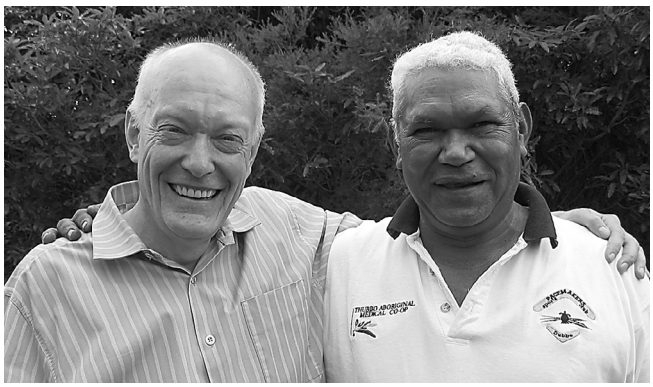


KARL-ERIK SVEIBY has for several years been Professor of Knowledge Management at Hanken Business School, Finland, and Honorary Professor at Griffith Graduate School of Management, Brisbane, and at Macquarie Graduate School of Management, Sydney. He is the author of twelve books on business and management.

TEX SKUTHORPE is a Nhunggabarra man from Nhunggal country in northwestern New South Wales and a painter, educator and custodian of traditional stories. He was awarded Aboriginal Artist of the Year by NAIDOC in 1990/1991 and currently works with young Aboriginal offenders in Kariong correctional centre, New South Wales.

TREADING LIGHTLY

The hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people

Karl-Erik Sveiby &
Tex Skuthorpe

ALLEN&UNWIN

First published in 2006

Allen & Unwin
83 Alexander Street
Crows Nest NSW 2065
Australia
Phone: (61 2) 8425 0100
Fax: (61 2) 9906 2218
Email: info@allenandunwin.com
Web: www.allenandunwin.com

National Library of Australia
Cataloguing-in-Publication entry:

Sveiby, Karl Erik.
Treading lightly : the hidden wisdom of the world’s oldest people.

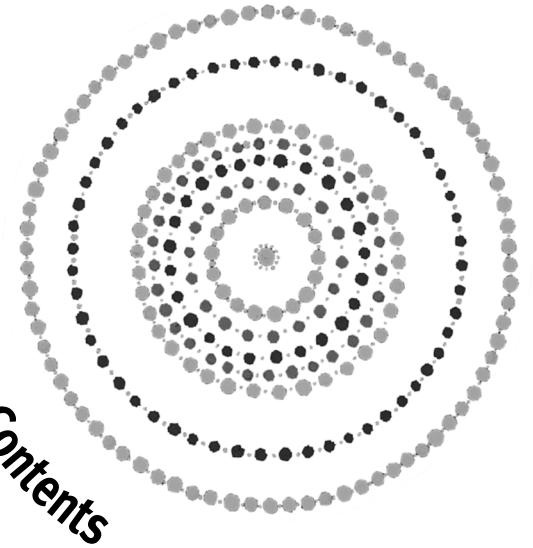
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 1 74114 874 X.

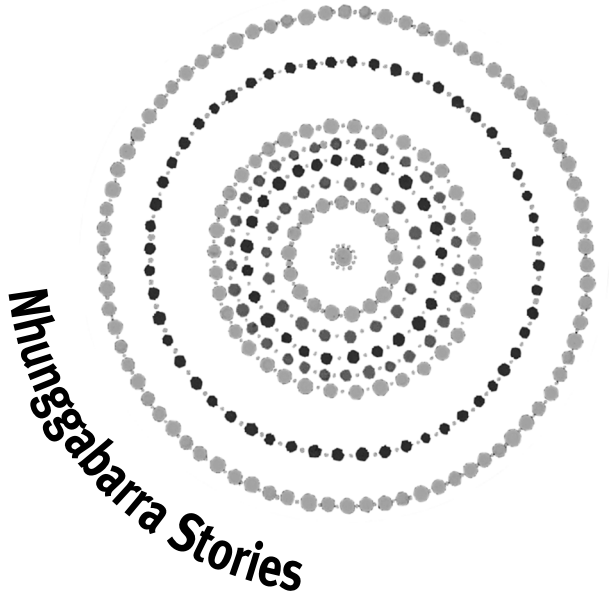
1. Sustainable development. 2. Aborigines, Australian - Social life and customs. I. Skuthorpe, Tex. II. Title.

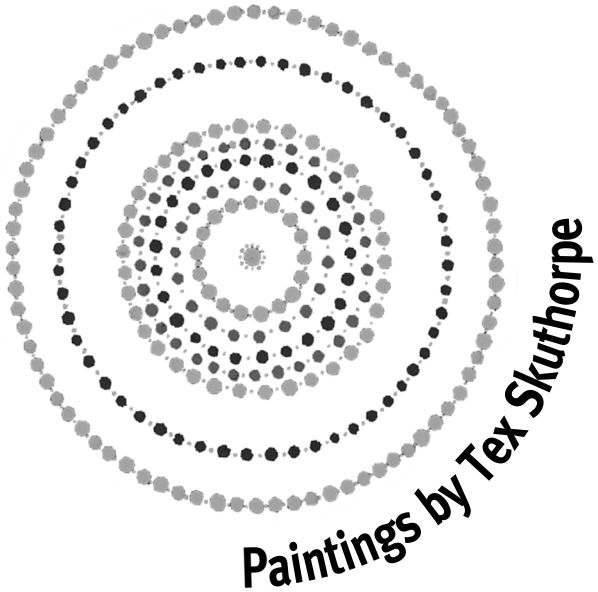
305.89915

Set in 12/16 pt Filosofia by Bookhouse, Sydney
Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1







