Poor Kangaroo Man fell down dead beside the body of Eagle Man.

Back at the Circle, little Black Snake Woman was still waiting for a chance to speak when Wombat man waddled into the ring, and silenced all the conversations about poor Burra’s death. “I am neither the bravest warrior in This Land, nor am I the Fastest Warrior in This Land. But I am the strongest warrior that ever lived, and I will find some way to get the poison bag off Goanna Man.”

The People were saddened when they saw poor Wombat Man hurry as fast as he could go to Bah’naga’s camp. And the news soon came back that Poor Wombat Man had been struck by the Poison Bag and his body lay between that of Eagle Man and Kangaroo Man.
Now, at last Mun’ dah, the Black Snake Woman, had a chance to speak to the Circle.

“I will get the poison bag from Goanna Man.” She said quietly. “But in return, I ask only that you allow me and my children to live amongst you in safety.”

Kolbi smiled. “I cannot see, little Mun’ dah that you would succeed where others much stronger and fleeter than you have failed. However, should you take the poison bag from Bah’naga, then we shall honour your request.”

Black Snake woman smiled, then quietly slipped away into the bushes.

Goanna Man was sitting beside his camp fire warming his toes when little Black Snake Woman came through the bushes carrying a coolamon full of delicious ripe berries and fruit.

She silently set the coolamon down beside the Goanna Man, and went around to the other side of the camp fire and sat down.

Goanna Man looked down at the berries, and across at Little Black Snake Woman, and as he ate the sweet, juicy berries, he thought how kind she was.

You see, all his life no one had ever been kind to Goanna Man. Even his parents disliked him, and criticised him all the time, so he grew up to be a very bad tempered person. Now, this very pretty woman had brought him a coolamon full of the sweetest tasting berries he had ever eaten in his life.

When the coolamon was empty, little Black Snake Woman picked it up and disappeared into the bushes.
Bah’naga was a little bit saddened when she left because he would have liked to ask her name. But pretty soon she returned, and this time the Coolamon was full to the brim of nice, juicy, wriggling witchetty grubs, and once again, she silently set it down beside Bah’naga, and went around to the other side of the fire and sat down.

Goanna Man could not believe his luck. Never in his whole life did anyone ever do anything such as this for him. As he ate the grubs he watched Black Snake Woman, and wondered if she would become his wife. She was pretty, and she was clever. She knew exactly which berries and grubs were the juiciest. And if she became his wife, then he would be the envy of every warrior in This Land.

But there was a problem. No one had ever been nice to Goanna Man, so he did not know how to be nice to other people. He did not know how to say thank you. He did not even know how to smile or to laugh. Worse still he did not even know how to ask Little Black Snake Woman to become his wife.

He was puzzling over what to do when little Black Snake Woman stood up. “I am feeling a little bit cold.’ She said. “Do you mind if I move closer to the fire?”

Bah’naga was delighted. “Come closer.” He said. “I am feeling a little bit cold, too, perhaps if you sat next to me, we could keep each other warm.”

Mun’dah sat down next to him, and smiled up at him. “I thank you.” She said.

Bah’naga looked at her shiny, black skin, at her glossy hair, and at her slender limbs, and thought how graceful she was. Then he remember once, long ago, watching a man and a woman together, and the man put his arm around the woman’s shoulders.

Perhaps, he thought, I could do the same.
As Goanna Man put his arm around Little Black Snake Woman’s shoulders, the poison bag that he wore around his neck swung in front of her face.

Swiftly, Mun’dah’s sharp teeth bit through the sinew that held the poison bag around Bah’naga’s neck, and swallowed it.

The Goanna man cried out with rage as Little Black Snake Woman fled silently into the bushes.
Now, in case you are mistaken, the law of this story is not “never trust a woman.”

Nor is it “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.”

By the time Little Black Snake Woman got back to the circle, the whole of her front had turned red from the poison. But it had also done something else to her. It had turned her deaf so that she could no longer hear The People.

“I now have the poison bag which once belonged to Bah’naga.” She said.

The People were surprised to see her return, and they expressed concern at what they perceived were her injuries.

“As you can see the poison had turned the front of me red and yellow,” she said, “But it has also made me deaf, and I can no longer hear you approach me.”

The People were saddened at this, because they admired Black Snake Woman’s bravery, and realised that being deaf would place her and her children in great danger. It meant that she could no longer hunt the mice and frogs and insects that her children loved to eat.

“Because of your bravery in saving us from Bah’naga’s poison bag, we invite you and your children to live amongst us in peace and in safety. We will no longer hunt you, nor will we harm you or your children.” They made the signs to her of what they had said.

Mun’dah was very grateful. “Should you see me or my children sunning ourselves on the pathways, or curled up on a rock asleep, do not try to call to us, because we will no longer be able to hear you. Nor try to touch us for we may awake in fright and attack you in fear. Instead, I ask that you simply stamp your feet three times on the ground, and we will feel your presence and move to one side, to allow you to pass in safety.”

