

Dreaming Lands

Country

Rainbow Serpent across the land

Baiame and the sky world

Tagai among island stars

Seven Sisters on the move

20 FIGURES TO FIND IN THE LAND

AUSTRALIA

Contents

Introduction

Where these stories
come from

FEATURE Rainbow Serpent

I section1 — Creation
and Cosmos

II section2 — Sky Beings
and Ancestral Powers

III section3 — Journey
Stories and Heroes

IV section4 — Spirits,
Creatures and
Powerful Places

Sources and a note on
respect



Tagai spans the island sky.

Australian Aboriginal Mythology Field Guide

Across Australia, many Aboriginal peoples tell stories of ancestral beings, sky figures, journeys and powerful places. Versions belong to particular Countries and language groups, and they are not one single system. This guide keeps to widely published, public accounts of figures such as the Rainbow Serpent, Tagai, the Seven Sisters, Bunjil and Baiame, while noting that details differ from region to region and from one community to another.

Its second purpose is practical and imaginative: to help you look at ridgelines, waterholes, storm clouds and the night sky and notice shapes that recall these stories. That is an artistic exercise, not science or history, and not a claim that landforms were deliberately shaped to match stories. Start with the long curves of the Rainbow Serpent and the bright star path of the Seven Sisters, then let other figures emerge more slowly as comparisons in rock, weather and light.

Rainbow Serpent across the land

CONTEXT

Where these stories come from

The stories in this guide come from many distinct Aboriginal traditions across the continent now called Australia, including traditions that are actively taught and maintained today. There is no single Aboriginal mythology: beings such as the Rainbow Serpent, Baiame, Bunjil, Tagai, Wandjina or Barnumbirr belong to specific regions, languages and ceremonial histories, and published versions may differ in name, role and emphasis. Much of what non-Indigenous readers can access in print was recorded by settlers, missionaries, anthropologists and collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, often through translation and with uneven understanding. Other important sources are more recent books and exhibitions created with Aboriginal custodians, artists and knowledge holders, especially for public education. This guide follows those public, widely circulated versions and avoids restricted material, using them as a careful introduction rather than a complete account.

PRINCIPAL SOURCES

Principal sources for this guide are Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, eds., *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*; National Museum of Australia, *The Seven Sisters*; Hugh Cairns and Bill Yidumduma Harney, *Dark Sparklers: Yidumduma's Wardaman Aboriginal Astronomy*; Mudrooroo, *Aboriginal Mythology: An A-Z Spanning the History of the Aboriginal Peoples from the Earliest Legends to the Present Day*; Robert Lawlor, *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime*; A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*; and K. Langloh Parker, *Australian Legendary Tales*.



Stories live in many kinds of Country.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE WELL

Read each figure as belonging to a particular Country, not to Australia in general. Expect more than one version. Use the land cues as a drawing exercise for attention: serpent bends in rivers, a watcher in a cliff face, a canoe of stars. They are comparisons only, not proof, archaeology or a map of belief.



The ancestral serpent moves through water and land.

THE FEATURE

Rainbow Serpent

ancestral being, waterholes, rivers, rain, fertility, creation, power, danger, renewal

Across many Aboriginal traditions, a great Serpent is linked with the making of waterways, the coming of rain, and the life held in deep waterholes. Widely published accounts say it travelled through Country shaping features and establishing patterns for living. Names and details vary greatly by region, and some stories stress generosity while others stress the Serpent's dangerous power.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A winding river channel or long waterhole, bending through plains like a scaled body after rain.

Tagai

ancestral culture hero, star figure, law, seasons, seafaring, Torres Strait Islander tradition, navigation

In Torres Strait Islander tradition, Tagai is a major ancestral figure seen in a large pattern of stars across the night sky. Publicly told versions describe how his story teaches proper conduct and helps mark seasonal change, weather, and seafaring time. Different islands may emphasise different parts of the story, but Tagai's place in sky knowledge and law is widely recognised.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A clear sea horizon under a star-filled sky, where a long figure seems to stride above the water.