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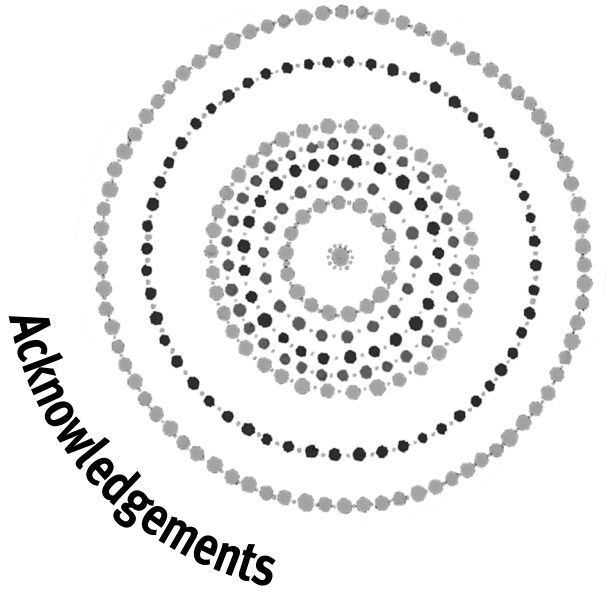


Acknowledgements

We acknowledge with great gratitude our partners in spirit, love and work, Anne Morrill and Dr Kati Laine-Sveiby. Anne, long before we met, had an unshakable belief in the power of the Nhunggabarra concepts for society and today's organisations. It is her knowledge of management and organisations that has allowed her and Tex to bridge the seemingly irreconcilable gap between traditional Aboriginal concepts and business, and to design seminars that managers can relate to. Without her dedication and work this book would not exist.

Kati, with her wealth of knowledge about ethnology and ethnological methods, has been an invaluable, frank and encouraging working partner all the way. She has discussed every idea and concept in the book; her eyes have seen every word, her hand has touched every page.

We are very grateful to Peter and Abigail Dyson, Christer Jacobson and Pat Sullivan, who have been part of the project from the start; they have walked some of the learning tracks with us and their long managerial experience has been valuable to test the validity of the concepts for modern-day organisations and societies. They were also with us during our first walks to the sacred sites, and Pat gave the manuscript

a kick in the right direction. Also Tom Lloyd gave valuable ideas at an early stage of the manuscript. Thank you!

The assistance of Dr Philip Clarke, Head of Anthropology at the South Australian Museum, has been greatly appreciated. He put Karl-Erik on the right track at the beginning of the project and he has given detailed and helpful feedback on the manuscript.

We thank Trevor Winne for his help in painting *Vision for a Sustainable Planet*, and Christer Jacobson and Pat Sullivan for permission to reproduce the paintings *Baayami, the Giant Crocodile and the Two Women* and *The Creation*, respectively.

We are particularly indebted to Dr Jared Diamond. His books have been an inspiration and we thank him for his willingness to share his wealth of knowledge on diseases in ancient cultures.

Brother John Giacon and Ian Sim have put a lot of effort into helping us with the spelling of words in the Yuwaalayaay/Yuwaalaraay language. We are grateful to them for their help.

Senior Collection Manager Melanie Raberts, Senior Curator Dr Ron Vanderwal and Collection Manager Simon Greenwood at Museum Victoria have been most helpful. Thank you for your insightful discussions about cylcons and your help with sources.

Special thanks go to the Member for Finland of the European Parliament and presidential candidate Henrik Lax, who has helped us see the relevance of the Nhunggabarra concepts for the European Union. Thanks also go to Professor Andreas Suchanek for the opportunity to bounce ideas about the relevance of Nhunggabarra concepts for modern society.

Thank you Karolina Sveiby and Lotta Jacobson for your enthusiasm and belief in the validity of the ideas for a young generation. Karolina was with us in the very beginning and helped us model our ideas into a book.

Karl-Erik has presented many of the ideas in the book to colleagues and doctoral students at Hanken Business School, who have given useful feedback and many suggestions. We are especially grateful to Professor Jeff Hearn for generously sharing his knowledge on gender

issues in society and to Professor Guy Ahonen for his help with sources and his commentaries on intangibles.

Thank you Elizabeth Weiss and Colette Vella at Allen & Unwin for your help and advice on the final draft and to Andrew Bell, who photographed the paintings.

Above all, we are indebted to the Nhunggabarra Ancestors, who kept their wisdom alive for countless generations. Thank you for the Knowledge.

Dear Euluwirri,

You, whose name means Rainbow, you are all colours in one. This is a book not only for you, but for all the young of all the colours on Earth. You are the future custodians of the world, and now is the time to learn from the past.

Sometimes one starts a journey knowing neither its purpose nor its goal. One only knows that one has to go because it touches one's soul. Then the track takes over; it becomes a journey of discovery. This book has been such a journey for me, one that has taken me to unexpected places.

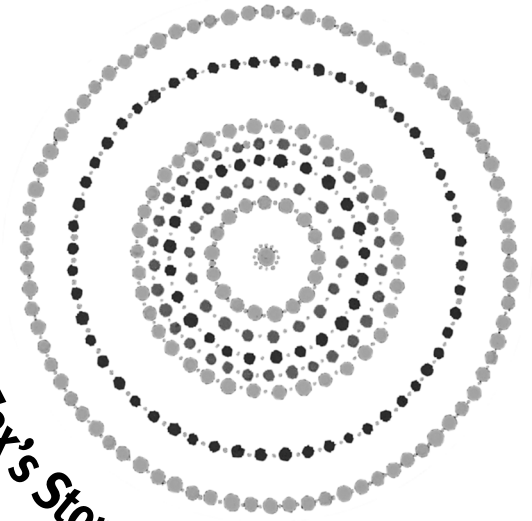
I did not plan to write about the validity for today of the world's longest record for sustainability when I started this journey, or about the world's first model for organising – it was the learning tracks of your Ancestors that led me here.

It has been a humbling experience. The discovery, or rather the re-discovery, of your Ancestors' wisdom filled me with a deep sense of respect – for their knowledge, for the eternal validity of their wisdom and above all for the humanity of their society. The industrialised world is primitive by comparison.

It has been a privilege to work with your great-uncle and an honour to walk the learning tracks of your Ancestors.

Yours,

Karl-Erik Sveiby



Tex's Story

THE MOST AMAZING JOURNEY OF MY life has been learning about my culture from the old people. They were so strong in their traditions and belief and through their teachings they have passed them on to me. I watched them live the messages in the traditional stories, watched them demonstrate how to live in a community and how to keep everyone safe. Colour was not an issue to them – they truly believed everyone living on their country was meant to be there and, as such, was part of their community. As I got older I began asking myself, 'How could they believe in themselves and their traditions, in the face of so much hardship and disrespect?' They worked to keep everyone safe – not just the Nhunggabarra people.

