

## SPECIAL PLACES

Doris Pilkington

(Nugi Garimara)

Almost every human being has the privilege of discovering a special place. A place that is determined by an incident, or in my case incidents, affecting how we perceive a special place that has a relationship between the land and our own spirituality. I would like to share with you my interpretation of what I believe is "the spirit of place: source of the sacred."

The first special place is located in a remote area south-west of the Jigalong Aboriginal Community. You know, every time I visit my family, I never cease to be enthralled by the sheer rugged beauty and the ever changing Pilbara landscape. I remember one beautiful spring morning a few years ago and in another part of this vast region, being the last day of a bush camp, my partner and travelling companion decided to rise early before sunrise and climb the highest hill nearby. Once we reached the top we sat and rested before taking snapshots.

A new day was dawning in the east behind us, the sun's rays highlighting strips of the landscape below. The sunlit patches of red earth stood out between the beautiful floral carpet of mauve to purple Mulla Mullas and scattered amongst them in full bloom were white, pink and yellow everlasting flowers. The scenery was magnificent, with a panoramic view of the red rugged hills and breakaways in the distance and even the dead and dying trees made a wonderful and unusual contrast to their surroundings. As the sun rose higher, the sweeping plains became even clearer and I could only marvel at the handiwork of the creator, while also knowing that this beauty was deceptive, as in reality this was a harsh and dry land.

I learned something from that wonderful experience that morning, and it inspired me to write a song of appreciation and respect for this land. This song is called "Dawn."

This peace that fills my heart within  
Rises from the earth beneath my feet  
and as I await the dawn to greet  
I see the leaves blowing in the wind  
across the path where my people roamed  
For thousands of years since time began  
Treading firmly over grass, sand and stone  
Beside cool waters, across the dusty plains  
To hunting grounds, corroborees and waterholes  
This land was theirs, this land is mine

My second "source of the sacred" is located in Oududjara Country, North East of Jigalong at a place with the traditional name of Bunguul. I was so fascinated that I took as many photographs as I could. As the used roll of film was rewinding I glanced back for a final look at this special place, and as I fixed my gaze on the rugged beauty of this ancient rock hole I tried desperately to conjure up images and visions of my people, whose lives and survival depended on this special pool. What a fascinating picture it made. As I slowly raised my eyes to the top of the rocky gorge, I noticed that there were layers and layers of different coloured rocks running horizontally into the clear pool. On the edge of the pool on either side of the rocky gorge were thick clumps of bull rushes and large shady, white trunk ghost gums. It was late afternoon, and there were flocks of zebra finches and bright green budgerigars darting in and out of the pool.

As I focused my gaze towards the quartzite rocks, the view immediately reminded me of a Dgugudane or creation story I heard some time ago. It was a story about the Jilla or rainbow snake, and in my mind this could be the very site where the giant snake landed, and the coloured rocks could have been the scales that came off the serpent's skin as it spiralled into the rocky hill.

I should explain that throughout the Western Desert region, there are scores of stories, each storyteller owning his or own story and displaying their own style, emphasis and expressions. Also there are many versions of the same stories across this vast continent of ours. I will now tell of one such story, which had its origins in the Dreamtime.

The Dgugudani, dreaming or creation stories, tell of how ancient ancestral spirit-beings roamed about the desert creating the landscape,

moulding and shaping the rocks and hills. They explain why animals, birds and all other creatures have peculiar shapes, habits and characteristics. These creation stories and storytelling are not merely forms of amusement and entertainment for the Mardu people, but have a special role in maintaining and preserving their cultural heritage. These stories function on two levels: firstly to preserve and maintain their belief system; and secondly and perhaps more importantly, they reinforce social behaviour according to the kinship laws and to the "law" itself.

So the story of the Jilla began in the dreaming, when the Dgugudani, the most powerful spirit, and other giant spirit beings were almost finished the mammoth task of creation. In the desert, thunder storms were a regular occurrence, and all living things were used to them. But one night the claps of thunder were louder and stronger than usual, and were followed by streaks of lightning that seemed to light up the whole desert landscape.

The frightened animals of the desert had already taken refuge in the breakaways in the high ground, in the caves, crevices and under rocky ledges; in fact anywhere they felt it safe enough to hide from the storm. They couldn't sleep, and could only watch and wish that it would cease.

There was another thunder clap, this one even louder than the previous one. "BOOM, BOOM, BOOM, BADU BOOM." Lightning lit up the flooded plains again, and the flashes was followed by a loud thud. The animals and other creatures felt the earth tremble and shake; they wondered what it could be and why it was shaking and trembling so. A short time later all was quiet except for the light patter of raindrops, and the animals settled down to catch up on some sleep.

The next morning all the animals peeped out from their refuges very cautiously; then one by one they wandered down the rocky hillside to the bottom. There they stood very still, surveying the landscape. It seemed that all the floodwater had disappeared, soaked into the dry earth. Then a giant kangaroo shouted at the top of his voice. "Look here, come quick!" And there, in the middle of the plains where the large rocky hill stood was a huge rock hole, but what they didn't know was that a giant Jilla, or snake, had taken up residence in that pool after having fallen from its home in the sky.

It had fallen so hard that it had made an enormous hole in the rocky hill where it landed. The water that had covered the plains had gushed in and filled up the hole, and it was in this hole that the Jilla had made its new home.

It was morning. He was very hungry, and what a feast he had. The curious animals and the crawling creatures that came closer to investigate the commotion at the water hole were killed and eaten by the Jilla. The huge serpent had a voracious appetite, and he ate everything that moved or chanced near the rock hole. Soon there was nothing left.

He waited for a couple of days, but nothing came down to drink from the pool. By this time he was absolutely starving, so the Jilla decided to leave the rock pool and search for food. With his huge body the Jilla broke down the wall of one side of the pool and slid on his belly down the slope of the hill and across the plains to find another home.

The rest of the story tells how the Jilla slithered across the landscape with his track filling up with water behind him. As he twisted from side to side searching the country side for food the tracks he made became rivers, and it is believed that all the lakes, rock holes, soaks and creeks have been created by the Jilla, the rainbow snake. According to legend it lives in a special place somewhere in the desert at a secret and sacred location known and visited only by initiated men.

This story is an example of the two levels of storytelling. On one level we are told of how the rivers, lakes, soaks and rock holes were formed; and on the other level, that both men and women have secret places which are forbidden to members of the opposite sex, and that everybody must have respect for such places. These secret and sacred sites are preserved and protected.

I tried once more to visualise movement and activities of the past, like those of my grandmother, Bambarn Banaka, as she filled her coolamons full with cool clear water, then carried them back to her cave home or perhaps her camp at the foot of the hill under the shady gum trees. Sadly, the images and visions never appeared, but I did come away with words for a second verse to my song "Dawn".

I sat beside the waters cool  
 The shady gum trees swaying to and fro  
 I hear the voices through the trees :  
 Whispering softly, clearly across the silent pool  
 Ancestral songs were sung to me  
 of heroic deeds of long ago  
 Of dancers, singers, hunters so bold  
 Of our creation their stories told  
 Their dreaming songs were shared with me  
 This land was theirs, this land is mine  
 This land was theirs, this land is mine

My spirit of place is where I discovered my Aboriginal spirituality; and the source of the sacred was a special place of cultural significance on Gududjara land – a cave where my grandparents, father, uncles and aunts lived during the cold winters. A few metres below the cave is a rock hole that could have been the very spot where the giant Jilla spirit being (the rainbow serpent) landed when he fell from the skies during the Dreamtime. This is a special place where the creation of mythical beings coexisted for centuries with the Mardudjara people of the Western Desert.