Tagai keeps his place among sea and stars.

THE TWO BEST FIRST TARGETS

Begin with the Rainbow Serpent and the Seven Sisters. The Rainbow Serpent is the easiest land figure to notice in winding rivers, wet-season channels, escarpment curves and rainbows after storms. The Seven Sisters are the easiest sky figure to find because the Pleiades are bright, compact and widely recognised, with many published Aboriginal versions across Australia.



I · SECTION 1

I Creation and Cosmos

Across Australia, creation and cosmos stories are told in many languages and from many Countries. Published public versions often describe ancestral beings who made places, set patterns for life, and remain present in land, water, weather, and sky. Names, roles, and details differ from one community to another, so this guide keeps to broad, widely shared public accounts.

Above: Creation stories join sky, water and ground.



Baiame watches from the sky.

Baiame

sky ancestor, creator, lawgiver, south-eastern traditions, ceremony, moral order, maker of features

In several south-eastern Aboriginal traditions, especially in public Kamilaroi and neighbouring accounts, Baiame is a sky ancestor associated with creation, law, and the ordering of the world. Published versions often describe him making parts of the landscape and watching from the sky. Older written accounts differ in detail because they were recorded by settlers and ethnographers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A broad dome of sky over a ridge line, with a single high summit standing apart like a watcher.

Wandjina

cloud and rain ancestors, Kimberley rock art, weather powers, Worrorra, Ngarinyin, Wunambal public traditions

In Kimberley traditions, especially among Worrorra, Ngarinyin, and Wunambal peoples, Wandjina are powerful ancestral beings linked with cloud, rain, and the seasonal life of Country. Public versions are well known through rock art and story. Published accounts describe them as beings who shaped aspects of the world and remain connected with weather, though details differ between communities and language groups.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A pale rock wall beneath storm clouds, where rounded faces and halo-like forms suggest rain-bringing presences.

Kuniya

woma python Ancestor, Uluru story cycle, Anangu tradition, journey, conflict, law, place-making

In public Anangu interpretations of Uluru, Kuniya is the woma python Ancestor whose journey and actions are remembered at important features around the rock. Widely shared versions tell of her travelling to Uluru and confronting another being after violence against her relative. The story is tied to specific places and to the continuing significance of Country, rather than to a single isolated episode.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A sinuous fold of red rock at the base of a cliff, curving like a resting python near a shelter.



II · SECTION 2

II Sky Beings and Ancestral Powers

This section gathers widely published public stories about sky beings and ancestral powers from different Aboriginal traditions across Australia. The figures here belong to particular peoples and places, and published versions do not always agree on family ties or exact roles. The landscape cues below are imaginative ways to notice story-shapes in country and sky, not history or archaeology.

Above: Sky powers appear in light and weather.

Bunjil

creator being, eaglehawk form, sky ancestor, lawgiver, organiser of land, people and kin relations

In Kulin traditions, Bunjil is a great ancestral being who helped order the world, make features of the land, and give laws and social patterns to people. Many published accounts describe him as Eaglehawk. After his work was done, he went up into the sky, where he remains associated with the upper world and moral order.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A high ridge above open plains, with one jutting crag like a watchful bird's head.

Daramulum

Daramulun

sky-associated ancestral being, law and initiation figure in published records, messenger or son in some accounts

Published south-eastern accounts describe Daramulum as a powerful ancestral being linked with the sky and with law. In some versions he is connected to Baiame as a son or messenger; in others the relationship is told differently. Older written sources often mention him in relation to men's ceremonial life, so public summaries are brief and careful.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A long cloud band crossing a pale sky, with a narrower tail trailing behind it.



Yhi brings light to the morning.

Yhi

sun woman, light-bringer, warmth, awakening power, life-giving presence in daytime world

In widely published Kamilaroi and Euahlayi tellings, Yhi is a sun woman whose coming brings light and warmth to the world. She is associated with waking life into action and making things visible. Some versions stress her role in enlivening the land and its creatures as daylight spreads across country.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A first burst of sunrise over flat country, lighting tree lines and waterholes one by one.