I came to learn that everyone in that community had a role: even though some of the people were from different areas, they were all a part of that community and their main role was to look after us – the young people. They lived their belief that their role and responsibility was to show us how to show respect to ourselves and our beliefs, so that we could then, and only then, show respect to others and their beliefs.

I remember two old blokes who showed me what this responsibility was all about. One, with his sons, would hold regular corroborrees and

dance some of the stories. As he danced he would explain where the story came from, what part of the country it related to and what you could and could not do at that place. The other old bloke would, every afternoon, stand on a mound in the reserve and shout out every kid's name and tell us what laws we had broken that day – first in his language and then in English. When I got home, my granny would tell me the stories again and explain what laws I had broken. But it never felt like a punishment. I always felt it was about teaching me.

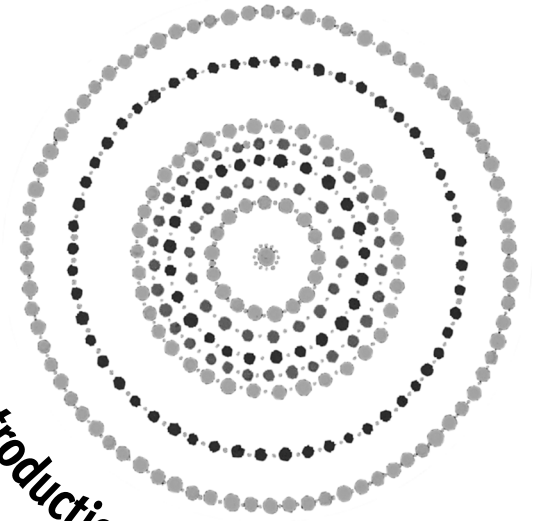
No one paid those old men or gave them any recognition for what they were doing – they didn't need it. It was their role.

Seeing this made me want to know more about how they were able to keep the knowledge alive and how they kept it true, how they kept the respect alive. Others were interested in language but my interest, even as a very young boy, was always in our ancestors' knowledge and the strength that those old people got from it.

My own journey of knowledge has continued with the work on this book. Karl-Erik has, from our first meeting, consistently shown respect to the knowledge those old people passed on. He has shown it in so many ways – through listening, through enduring some hardship on our 'journeys', through struggling to pull meaning out of stories, but most of all through showing himself and his beliefs, so that I can understand and show respect to him and his belief.

That is why I am co-writing this book. It is my humble attempt to explain in words and paintings what I have learned from the old people. This is my way of showing respect.

Tex Skuthorpe



Introduction

THIS BOOK STARTED BACK IN 1999 when Karl-Erik asked Tex: 'What is the word for knowledge in your Aboriginal language?' 'We don't have a word for it,' Tex replied.

He must have felt Karl-Erik's disbelieving look. Struggling to find the words he continued: 'Our land is our knowledge, we walk on the knowledge, we dwell in the knowledge, we live in our thesaurus, we walk in our Bible every day of our lives. Everything is knowledge. We don't need a word for knowledge, I guess. Maybe that's why.'

Tex is a Nhunggabarra man, painter and storyteller from north-western New South Wales in Australia and Karl-Erik is a Swedish professor in knowledge management who currently lives in Finland. This was the first time we met, and Tex's answer was so unexpected and so intriguing that Karl-Erik immediately became interested in learning more about the Nhunggabarra Aboriginal people.

There was in particular one issue that gradually took hold of Karl-Erik and which in the end became the topic of this book: *Australian Aboriginal society's model for sustainability has the longest proven track record on earth.* While societies outside Australia emerged, prospered and went under, Aboriginal society withstood and proved its sustainability over tens of thousands of years of dramatic events, until the

Europeans' arrival in 1788. It is an extraordinary achievement, especially considering that this is something humanity is now struggling with: the way to build a truly sustainable society on this earth.

How did the Aborigines do it? How did they organise for sustainability? What type of leadership did it require? They must have had a 'recipe for success'. What was it? Could we reconstruct it?

But how does one reconstruct something that was lost 200 years ago and where practically all sources and written reports are from a younger date? It would be an impossible task were it not for a unique source: the Nhunggabarra stories.

Tex's role is to learn, record and teach the traditional stories that contain the Nhunggabarra Law. He got this role because both his father and his mother were the eldest of their families and because both were law totems. If Tex had not had this specific kinship heritage, he would not have been allowed to co-write this book. The 'story owns the storyteller', not the other way around.

He is also one of the few Aboriginal people in Australia and the only Nhunggabarra person of his generation to have learned the stories in the traditional, 'hard', intellectually challenging way, from the original custodians – his father and his maternal grandmother (who died in 1972 aged 96). This learning allowed him to open up the hidden treasure chest of information contained in each of the stories. This method of interpreting the stories has been a well-kept secret until this day.

Our book is, as far as we know, the first serious attempt to use Aboriginal traditional stories for their original purpose: to convey knowledge from one generation to another, about the world, the law, society and the life and death of people.

A KNOWLEDGE-BASED ECONOMY

A Nhunggabarra law story is like a time capsule. It has travelled through the disturbances of the 19th and 20th centuries virtually untouched. It can thus be a more reliable source about how Aboriginal society was

meant to function than many European eyewitness reports. The stories tell of what was once a shared understanding of how to behave as an ideal Nhunggabarra person. This is the value of the law stories for our purpose: they contain the rules that governed Nhunggabarra society, the 'recipe of success' that we reconstruct in this book.

The trouble for all studies of Aboriginal society, especially in the Australian southeast, is that so much of the original knowledge was lost very soon after the Europeans arrived on the continent due to the epidemic diseases unwittingly introduced by the explorers, soldiers and settlers. Maybe half the Aboriginal population of the southeast – some sources suggest even higher casualty numbers – succumbed within a few years of the first settlement.

