

Interpreting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art and Artefacts

Jānis (John) Tālivaldis Ozoliņš

*School of Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia
Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia
Department of Philosophy, Catholic Theological College, University of
Divinity*

The artefacts of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, common with other ethnic peoples, have to be understood not simply as objects that can be described in terms of their physical characteristics and the use made of them, but also as objects that have cultural, historical and religious significance. It is crucial that we see artefacts not just starkly as having utilitarian purposes, but immersed in an Aboriginal world in which they will have different meanings, if not uses, for different Aboriginal communities. It is also important to realise that every Aboriginal community will have prohibitions on outsiders knowing certain things which are sacred to that community and which only designated members of the community can know. Unless individuals are members of that community, they will not be privy to their secret matters. This is to preserve the value of not only certain ceremonies and rituals, but also specific designs, totems and objects. This means that the significance of the artefacts considered below can only be partially understood since our ability to enter the world of a specific Aboriginal community is limited. We remain outsiders and even if invited into the community we can only participate in the community to the extent allowed by the taboos, rituals and laws of the community. This does not mean, however, that we cannot appreciate and admire the aesthetic and cultural value that these artefacts have. We will consider the following artefacts that are distinctly part of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and tradition: (i) the boomerang, (ii) the woomera, (iii) a cave painting and (iv) a piece of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art. We will draw on Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* and

Being to help understand and interpret these artefacts in the context of the Dreaming and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture.

Dilthey's notion of historicity leads Heidegger to realise that meaning and significance originate in human history, since human ideas are formed from within a specific time and culture. In Heidegger's view, this means that we cannot make any sense of human life except through an understanding of its specific context. While a kind of objectivity may apply within the natural sciences, in trying to be objective about human life, we leave out what is central to our lived experience, namely the life world in which we are immersed, and which gives meaning to our activity within it. Heidegger says that *Dasein* is the Being-in-the-world and explains that Being-in is a state of *Dasein*'s Being, but of a different character. In relation to *Dasein*, it means "dwelling" or "residing" in, it means something like "inhabiting the world". Heidegger says that "Being-in" is the formal existential expression for the Being of *Dasein*, which has *Being-in-the-world* as its essential state.¹ When Heidegger speaks of *Being-in-the-world*, he means it in an everyday sense in which we are immersed in our lives. When we encounter objects in our everyday world, they are not objects of study or observation, rather they are objects that are "ready-to-hand", objects which we make use of in our daily lives. We do not think of them as objects, rather as tools. For example, we use pens, hammers, glasses, cars and any number of other items that are at hand. These are functional items that Heidegger calls equipment (*Zeuge*).² To understand anything about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders we have to understand them, as Heidegger argues in relation to *Dasein*, the Being-in-the world, in their "Being-in". This means an understanding of the objects which for them are ready-to-hand, having a use but also charged with meaning as instruments of ritual and spiritual significance. It also means having an understanding of what "Being-with" is for Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples.³ This is because the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), to use Husserl's term that Heidegger also uses in his Freiburg lectures, of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), 80.

² *Ibid.*, 97.

³ Note that I use the older term for the First peoples of Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander peoples, rather than the term now in common use, First Nations, because the term nations does not apply to the way in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders organized their communities.

dictates not only the number and kind of objects or artefacts that are ready-to-hand but also their significance. A nomadic life-world has no use for the accumulation of artefacts and so those things that must be carried from place to place must serve multiple purposes.

Although no analysis of the uncanny resemblance of the Dreaming with Heidegger's conception of the relation between *Dasein* and the world is attempted here, his conception of Being helps us understand the nature of the Dreaming. Heidegger says that the relation between *Dasein* and the world does not coincide with the division between subject and object.⁴ One reason for resisting this for Heidegger is that it creates a gap between *Dasein* and the world. Heidegger argues that the relation is one in which *Dasein* has *being-in* and is towards the world. He observes that knowing is not in the objects known but belongs solely to those entities which know. The question becomes one of explaining how the entity which knows comes out of its own sphere into another external sphere. Heidegger says that no adequate explanation is forthcoming: it is just assumed that there is a connection. The way around this problem is through construing knowing as a mode of Being of *Dasein* as Being-in-the-world. In knowing, *Dasein* achieves a new *status of Being* [*Seinsstand*] towards a world that has already been discovered in *Dasein* itself. Knowing, concludes Heidegger, is a mode of *Dasein* founded upon Being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world is a basic state and must be interpreted beforehand.⁵ For the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, there is no division between themselves and the world in which they are immersed. The Dreaming abides, forming the ground of their Being. It is more than just the historical world of culture, religion and tradition that Aboriginal *Dasein* has its Being-in. The Dreaming is the source of the Aboriginal world and of themselves. In the Dreaming, everything has its being, past, present and future.

