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Climate Change and the Politics with the Indigenous: A Comparative Study of *The Swan Book* and *The Last Wave*

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Abstract
The study of Australian literature could very well be analysed in juxtaposition with Indian literature, as far as their postcoloniality and democratic entities are concerned. However, the politics involved in the degradation of their natural habitat and the onset of climate change might be a little seminal one. Discussions on the contemporary issue of the political rights relating to the basic sustainable environmental conditions vis-à-vis the 'plight' and 'identity' of the aboriginal tribes are relevant in the present scenario. To substantiate this, the novel ***The Swan Book*** (2013) by the Australian writer Alexis Wright would be analysed, with parallel reading of ***The Last Wave*** (2014), the first island novel by the Indian writer, Pankaj Sekhsaria. The special thrust of the paper would be to evoke the metaphoric image of the legendary character 'Rip Van Winkle', through the perception of Wright and move ahead to the Indian cultural context. It would ponder over the politics involved in the state of affairs which leaves the denizens at the state of slumber, overlooking the ethical dimensions that may lead to the threat towards the ecology that is on the sharp edge of 'time' and 'history'. This threat might be, in the quintessential sense, to the extinction of the 'Jarawa tribe' in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands belonging to the Indian sub-continent (as depicted in ***The Last Wave***) or the rape of the protagonist 'Oblivia' (as in ***The Swan Book***), an aboriginal lady living in the polluted dry swamp, a habitat for the indigenous in the northern Australia.

Keywords
Climate Change, indigenous, political rights, postcolonial ecocriticism, natural habitat.

The comparative features of the two major multicultural nations, namely Australia and India, could be identified in terms of their postcolonial identities and political doctrines of democracy. These multicultural spaces quite substantially abound with minority classes including, the refugees, lesser developed castes (particularly in India), and Indigenous tribes. One of the basic concerns of these marginal people, mainly after the independence from the colonial rule, are the provisions for equal rights, particularly relating to the basic sustainable environmental conditions. For this special aspect concerning 'postcoloniality', the study of 'ecocriticism' would be quite digressing from the perspective of the First World nations of Europe and the United States and also quite diverse within its own body of postcolonial

ecocriticism. In this regard Pablo Mukherjee's assumption on 'postcolonial ecocriticism' stands apt:

> Surely, any field purporting to theorise the global conditions of colonialism and imperialism (let us call it postcolonial studies) cannot but consider the complex interplay of environmental categories such as water, land, energy, habitat, migration with political or cultural categories such as state, society, conflict, literature, theatre, visual arts. Equally, any field purporting to attach interpretive importance to environment (let us call it eco/environmental studies) must be able to trace the social, historical and material co-ordinates of categories such as forests, rivers, bio-regions and species (as quoted in Huggan and Tiffin *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* 2).

The above quoted statement of Mukherjee would form the basic theoretical framework of the paper and would further explore some serious political intent, impacting upon the natural landscapes such as the forests, the swamp, the Ocean, etc. The essay further proposes to show how these natural elements act as the social, historical as well as the cultural determiners in order to seek towards the extent to which the two postcolonial nations are striving/failing to recognise Indigenous sovereignty inhabiting a limited landscape of the respective nations. The essay would also seek to inquire the dangerous implications of these political strategies, not only for the different indigenous tribes, but also for the way both the nations are inhabited and for the way humans inhabit the Earth. To substantiate this, the novel *The Swan Book* (2013) by the Australian writer Alexis Wright would be analysed, with parallel reading of *The Last Wave* (2014), the first island novel by the Indian writer, Pankaj Sekhsaria.

This essay, while engaging with the socio-cultural spaces of the indigenous tribes of the respective nations, would also try to prove that the authors in the present narratives are the quintessential intellectual revolutionaries, who through the literary genre attempt to disseminate the conviction involved in the fight for sovereignty over the land. While discussing about the author's intellectual potentials Wright points out: "if you could succeed in keeping the basic architecture of how you think, then you owned the freedom of your mind, that unimpeded space to store hope and feed your ability to survive" (Wright quoted in Jane Gleeson-White, August 23, 2013). Hence, both the narratives tend to represent this 'architecture of the mind' and with great clarity and precision extricate the many dimensions of the fragility of the natural landscapes that exactly juxtaposes the identity of the indigenous that inhabit those landscapes.

The novel, *The Swan Book* opens with this 'architecture of the mind' through a queer confession:

> Upstairs in my brain, there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house. Little stars shining over the moonscape garden twinkle endlessly in a crisp sky. The crazy virus just sits there on the couch and keeps a good old *qui vive* out the window for intruders (*The Swan Book* 1).