Apart from the incomprehensible suffering experienced by the people, a large part of their enormously rich, intangible asset base disappeared. The earliest settlers and the first anthropologists did not realise that they were only observing the fragments of collapsed societies that no longer functioned as they once did. And what they saw they could not comprehend, because they could not free themselves from their own cultural blinders. This means that the Aboriginal people were from the first encounter defined from a 'deficiency perspective' – they were lacking technology, lacking agriculture, lacking housing, lacking clothing etc. It was even believed they were lacking leaders.

We have instead approached traditional Aboriginal society from a much more plausible perspective: they knew what they were doing. The combination of the insider, Tex, and the outsider, Karl-Erik, has allowed us gradually, piece by piece, to reconstruct the Nhunggabarra model for sustainability.

The most striking feature of the Nhunggabarra society is their *knowledge-based economy*. Because food and handmade tools were the only production scientists and economists have recognised and have been able to measure, they have long dismissed Aboriginal economy as producing very little of any value. What they have missed is more than half of the Aboriginal economy: the very high production of

intangible value, such as education, knowledge, art, law, entertainment, medicine, spiritual ceremonies, peacekeeping and social welfare.

The Aboriginals' farming methods were built on intimate knowledge of the ecology of the land, so they were indistinguishable from nature itself. They were treading lightly on earth; consequently, they were long dismissed as 'primitive' both by arriving settlers and by scientists up to our present day. It is only due to the very latest advances in ecological science that their methods are now being recognised. The Aboriginal people created the world's first systematic approach to *ecofarming*. We will explore their intangible economy, ecofarming methods and even *intangible trade* thoroughly in the book.

Karl-Erik gradually realised that the Nhunggabarra principles for organising society were *context-specific leadership* and *knowledge-based organising*. Everyone in society had a leadership role in a specific area of knowledge, and the leader role shifted depending on the context and who, within that context, was the most knowledgeable. This is a highly advanced form of leadership, found primarily in high-performing teams and in knowledge-intensive organisations. It was unknown to the English military commanders who arrived on the Australian continent and its significance has not been understood among other observers until this day.

Together with spiritual principles that emphasised the *interconnectedness* of all and everything, these economic, ecological and social principles were the main ingredients of the Nhunggabarra society's 'recipe' for sustainability.

Focusing on one single community has enabled us to understand and to reconstruct the model as a whole. The focus is our method for research: we are not suggesting that the Nhunggabarra people were uniquely successful or 'better' than other Aboriginal communities. We believe that there is much in this book that is general for many Aboriginal communities across Australia and we have used this belief as a source of inspiration, but we do not try to generalise – that is not our purpose.

ABOUT METHOD AND SOURCES

The 'Further Reading and Research Notes' section of this book contains background material, analytical materials, notes, references and a critique of sources. The notes are organised on a per-chapter basis and we recommend that you keep an eye on them while you read.

The approach in this book is an attempt to 'make sense' of traditional Aboriginal knowledge from an organisation and society perspective. The content and interpretation of the stories form the core, and written sources, interviews and site visits complement the stories. Our 'walkabouts' on the learning tracks of Tex's ancestors in Nhunggal country have been a crucial element. They have added greatly to Karl-Erik's understanding of Nhunggabarra culture and have contributed to several of the key findings in the book.

The analysis is primarily based on qualitative data and the main sources come from oral tradition. For this reason, reliability and validity merit special attention. The methodological approach is to combine the Nhunggabarra stories with as many different sources as possible: written sources, site visits and interviews. Wherever possible, at least three sources have been combined: a story, a written source and a visit to the site in the story. It is a validation method familiar to qualitative researchers and is known as triangulation.

We have also discussed interpretations thoroughly. In situations where the sources are in conflict or when interpretations do not agree, one interpretation has been selected in the main text and the alternatives have been commented upon in the notes. Data with only one source have been flagged in the text.

The process of producing the book has been as follows: Tex concentrated on expressing the stories in a written form with the help of his partner Anne Morrill (many of the stories had never been put to paper before). He simultaneously made the paintings that are found in the book; the painting process also helped him to remember the stories better. Karl-Erik focused on reading the written sources available in

the AIATSIS library in Canberra and the state libraries and museums in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane.

Tex would tell a story and describe his painting for Karl-Erik. Karl-Erik then went to the written sources to find something that confirmed or rejected the interpretations. Sometimes it was the other way around – Karl-Erik found something in the written sources that might be relevant and Tex confirmed or rejected it, based on the stories and his knowledge of the Nhunggabarra traditions.

This is not a book about the supernatural and spirituality. We are, however, of the belief that in dealing with Aboriginal traditional knowledge one must have an open mind, so Karl-Erik was prepared to test alternative methods for seeking knowledge.

This means that our personal learning tracks have taken us out of our comfort zones. Karl-Erik has felt compelled to test unconventional methods and to travel to places uncommon and sometimes uncomfortable for a scholar in organisation theory and business administration – in both a geographical and a knowledge sense. Tex has had his traditional knowledge tested and questioned by the unforgiving methods of scientific enquiry and he has challenged his fears by climbing Wubi-Wubi Mountain for the first time.

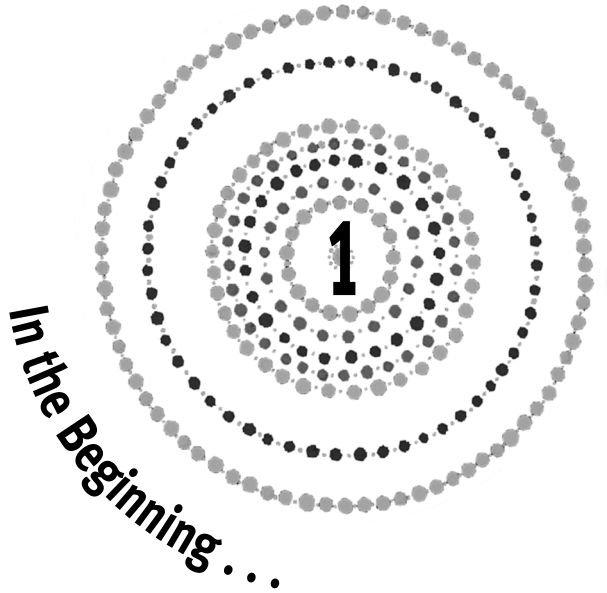
We start the book by describing the Nhunggabarra worldview and their spiritual beliefs from the Time of Creation – the *Burruguu*. In the second chapter we take the reader along one of the *learning tracks*, which combines knowledge of the land and the spiritual world, and here we also describe country, population and language. In chapter three we uncover the Nhunggabarra art of four-level storytelling and in the fourth chapter we describe their learner-driver education system. We display their *ecofarming methods* in the fifth chapter, and in the sixth chapter we discuss leadership, organisation and the unique system for security and welfare: *tuckandee*. We even suggest a new hypothesis: that the Nhunggabarra and their neighbouring communities may have developed *a writing system*. In the seventh chapter we describe the spiritual *Fourth Level* knowledge and our own involuntary touch of it. In chapter eight we bring the reader to present times and