It should always be remembered that in speaking of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture that we are generalising, and should really be speaking of Aboriginal cultures, since there is as much variety and difference in Australian Aboriginal cultures as there are in European cultures. We can identify commonalities, just as we can in European cultures, but it is equally wrong to suppose that they are uniform.

⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵ Ibid., 88-90.

Traditions and customs vary from region to region, so that what is a custom in Northern Australia, for instance, may not be in Southern or Western Australia. Thus while the world in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have their Being-in varies, the Dreaming and the Law form the Heideggerian truth of being of which all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are conscious. Place, however, which forms the particular world in which Aboriginal *Dasein* has its Being-in, is important and is reflected in both the art and artefacts of specific communities.

Aboriginal peoples did not use writing to convey stories and traditions, but they did make extensive use of symbolism in their art in order to convey meaning. An important aspect of Aboriginal religion and culture are creation stories from The Dreaming. Aboriginals had a conception of the world as comprising human beings, the plant and animal world, the physical environment and a spiritual realm. Two crucial principles form the basis of Aboriginal world views, and these are the Law and the Dreaming. The former, the Law, provides the rules for the conduct of life and these were handed down to human beings during The Dreaming. It specifies what can be done and what is held to be taboo.⁶

The Dreaming is a symbolic formulation of an intuition of a mystery, which is the *significatum* of the religious rites and myths. Its subject is the imprisoning dialect of human life in aboriginal society, a perennial condition of good-with-suffering.⁷ A central meaning of it is that of a sacred, heroic time long ago when man and nature came to be as they are. The Dreaming conjures up the notion of a sacred, heroic time of the indefinitely remote past, but a time also part of the present. The Dreaming is many things in one. (i) It is a kind of narrative to things which happened, (ii) a charter of things still to happen, (iii) and a kind of *logos* or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man or woman.⁸ If we are to understand what is mean by the Dreaming, then it is wise not to

⁶ Robert Tonkinson, “Australian Aboriginal Society and Culture: An Overview,” in James D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd Ed. (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2015), 236.

⁷ W. E. H. Stanner, and John Hilary Martin, *People from the Dawn: Religion, Homeland, and Privacy in Australian Aboriginal Culture* (Antioch, CA: Solas Press, 2001), 64.

⁸ W. E. H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009), 58-59.

think in non-Aboriginal categories of understanding, but to conceive of things in the metaphysical categories used by the Aboriginal people themselves. Nevertheless, it helps, for non-Aboriginal people, understanding the Dreaming if it can be compared to more familiar ways of thinking. Heidegger's notion of Being as the time or duration in which *Dasein* becomes conscious that it has its being-in-the-world, helps explain how the Aboriginal peoples perceive their relationship to the Dreaming.

The Dreaming is not an accurate rendition of the meaning of the Aboriginal terms used to describe it and has much greater depth of meaning. Thus, the Aranda phrase *altjiranga ngambakala* has the connotation of "having originated out of one's own eternity", immortal, uncreated, and this is essential to the concept of the Dreaming. There is something of Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*'s "thrownness" here. The Dreaming is a plurivocal term with a number of distinct though connected meanings. (i) It is a narrative mythical account of the foundation and shaping of the entire world by the ancestor heroes who are uncreated and eternal. (ii) It refers to the embodiment of the spiritual power of the ancestor heroes in the land in certain sites, and in species of fauna and flora, so that this power is available to people today. The land itself is a kind of religious icon, since it both represents the power of the Dreamtime beings and also effects and transmits that power. (iii) It denotes the general way of life or "Law" – moral and social precepts, ritual and ceremonial practices, etc. (iv) It may refer to the personal way of vocation that an individual Aboriginal might have by virtue of his membership of a clan, or by virtue of his spirit-conception relating him to particular sites. The Dreaming is a present reality – individuals can, through ritual, enter the spirit world, contact the Dreamtime presences and become identified with them. The Aboriginal person through the ritual becomes absorbed into the very essence of the being (such as a rock kangaroo) as it exists in the Dreaming.⁹