The People were grateful for this, because they knew how protective Little Black Snake Woman was of her children, and they expressed sorrow for what they had done in the past.

Mun’dah was happy, so she made one more promise. “Now that I have Bah’naga’s poison bag, when you allow me and my children to live in safety amongst you, we promise that we will protect you from all other venomous snakes and spiders.”
And that is why the Red Bellied Black Snake is allowed to live amongst The People, because she will not only eat her favourite food of frogs and mice, but she will also eat those other creatures that may be a danger to The People.

And, of course, thanks to Mun’ dah, the red bellied Black Snake Woman, The People learned a very important lesson.

Kind acts and soft words will achieve what bravery and strength cannot.

Sometimes soft words and kindness will achieve that which bravery and strength cannot.

Can you think of times at school, or even at home, when this law would apply? Even little things, like accidentally treading on your brother or sister’s foot. Isn’t it better to say “Oops, sorry, I didn’t mean it.” than to say “That was your fault, you shouldn’t have had your feet there?”

Can you think of any lessons you have learned from this story?

When you see a red bellied black snake sunning itself on the pathway, just stamp your feet on the ground, and it will move away.

Goannas are very bad tempered, and it is best to leave them alone.

Ferns are where the red bellied black snakes like to make their home, so it is best to be very careful when moving through ferns, and keep to the track.

Red bellied black snakes will not bite you unless they feel threatened.

These lessons are all very sensible aren’t they? Did you know that most people who have been bitten by red bellied black snakes have been trying to kill the snake?

And when you are walking through ferns it is very difficult to hear your footsteps, so it is always wise to keep to the track so that you can see your way clearly.

And, of course, everybody knows how bad tempered goannas are, and how it is best to keep away from them, and not chase them. Although Goannas no longer have a poisonous bite - thanks to Mun’dah the red bellied black snake, they can still give you a very nasty bite which takes a long time to heal, and can be very painful. Now, can you think of any more lessons you may have learned from this story?
I’ll bet that you didn’t realise how many words of the Aboriginal languages that you use already. Can you think of some?

Like the names of some animals, koala, wombat, kangaroo, numbat, wallaby, or the names of places, like Bondi, Milperra, Bunnerong, Coogee, Leumeah, Mittagong. What about the word Corroboree?

What new words of the D’harawal language have your learned from this story?

Bah’naga - goanna
Diruwan - magpie
Burran - kangaroo
Gugarra - kookaburra
Mananga - eagle
Mun’dah - red bellied black snake
Ganno’kan - bird’s nest fern.

Do you think you could do a drawing of the animals in this story and print their D’harawal names on the piece of paper?

Some facts about snakes.

Snakes move around without legs by gripping the ground with the scales on their bellies and moving forward by contracting their stomach muscles.

Snakes are able to swallow prey that is much larger than their mouths because the two halves of their jaws are joined together by an elastic ligament which allows them to stretch their mouths and swallow their prey.
Snakes have a forked tongue which they constantly flick in and out of their mouths, this enables them to detect, and both taste and smell their prey.

Snakes do not have any ears and detect tiny vibrations in the ground. That is why Mun’dah, in the story you have just read, asked The People to stamp on the ground before approaching her, and she will move away.
The red bellied black snake likes to live near water, and is active during the day in warm weather, but hibernates during cold weather. The female gives birth to an average of 12 young in late summer to early autumn, which are about 20cm long. An adult can grow to 2.7m long.

Red bellied black snakes like to eat frogs, lizards, other reptiles, small mammals and eels

If you or a friend are ever bitten by a snake, do not waste time trying to catch the snake, instead apply a broad, constrictive bandage over the wound, binding towards the heart, and covering the whole limb if possible.

When the wound is bandaged, tie a stick to the limb so that it cannot move. If you can, telephone for an ambulance, but if you are too far away from a phone, or a stretcher, help your friend to walk, but don’t let him or her run. Keep your friend calm, and talk to him or her.

Some Facts about Goannas

This is our largest lizard and can grow to about 1.5m. in length.
It likes to lay its eggs, (6-20) in termite mounds where the warmth of the mound will hatch the eggs, and the termites will keep the eggs safe until they hatch.

Goannas like to eat small birds and eggs, small mammals, reptiles, insects and dead things. Sometimes, though, Goannas hang around picnic areas and scavenge for scraps. It is best not to feed goannas or leave food scraps around because by doing this you do not help goannas to live properly in their natural environment.

When frightened, a goanna will quickly climb the nearest tree, and if it feels threatened will rear up on its hind legs and lash out with its tail.

It is best to leave goannas alone if you happen to find one in the bush. Although it does not have venom, it can give you a nasty bite which could take a long time to heal. Besides that, they have very sharp claws that can inflict a deep, painful scratch.