

THE ADNYAMATHANHA FIRESTICK WEDDING

This is a unique piece of art from The Adnyamathanha nation of the Northern Flinders Ranges, in South Australia, where I lived for four years. I think it is fair to say that this nation does not have an established “school” or style of painting, unlike other nations from the Central desert. Dot painting is certainly not part of the Adnyamathanha culture.

The painting was brought to me by the artist, Theresa Brady and I paid \$4,000 for it (probably too much) because I have never seen anything like it before or since and I know it is a unique and very powerful evocation of a deeply sacred ceremony which is no longer carried out, to my knowledge.

The Firestick Wedding ceremony used to be performed by *Wilyaru* (fully initiated) Lawmen until ten years or so but as the Law stopped in 1947, there are no qualified Law Men now alive who are able to conduct it. One of the last of these is a Senior Man, Uncle Ron Coulthard, whom I know well, and who did conduct the ceremony for whitefellers upon request.

The Wilyaru Elder is sitting with his stick, faced by the couple and flanked by other Elders. They are linked by the energy of The Lightning Brothers (the white streaks). Depicted are bush tucker items such as witchetty grubs and quandong fruits (red). The Quandong tree, *santalum acuminatum*, is said to be the embodiment on earth of one of the Sisters of the Pleiades who felt so sorry for the Creation serpent, the Arkurra, who had fallen in love with her, that she came back to earth as a Quandong Tree. Mind you, this was after he had eaten all the Seven Sisters in a rage when Great Spirit had told him “don’t even think about it!” Here are echoes here of the Persephone myth, when she agreed to return to Hades, even after he had abducted her, for six months every year and when she does so, she carries another red fruit, the pomegramate. The things women do for love! The blue vortexes are the waterholes and there are shadowy depictions of other bush tucker in the shape of two lizards.

The connection to the stars – from which the Seven Sisters came down to give the law of Moiety (*skin kinship*) to the people is also shown. The moieties are *Matheri* (south wind – yin principle, cool, moist, fertile, planting of seeds and ideas) and *Arura* (north wind – yang principle, hot, dry, hard, harvesting of seeds and ideas). To add to the mystery, very very near to the town where we lived and where this painting was made, is a hill which is known as The 8th Sister, the Fallen Star, according to one woman Elder. That’s another story however.

This composition strikes me as a remarkable statement of Adnyamathanha culture. It is an exuberant celebration of the old myths, of the abundance of the land, of the respect for the ancient Elders and the sense of strong community as evidenced by the handprints, which overlay the images of the friends and family bearing witness to the ceremony of Divine Union.

I have no knowledge of whether Theresa ever painted anything like this again, but I was very honoured to be offered custodianship of this canvas for the years during which it has been in my life.

I hope it will find a new home, and the proceeds from it are intended as a donation to the Foundation for the health of the Adnyamathanha Elders.