The Dreaming brings together the past, present and future, they are the one thing. For Aboriginal ontology there is a sense of permanence and stability about life and human beings. That is, we can understand the Dreaming, while it contains a narrative about creation events, is not about

⁹ Max Charlesworth, "Introduction," in Max Charlesworth, Howard Morphy, Diane Bell, and Kenneth Maddock (eds.), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia: An Anthology* (St. Lucia, QLD: University of Queensland Press, 1984), 9-10.

either the past, present or the future. In it, the past, present and the future disappear, and the Dreaming abides. It can be thought of as cosmogony, an account of the begetting of the universe, a study of creation and a cosmology, an account of how what was created became an ordered moral system. The stories of the Dreaming are a type of commentary on what is thought to be permanent and ordained at the very basis of the world and life. It determines not only what life is, but also what it can be and provides a guide, through stories, of how good persons should, and bad persons will, act now. These stories are a key or guide to the norms of conduct, and a prediction of how human beings will err. Aboriginal people have a mythology, a ritual, and an art which expresses an intuitive, visionary, and poetic understanding of ultimates such as reality, truth, goodness and beauty. This Aboriginal philosophy steeped in mythology, the product of an indeterminate past, is lived out through ritual and an expressive art, and in part through non-sacred social customs.¹⁰

There is something reminiscent of Heidegger's elucidation of time or temporality in this characterisation of the Dreaming. Heidegger rejects the idea of time as a linear succession of "nows", originally proposed by Aristotle, taking as his starting point the human being, *Dasein*, in his phenomenological experience of being-in-the-world. *Dasein* in its ownmost being, its authentic self, is the coming to be being. This, however, cannot be divorced from what *Dasein* has been in the past. Heidegger says that I am nothing but the future of *Dasein* and with it its past.¹¹ Heidegger says that the past, present and future for *Dasein*, the human being, are form a unity and should be thought of as containing the being of *Dasein*. Likewise, though it is a much richer concept of what it means to be a human being, the Dreaming forms a unity in which not only the Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander persons have their being but is the very ground of their existence. Just as for Heidegger, *Dasein* cannot be divorced from being-in-

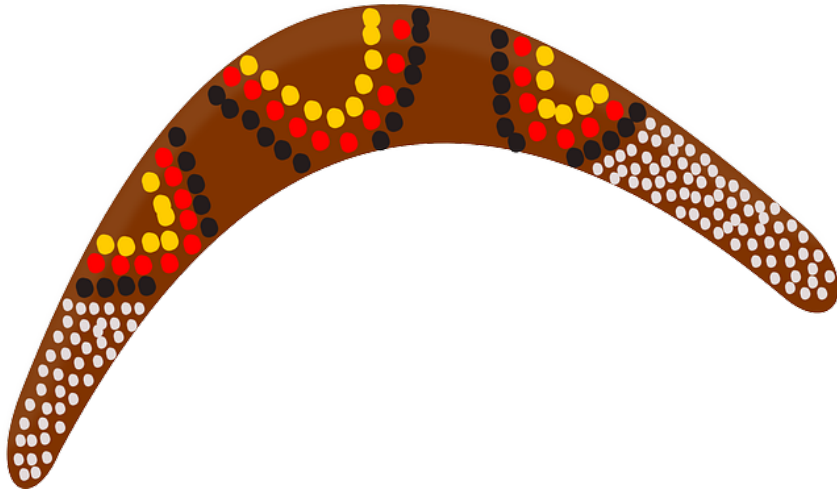
¹⁰ W.E.H. Stanner, *The Dreaming and Other Essays* (Collingwood, Victoria: Black Inc. Agenda, 2009), 67-69.