Bahloo

moon figure, nightly traveller, linked with tides, death, return and recurring cycles

Bahloo is a moon figure in several New South Wales traditions. Published stories often connect Bahloo with the tides and with the repeating pattern of waning and return. In some versions

Bahloo's changes help explain death and renewal, not as simple immortality for people, but as a lesson drawn from the moon's visible cycle.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A bright moon above tidal water, with silver tracks shifting across an estuary or beach.

Mimi

slender spirit beings, western Arnhem Land rock art figures, teachers of skills, elusive bush dwellers

In public stories from western Arnhem Land, Mimi are slender spirit beings associated with rocks, country and old times. They are often shown in rock painting. Published accounts say they taught people practical skills such as hunting, cooking or painting before withdrawing, and they are commonly described as shy and hard to approach.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A line of thin sandstone pillars under an overhang, like narrow bodies sheltering from wind.



III · SECTION 3

III Journey Stories and Heroes

Across Australia, many well-known stories are built around movement: people crossing country, a pursuer following a trail, a star ancestor travelling at dawn, the moon changing as he goes. Publicly shared versions differ by language and place, but they often link story, sky and route, inviting listeners to remember both the land underfoot and the path overhead.

Above: Journey stories cross great distances.



The Seven Sisters travel together across Country.

Seven Sisters

ancestral women, long songline cycle, pursuit story, stars, travel routes, law, country, ceremony

A widely shared cycle tells of seven ancestral sisters travelling across Country while a male pursuer follows them. In many published versions the sisters are linked with the Pleiades, and the pursuer with another star figure. Names, exact routes and events vary from region to region, but the story is consistently one of movement, evasion, kinship and the marking of places along a long path.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A chain of low hills or waterholes stepping across open country, like travellers keeping just ahead of pursuit.

Tiddalik

giant frog, greed, drought, trapped water, animal trickery, laughter, release, renewal

In well-known south-eastern retellings, Tiddalik the frog drinks all the fresh water in the land, leaving animals and plants in distress. The other creatures gather and try to make him laugh.

At last he does, and the water pours back out, refilling rivers, lagoons and billabongs. Versions differ in which animals perform and how the joke succeeds.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A round waterhole beneath a squat hill, as if a swollen frog had settled there after drinking deeply.

Barnumbirr

Yolŋu Morning Star ancestor, Venus, guide, sea crossing, first light, song, knowledge, pathway

In Yolŋu public accounts, Barnumbirr is the Morning Star ancestor, associated with Venus. She is said to have come across the sea and travelled inland, naming or revealing features and bringing knowledge to people. Published versions emphasise guidance, light and route-making; details differ by clan and narration, and some ceremonial knowledge connected with Morning Star traditions is not public.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A bright dawn star above a pale coast or long ridge, seeming to draw a path inland.

Mulian

south-eastern bush being, ogre-like figure, child-stealer in some tellings, cave dwelling, danger, rescue

Mulian appears in south-eastern published story collections as a dangerous bush being, often described in ogre-like terms. In a well-known cave tale, children are taken or trapped and later rescued through courage and clever action. Details vary between retellings, including Mulian's appearance and the exact means of escape, but the warning about risky places remains strong.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A dark cave mouth in a scrubby hillside, with broken rock and shadow where a watcher could hide.

Ngalindi

Yolŋu moon man, lunar phases, kinship conflict, bodily change, death and return, night light

In widely published Yolŋu retellings, Ngalindi is a moon man whose body is cut back bit by bit, explaining the moon's waning. After dwindling away, he returns and grows full again. Some

versions place this within family conflict, including punishment by his wives; others tell it more briefly as a simple account of the moon's changing shape.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

*A thin curved dune or sandbar beside dark water,
shrinking to a sliver before swelling full again.*



IV · SECTION 4

IV

Spirits, Creatures and Powerful Places

This section gathers beings, lights, storm powers and a celebrated stone place from different Aboriginal traditions across Australia. The stories are public versions only, and many have local tellings that differ in detail. For landscape-reading, treat the “look for” cues as imaginative ways of seeing story figures in Country, not as history or geology.

