



# Ancient ‘Evidence’ for a Modern Sacred

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As Lady Mungo’s remains had not turned to dust, their reappearance in the late 1960s connected various living people with a woman who lived at least 40 000 years ago. There is evidence that, after her death, her body had been ceremonially prepared, her bones crushed, then burnt and deposited in hot coals. The unusual calcrete mass holding her remains was first noticed during a geological expedition in a highly erosive landscape of wind-blown dunes<sup>1</sup>. Their location on a crescent-shaped fixed dune (or lunette) suggested dates of at least 20 000 years ago, and since then new technologies have confirmed much older dates. The reconstruction of her skull revealed a thoroughly modern human — a *Homo sapiens sapiens* — with the same physical characteristics as we share today. Possibly the world’s earliest known human cremation, it serves to remind us of the human propensity for elaborate rituals for the dead<sup>2</sup>.

In the settler-colonizer nation of Australia, debates over Aboriginal remains became a stage on which the on-going tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people were played out. A contest of secular science and Indigenous knowledge perspectives initially sparked conflict over custodianship and interpretation, but these gave rise to mutual learning exchanges, to the growth of mutual regard and to possibilities for reconciliation.

Lady Mungo was a woman who lived only into her twenties. For Western-trained scientists, her bones were the ‘hard material’, the ‘evidence’ that would reframe the chronology of the global history of

human evolution, if not the human past. Scientifically and politically significant, this evidence ‘proved’ to a colonizer nation that Aboriginal people had not only occupied the continent long before the newcomers, but that this might be the longest continuing occupation on the planet. Appreciating their power, Aboriginal people nonetheless rejected the prospect of her remains being viewed as prized artefacts to display in a museum or in a catalogue.

While Aboriginal people’s associations with their land had been ruptured by state government policies that concentrated them on state reserves and removed their children, the Mutti Mutti, Niyaampa and Paakantyi still upheld a long tradition of custodianship of Willandra Lakes where Lady Mungo’s remains were found. When female Mutti-Mutti elder Alice Kelly found out that scientists were excavating human remains on her ancestral lands, she demanded that Aboriginal people be consulted. Tibby Briar and Alice Bugmy joined her to become a formidable trio that represented all three tribal groups responsible for the region.

Since the later nineteenth century, imperial museums had prized both ancient and recent skeletons and even the organs of the recent Indigenous deceased, for public display. Often without any Indigenous consent, private collectors and state ethnologists removed thousands of Australian Aboriginal human remains from their resting places. This ‘evidence’ was used to exemplify ‘primitive’ peoples and human evolution. Aboriginal people found this painful and deeply offensive. When a person’s spirit

is forcibly estranged from their country, it affects the whole community's wellbeing.

At Willandra Lakes, the elders now work to ensure that no more human remains are taken away. In the ever-eroding sands of Willandra, bones, stone tools and the remnants of hearths and shared meals constantly rise to the surface. The Elders Council and the younger Indigenous discovery rangers have won significant rights to control research and tourism. In order to respect the ancient dead, they work closely with scientists to ensure the proper protocols concerning human remains are applied<sup>3</sup>. As Indigenous Discovery Ranger Marie Mitchell put it: 'Down this way the elders have got them well trained. [...] If a scientist is very rude or disrespectful, they don't get a foot in the door'<sup>4</sup>. Modern Aboriginal people live in an intercultural space, and as long as respect for Indigenous knowledge and for the dead are forthcoming, many are not opposed to engagement in the practices of contemporary Christianity and contemporary science.

Although early investigations suggested she was female, the first skeletal remains to be uncovered were classified in tandem with the excavation site, in the 'neutral' scientific style with the impersonal 'WL1' and 'Mungo 1'. Although scientists assumed that this burial and its irrefutable scientific 'evidence' should be placed in their professional hands, Indigenous custodians of the land asserted ownership by declaring her as kindred, as essential to *their* history; they referred to her in humanizing language as 'Mungo Lady'. A kind of reverence grew for all that their ancestor had given them. Rather than constituting passive evidence, they explain that she had actively 'come to the surface'. Gradually, she was believed to be exerting mystical powers as an integrated element in the natural world. By 1992, she had transcended the appellation of Mungo Lady. Now with the honorific title of Lady Mungo, she gained more status and an enhanced sense of reverence. As Marie Mitchell explains:

**Traditional owners and Indigenous parks rangers at the entrance to the Lake Mungo walkway, 2006**

Left to right: Warren Mitchell, Lottie Williams, Leanne Mitchell, Joan Slade, Mary Pappin, Tanya Charles

