

An Aranda *Intichiuma* Ceremony and the Dreamtime¹

(A World Renewal Ceremony and Oral Tradition)

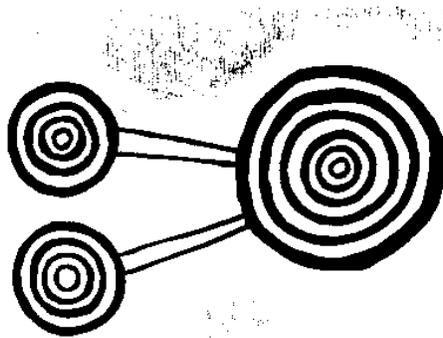
[\(Images and sounds\)](#)

Along with a host of others, you've left the camp, leaving behind the women and the uninitiated and all vestiges of the mundane, your spears and carrying bags, and your social names. You're on a solemn journey to your birth place. Single file, without a sound, you and the others walk in awe. Although it's not far into the desert, few ever visit without invitation.

Your group has arrived, and all immediately begin to clear the ground of the debris and stones that have accumulated since last you were here. The area of some twenty paces is laid smooth. Several go to a nearby rock outcropping and, from the cache, bring out with great care the churinga boards. Some are as long as an arm, most much shorter, all of wood, each richly carved with the signs of the clan ancestors and of their adventures. Sitting in a circle on the cleared earth, the churingas are passed to each of your group in turn. Each holds the oval-shaped boards close, rubbing them against himself.

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Ground Painting
of the Wallunqua (Snake) Totem
(Warramunga Tribe, 2 meters long)



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¹For additional background, see Bell 1983, Berndt and Berndt 1977, Emerson 1985, Frey 1987, Plato 1968, Spencer and Gillen 1899 and 1904, Stanner 1959-63, Strehlow 1947, Thoreau 1960 and Tonkinson 1978.

A couple of the older men begin opening the veins of their arms, letting the life within fall upon the smoothed ground and upon a few other men who sit to one side of the circle. It's a gift of blood. When blood fell from the veins of the ancestors, human sons emerged out of the ground. Song has begun; the words of the ancestors, their names, their birth places, and their adventures are heard in verse. Upon the base of blood is added the white of down feathers and of pipe-clay, and the reds and yellows of clay ochres. The patterning of feather and ochre is as the designs on the churinga boards; and the ground and the men are no longer who they may have been. As the sun sets, a fire is lit. The songs continue. All sense of ordinary time and place is replaced.

In the flickering light of the stars and the fire, those who are painted will dance out the adventures of the ancestors. And the ancestors have emerged. It's they who move about in their ancient landscape. Those who have journeyed have journeyed far, as you now will witness and participate in the *Alcheringa*, the Dreamtime

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The earth is a barren plain...

There are no mountains,.

no rivers,.

no animals,.

no plants...

It's a dry plain,.

without light..

All is in perpetual darkness,.

without form...

Night oppresses the earth.....

There's no life,.

no beginning,.

there's no death...

The sun,.

the moon,.

the animals,.

the plants,.

all are resting in a state of half-dream,.

under the earth,.

in a perpetual eternity...

They do not stir.....

On the surface,

scattered about,...

are half-developed infants..

They do not grow,

they do not die..

All exist in a perpetual eternity....
Karora is one of those in perpetual sleep.
On the earth that covers him,
 is a bed of red,
 of purple flowers.
Near his head towers a churinga pole.

Below this surface of flowers,
 of churinga,
 lies the bandicoot ancestor....

Without warning,
 all over the earth,
 the awakening happens..

Karora begins to think,
 to desire,
 and from his navel,
 from his armpits,
 bandicoots burst through the earth,
 and spring to life....

Now Karora himself breaks through the crust of earth,
 the place where he had laid becomes a soak,
 filled with the sweet dark juice of the honeysuckle buds..

All over,
 the ancestors emerge from the ground,
 born out of their own eternity...

They are the kangaroo,
 the emu,
 the opossum,
 the crocodile,
 the moon,
 the wallaby,

 some are men,
 some are women,
 all are in various shapes,
 various appearances.

They are human,
 they are animal,...
 as one....

The sun floods the land in light.....
Slowly the eyelids of Karora open.
He is yet not fully awake,
 he thinks,



In their hunger,
 Karora sends his sons on a long hunt,
 to search for food.
There is tall grasses,
 trees,
 the sons search for the bandicoots.
In the great expanse,
 no bandicoots are found,
 the sons return to Karora,..
 hungry,.
 tired....
Suddenly,
 a sound comes to the ears of Karora,
 to the ears of his many sons.

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Painting from Aryes Rock
(7 meters in length)



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It is a sound like that which comes from the whirling of the bull-roarer...
Karora,
 his sons search for the sound,
 stabbing at all the bandicoot nests with their sticks..
They search,
 they search...