¹¹ See the discussion in the following texts of Heidegger: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962), Section 68; Martin Heidegger, *The Concept of Time*, trans. William McNeill (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1991); Martin, Heidegger, *History of the Concept of Time: Prolegomena*, trans. Theodore Kisiel (Indianapolis, IN.: Indiana University Press, 1992), 319.

the-world and being-with, neither can the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person be divorced from his or her place enmeshed in the world and in the timelessness of the Dreaming.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander artefacts below offer a glimpse into an ancient and sophisticated culture, as well as an insight into how the Aboriginal peoples of Australia lived for thousands of years before the waves of migration, commencing with British colonisation in 1788, that have created modern multicultural Australia. There is much to be learned from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of living in harmony with their environment. Not only this, but perhaps also a deeper insight into what it means to be human.

The Boomerang



The boomerang is probably one of the most recognisable symbols of Australia, even though it historically has been found in other civilisations.¹² It evolved from a throwing stick which was designed to kill animals for food or as a weapon of war. Some, made in pairs, are used as percussion instruments in ceremonies and rituals, as well as to just make music. There

¹² See P. Valde-Nowak, A. Nadachowski, and M. Wolsan, “Upper Palaeolithic Boomerang made of a Mammoth Tusk in South Poland,” *Nature*, 329 (1987): 436-438. Excavations in a cave in South Poland uncovered a boomerang made from a mammoth’s tusk. This artefact was dated to about 21,000 years B.C. Nevertheless, it was the Aboriginal peoples who perfected the returning boomerang.

are, therefore, several different types of boomerangs, depending on the use that is to be made of them. For example, not all have the curved aerodynamic shape depicted in the above picture, that is the shape of the returning boomerang, which was invented by the Australian Aboriginal people. The curve of the boomerang is not its main feature, rather it is the shape of the two sides that is important. The upper side of the boomerang is concave, while the underside is flat. It is this shape which gives it the aerodynamical features which enable the boomerang to return to its thrower.¹³ The boomerang has to be in a vertical orientation when it is thrown and when it returns, it will be in a horizontal orientation. Most boomerangs were not designed to come back but had to be fetched from where they had landed. The returning boomerang was not designed to bring down game, but to disrupt the flight of birds so that they became ensnared in nets and could be captured. Other boomerangs were used to catch fish, also having a flat curved shape, in order to be able to smoothly enter the water. Heavier boomerangs were also used for warfare. Medium weight boomerangs would be thrown at opponents and could be deadly, while two-metre tall boomerangs were used for fighting in close quarters. Such boomerangs did not have the curved shape of the aerodynamic, returning boomerang.

The boomerang could also be used as a digging stick for foraging for root vegetables, such as the youlk, a plant the roots of which look like a potato and taste like a nashi pear and radish crossed with kohlrabi and potato. It is found in the sandy soils of South-western Australia. The sharp edge of the boomerang could also be used to make fire by rubbing it on a soft wood. Like other artefacts of the Aboriginal peoples, the boomerang is very versatile and has many different uses.

¹³ For a discussion of the aerodynamics of the boomerang, see Felix Hess, “The Aerodynamics of Boomerangs,” *Scientific American* 219, no. 5 (1968): 124-139, and Daniel Drollette, “Return to sender: Aboriginal design is still the best place to start if you want to get your boomerang back,” *The Sciences* 38, no. 3 (1998).

The Woomera



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The spear was the most common hunting and fighting weapon used by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Spears were made from flexible wooden rods hardened by fire and were up to three metres long, depending on the individual and its intended use. While few Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples live a traditional life, some maintain the skills passed down from their elders. Different materials are used for the spears depending on the region. In Arnhem land, in the north of Australia, bougainvillea rods are used, in riverine areas, reeds are used to make lightweight spears and in other parts of Australia, tree saplings are utilised. For a heavier spear, a more dense wood, such as an acacia, would be used. Such a spear would be used to hunt large prey. Sharpened at one end, stone tips would be attached to the spear with a strong binding, usually made from kangaroo tendon or cord made from tree bark. For fishing, microliths, or small sharpened stones would be hammered into the top of the shaft of the spear to form barbs. These would ensure that the spear remained in the prey until it was retrieved. In order to extend the throwing range and the force with which the spear could be thrown, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people invented the woomera or miru. This device is unique to the Australian Aboriginal peoples. The woomera uses leverage in order to attain greater velocity and hence distance for the spear. As indicated in the picture, at one end there is a peg in which the spear rests. The woomera

is gripped by the thrower at the other end. If the spear was being used for fishing, it would be angled towards the water, as illustrated, if it was to be thrown at a wallaby or land prey, it would be angled upwards. The woomera could be thrown with great accuracy.