**Peter Clark (Lake Mungo National Parks Archaeologist) guiding members of the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service Aboriginal Sites Committee to sites on the Lake Mungo lunette, 1981**

Left to right: Carmelia Corowa, Peter Clark, Kevin Cavenagh, Ronald Lampert, Sharon Sullivan, Gretchen Poiner, Alice Kelly



**Lady Mungo was a lady that was well respected in her tribe. She was like the queen [...] a very strong person. And she'd have to be to come back up to surface for people to take a *standstill* and for the world to know about her. That's reincarnation for you, hey, she come back<sup>5</sup>.**

Her life and her recent post-1960s 'afterlife' are not yet written into the mainstream accounts of Australian history. Most of the world's religions are preoccupied with questions of life and death, and several open the possibility of a return to life, an afterlife, and even of 'rising again'. Indigenous Australians believe in forms of reincarnation, and of people living on in spirit form. This is often referred to as the 'Dreaming' or as anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner put it in English, as the 'everywhen', a temporal zone of continuity<sup>6</sup>. In such diverse thinking, humans potentially transcend life, death and particular epochs of time.

Although we cannot be sure of the extent of Catholic influences, the 'Lady' title and some of the powers that Aboriginal people attribute to Lady Mungo resonate with the most elevated female figure in Roman Catholic belief — 'Our Lady' or the Virgin Mary. Being widespread in many religions, reverence for a female figure may satisfy a deep human need; certainly it draws upon longer historical traditions of goddess worship. Although customs differ across the continent, Indigenous respect for the remains of the dead connects with (and diverges from) a Catholic tradition, which cherishes certain bones and clothing as relics of historical saints.

**With saintly selflessness, Lady Mungo is said to have surfaced — or physically 'appeared' — with the mission of drawing international attention to the sufferings of others.**

On one level, Aboriginal people's engagement with Christian belief provided a moral common ground for negotiating with the colonizer culture.

**For assistance at high-level meetings where scientists and government officers used technical and regulatory language, Alice Kelly drew upon an English dictionary and a Bible.**

Alice had named her daughter Mary and had sent her to a Catholic school<sup>7</sup>. Since the government could readily remove Aboriginal children from the state school system on the most spurious grounds, some Aboriginal parents opted for Catholic-run schools. Others were also exposed to Catholicism when they married Irish Catholic partners or worked for Catholic employers<sup>8</sup>. Alice Kelly became deeply connected with the spirit of Mungo Lady, and witnessed revelations. She heard her crying out at the pain of being taken away from her country. Significantly, Alice wanted to reconcile her Aboriginal spirituality with Catholic belief, especially in regard to her special connection with Lady Mungo<sup>9</sup>.

In Aboriginal 'Dreaming' stories, proof of the creation of the world is not fixed in words, but written into the landscape itself. Through parentage, conception dreaming, totemic, clan-group and other associations, many Aboriginal people enjoy visceral, embodied and emotional connections with 'Country'. Sustaining Aboriginal people through providing nourishment and nurture, this storied landscape embodies a world of cross-generational connection. Irrespective of whether physical human remains are those of close relatives, or of a person who lived 40 millennia ago, contemporary Indigenous custodians hold a moral duty to protect the dead in their land.

