

## HOW BUNJIL GOT PROMOTED TO GOD

Bunjil the Eagle is often cited by Woiwurrung people as their equivalent of God, but that does not make much sense to me from a traditional Aboriginal cultural perspective.

It can be a bit dangerous for a non-Aboriginal person to question such things, but the reality is that Aboriginal people have been subject to many generations of indoctrination into 'white' thinking. Also, Aboriginal people have suffered such cultural loss that understandably they want to cling closely to any information or cultural practice handed down.

The problem is that the idea of Terra Nullius did not just proclaim Australia as a continent '*owned by no-one*'. It painted Aboriginal people as a simple, primitive, backward bunch of stone-age wanderers. Historians and anthropologists have drawn their conclusions based on western cultural assumptions and many of these assumptions have leached insidiously into present day Aboriginal thinking. The term 'Cultural Expropriation' could perhaps be coined.

Conclusions that seem eminently logical to European minds are not questioned. People fail to ask: *Well how did Aboriginal think when they were confronted with that problem? How did they make sense of it from their perspective?*

For instance, Aboriginal stories are often presented as simple animal fantasies. Totem meanings of the animals are rarely explained. For instance Eagle is the totem for power, Crow means wisdom, Owl means death, Turtle means age or Blue Wren signifies a little girl and so on.

Totems also represent sophisticated ecological concepts. For instance Aboriginal philosophy splits the world as into complementary opposites, much like the Taoist ideas of Yin and Yang. The world is seen to compose of dualities like night and day, male and female, hot and cold, up and down, thunder and lightning, wind and rain and so on. Everything is held in balance within these two halves of reality.

In eastern Australia these halves (moiety) were represented by the totems of Bunjil the Eagle and Wagara the Crow. To designate one of these moiety totems as the Supreme Being upsets this idea of universal balance.

As indicated, Bunjil is also the totem for power and Wagara the totem for wisdom, so this directly implies that power and wisdom must be kept in balance. Power must be exercised with wisdom and wisdom has to be recognised as a source of power. Also, within the original Woiwurrung skin-group marriage system, both Eagle and Crow represented the father-child relationship.

When Victorian colonisation began in 1835, the Woiwurrung were confronted with evangelistic Christians such as the Aboriginal Protector, William Thomas. One of the earliest sermons by Thomas in 1839 was '*The All-Seeing Eye of God*'.

In it he painted the Christian God as almighty, all-powerful, all-seeing and vengeful, as well as having a special father-son relationship. Thomas recorded God's name in Woiwurrung as *Marmanella*, but this is more a form of address meaning '*Our Father*'. So it seems likely that Woiwurrung people were just reflecting the words Thomas commonly used in prayer.

Like in the Jewish faith where the name of God 'Yahweh' tended to be secret and not openly spoken, so the name of the Supreme Being in many Aboriginal tribes tended not to be spoken. In many south-east Australian tribes this secret name was Baiamee, with Bunjil being a major Creator Spirit responsible for creating the wind and the sky, in other words the heavens.

However in 1888 William Barak disclosed that Booriel was the Woiwurrung name for the Supreme Being. Barak said that Booriel was an infinite being who was discussed as little as possible, because you could look foolish in discussing something beyond comprehension.

On hearing sermons about the Christian God, the first question likely to arise in the mind of an Aboriginal person was therefore: *What is this God fellow's totem?*

Logical reflection would be along the lines: *Well, both Eagle and Crow represent the father-child relationship, but Crow represents all-knowing wisdom, while Bunjil represents almighty power. Bunjil also has all-seeing eyes, and was the Creator of the Heavens, where this God-fellow is supposed to live, so his totem must be Bunjil.*

Apart from being a Creator Spirit, Bunjil was also an Ancestor Hero of human form. So the stories of how Bunjil once walked on Earth now became a parallel for Christ's time on Earth. This therefore reinforced the primary totemic connection of God with Bunjil. Also, as Christ now became the medium for Christian ascent to Heaven, the parallel with Bunjil as Creator of the Heavens was complete.

With the effluxion of time and the continual erosion of cultural knowledge through the Mission Station era, I therefore believe Bunjil ended up being promoted by Woiwurrung people in the neo-colonial period from a Creator-Spirit and Ancestor-Hero, to the Supreme Being. Regardless of this promotion however, Bunjil can nonetheless still be legitimately regarded as God's Totem to contemporary Woiwurrung people.