The woomera itself is made from mulga and, like the boomerang, serves multiple purposes. It also comes in a variety of shapes and sizes, depending on the particular tribe and part of the country from which it originates. In general, the woomera will be around 60 centimetres long and about 12 centimetres wide. Wider woomeras can be also useful for deflecting enemies' spears during warfare. The woomera usually has a shallow concave surface, though in some regions they are flat, and an elliptical shape, narrowing at both ends. This is because at one end will be the peg in which the spear rests and at the other, the grip which enables the spear to be thrown. The grip itself is made from a spinifex resin, which is rounded into sphere. The resin, formed by beating the resin out of spinifex and other grasses such as porcupine grass, cleaning and heating it to form a black sticky substance, is a form of thermoplastic capable of binding rock to wood. The peg could be made from a variety of materials, such as a large tooth of a kangaroo, a piece of bone or a sharp piece of quartz. In South-Eastern Australia, the peg may be made of wood. The end of the spear is held in place by the sharp point of the peg until it is ready to be launched.

Generally, the type of spear that could be thrown utilising the woomera is lighter than one that was thrown by hand. This is because the main purpose of the spear thrower is to generate greater speed and distance. The woomera utilises leverage, with the fulcrum being at the end grasped by the thrower. The other end of the lever moves through a larger distance and so generates a much higher velocity at the point at which the spear is released. The longer the spear thrower, the lighter the spear has to be in order to achieve the speed and distance required to successfully hunt smaller animals and birds. Shorter woomeras could be used with heavier spears to hunt large animals. The speed and accuracy of Aboriginal spears aided by the spear throwers meant that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples never had a use for bows and arrows.

While its primary function was as a spear thrower, the woomera had other uses. The sharp piece of quartz could also be used as a cutting tool, while

the edge of the woomera could be used to make fire by rubbing the edge on a soft wood. Since it was pointed at one end, it could also be used as a digging stick. The slightly concave ones could be used for mixing ochres for use in painting or decorating the body for ceremonies and rituals. It could also be used as a receptacle for carrying various items. The woomera itself was often decorated using ochres to paint them, or they were carved with various tribal symbols. Both the differing shapes of the woomeras and their carvings and decorations were an indication of which clan or tribe they came from. Central desert woomeras, for example, are a wide with a concave shape, while those from the Kimberley region are narrow and flat.

Rock Art



(By Thomas Schoch [GFDL (<http://www.gnu.org/copyleft/fdl.html>) or CC BY-SA 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons)

The painting depicted is Aboriginal Rock Art, Anbangbang Rock Shelter, Kakadu National Park, Australia. It shows Namondjok, a Creation Ancestor, who later becomes Ginga, the Saltwater crocodile at the top, the Lightning Man, Namarrgon, to the right with his wife Barrginj below to the

left, and a group of men and women with ceremonial headdresses underneath. These Spirit figures were repainted between 1962 and 1964, the last major rock painting at the Anbangbang Art site in Nourlangie Rock. Repainting was undertaken by Aboriginal rock artist Najombolmi (1895-1967) and can only be carried out by someone authorised to do so, though not all rock art can be repainted. Anbangbang Rock Shelter was a place in which people sheltered during the rain in the monsoon season. It was a place for making tools, telling stories and playing games while food was cooking. It was an important place for the Warramal clan of Aboriginal people. Archaeological evidence at the site indicates that it has been used as a shelter by Aboriginal people for at least 20,000 years. The materials found suggest that the site was used by a family group as a base camp, as animal and plant remains have been found. These indicate a varied diet, with fish, magpie geese, freshwater mussels, waterlilies, fruits, wallabies, goannas, flying foxes, echidnas, and crocodile eggs all featuring on the menu.¹⁴