Alice Kelly at Lake Mungo, near the site of the burial of Lady Mungo, NSW



Lake Mungo lunette, not far from the place where Lady Mungo was found



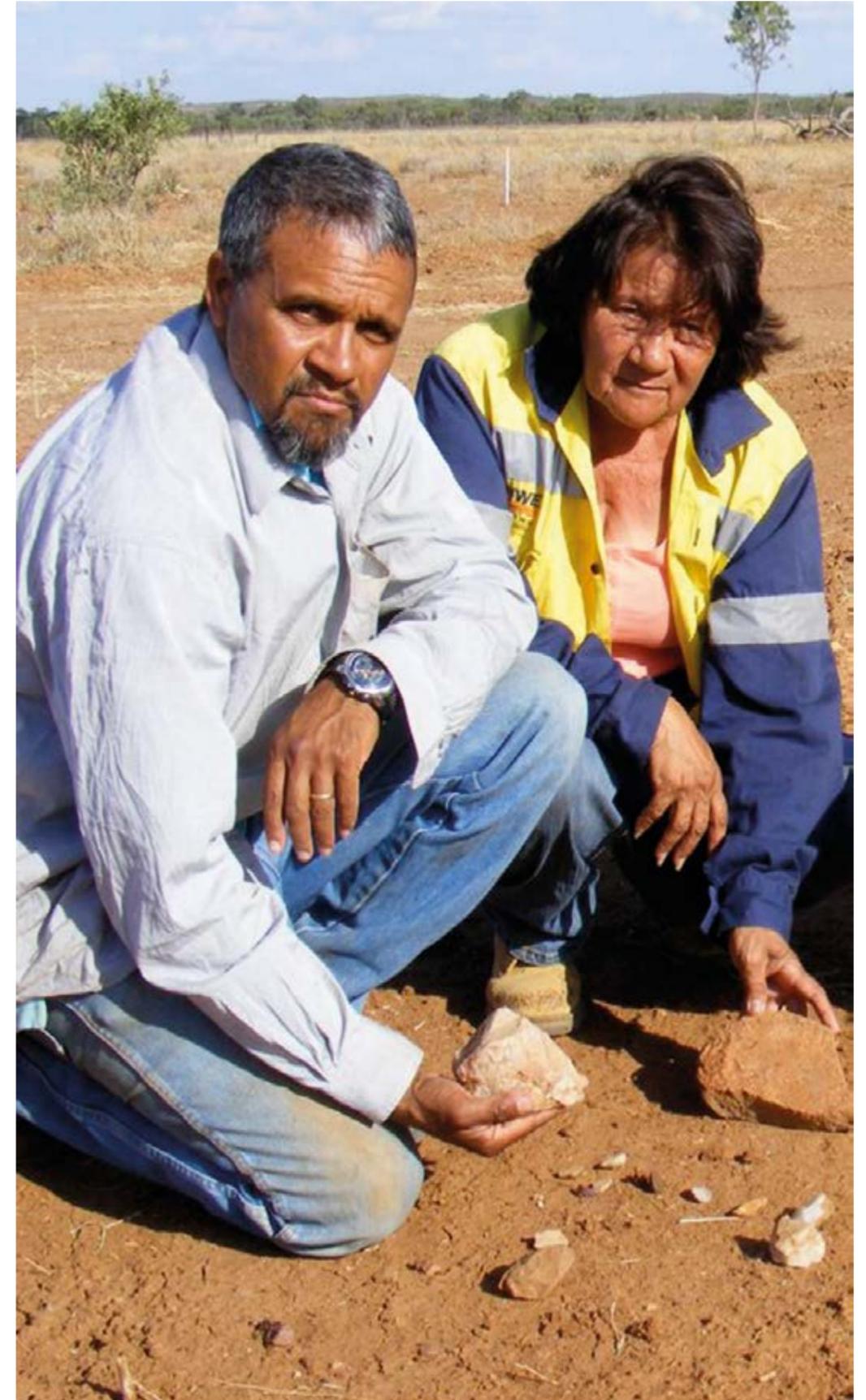
Indeed, Indigenous elders and rangers talk of Lady Mungo as if she is an old aunty who died only 'yesterday'. Today, Aboriginal people engage not just with her 'memory', but also with her transcendent presence. Promoting a dynamic contemporary form of female sacredness, many Aboriginal people tell narratives that explain how Lady Mungo has intentionally intervened to draw attention to their plight.

The tangible 'body of evidence' of this ancient woman's existence has created connections and exchanges between Western scientists and the Aboriginal people lobbying for the repatriation of her remains. Palaeontologist Alan Thorne, who had pieced together her skull and skeletal remains, continued to hold them in laboratories and offices at the Australian National University in Canberra. When he agreed in 1992 to 'bring her home', a special ceremony was arranged. As numerous people gathered to watch the return of her remains in a special casket, it was a highly charged emotional moment for all parties. Witnesses felt the sudden change in the weather — from stillness to a *wurley-wurley* (dust storm). This was considered irrefutable proof that the Lady's spirit was returning to her Country<sup>10</sup>.

Both male and female Aboriginal elders see Lady Mungo as a powerful defining figure whose revelations are integrally connected with a place suffused with spiritual power. She has attracted leading scientists from all over the world to the country of the Mutti Mutti, Niyaampa and Paakantyi, and since she has surfaced, their recognition as the first peoples has been significantly enhanced. What is more, Lady Mungo has the power and the allure to engender a more inclusive and reconciled history of nation, and to generate convergent cross-cultural insights that could inform a more nuanced global human history.



Lottie Williams, Paakantyi elder and a senior traditional owner of Lake Mungo, 2006



**Gordon and Pearl Connelly, Mount Isa, QLD, 2009**

Indigenous groups work in collaboration with archaeologists in many parts of Australia. Here, Gordon and Pearl Connelly of the Mitakoodi peoples of the Cloncurry River (the River People) are recording some of their ancestor's stone tools during an archaeological site study in the Mt Isa region. With 130 working mines in the region, such archaeological projects are important in managing and protecting the Mitakoodi peoples' rich and ancient cultural heritage