

serpent noun

נָחָשׁ

<http://www.morfix.co.il/en/serpent>

bow ; rainbow ; arc

קִשְׁת

<http://www.morfix.co.il/en/%D7%A7%D7%A9%D7%AA>

ثَعْبَان

snake Noun ثعب

قَزَح

rainbow Noun قزح

<http://aratools.com/#word-dict-tab>

lar figure among the Hindu gods and goddesses. The Aboriginal Australians worship a deity known as the Rainbow Serpent, and in Japan the god Ryūjin is depicted as a dragon, whose servants include fish and sea turtles. Among the indigenous peoples of

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By Skye Alexander

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# Rainbow Serpent

This article is about an Australian Aboriginal mythological figure. For the aquatic snake found in the southeastern United States, see *Farancia erythrogramma*. For the Australian music festival, see *Rainbow Serpent Festival*.

The **Rainbow Serpent** or *Rainbow Snake* is a com-



*Australian Aboriginal rock painting of the "Rainbow Serpent".*

mon deity, often a creator god,<sup>[1]</sup> in the mythology and a common motif in the art of Aboriginal Australia.<sup>[2]</sup> It is named for the obvious identification between the shape of a rainbow and the shape of a snake.<sup>[3]</sup> Some scholars have suggested that the link between snake and rainbow suggests the cycle of the seasons and the importance of water in human life.<sup>[4]</sup> When the rainbow is seen in the sky, it is said to be the Rainbow Serpent moving from one waterhole to another, and the divine concept explained why some waterholes never dried up when drought struck.<sup>[3]</sup> There are innumerable names and stories associated with the serpent, all of which communicate the significance and power of this being within Aboriginal traditions. It is viewed as a giver of life, through its association with water, but can be a destructive force if angry.<sup>[5]</sup> The Rainbow Serpent is one of the oldest continuing religious beliefs in the world<sup>[6]</sup> and continues to be a cultural influence today.

## 1 Names in different cultures

The Rainbow Serpent is known by different names by different Aboriginal cultures. The Rainbow Serpent (or Serpents if there are more than one) is known as *Borlung* by the Miali,<sup>[2]</sup> *Dhakkan* (or *Takkan*) by the Kuli,<sup>[3]</sup> *Kajura* by the Ingarda,<sup>[3]</sup> *Goorialla* by the Lardil

people,<sup>[7]</sup> *Kunmanggur* by the Murinbata,<sup>[2]</sup> *Ngalyod* by the Gunwinggu,<sup>[2]</sup> *Numereji* by the Kakadu,<sup>[3]</sup> *Taipan* by the Wikmunkan,<sup>[2]</sup> *Tulloun* by the Mitakoodi,<sup>[3]</sup> *Wagyl* by the Noongar,<sup>[8]</sup> *Wanamangura* by the Talainji,<sup>[3]</sup> and *Witij* by the Yolngu.<sup>[11]</sup> Other names include *Bolung*,<sup>[4]</sup> *Galeru*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Julunggul*,<sup>[9]</sup> *Kanmare*,<sup>[3]</sup> *Langal*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Myndie*,<sup>[10]</sup> *Muit*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Ungur*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Wollunqua*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Wonambi*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Wonungar*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Worombi*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Yero*,<sup>[2]</sup> *Yingarna*,<sup>[11]</sup> and *Yurlunggur*.<sup>[2]</sup>

## 2 Development of concept

Though the concept of the Rainbow Serpent has existed for a long time in Aboriginal Australian cultures, it was introduced to the wider world through the work of anthropologists.<sup>[12]</sup> In fact, the name *Rainbow Serpent* or *Rainbow Snake* appears to have been coined in English by Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, an anthropologist who noticed the same concept going under different names among various Aboriginal Australian cultures, and called it "the rainbow-serpent myth of Australia".<sup>[3]</sup> It has been suggested that this name implies that there is only one Rainbow Serpent, when the concept actually varies quite a bit from one Aboriginal culture to another, and should be properly called the Rainbow Serpent myths of Australia.<sup>[10]</sup> Similarly, it has been suggested that the Serpent's position as the most prominent creator god in Australian mythology has largely been the creation of non-Aboriginal anthropologists.<sup>[12]</sup> Another error of the same kind is the way in which western-educated people, with a cultural stereotype of Greco-Roman or Norse myths, tell the Aboriginal stories in the past tense. For the indigenous people of Australia the stories were "Everywhen" - past, present and future<sup>[13]</sup>