Something darts up,
 is gone....
 It is a sandhill wallaby.
 The sons throw sticks,
 hit the wallaby,
 break its leg.
 It limps off giving words in song,
 "I've grown lame.
 I'm a man as you are,
 not a bandicoot!" it sings....



Karora,
 the bandicoot brothers return to their soak,
 they sit at its edge in a circle...
 From the east,
 comes a great flood of sweet honey from the honeysuckle buds,...
 washes the bandicoot ancestors back into the soak...
 The rocks,
 the stones that you now see scattered about the soak are the undying bodies of the
 bandicoot brothers.
 At the bottom of the soak lies,...
 Karora himself,
 fast asleep.....

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Words of Karora have been heard and sung. Images of Karora on churinga boards and on ground and body paintings have been viewed and worn. And you have danced with Karora and his Bandicoot Sons, and in the *Alcheringa*.

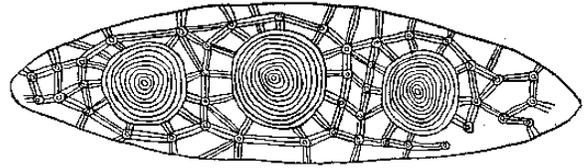
After the churinga boards are placed back in their cache, the designs on body and ground removed and the songs stored in memory, the short journey to camp is made. Each who had just participated is secure in the understanding that the wisdom and spirit of Karora is alive in the Dreamtime, and, as it is alive, so are you. The world is made.

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The following illustrations are the reverse sides of a churinga board. The board is from the Aranda (an Australian Aborigine people) and represents the Frog spirit, an expression of the *Alcheringa*. The wood carving is 39 centimeters in length. On the churinga, the three prominent sets of concentric circles are the celebrated gum-tree at the sacred site near Hugh River. It is out of these trees that the frog comes forth. On the first side (top), the double concentric circles are the bodies of small frogs having just emerged from the trees. The lines connecting them are their limbs. On the reverse side (bottom), the three gum-trees are again

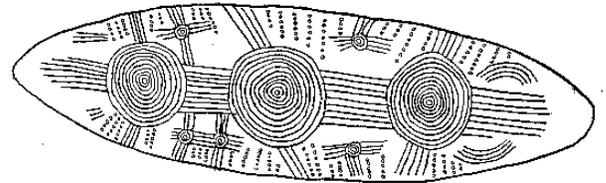
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seen. The series of lines extending from them are their roots. The smaller concentric circles are less important gum-trees with their roots. The dots are the tracks of the frogs as they hop about in the sand of the river bed.



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As happened at the soak of Karora, after many adventures and misadventures, an overpowering weariness falls upon all of the ancestors. And the ancestors return to the earth. But that is not the end of the Dreamtime.



The ancestors have left much behind and even now are still present. Mountains and rivers, fire and the moon, animals and humans, various ceremonials, and death itself are now present on the earth's surface.

Like Karora, the spirit of each ancestor is at his or her resting site: a soak, a rock outcropping, a river's bank. Karora remains at his soak. The entire landscape abounds with these sacred sites. These are the ceremonial places, the places of initiation and of honoring the ancestors, the birth places of the ancestors and of the human descendants of those ancestors.

At each of these sacred sites are kept the churinga boards. Within each carved board is the spirit of the kindred ancestor. Karora's spirit is within his churinga boards.

Each ancestor vested his or her spirit in the particular animal or plant that came from his or her body. The bandicoot seen nesting in the nearby thicket has the spirit of Karora within it. All of the life and all of the landscape we now view is inundated with the spirits of the ancestors.

The ancestors also left the knowledge of the Dreamtime to their human descendants. In the words in song and story, in the actions of ceremonial procedures and in the designs of the churingas, the ways of maintaining the proper relationship with the ancestor and the Dreamtime world are made accessible. In the words, ceremonials and designs are also the spirits of the ancestors. Karora has his particular songs and stories, his ceremonials and designs.

And the spirit of each ancestor is within the human descendants of that ancestor. The human descendants, who share in this kinship, are organized into social clan groupings. The human clan of Karora is the Bandicoot clan, having its own sacred site, churinga boards, songs and ceremonials, and animal kinsmen--the bandicoot. Each is intimately tied in spirit to Karora, their source of life and meaning.

Because of this animal-human kinship, clan members do not eat of their own animal kinsmen. It would be as eating of oneself. But among the various clans, reciprocity predominates, and each shares in the animal kinsmen of other clans. The Bandicoot clan members can eat of the kangaroo, while the Kangaroo clan can eat of the bandicoot. Each sees to the well-being of its own animal kinsmen so that others can eat and so that all life will remain in balance.

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Kangaroo
(Oenpelli Tribe, bark-painting 29" high)



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