Aboriginal art, as depicted in the painting, has meanings which non-Aboriginal people are not entitled to know, hence, any explanation of the figures depicted will not convey the full meaning of the rock art. Namondjok, the largest figure in the painting, is a creation ancestor, and there a number of different stories surrounding him. He now lives in the sky and can only be seen as a black spot in the Milky Way. To his right, is Namarrgon, also a creation ancestor, known as the ‘Lightning man’ because he creates the violent lightning storms that commence in Northern Australia during the monsoon season. Below Namondjok and to the left is Barrginj, Namarrgon’s wife. Their children are the Alyurr (Leichhardt’s Grasshoppers) who are important to the local Aboriginal people, because they gave them their language, beliefs, values and the structure of their society during the creation time. The Alyurr grasshoppers, blue and orange in colour, are quite rare, and having been described in 1845 by Ludwig Leichhardt, were not rediscovered by non-Aboriginal people until the 1970s. They feed on one particular plant, *pityrodia jamesii*, a flowering member of the mint family, and are seen just before the wet season. Below the three creation figures

¹⁴ “Nourlangie Art Site,” Nomad Explorers Site, accessed October 4, 2024, <http://thenomadexplorers.com/sites/default/files/users/65/files/australia-northern-territory-kakadu-and-surrounds-202/nourlangieartsite.pdf>.

are a group of human beings wearing headdresses, which suggests that they might be going to a ceremony.¹⁵

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia have an elaborate and complex understanding of their relationship between themselves and the land, as well as the plants and animals that abound. Their art, their sacred ceremonies and the stories of the Dreaming express their understanding of creation and of their place in the order of heaven and earth. Arguably, they have a heightened sense of what being-in-the-world means and this meaning is specific to the particular world which they have their being.

Indigenous Painting



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The painting depicted above has several layers of meaning, only some of which can be known by non-Aboriginal peoples. Various techniques of

¹⁵ Ibid.

painting, such as the use of dots (as in the picture) belong to specific tribes and cannot be used by others. There are usually three layers of meaning: (i) the first is the most obvious depiction of either landscape or a scene from daily life; (ii) conveying in symbolic form, knowledge specific to a tribe and (iii) a deeper, cosmological Dreamtime meaning. Though there are some common symbols, such as concentric circles to represent a camp site or a water hole, and wavy lines to represent water, knowing the common symbols will not reveal the full story.

There are four separate series of concentric circles below. The largest, which connects to the other three, appears to be a large meeting place, or may be an important water hole. There are clearly tracks between these concentric circles, which suggest that it is possible to journey between these. Running between the water holes are sugar ants moving away from the concentric circles. The curved arcs around each of the waterholes or meetings places could represent people meeting there. Indigenous Australian art has been widely recognised throughout the world and features in many world famous art galleries. The painting process, carried out by indigenous artists, mostly follows traditional colours and materials, though in more recent times, artists have been using acrylic paints which allow for the use of colours not available to earlier generations of artists. This raises questions about the authenticity of the artwork, if it is considered to be an expression of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and hence authentically representing something with a deeper meaning for the particular clan or tribe.

The four artefacts are by no means the only artefacts that can be said to be uniquely representative of the Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. They do, however, allow a glimpse into the rich and complex lives that the peoples of the Australian continent lived before the establishment of the first British penal colonies and the subsequent rapid migration to its shores from every part of the globe. The artefacts, in the first two instances, illustrate how the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples developed a simple, but effective technology that could be used in the hunting of a variety of game. The second two artefacts illustrate something of their spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities. We briefly compared the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander conception of the Dreaming with Heidegger's conception of Being. While the Dreaming is not the same as

Heidegger's conception of Being, it is at least as sophisticated and as complex a metaphysical account of the relation between human beings and the world in which they find themselves. The Dreaming also explains the rules which govern the relationships between human beings and a transcendent world. There is a great deal to be learned from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia.

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Jānis (John) Tālivaldis Ozoliņš

School of Philosophy and Theology, University of Notre Dame Australia

Institute of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Latvia

Department of Philosophy, Catholic Theological College, University of

Divinity

<john.ozolins@acu.edu.au>

<john.ozolins@nd.edu.au>