Opinion

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Indigenous songlines: a beautiful way to think about the confluence of story and time

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How many non-Indigenous Australians know what a songline is?

Given this country's pervasive general ignorance regarding Indigenous Australia, you'd have to bet not too many - despite the fact that songlines criss-cross not only the remotest parts of the continent as well as our seas, but also the cities and suburbs.

So precious, so enveloping of pre-colonial history dating at least 50,000 years are the songlines, there are even suggestions that they ought to be Unesco world heritage-listed.

This year's Naidoc (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week is aiming for a broader Australian engagement with these wondrous, magical and fascinating phenomena of Indigenous culture and history.

The theme is Songlines: the living narrative of our nation. As someone who recently started to contemplate the wonders of the songline, I'd urge you to engage this week and take the journey too.

A little back story: two years ago I had the opportunity to trace some of the ancient songlines of the Yolngu of north-east Arnhem Land out into the Arafura Sea.

It was a wild and wonderful trip on a sturdy ex-pearling boat that began on a glassy green sea with several generations of famous Yolngu clans, and, naturally, some of their dogs.

It included a visit to Rargala, the distant island home of one of the elders, and ended safely a few days later back in port - but only after an impromptu prayer meeting in the boat's hull as the vessel rocked and rolled in a vicious storm.

I'd had reasonable exposure to Indigenous peoples and their cultures before this voyage. But I'd never properly tried to understand or to explain exactly what a songline was. My aim was to be able to do both.

Before we set sail I prepared with Englishman Bruce Chatwin's superb 1987 work of narrative nonfiction, The Songlines, about Indigenous northern Australia.

Chatwin, who died far too young soon after the book came out, wrote: "The melodic contour of the song describes the land over which the song passes ... certain phrases, certain combinations of musical notes, are thought to describe the actions of the ancestors' feet. An expert song man ... would count how many times he has crossed a river or scaled a ridge - and be able to calculate where, and how far along, the songline he was ... A musical phrase is a map reference. Music is a memory bank for finding one's way about the world."

Fixated as we are by the clock and the calendar, and trusting of historical - and spiritual - references that are written on parchment or paper, or digitised, rather than passed down the generations orally, the songline is not an easy concept for the non-Indigenous to grasp.

Anyway, after much exceedingly patient explanation on both the island and the boat by the Yolngu elder and academic Ms Gurruwiwi, who passed a few months back, I was able to write with some clarity: "At the most basic conceptual level, perhaps think of the songlines as the oral archives of Indigenous history that chart the very creation of the land and sea by the Dreaming totems (animals), and the various marks - trees, waterholes, rocky outcrops and creatures - along them. The songlines also hold the stories of the people and the eternal spirits who inhabit them. Because melodic variance is used to describe the land, the songlines - which also manifest in artworks, dance, the yirdaki and clapsticks - transcend language. The songlines or tracks transcend the language groups. If you know the song, you can navigate."

For me that voyage was kind of like Songlines 101. Ms Gurruwiwi explained, from the deck of the pearler, by pointing her bony fingers at the land, which rocky outcrop or distant cave was made by which creationist animal, and where certain events - for example, the introduction of Islam through first Yolngu contact with the Macassan traders in the 16th century fitted in the song ahead of others, like the introduction of Christianity through the missionaries several hundred years later.

Now, you've got to love that: a song that can tell a story about the creation of the land you're walking - or driving - over, or even the sea, and the people who've traversed it ahead of you, *and* bring you safely to a destination where you've never been before, without an atlas or Google Maps. All you've got to do is know the song.

Diana James, a senior researcher with the Australian National University's Songlines of the Western Desert project, has spent decades in the continental centre talking to first peoples about their stories and songlines.

She was a critical force behind the Ngintaka project - an exhibition at the South Australian Museum and an associated book about a songline stretching across Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) Lands told by Anangu Traditional Owners. The exhibition and the book became mired in controversy and legal action after a small group of APY traditional owners, including the well-known blind Indigenous activist Yami Lester, claimed they were not properly consulted and that cultural confidences were breached.

However, an APY Council: Anangu Law and Culture Committee finding that no breach of traditional law was made in either the exhibition or the book was ultimately upheld by the supreme court of SA.

This was good news for those Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who wanted to share (without breaching cultural sensitivities) the story of Ngintaka, the creationist perentie lizard who searched for the perfect stone to grind seed. It's a story of deception, theft and revenge that follows Ngintaka's 500km journey (across the borders of three modern states - Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory).

The South Australian Museum exhibition told the Ngintaka story through traditional dance, song and visual art produced by the arts centres situated along the songline.

James has written extensively about the importance to Indigenous and other Australians of songlines.

In explaining how songlines work, James wrote in her 2015 essay Tjukurpa Time, of how Nganyinytja, a Pitjantjatjara woman of elder high degree, learned to read her people's history written in the land.

Nganyinytja explained: "We have no books, our history was not written by people with pen and paper. It is in the land, the footprints of our Creation Ancestors are on the rocks. The hills and creek beds they created as they dwelled in this land surround us. We learned from our grandmothers and grandfathers as they showed us these sacred sites, told us the stories, sang and danced with us the Tjukurpa (the Dreaming Law). We remember it all; in our minds, our bodies and feet as we dance the stories. We continually recreate the Tjukurpa ... "

For the uninitiated, it's a challenging but beautiful way to think about the confluence of story and time. Indigenous story starts in the distant past and lives today. Time in traditional Indigenous Australia, meanwhile, is not merely a collection of fragmentary moments connected by the calendar but the continuum of past and present.

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I find this fascinating. Thanks so much for a neat article and for the link to the Naidoc Week website.

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acacia32 4 Jul 2016 11:24 1

I always liked the poetry of the phrase (the songlines), but have never really understood what it means. It seems such a beautiful way of seeing the world. Thanks for this article.

Report

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