## 3 Characteristics and associations

*Dreamtime* (or The Dreaming<sup>[5]</sup> or Tjukurrpa or Jukurrpa<sup>[11]</sup>) stories tell of the great spirits and totems during creation, in animal and human form that moulded the barren and featureless earth. The Rainbow Serpent came from beneath the ground and created huge ridges, mountains, and gorges as it pushed upward. The Rainbow Serpent is understood to be of immense proportions and inhabits deep permanent waterholes<sup>[14]</sup> and is in control of life's most precious resource, water. In some cultures, the Rainbow Serpent is considered to be the ultimate creator

of everything in the universe.<sup>[9]</sup>

In some cultures, the Rainbow Serpent is male; in others, female; in yet others, the gender is ambiguous or the Rainbow Serpent is hermaphroditic<sup>[2]</sup> or bisexual, thus an androgynous entity.<sup>[15]</sup> Some commentators have suggested that the Rainbow Serpent is a phallic symbol, which fits its connection with fertility myths and rituals.<sup>[15]</sup> When the Serpent is characterized as female or bisexual, it is sometimes depicted with breasts.<sup>[15]</sup> Other times, the Serpent has no particular gender. The Serpent has also been known to appear as a scorpion or another animal or creature.<sup>[15]</sup> In some stories, the Serpent is associated with a bat, sometimes called a “flying fox” in Australian English, engaged in a rivalry over a woman.<sup>[15]</sup> Some scholars have identified other creatures, such as a bird, crocodile, dingo,<sup>[10]</sup> or lizard, as taking the role of the Serpent in stories.<sup>[4]</sup> In all cases, these animals are also associated with water.<sup>[4]</sup> The Rainbow Serpent has also been identified with the *bunyip*, a fearful, water-hole dwelling creature in Australian mythology.<sup>[10]</sup>

The sometimes unpredictable Rainbow Serpent (in contrast to the unyielding sun) replenishes the stores of water, forming gullies and deep channels as the Rainbow Serpent slithers across the landscape.<sup>[16]</sup> In this belief system, without the Serpent, no rain would fall and the Earth would dry up.<sup>[5]</sup> In other cultures, the Serpent is said to come to stop the rain.<sup>[3]</sup> In addition to the identification with the rainbow, the Serpent is also identified with a prismatic halo around the moon that can be regarded as a sign of rain.<sup>[3]</sup> The Rainbow Serpent is sometimes associated with human blood, especially circulation and the menstrual cycle, and considered a healer.<sup>[2]</sup> Thunder and lightning are said to stem from when the Rainbow Serpent is angry,<sup>[2]</sup> and the Serpent can even cause powerful rainstorms and cyclones.<sup>[5]</sup> Quartz crystal and seashells are also associated with the Rainbow Serpent and are used in rituals to invoke it.<sup>[2]</sup> The identification with quartz crystal presumably results from its prism-like appearance.<sup>[3]</sup>

## 4 Serpent stories

Stories about the Rainbow Serpent are often passed down from generation to generation.<sup>[8]</sup> Serpent stories vary according to environmental differences. Tribes of the monsoonal areas depict an epic interaction of the sun, Serpent, and wind in their *Dreamtime* stories, whereas tribes of the central desert experience less drastic seasonal shifts and their stories reflect this.<sup>[16]</sup> It is known both as a benevolent protector of its people (the groups from the country around) and as a malevolent punisher of law breakers. The Rainbow Serpent’s mythology is closely linked to land, water, life, social relationships, and fertility. The Rainbow Serpent often takes part in transitions from adolescence to adulthood for young men and swallows them to vomit them up later.<sup>[2]</sup>

The most common motif in Rainbow Serpent stories is the Serpent as creator, with the Serpent often bringing life to an empty space.<sup>[6]</sup>