compare the state of Nhunggal country today to that of yesterday. Chapter nine summarises our findings in a 'recipe' for *sustainable organisation and leadership*, and validates them. In chapter ten we offer a vision and make some concrete proposals for today's societies.

Tex has been holding the paintbrush, Karl-Erik the pen, so the 'I' in the text is Karl-Erik's voice.

Welcome! In the Nhunggabarra spirit, we thank you for the respect.

Karl-Erik Sveiby and *Tex Skuthorpe*
Helsinki, Finland *Bucketty, NSW, Australia*



THIS IS WHERE IT ALL BEGAN.

Tex and I are standing at one of the sites of Creation. To me it does not look all that impressive.

STORY | THE RAINBOW SERPENT (PART 1)

The earth gave birth to a snake and it wriggled all over the earth making all the river beds as it went. The snake then asked for the frogs to be born. The frogs were born in sacks of water so the snake tickled them and made them laugh. They laughed so hard that the sacks burst, releasing the water and filling all the river beds. With the coming of water to the land, all the plants, trees, birds and animals were made.

A large mud flat expands in front of us. The mud is dry and hard and sun-cracked. A few small pools filled with fresh water are also visible. It is from them the Rainbow Serpent emerged when the earth gave birth to it.

It is a hot and dry day with a deep blue sky – one of many of these sorts of days in this part of Australia. A buubiyala tree stands in a

clump of grass at one of the pools. Tex pulls down a branch with purple berries. They are ripening and their taste is sweet and cool. I venture closer to one of the pools of water, but I have to retreat rapidly when the mud beneath my feet unexpectedly turns soft and threatens to pull me down.

The small pools of water are not as innocent as they look. They are in fact the outlets of a deep underground lake, holes of water penetrating the mud. I suddenly understand why the mud flat is full of the whitened skeletal remains of wild goats. Seeking the precious water, they became stuck in the mud and perished.

The mud between the holes feels strangely wobbly under my feet. Tex jumps up and down and the water in the waterholes ripples. We are standing on water! He explains that the mud is at least five metres thick and covers an underground lake and a system of underground water channels, which are fed by the Culgoa River some 25 kilometres away.

The Rainbow Serpent is gone, but the frogs are still around everywhere in the Nhunggal country, although we cannot see them. They sit at least one metre under the surface in their water sacks and breathe through an air canal, waiting for the next flood.

Must be a lonely frog life these days, with laughs few and far between.

BURRUGUU

It is impossible to even attempt to understand Australian Aboriginal people without first appreciating the fundamental difference between Western and Aboriginal thought paradigms. Westerners, raised with a Judaeo-Christian worldview, think of themselves as separate from the natural world in which they live. Aboriginal people considered themselves integrated with and part of the natural world.

The Aboriginal belief system is often referred to as the 'Dreaming' or the 'Dreamtime'. These terms were coined either by Aborigines in

an attempt to communicate the content of their spirituality to non-Aboriginal English-speaking people, or by white people in an attempt to find words that capture the Aboriginal worldview. The words are misleading and do not accurately describe the Aboriginal concepts. We will therefore throughout the book use the Nhunggabarra term *Burruguu*, from the Yuwaalaraay language, which means approximately 'time of creation'. The Burruguu was a creative era when the Ancestors travelled the universe. Their travels, their fights, adventures and hunting made imprints on the earth's topography and created the landscape. These ancestral beings possessed superhuman powers, but they were subject to human traits, pleasures, desires and vices; they fought, quarrelled and made mistakes. Aborigines always refer to them as their 'Ancestors'; they were not gods.

When the Ancestors had created the earth they returned to the *Warrambul*, the sky world, where they still live. The earth that the Nhunggabarra walked on was the mirror of the Warrambul, the explicit and tangible expression of their Ancestors' intangible world. Every form thus had both a tangible and an intangible expression. Plants, animals, the soil, even a piece of rock had an intangible counterpart in the sky, just like the people.

For the Nhunggabarra and other Aboriginal people in the north-western part of New South Wales, the most powerful of the Burruguu Ancestors was *Baayami*. The early European settlers and missionaries, eager to find evidence of an Aboriginal 'religion', jumped to the erroneous conclusion that Baayami was the Aboriginal equivalent of the Christian God. The stories, when not distorted by European 'interpretations', however, show that this was not the case. For the Nhunggabarra, Baayami was the first initiated man made by the Creator and he was the 'law maker'. Before the Nhunggabarra people arrived on the scene, he laid out the customs and rules about social relationships to be followed by all the animals.

