The Phenomenological Interpretation of the Australian Aboriginal Dreamtime Stories and Their Symbolism

Mikyung Jang*

Abstract

In this study four Australian Aboriginal stories (Dreamtime stories) were selected for phenomenological description and empirical interpretation based on analytical psychology. The phenomenological contents were classified in accordance with the four categories suggested by Van Manen (1990/1994), namely empirical space (spatiality), empirical body (physicality), empirical time (temporality) and empirical human relations (relationality). The Aboriginal stories deal with the vitality and divinity of the earth in terms of spatiality; the extraordinariness of human beings in terms of physicality; Kairos time, which exists significantly in terms of time; and human primal desires and social taboos in terms of relationality. Furthermore, unlike stories from Western cultures, referred to as fairytales, myths, legends and sagas, the Aboriginal stories tend to encompass all four categories in one story.

Key words: Dreamtime Story, Phenomenological Approach, Myth, Empirical Categorization

* Corresponding Author: Mikyung Jang, Professor, Department of Child Welfare, Namseoul University (jangmiky@hotmail.com)
Introduction

When we encounter other cultures often their difference from ours and uniqueness strongly attracts our curiosity. By accident I had the opportunity to enjoy an Aboriginal arts exhibition at a small art center in Melbourne. From this exhibition I came to know about the Dreamtime stories of the Australian Aborigines. Reading these stories I felt freedom as though I was dreaming as well as a sense of being far away, as though I were living in a time long ago. Since then I have been interested in what the Dreamtime stories say and the imagination of the Australian Aborigines. Similarities as well as differences from those of other cultures can be found in these stories, too. In this paper, it is first considered what the stories talk about and how before proceeding to analyze them. The Australian Aborigines do not have written languages so their stories have been inherited through oral practices or expressed on rocks and caves as paintings. Due to this situation, it can be said that the storytellers’ personal feelings or interpretations might have become involved in their storytelling.

The reason why the Australian Aborigines call their stories the Dreamtime stories is that they symbolize an era which was free, when imagination came true in myths and legends, as seen in their expression, “when the land was still in the Dreamtime…” Interestingly, however, their stories do not exist only in the Dreamtime but also in the present time. To the Aborigines the stories were not simply pleasant tales to beguile the evening hours. According to Elkin (1964),

> Mythology is not just a matter of words and records, but of action and life, for the cult societies, the totemic lodges, do not spend their time at meetings reciting and chanting only; what they do in the course of their labors must now be done in ritual and the places most part, the details of any myths are only important because they enable the present-day time to walk the path with fidelity, which leads into the sacred dreamtime, the source of life (244).

Therefore the Dreamtime stories still exist in the unconsciousness of the Aborigines, working in and affecting it and being expressed in their modern telling of the stories. Berndt and Berndt (1994) observed this in the same context. The stories were believed by the people who told them and those who listened to them. In traditional Aboriginal terms they embodied ‘truth’, purporting to depict what actually happened in the distant past.

In every culture, we can find the forms of stories similar to the Australian Aboriginal stories,
namely Dreamtime stories – that is, fairy tales, myths, legends, sagas, and so on. There have been attempts to identify the differences among them and efforts to explain them in line with human psyche (Betts, 2007; www.jungipod.com). Even the scholars who have recorded the Australian Aboriginal stories use the terms fairytale, myth or legend to refer to these stories.

Fairytales represent the human collective unconscious and are generated spontaneously surrounding archetypal themes. Von Franz (1970/1996) defined fairy tales as “the purest and simplest expression of the collective unconscious”. This contrasts with dreams, which represent more the individual unconscious. Fairy tales are older than history and timeless, and those throughout all cultures and regions share similar motives and themes. Many fairytales, so to speak, begin with phrases like “once upon a time…” or “there lived a king in a village…”, and only a few elements such as characters’ names reflect the cultures where the tales were generated.

Fairytales suggest human conscious and unconscious use of symbols. They were originally intended for exploration of the dark and uncanny aspects of the human psyche rather than entertainment. In other words, they allow us to approach the inaccessible. Thus, the analysis of fairytales takes the form of the psychodynamic analysis of archetypal patterns, namely the individuation process.

On the other hand, myths are stories of archetypal encounters, metaphorically expressing the functions of archetypes without the involvement of human consciousness. In other words, they are original revelations of the preconscious psyche in the form of voluntary statements. Thus, myths do not involve human consciousness unlike fairytales and dreams which are analogous to personal complexes. According to Jung (1968, para. 261), myths represent the basic patterns of the human psyche as seen through the prism of culture and they are the voluntary statements of psyche.

For this reason, myths mainly consist of stories reflecting cultural aspects, such as relationships between gods and human beings, absolute truths including Christian myths, divine history, origin of humankind, exemplary conduct, interactions with others, models for human actions and behavioral standards such as the Ten Commandments. Moreover, myths contain actual history, and the Gilgamesh myth, the first written myth, and Greek myths are examples. Legends present historical figures with actual names, temporal and spatial backgrounds, and a series of objections. The legend of King Arthur and that of Tannhauser are examples. In legends, ‘this world’ and ‘that world’ adjoin each other; when characters encounter ‘that world’, they are injured or overwhelmed with anxiety. For example, unlike characters in fairytales, those in legends may have a premonition such as finding a magic flower in their garden or be astonished to see animals talking.
Research Problems

1) What Phenomenological contents compose the Australian Aboriginal stories?
2) How do the Australian Aboriginal stories differ from fairytales, myths, and legends?