This virus, according to the narrator is the "nostalgia for foreign things" (3) and is "a sickness developed from channelling every scrap of energy towards an imaginary, ideal world with songs of solidarity, like "We Shall Overcome"" (3). However, this virus is a confused stuff that emits paradoxical images: "Hard to believe a brain could get sucked into vomiting bad history over the beautiful sunburnt plains" (1). Here Wright's paradoxical images quite aptly evoke the politico-cultural history of the place upon its environmental diversities, where the enchanting landscape is overshadowed by the memory of its historical past.

In the Prelude to the novel which she names it as "Ignis Fatuus" meaning foolish fire, Wright introduces an aboriginal girl's aspirations to get back her power of authority upon herself and her life. This girl forms the centre of the plot in the novel. According to Wright, this girl depicts the quintessential human mind which has the capacity to "imagine, with the way stories are born from particular locales and yet can spread like viruses, travelling gypsy-like across the planet in the way of migratory birds, taking hold of minds in places they don't belong" (Jane Gleeson-White 2013) and the narrative fiction *The Swan Book* quite appropriately suggest that "stories, their dissemination and cross-pollination, bear upon the ability of Indigenous Australians to govern their own minds, and by extension their land (these are inextricably linked)– and that this has implications for the future of human life on Earth" (White 2013).

In the similar way, *The Last Wave* portrays the author's fascination towards an archipelago. Pankaj Sekhsaria through the narrative fiction proves his intense concern and compassion towards the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The narrative depicts the characters and their life and stories revolving around the territory of the 'Jarawa' tribes who inhabit the rainforests of the Andaman island. The author of the novel has multiple identities, he is a journalist, environmental activist, photographer and an academic. His deep interest and consistent research on the socio-cultural and political impact upon the archipelago's environmental condition has provided him substantial understanding regarding certain crucial factors which may lead to catastrophic climate change in the environmentally fragile

landscapes. Madhusree Mukerjee substantiates the author's achievement in articulating the archipelago's unique natural features by pointing out: "Since the 1990s, the author has devoted himself to defending all that is magical about the emerald isles, their coral-studded waters, and the ancient culture that thrives within its glorious and primeval rainforest" (Mukherjee 2016).

Australia is an ancient 'island continent' which is detached quite exhaustively from other countries through vast oceans. However, this island continent is quite self-sufficient because of its rich biodiversity. Helen F. McKay substantiates its rich bio-diverse natural landscape by stating thus:

> The land is home to some of the oldest living flora, including such recently rediscovered plants as the Wollemi pine, which has a fossil line stretching back more than 90 million years, and the cycads, food of the dinosaurs. Because it is an island, Australia is also home to some of the most unique animals in the world (McKay 3).

Similarly, the Andaman and Nicobar are also islands with rich flora and fauna that are mostly endemic (found nowhere else). In *The Last Wave* Sekhsaria sketches the bountiful flora and fauna beautifully of the 'waxy green mangroves', the 'crocodiles with eyes like glowing coals', the 'lush green rain forests', the exotic 'Giant Leatherback turtle' etc. However, the postcolonial identities of the nations and their cultural past as well as present intervene persistently with their political and materialistic intentions to affect the ecosystem of these environmentally diverse yet fragile islands. While discussing Australia as a postcolonial nation, Graham Huggan attaches some special features to the 'cultural' and 'literary' assumptions by quoting Hodge and Mishra's observation regarding the mentioned two very important aspects related to the nation's postcolonial identity as: "still [being] determined massively by [their] complicity with an imperialist enterprise" (Hodge and Mishra quoted in Huggan 30). This statement encapsulates the motif of the literary and cultural representations which, through the postcolonial lens tries to bring into visibility, the fissures within what is considered as the central (imperialist) and the marginal (colonised). Hodge and Mishra further clarify their distinction between what they call, 'oppositional' and 'complicit' mode of postcolonialism in the following manner:

> The former is largely attached to Aboriginal and other marginal forms of literary/cultural productions; the latter to the neo-colonialist literature of the white majority, which is encapsulated in the contradictory figure of the (male) explorer/convict/bushranger, forever battling to assert presence in a country not his own (quoted in Huggan 30).