The Rainbow Serpent story also tells us that there was no difference between an Aboriginal person and an animal. Both were made of the same material as the earth. People and animals were equals, except

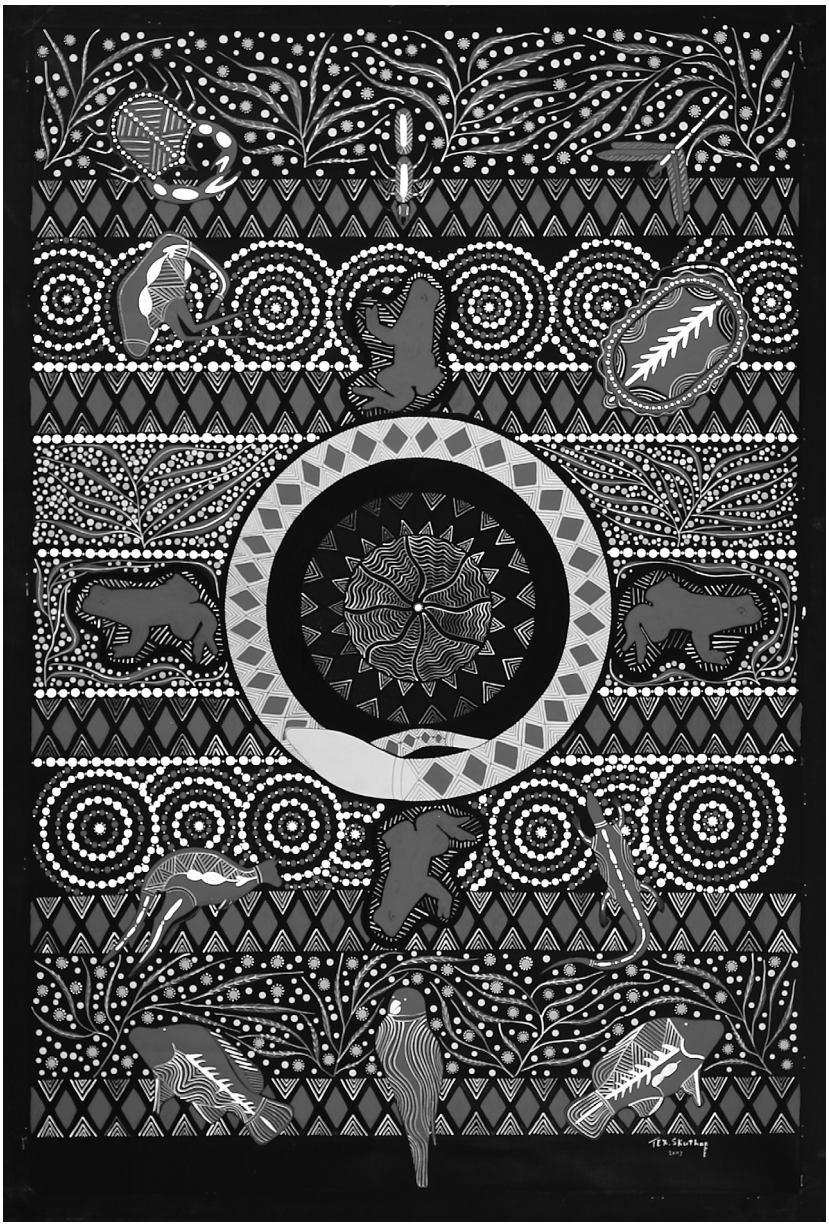
that the Burruguu animals that had obeyed the law had been turned into people, while the animals that remained in their animal form were the ones that had broken the law.

STORY | THE RAINBOW SERPENT (PART 2)

In the Burruguu one of the laws that the animals learned was about certain places they could not go. Some of the animals broke the law by going to these places and they were turned into hills, mountains and valleys. These animals that broke the law became law totems. In Nhunggal country, the animal that broke the law was the long-neck turtle, and so he is the law totem for the Nhunggabarra people. The animals that did not break the law were turned into Aboriginal people. This is how Aboriginal people got all their different *yurrti* (totems) – from the animals who were rewarded and turned into people.

The Nhunggabarra did not worship any gods – not even nature spirits. Instead, for them every rock and every land form, every plant and every animal had its own consciousness, just as people did. Everything was 'alive'. Hence, every land formation and every creature on earth held hidden meanings. The Ancestors and the connection to the Burruguu were always present in the landscape for the Nhunggabarra people – thus their presence was felt concretely every day when the people walked their country. The Nhunggabarra were at any time able to connect to the spiritual world, either individually or collectively, through a whole range of means. The 'places they could not go' in the Rainbow Serpent story became the sacred sites, sites with a special spiritual connection. They could still be accessed, but only if the people performed the proper ceremonies to respect the law. The sacred sites were generally not visually distinguishable as particularly valuable or remarkable in the landscape.

Spiritual life was much more significant than material life for the Australian Aboriginal people. Instead of putting their surplus energy into squeezing more food out of the land, Aborigines expended it on



The Creation (Rainbow Serpent)

The Rainbow Serpent in the centre of the painting circles the springs, and the frogs sit in their sacks, waiting to be tickled. The animals and leaves symbolise the creation of life with the coming of water. The ant at the top of the painting and the circles of dots represent the birth of insects. The yellow dots among the leaves and frogs symbolise the mission to keep everything alive. The diamonds are one of Nhunggal country's traditional designs, being representative of the designs made by Baayami on the three sacred trees (see chapter two).

intangibles: spiritual, intellectual and artistic activities. They carried their palaces on their backs, their cathedrals were built in their minds and they felt no need to glorify human heroes. It is in the mind and the creativity of the spirit – in the intangible rather than the tangible artefacts – that Aboriginal society stands out.

The sensual lifestyle of the Aborigines, their deeply spiritual communication with the earth and their Ancestors, and their unshakeable belief in ancestral laws created a psychology that was completely disinterested in acquiring and possessing material things. Aboriginal 'high-technology' was largely intellectual and intangible.

Space–time

The Burruguu happened in what those in the West consider to be 'the past'. But for the Nhunggabarra there was no difference between past, present and future. The Burruguu still exists; it is the environment that the Aboriginal people lived in and still live in. Human life and being were as permanent, enduring and unchanging as the world itself. All things had always been the same. Thus people on earth did not create anything new. For the Nhunggabarra, the dynamics and changes that they experienced during their existence on earth were only illusions. An innovation was interpreted as merely the discovery of a feature that had always been there. New rituals and new songs – which, for Westerners, are the products of human creation – were for the Nhunggabarra clearer views of what had always been there.