Research Methods

Subject Stories
Four of the Australian Aboriginal stories were selected for this study. The four stories were chosen in order, with no other criteria used, from the collection by Berndt and Berndt (1994), who recorded the largest number of stories in Australia.

Analysis and Interpretation
Phenomenological description and empirical interpretation based on analytical psychology.
This study described phenomenological contents and classified them in accordance with four categories suggested by Van Manen (1990/1994) – that is, empirical space (spatiality), empirical body (physicality), empirical time (temporality) and empirical human relations (relationality). This study then endeavored to interpret the contents from the perspective of analytical psychology.

Results

Phenomenological Description and Empirical Categorizations

Empirical space (Spatiality) – Vitality and Sacredness of the Earth
Human beings are described as having been born from the earth. The Australian Aboriginal attitudes toward the space of the earth can be found in expressions such as ‘a person born in a hole of the earth (1)’, ‘a baby born from the earth at night (2)’, and ‘a taboo tortoise island (3).

In the stories, the earth functions as the root of life, and human beings are derived from the earth, emphasizing the vitality that the earth bears rather than the specific space of the earth.
Like all the Australian Aboriginal stories, the four stories selected here refer to specific place
names. The place names *Angmeridja, Mowangi, Badaya, Marabibi, Gurrudana, Wan-gran* and *Malay Bay* appear in the four stories. These places still exist today and have English names which represent the characteristics of those places. Although there is no evidence for any correlation between the place names and the stories themselves, it would seem that references to the place names are to emphasize that the stories indeed originated in those places and to highlight an awe of the vitality of the earth and the earth itself as part of Nature.

**Empirical Body (Physicality) - Extraordinariness of Human Beings**

The stories describe the outstanding appearances of the characters and dead bodies changing into rocks, and refer to the names of the characters to emphasize that the stories are true. The stories indicate that human beings possess not only normal human bodies but also extraordinary physicality with a range of abilities to survive disasters. They depict ‘being afraid of the person born from a hole of the earth (1)’, ‘a baby growing into an adult in four weeks (2)’, ‘a girl and a boy surviving from fire that killed everybody else (4).

All four stories refer to the specific names of the characters, and the names are thought to underline the reality of the extraordinary physicality of the characters.

**Empirical Time (Time) - Kairos Time (Universality of Time)**

‘The dead body’s skeletons of milk tree color (pink color) dispersed in all directions, and some of them are still found today (1)’, ‘friends of the young man attacked and killed those who were jealous, and the dead bodies changed into rocks in the sea. In other words, he made himself a dream … the young man’s tomb made by the people still remains as a hill … and the mouth of the cabin that his father made for him using grasses can also be found today (2)’, ‘however, many people died of the measles … their skeletons are still to be found in everywhere (3).

The Australian Aborigines’ concept of time is evident in these stories, highlighting that the existence and reality of the events are immortal even after the death of heroes and other relevant characters. The Aborigines believed that people can be “dreaming” even after they die. Dreaming means the unconscious, while Kronos time does not exist in their dreams. The stories may have been intended to teach that the environments and characteristics of the heroes remain the truth of them for all eternity. This may be why the stories were expressed in the present tense by the
storytellers. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the Australian Aboriginal stories are called Dreamtime stories.

Empirical Others (Relationality)-Human Primal Desires and Social Taboos

“The man of the earth was jealousy of and killed the three men who visited his wife and he tried to kill them but he survived one of the three men survived and he and some other men killed the man of the earth (1),” ‘a person who was jealous of the beautiful appearance of the young man killed him by piercing his heart … the man who killed the young man was attacked and murdered by the young man’s friends (2),’ ‘feeding inappropriate food … the baby cried himself hoarse … a running star, namely a fire, called Nyimbili or Yung-gailey, fell from the sky and killed all the villagers including the baby (3),’ ‘the babies of the brother and sister grew up to establish a large country, but … many people died of rubella (3),’ ‘killing the tortoise in the taboo island … the island burst into flames, and people became ill and dies after all (4).’

The stories represent the universal desires and emotions of human beings, whether positive or negative, social taboos and social notions of relevant punishments.

Conclusion

This study analyzed and interpreted the Australian Aboriginal oral stories, also called the Dreamtime stories, from a phenomenological perspective. This study also identified the differences and similarities between these stories and Western stories in similar forms.

First, the stories deal with the vitality and divinity of the earth in terms of spatiality, the extraordinariness of human beings in terms of physicality, Kairos time which exists significantly in terms of time, and human primal desires and social taboos in terms of relationality. Second, unlike Western stories, referred to as fairytales, myths, legends, and sagas, the Aboriginal stories tend to encompass all the factors in one story.

This study also produced some implications for future studies. All four Aboriginal stories are so similar that they seem like one. However, no study has examined the correlation among the stories as they have been orally transmitted and sporadically recorded by the Aborigines. Analyzing as many Aboriginal stories as possible will help determine the relationships among these stories. If each story consists of a huge story as a whole and all the stories turn out to represent the
developing process of human psyche, therefore each of the stories would fall under each stage of the process.

References


Internet

www.jungipod.com