This statement could be extended further to discuss India's contemporary postcolonial mode as well. Through the literary productions articulated by the activist cum author like Sekhsaria who consistently voices this cultural divide, when the Indigenous tribe of the Andaman Islands are exploited and their territories are being encroached by the mainland Indians or the 'neo-colonialist' for their own selfish gains, it is evident how the history of the colonial past are still reproduced by the mainland Indians to colonise the tribe. Sekhsaria's intention while writing the narrative is in the similar light pointed out by Ajay Dandekar when he says: "Sekhsaria is strongest when he weaves in the rich tapestry of local history, the Andaman's rich ecological terrain, its colonial legacy and the rapaciousness of capital into the narrative" ("No Man is an Island" 17). Sekhsaria, through his eloquent social, political and ethnographical representation "brutally exposes the mainstream view that holds the indigenous in contempt−and in fact continues to cling on to the colonial imagery of the 'primitive' and the exotic" (17).

In the context of the representation of Australia's marginal identities as the easy victims of the nation's politico-cultural revolutions, Alexis Wright's central character in the narrative *The Swan Book*, an aboriginal, dumb teenage girl named Oblivian Ethyl (ene) stands as an appropriate example. This unidentified aboriginal girl had "fallen into the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree" (*The Swan Book* 6) after being raped by some local youth and had remained unconscious there until was found and rescued and was christened as 'Oblivia':

> Oblivia had been born at all after this dumb girl was dragged out of the eucalyptus tree by old Bella Donna after years ---a decade of being missing---and who disowned her people by acting as though she had bypassed human history, by being directly descended from their ancestral tree (*The Swan Book* 10).

Just like Sheksaria's assumption about the way the mainstream views the indigenous, with contempt, Wright also directs the similar perspective, though suggestively, through 'Oblivian Ethyl (ene) s' name. The girl's name 'Oblivian' suggests the way she is considered by the 'white' Australians, because of her identity of an aboriginal girl. Wright calls her 'Ignis Fatuus' or the 'foolish fire'that accompanies smoke, dust and drought. Ethylene literally means "a hydrocarbon found in crude oil that is used to produce, among many things, the ubiquitous plastic shopping bag and a hormone that ripens fruit" (White). After Oblivia's consciousness is restored, her mind is filled with Bella Donna's strange 'swan stories' and after her long unconsciousness, her fresh memory is "created by what the woman had chosen to tell her" (*The Swan Book* 77-78).

'Bella Donna of the Champions' is a climate change refugee from the war-torn northern hemisphere. Her rendition about her experiences during the war encapsulates the way human life and nature fall prey at the hands of the socio-political upsurges. She enumerates thus:

> Where I came from, whole herds of deer were left standing like statues of yellow ice while blizzards stormed. Mute Swans sheltered in ice-covered reeds. The rich people were flying off in armadas of planes like pack of migratory birds. The poverty people like myself had to walk herdlike, cursed from one border to another through foreign lands and seas (15).

Bella Donna eventually walks her way to northern Australia and finds Oblivia, with whom she starts living in a dirty and dusty swamp in a dilapidated warship. Wright uses a striking irony to describe this place where the majority of aboriginal Australians take refuge: "They were already the overcrowded kind of people living in the world's most unknown detention camp right in Australia that still liked to call itself a first-world country" (35).

The first chapter of the narrative "Dust Cycle" is quite a significant one as it holds 'war' and its ravages as the chief event that brings climatic as well as animate/inanimate devastation in the land. The novel's plot being set hundred years earlier than the present-day world has observed 'Mother Nature' as "Mother Catastrophe" (5), the elemental life-giving source, suddenly turning hostile and destructive causing "flood, fire, drought and blizzard" (5), leading thousands of refugees like Bella Donna to migrate to the different parts of the world. Thus, these environmental refugees are forced to flee from their native places due to the fear of dire consequences like "tsunamis" which might be caused through the human destructive forces like "nuclear fallout" (5).

This 'tsunami' which was feared by the environmental refugees depicted in *The Swan Book* is actually represented in *The Last Wave*. The devastation caused by tsunami in December 2004 that significantly affected the Andaman Islands and its topography is a proof of how 'Mother Nature' turns into 'Mother Catastrophe' in the Indian context, when thousands died, few small islets submerged under water and many coral reefs were permanently destroyed. Sekhsaria, being an author cum environmental activist, attempts quite actively to sensitise mainlanders regarding the environmentally fragile island by having written:

> Magazine articles about the Andamans; campaigned to protect the Jarawa, the hunter-gatherers who live within the strip of great evergreen rainforest along the western coast of two Andaman islands; published academic articles on the archipelago's environment, development, and strategic role in India's defence policies; co-edited a collection of

> papers on the Jarawa's encounters with outsiders; and, most recently, exhibited photographs on the archipelago's natural wonders. It is the same Indian counterpart, which is quite often forgotten by its mainland dwellers (Mukerjee; original emphasis).