As the Rainbow Serpent story tells, the Nhunggabarra believed that they had been created together with the landscape, so the past was not an issue. Their language did not even contain a word for time, nor did the Nhunggabarra people before European contact have a concept of time as a straight line. The present-day Western sense of time does not allow us to 'go back' to the past; we can only 'go forward' into the future. The Nhunggabarra and other Aboriginal people, on the other hand, conceived time not as a movement from past to future, but as a continuous channelling of consciousness from an intangible to a

tangible and explicit expression. The rock in the landscape was the ongoing tangible expression of the rock's consciousness in the sky world, as it had been since the time of creation. It was the same with people, animals and vegetation. All were both in the sky world and here on earth simultaneously and they had always existed. In this sense the Burruguu was not in the past; it was always present, always 'here'. Western scholars have sometimes tried to understand the Aboriginal concept of time as *past in present*.

The Nhunggabarra also did not make a distinction between time and space in their language. The suffix *–baa* means both 'space of' and 'time of'. A combination of space and time baffles a person with a Western perspective. How could, for instance, the Nhunggabarra invite someone to a gathering to be held in the future if they did not have a concept of time? But they could. The Yolngu-speaking people of the Northern Territory, for example, tell time in terms of synchronicity: an event will happen when all or a sufficient number of conditions are met. Thus when a certain flower blooms in one place it is the appropriate time for harvesting in another; when the flowering of a certain tree occurs then yams are fully mature at a particular place.

It is likely that the Nhunggabarra used a similar method; for them it could have been the right time for the Big Buurra (initiation ceremony) when a certain fish appeared in the Narran River or had reached a minimum fat level.

The Nhunggabarra view of the universe is thus more sophisticated and advanced than it first appears, and is close to quantum physics and the theory of relativity. Time is regarded by quantum physicists as part of a space–time continuum, a concept that the West required an Einstein to discover (in 1905).

MISSION: KEEP ALL ALIVE

To the Nhunggabarra, the role of humanity was to maintain the world created in the Burruguu and to keep everybody and everything alive,

including animals, vegetation, every feature of the earth, knowledge, even the Ancestors in the *Warrambul* (the Milky Way). The Nhunggabarra had to continue to tell the stories, and perform the dances and the ceremonies, or else the animals, the earth and the Ancestors would die. If they failed, say, to preserve the emu species on earth, the intangible spirit of the emu would also disappear from the spirit world and, because of the interconnectedness of everything, all the Aboriginal people of the emu totem on earth would also die. This enormous commitment put pressure on each individual and on the Nhunggabarra people as a whole.

Tex: *I remember this old bloke in the 1960s, who continued to perform the dance of the giant emu, a species that has been extinct for 20,000 years. Every year he dressed up and painted himself and performed the dance. He had the role to perform the dance and he was convinced that in doing so, he kept the giant emu alive in the Warrambul.*

The 'old bloke' showed what it was all about. When the Nhunggabarra performed the dances, sang the songs and told the stories it was not trivial entertainment; it was 'work' and a lifetime commitment. It was a mission.

The mission of the Nhunggabarra people was: to sustain the earth (the plants as well as the rocks and the soil), to keep the totems alive (the animals), and, last but not least, to 'sustain the mob' (to keep the Nhunggabarra people alive).

Sustaining the earth

The first European explorers in this region, Charles Sturt (in 1828–29) and Thomas Mitchell (in 1831 and 1835), travelled an Australian landscape untouched by white people. As it turned out they became the last white people to observe Aboriginal people living a traditional life in the region before diseases and settlers disrupted their societies.

This makes their journals invaluable for us when we are trying to understand traditional Aboriginal Australia.

Thomas Mitchell, who passed through Nhunggal country in June 1846, admired the parklands and open woodlands:

> I came to what seemed to me the finest region on earth: plains and downs of rich black mould, on which grew in profusion the panicum laevinode grass [wild millet grass], and which were finely interspersed with lines of wood which grew in the hollows, and marked the courses of streams; columns of smoke showed that the country was too good to be left uninhabited.

Neither the explorers, nor the early settlers who came after them, realised that much of the land and the vegetation they encountered was not natural, but altered by Aboriginal cultivation. The Australian landscape was to a large degree an Aboriginal artefact created by thousands of years of sustaining the earth.

The Aborigines used a wide range of tools for cultivation, both visible and invisible. The most visible and versatile tool in Aboriginal Australia was fire. The Nhunggabarra carried a burning fire stick with them everywhere on their walks, always ready to use. Cooking was only one application for fire. It deterred spirits from approaching camp at night. Smoke was the most popular insect repellent and hot ashes were applied to snake bites by some communities. Fire was used in the manufacture of spears. It provided illumination during moonless nights and a beacon was created by setting fire to a log. Fire was the primary source of warmth during cold nights and a tool in large-scale hunting, both to drive prey towards waiting hunters and for signalling. In some regions (not Nhunggal country) fire burned the dead.

The flat Nhunggal country was perfect for smoke signalling. Smoke signals acted like today's mobile phone: a group could, for instance, indicate the direction of their walk to other groups in the neighbourhood, and hunters could coordinate their actions when hunting over

long distances; the explorers reported that everywhere they travelled they were followed or preceded by smoke signals.

Above all the Aboriginal people burned the land. Fire was their main tool for tending the land: 'fire-stick farming'. Depending on the season, the skies in Nhunggal country were full of smoke from the fires burning off the vegetation. 'All the country beyond the river was in flames . . . the atmosphere had been so obscured by smoke, that I could never obtain a distinct view of the horizon', the explorer Thomas Mitchell noted in his journal on 23 December 1831.

The Nhunggabarra bushfires were nothing like the wild and uncontrollable fires that threaten human lives and property in the Australia of today. They were carefully managed to avoid killing the animals and the trees; the Aborigines knew how to manipulate fire frequency, intensity and timing to fit the ecosystem. Captain James Cook observed on his first trip to Australia that 'they produce fire with great facility and spread it in a wonderful manner'. Dame Mary Gilmore, the well-known Australian labour rights activist and author, lived not far from Nhunggal country as a child in the 1860s. She described vividly in her memoirs her experience of how expertly the Aborigines handled fire where she grew up. When there was a bushfire in the outback the white settlers would yell out: 'Call in the blacks!' She saw whole stations in full panic when there was a fire; the white men lost their nerves and exhausted themselves in frantic efforts to quench a fire. But as soon as the Aborigines arrived on the scene they would control it with ease.