Above: Some places are known for powerful presences.

Bunyip

dangerous water-being, billabongs and swamps, nocturnal threat, warning presence, variable form in different tellings

In south-eastern Aboriginal traditions, Bunyip is a feared being of deep waterplaces such as swamps, creeks and billabongs. Early written accounts recorded very different descriptions, and later retellings vary even more, from seal-like to long-necked or shaggy forms. What stays consistent is danger: Bunyip belongs to certain waters and is not approached carelessly.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A dark billabong under reeds and leaning gums, with one still pool that seems deeper than the rest.

Min Min lights

strange moving lights, inland night country, uncertain meaning, warning or lure, place-specific interpretations

Min Min lights are mysterious lights seen in inland Australia, especially at night over open country. Aboriginal storytelling and later settler reports both describe them, but meanings differ from place to place. In some tellings they warn, in others they mislead travellers or mark a charged place. Published accounts do not present one single explanation.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A far plain after dusk, where a small wavering light seems to hover just above the ground.



Namarrgon arrives with the storm.

Namarrgon

lightning being, storm power, thunder, wet season, western Arnhem Land ancestral force

Namarrgon is the Lightning Man in Kunwinjku and related western Arnhem Land traditions. He is associated with violent storms, thunder and the force of the wet season. In widely shared public accounts, flashes of lightning are linked with his power, while thunder follows his storm-making action. He remains part of living tradition in Arnhem Land today.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

A storm front over stone country, with forked lightning and hard rain sweeping across the escarpment.

Julana

pursuing male figure, Seven Sisters cycle, desert traditions, desire and pursuit, often compared with Orion

Julana is a pursuing male figure in many desert tellings of the Seven Sisters story. He chases the sisters across Country, and across the sky in some versions. Details differ by language and

place, including his name and particular actions. In many public retellings he is often compared with Orion, while the sisters are linked with the Pleiades.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

Three bright stars rising in a line above a low horizon, seeming to follow a clustered group ahead.



Karlu Karlu holds ancestral presence in stone.

Karlu Karlu

rounded granite boulders, Warumungu Country, ancestral action, powerful place, living cultural significance

Karlu Karlu, in Warumungu Country, is a major place of rounded granite boulders with deep cultural significance. Public tradition explains the boulders through ancestral action in the Dreaming, with versions differing in detail between tellings. Today Karlu Karlu is respected as a living place, not simply a scenic site, and should be approached with care and respect.

LOOK FOR IN THE LAND

Great rounded red boulders piled on an open plain, balanced like a gathering of massive stone bodies.

SOURCES

1. Sylvia Kleinert and Margo Neale, eds.. *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*. Oxford University Press, 2000
2. National Museum of Australia. *The Seven Sisters*. National Museum of Australia Press, 2017
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4. Mudrooroo. *Aboriginal Mythology: An A-Z Spanning the History of the Aboriginal Peoples from the Earliest Legends to the Present Day*. Thorsons, 1994
5. Robert Lawlor. *Voices of the First Day: Awakening in the Aboriginal Dreamtime*. Inner Traditions, 1991
6. A. W. Howitt. *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*. Macmillan, 1904
7. K. Langloh Parker. *Australian Legendary Tales*. David Nutt, 1896

Imagery and "Look for in the land" cues are artistic interpretation, not historical or scientific claims.

A NOTE ON RESPECT

A note on names, versions and respect: this guide uses broad English labels where that is what the public sources provide, but many figures also have local names, local histories and local limits on how they should be discussed. Published accounts often disagree because they were recorded in different places, times and languages. This guide is an outsider's introduction. For depth and correction, consult the tradition's own voices: its elders, teachers, cultural centres and community publications.

The plates in this issue are interpretive illustrations, not historical artefacts.



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