Wright, just like Sheksaria, links climate change to the issue of aboriginal rights. Through her novel, Wright on behalf of the climate change refugees who are mainly aboriginal tribes, demands for the right to the land, who as a matter of paradox, have been colonised by the white Australians, despite carrying the identity of natives since time immemorial. Tracing the historicity of these Aboriginal identities and their rootedness to the land McKay points out: "The Aboriginal people have their own beliefs about the history of their lands. Many believed that their ancestors originated in Australia, as evidenced by many of their stories from the Dreaming" (McKay 4).[1] McKay further proves these stories to be true by claiming that the: "Aboriginal people understand much about their prehistory and have developed a strong connection to their land. The information in many of these stories is now being researched and is proving to be essentially correct" (4).

However, when the white counterpart of the nation of Australia fails to reclaim sovereignty and equal right for all, it is expected that a leader from the Aboriginal community would rise up from somewhere and would assert rights on behalf of his community. Wright introduces a similar figure in the narrative, called Warren Finch, whose stature she elevates enough be regarded as "a modern Moses" (*The Swan Book* 110). He is the Aboriginal hero and the Deputy President of Australia. He comes to this 'Swan Lake' to marry the girl he had promised: the raped, abandoned, Aboriginal girl, Oblivia. But, very soon all his charisma and charm is lost when he marries and captivates Oblivia in a tower. Finch had selfish political intention and through him Wright perhaps wants to extricate how power and political influence can make one a tyrannic coloniser, irrespective of race or colour. This perspective is made clear in the narrative when Wright underlines Finch's characteristics thus:

> He moved from one country to the next, each time with ancient law holders by his side in his role (one of many) as the special old-law rapporteur to the world's highest authority of elders for ancient laws, ancient scriptures, and modern Indigenous law-making. He was wearing yet another hat from his home hat, or his national hat, who knew these days. He had too many hats. They say he was leading the development of new laws for the world on the protection of the Earth and its peoples, after centuries of destruction on the planet (113-114; original emphasis).

Sekhsaria in *The Last Wave* talks about the encounters – direct and indirect between the settlers and the Jarawas. Historically speaking, the Jarawas shot arrows and killed any intruder who attempted to encroach upon their territory. However, Sekhsaria points out at the timewhen they started emerging from the forests and initiated socialising with the settlers. He churns fiction and some real-life incidents to represent how the two cultures reacted to each other's presence. Their hesitant encounter made Sekhsaria wonder: "here was a strange, unprecedented roadside meeting of two worlds living side by side, yet separated by huge legacies of history, distrust and fear" (*The Last Wave* 62). Sekhsaria at one point shows an instance of howthe fearsome and speculative encounter between the settlers and the Jarawas takes place. Through the narration it is evident that the settlers have less compassion towards them, when on seeing a naked Jarawa woman, one of the young men "in tight jeans brushes against a Jarawa woman's bare bottom" when she is forced to push him over (63). In another instance, perhaps in an attempt to 'tame' the 'wild' or to politicise the Jarawa encounters, the act that doesn't seem culturally correct or appropriate and is even not approved by Harish, who witnessed the whole scene, when a policeman's wife "held up the Jarawa woman's right hand, picked up a bunch of bangles and slipped them effortlessly over the dark bare wrist" (65), she even "brushed a little sindoor from the parting of her own hair and placed a small dot on the forehead of the Jarawa woman" (66) and "to ensure the modesty, the lajja, of the Jarawa woman, wrap a saree around her" (66).

Despite few encounters, the culture gap is too wide to comprehend any mutual assimilation. Sekhsaria's documentation, on the other hand, directs the attention towards the dwindling of the ecosystem and juxtaposes the sensitive issue with the indigenous life. His book *Islands in Flux* published in the year 2017, attempts to historically trace the tribes and puts before the world, the irony of their existence thus: "the islands belong to them, but ironically, the people who write the history are we, the citizens of the modern democratic Indian state" (*Islands in Flux* 3). His ironical statement makes it pertinent that despite all the laws and policies framed to uphold and protect equal rights, the indigenous still are bereft of certain basic 'democratic' rights. Sekhsaria further enlists the names of these ancient tribal communities as "the Great Andamanese, the Onge, the Jarawa and the Sentinelese" (3) and states their dwindling population by pointing out: "Just 150 years ago, the population of these tribal communities was estimated to be at least 5,000", talking about their total population today, he says: "the population of these four communities put together is not more than a mere 500" (3). To this fast-dwindling state of the indigenous, Sheksaria holds not only British

imperial role responsible, but shows his severe discontent towards the newly independent India, when in 1960s "an official plan of the Government of India to 'colonize' (and this was the term used) the Andaman and Nicobar Islands was firmly in place" (3). Furthermore, he also holds this new set of colonizers responsible in initiating to 'tame' whatever they considered 'wild' in nature, thus striking imbalance in the ecosystem of the fragile islands. Sheksaria thus points out:

> The forests were 'wastelands' that needed to be tamed, settled and developed. It did not matter that these forests were the home of myriad plants and animals that had evolved over aeons. It did not matter that ancient tribal peoples were living here for centuries, neither that they were physically and spiritually sustained by these forests (3).