The most common Rainbow Serpent myth is the story of the *Wawalag*<sup>[9]</sup> or *Wagilag* sisters.<sup>[1]</sup> According to legend, the sisters are traveling together when the older sister gives birth, and her blood flows to a waterhole where the Rainbow Serpent lives.<sup>[9]</sup> In another version of the tale, the sisters are traveling with their mother, *Kunapipi*, all of whom know ancient secrets, and the Serpent is merely angered by their presence in its area.<sup>[1]</sup> The Rainbow Serpent then traces the scent back to the sisters sleeping in their hut, a metaphor for the uterus.<sup>[9]</sup> The Rainbow Serpent enters, a symbolic representation of a penis entering a vagina, and eats them and their children.<sup>[9]</sup> However, the Rainbow Serpent regurgitates them after being bitten by an ant,<sup>[9]</sup> and this act creates *Arnhem Land*.<sup>[1]</sup> Now, the Serpent speaks in their voices and teaches sacred rituals to the people living there.<sup>[1]</sup>

Another story is from the Great Sandy Desert area in the northern part of Western Australia.<sup>[17]</sup> This story explains how the Wolfe Creek Crater, or *Kandimalal*, was created by a star falling from heaven, creating a crater in which a Rainbow Serpent took up residence, though in some versions it is the Serpent which falls from heaven and creates the crater.<sup>[17]</sup> The story sometimes continues telling of how an old hunter chased a dingo into the crater and got lost in a tunnel created by the Serpent, never to be found again, with the dingo being eaten and spit out by the Serpent.<sup>[17]</sup>

Another legend from Western Australia tells of how Rainbow Serpents, or *Wagyls*, smashed and pushed boulders around to form trails on Mount Matilda, along with creating waterways such as the Avon River.<sup>[8]</sup>

A myth from the Northern Territory tells of how a great mother arrives from the sea, traveling across Australia and giving birth to the various Aboriginal tribes.<sup>[18]</sup> In some versions, the great mother is accompanied by the Rainbow Serpent (or *Lightning Snake*), who brings the wet season of rains and floods.<sup>[18]</sup>

Some Aboriginals in the Kimberley regions believe that it was the Rainbow Serpent who deposited spirit-children throughout pools in which women become impregnated when they wade in the water.<sup>[9]</sup> This process is sometimes referred to as “netting a fish”.<sup>[9]</sup>

A more children-friendly version of the Rainbow Serpent myth tells of how a serpent rose through the Earth to the surface, where she summoned frogs, tickled their bellies to release water to create pools and rivers, and is now known as the mother of life.<sup>[11]</sup> Another children-friendly tale is told in Dick Roughsey’s children’s book, which tells how the Rainbow Serpent creates the landscape of Australia by thrashing about and, by tricking and swallowing two boys, ends up creating the population of Australia by various animal, insect, and plant species.<sup>[7]</sup>

## 5 Possible origins in nature



*Wonambi naracoortensis* and *Thylacoleo*

The Carpet Snake is considered a form that the Rainbow Serpent can take by the Walmadjari people.<sup>[16]</sup> Furthermore, three snakes may have served as inspiration for the Rainbow Serpent. These three snakes are the rough-scaled python, the taipan, and the file snake. Each of these snakes possesses a characteristic that was associated with the Rainbow Serpent.<sup>[19]</sup> In Queensland, a fossil of a snake was found, and they believe that it came from the prehistoric family of large snakes that inspired the Rainbow Serpent myth.<sup>[12]</sup> *Wonambi* is a genus that consisted of two species of very large snakes. These species were not pythons, like Australia's other large constrictors of the genus *Morelia*, and are currently classified in the extinct family Madtsoiidae that became extinct elsewhere in the world 55 million years in the past. Aboriginal people describe this serpent as having "hair" around its head and face.