Thousands of years of burning changed the Australian landscape, both intentionally and unintentionally. The fire-stick farming method that the Nhunggabarra and other Aboriginal people used had the effect of increasing both the amount of food available and the diversity of plants. It allowed certain fire-resistant species to prosper and it enabled the grasses to grow to the benefit of both grazing animals and people. The ash after fire-stick farming acted like manure and encouraged regrowth of eucalypts and of edible plant foods, such as millet

grass, bracken roots and shoots. It generated the 'finest region on earth', as described by Thomas Mitchell.

Apart from through the use of fire, the earth was sustained through an invisible and even more important tool – the story. Telling stories kept alive the links between the earth and the animals, the people and the ancestral land in the Warrambul – the Milky Way. Without stories, the knowledge would die and when the knowledge was gone, everything else would die too.

Sustaining the animals

For the Aboriginal people, people and animals were one and the same. Thus, for Tex, who is of the sand goanna totem, it is just as correct to say that he *is* a sand goanna.

The sand goanna clan consisted of (still today) all the sand goanna totem people in Aboriginal Australia. They are all of the same kin. This means that Tex has relatives in every corner of Australia. All he needs to do on his journeys is to ask for the sand goannas and he will be accepted as a son by the oldest sand goanna couple and as a brother by the other sand goanna people.

The Nhunggabarra of all totems had to maintain and improve the habitats of all the plants that the animals fed from. They learned this by observing animal behaviours from a young age. Knowledge and rules of behaviour were also embedded in stories, dances and ceremonies.

It was the people's responsibility to keep this knowledge alive and in this way the animals were kept alive both on earth and in the Warrambul. In particular, they felt responsibility for their own totem animal. Hence, if the sand goanna disappeared from an area the sand goanna people would blame themselves; they would perform ceremonies to try to figure out where they had shown disrespect towards the knowledge and confront themselves with their mistakes.

The people formed a close relationship with their totem animals from a very early age; they often had dreams containing their totem

and the sighting of their totem animal would always imply a meaning, which had to be interpreted. Consequently, they were highly motivated to safeguard and keep their totem animal alive – the ultimate threat was that if their animal became extinct then they would die too.

Nhunggabarra people used several methods to sustain and keep animals alive. They kept their fires low-intensity so that larger animals could flee and survive and, after firing, new grass could spring up and feed kangaroos and other herbivores. Some Nhunggabarra stories also outlined the rules for where and how areas were to be – or not to be – protected from hunting and other usage. This would have been the case all over Aboriginal Australia.

There was a dilemma in all this: how did the mission to keep all alive sit alongside the killing and eating of animals? For the Nhunggabarra, it was the same thing as killing and eating a brother or sister. Hunting and eating, particularly big game such as kangaroo and emu, were sacred acts. They had to kill the animals – their brethren – to survive, but they made sure that they only killed a minimum, and that they compensated the spirit of the animal they killed. Before the actual hunt, they performed a ceremony, which made up for the killing – an act of reciprocity. In the ceremony the Aboriginal men internalised the animal so that they *became* the animal in spirit. In this way the spirit life of the animal was extended in the men in exchange for its physical death.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED – THEN WHAT?

The Nhunggabarra people believed they were created at the same time as the earth and their soul spirits lived forever. They did not believe in reincarnation; they had only one 'turn' in physical form on earth, during which they had a mission to complete. All individuals had their own personal role in their earthly life to help fulfil this mission. When they died their soul spirits left the body and went to the Warrambul, their intangible world in the sky.

No wonder the Nhunggabarra were not afraid of death. After their roles were completed on earth they could look forward to eternal life in the Warrambul, a place that was a mirror image of their Nhunggal country, with the same vegetation and all the animals; they would meet their dead parents and relatives again and they would finally get to see and meet the mythical Ancestors, whom they knew so well from the stories. They did not need a human authority to tell them this; they 'knew' it was true, because they had already visited the sky world in their dreams. There was no hell to fear; they did not believe in hell and so they did not have to fear punishment in the afterlife for sins committed on earth.

The crucial condition for a happy afterlife was that the proper ceremonies were held by the living to help the deceased's spirits to separate from the earth. A Nhunggabarra person had four spirits according to traditional belief: the soul, the totem, the shadow and the dream spirit. These contained the vital essence of a person, and the human body was merely the explicit tangible expression of one's spirits.

The soul was your 'self', the part of you that lives on forever. The totem was 'the animal that is you', both on earth and in the intangible ancestral world. The shadow spirit was active only during your existence on earth and could be sent out to influence other people. The dream spirit was also active only during your existence on earth. It could travel to the Warrambul to meet with the spirits and receive messages from them. These 'spirit travels' usually took place during sleep.

After death, the totem spirit and the shadow spirit were taken care of in ceremonies during the burial of the body. The soul spirit required a lot of support to find its way back to the Ancestors in the Warrambul and it would get lost unless the ceremonies were properly conducted. The successfully guided spirit of a dead person never returned to earth, but it kept in close contact with everything that went on and got in touch frequently with the living by communicating with the living's dream spirits.

The worst scenario a Nhunggabarra person could imagine was for their soul spirit to remain on earth; it was their nearest equivalent of hell. They had met those poor souls in their dream travels; they had heard stories about them, perhaps even seen one of them while awake. Traditionally, the adults would not have been scared by such encounters; these souls were to feel sorry for and to learn from, so the Nhunggabarra could avoid their mistakes.

The Nhunggabarra must of course have been terrified of what they had seen and heard could happen to lost souls and this put a lot of pressure on the relatives of a dead person. As a consequence, the ceremonies for guiding a dead person's soul were quite elaborate and lengthy; they could go for up to two years.

In pre-European times, the Nhunggabarra would have been encouraged from childhood to explore meditative states and to remember what they saw in dreams. They were taught how to behave when they met their Ancestors in the dreams and also how to protect themselves from spirits and the earth-bound ghosts, who would do their best to distort the Nhunggabarra person's travel. When a person woke up from such 'trips' they had had a deeply spiritual and emotional personal experience that reinforced their belief system. They would also often claim to have 'seen' something, sometimes of significance for the Nhunggabarra as a people.