



Keeping culture alive

The Songlines¹

Bruce, the narrator of this story, is touring Australia to try to learn more about Aboriginal culture. He is now in the Alice Springs area, in Mrs Lacey's Desert Bookstore, where a couple of American tourists are buying souvenirs. Stan is a Pintupi² elder and artist who has come to sell one of his paintings.

Mrs Lacey switched to her second pair of glasses and said: "What you got here, Stan?"

"Honey-ant³," he whispered in a hoarse voice.

"The honey-ant", she turned to the Americans, "is one of the totems⁴ at Popanji. This painting's a honey-ant Dreaming⁵."

"I think it's beautiful", said the American woman thoughtfully. We could buy it."

"Now, dearest," said the husband in an effort to calm her. "First we have to ascertain if this honey-ant painting is for sale. And if so, how much?"

Mrs Lacey fluttered her eyelashes and said, harshly, "I couldn't say. You'll have to ask the artist."

Stan rolled the whites of his eyes to the ceiling and rustled his lips. Obviously, he was thinking of a price—the price he'd get from Mrs Lacey—and doubling it. [...] He then lowered his head and said, "Four hundred fifty."

"Australian dollars," Mrs Lacey chipped in.

"Fair enough," said the man, looking rather relieved. [...] "But now I want to know what's going on. In the painting I mean."

I crept up behind the Americans and watched Old Stan point his bony finger at the large blue circle on the canvas.

It was the Eternal Home, he explained, of the Honey-ant Ancestor at Tatata. And suddenly it was as though we could see the row on row of honey-ants, their bodies striped and gleaming, bursting with nectar in their cells beneath the roots of a mulga tree. We saw the ring of flame-red earth around the entrance to their nest, and the routes of their migration as they spread to other places.

"The circles," Mrs Lacey added helpfully, "are honey-ant ceremonial centres. The 'tubes', as you call them, are Dreaming-tracks."

The American man was captivated. "And can we go and look for these Dreaming tracks? Out there, I mean? Like the Ayer's Rock? Some place like that?"

"They can," she said. "You can't."

"You mean they're invisible?"

"To you. Not to them."

"Then, where are they?"

"Everywhere," she said, "For all I know there's a Dreaming track running right through the middle of my shop."

"Spooky," the wife giggled.

"And only they can see it?"

"Or sing it," Mrs Lacey said. "You can't have a track without a song."

"And these tracks run every place?" the man asked. "All over Australia?"

"Yes," said Mrs Lacey, sighing with satisfaction at having found a catchy phrase. "The song and the land are one."

Bruce Chatwin, *The Songlines* (1986)



1. tracks/lines the mythical Ancestors followed as they sang the world into creation

2. an Australian Aboriginal group

3. Honey ants look like small crawling honey pots.



4. an animal or a plant which is the emblem of a clan and sometimes revered as its ancestor

5. The "Dreaming" or "Dreamtime" is the Aborigenes' mythical time when the Ancestors walked across the land to create life.