## 6 Role in traditional culture

In addition to stories about the Rainbow Serpent being passed down from generation to generation, the Rainbow Serpent has been worshiped through rituals and has also inspired cultural artifacts such as artwork and songs, a tradition which continues today.<sup>[9]</sup>

There are many ancient rituals associated with the Rainbow Serpent that are still practiced today.<sup>[9]</sup> The myth of the Wawalag sisters marks the importance of the female menstruation process and led to the establishment of the

Kunapipi blood ritual of the goddess, in which the indigenous Australians allegorically recreate the Rainbow Serpent eating the Wawalag sisters through dance and pantomime, and can be regarded as a fertility ritual.<sup>[9]</sup>

Female menstruation is sacred to many indigenous Australian cultures because it distinguishes the time when a female is capable of bringing life into the world, putting a woman on the same level of creative abilities as the Rainbow Serpent.<sup>[9]</sup> It is for this reason that men will attempt to mimic this holy process by cutting their arms and/or penises and letting their blood run over their own bodies, each other's bodies, and even into a woman's uterus.<sup>[9]</sup> Men will sometimes mix their blood with a women's menstrual blood, letting them flow together in a ceremonial unification of the sexes.<sup>[9]</sup>

The earliest known rock drawings of the Rainbow Serpent date back to more than 6,000 years ago.<sup>[9]</sup> Because of its connections with fertility, the Rainbow Serpent is often illustrated as a vagina, and vice versa.<sup>[9]</sup> Some rock art has been discovered in which the Rainbow Serpent was drawn mouth open and tongue out to represent the vaginal opening and streaming menstrual blood.<sup>[9]</sup>

The Rainbow Serpent is also identified as a healer and can pass on its properties as a healer to humans through a ritual.<sup>[20]</sup>

## 7 Influence in modern culture



*Sidney Nolan's Snake (1970-72), held at the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, is a giant Rainbow Serpent mural made of 1620 painted panels.*

The Rainbow Serpent, in addition to the continuation of traditional beliefs (which can be the subject of religious controversy), is often referenced in modern culture by providing inspiration for art, film, literature, music, religion, and social movements. For example, The Rainbow Serpent Festival, an annual music festival in Australia,<sup>[21]</sup> and the Rainbow Serpent Project, a series of films which document the filmmaker's journey to various sacred sites around the Earth,<sup>[22]</sup> are both inspired and named after the creature.

Furthermore, the Rainbow Serpent is used in art as a subject, even as an assignment in art classes.<sup>[11]</sup> For children,

it is often used to teach colors and symbolism; for older art students, it is used to teach painting techniques.<sup>[11]</sup> Many Aboriginal Australian artists continue to be inspired by the Rainbow Serpent and use it as a subject in their art.<sup>[12]</sup>

The Rainbow Serpent has also appeared as a character in literature. The Lardil people's Dreaming story of the Rainbow Serpent was retold in Dick Roughsey's award-winning Australian children's book *The Rainbow Serpent*;<sup>[7]</sup> the Rainbow Serpent has also appeared as a character in comic books such as *Hellblazer*.<sup>[23]</sup>

The Rainbow Serpent can still serve a religious role today, particularly for Aboriginal Australians, but some Aboriginal Australians who are Christians reject the belief and resent its identification with Aboriginal culture.<sup>[12]</sup> Some New Age religions and spirituality movements around the world have now also adopted the Rainbow Serpent as an icon.<sup>[12]</sup>

Similarly, the Rainbow Serpent can inspire social movements.<sup>[20]</sup> Art historian Georges Petitjean has suggested that the identification of the Rainbow Serpent with various genders and sexualities helps to explain why the rainbow flag has been adopted as the symbol of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities.<sup>[20]</sup> Politically, for example, the Rainbow Serpent was adopted as the symbol of an anti-uranium mining campaign in Australia, using the notion that the mining would disturb the Serpent and cause it to seek revenge as a metaphor for environmental destruction.<sup>[20]</sup>

## 8 See also

- Australian Aboriginal mythology: Rainbow Serpent
- Serpent (symbolism)
- Wirnpa
- Rainbow

## 9 References

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## 10 External links

- A Rainbow Serpent myth accompanying Jimmy Njiminjuma bark painting Accessed 8 July 2008
- Explaining Northern Land Council's use of the Rainbow Serpent in its logo Accessed 8 July 2008
- *First Australians* television series Accessed 29 April 2013
- *The Trails of the Rainbow Serpents* short film Accessed 3 May 2013

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Rainbow Serpent

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