Wright also quite similarly holds government policies responsible in disturbing the lives of aboriginal Australians and their sustainable environment. She directs her attack upon these policies and also on the people who politicise the whole affair for their selfish ends. She says: "Messiahs come and go, usually in the form of academic researchers, or a few chosen blacks and one-hit wonders pretending to speak for Aboriginal people and sucking-dry government money bureaucrats" (*The Swan Book* 27). She uses striking imageries to depict the plight of the aboriginal tribes, now living in exile due to climate change because of wars. Few examples among her intriguing paradoxes are: the 'oasis of abandonment' and 'living the detention life-style'. She even evokes the legendary fairy-tale *Rip Van Winkle* (6), which metaphorically represents, not only the inability of the aboriginal to stand up for themselves, but of every citizen of the nation state who are in a long and deep slumber (like the old man Winkle) and couldn't realise the urgency of the matter that may lead, though in a slow pace, to the gradual depletion of the whole eco-system.

Both the novelists portray new stories and a different dimension of the changing world because of the way, quite biased, the dominant 'anthropocene' beholds what he considers as 'uncivilized' or 'wild'. Wright quite rightfully compares these new breeds of storytellers as the myna birds, from whom: "You had to hear these soothsaying creatures creating glimpses of a new internationally dimensional language about global warming and changing climates for this land. Really listen hard to what they were saying" (297).

In *The Swan Book*, the major characters that play the role of the climate change refugees are Oblivia, Bella Donna and 'the swan', whose migration suggest that even animals and birds are affected due to human inflicted climate change issues and overall, this migration, both of humans and animals suggest the permanent snapping off of ones rootedness from culture,

tradition and also, at the same time, from their mutual relationship with their natural habitat. This socio-cultural conflict is even more intense when the climate change refugee belongs to a minority or indigenous community. Bruce Burson in this regard, substantiates their excruciating plight by pointing out:

> A recent report observes that, in many cases, the impact of climate change is felt most acutely by minority and indigenous communities which often live in the most marginal areas. If these communities have historically encountered entrenched official and societal discrimination, this may result in a failure to respond to their needs in the wake of environmental disasters caused or exacerbated by climate change. (6)

The Last Wave on the other hand, underlines the tragic environmental disaster that strikes due to the lavish exploitation of the pristine natural habitats. The disastrous waves of the Tsunami of 2004 shook the earth of many islands of the archipelago, and also the life of the protagonist, Harish, who witnessed the whole calamity and finally lost his beloved, the local born girl Seema. Being injured by the calamity and pained by the great loss, Harish opens his eyes to find himself in the hospital, there he finds his loss quite similar to the Jarawas who were also admitted at the same hospital. He could then, find a metaphoric connection between himself and the Jarawas. He feels, just like him, the Jarawas were also completely at loss, but for them the giant wave was the wave of 'exploitation', in the name of development imposed upon them and their habitat by the mainlanders. Sekhsaria in this regard is quite vocal and speaks on behalf of the voiceless tribes, particularly the Jarawas. Talking about the illegal and criminal activities happening in those jungles, in one occasion, Sekhsaria quite disapprovingly talks about the swift and spontaneous 'colonizing' that continues till today. Multiple points that are quite disturbing on both human and environmental interest are quite pertinently raised by Sekhsaria which is worth reiterating:

> Exactly like termites drilling into a wooden frame, the forestry operations created small inroads into the impregnable forests. Small channels that grew step by step, elephants and trucks and quickly sucked out everything – log by log, tree by tree, forest by forest (*The Last Wave* 192).

Seksharia shows his concern towards the environmental imbalance that such actions could lead to and finally his warning goes off when a huge tsunami is witnessed on 26th December, 2004, wiping off many plant and animal species from the face of the earth and killing many people, animals and destroying numerous plant lives. Illegal activities taking place here include: poaching, combing of trees and smuggling the timber by forest department, and most

prominently, the laying of the 'Andaman Trunk Road' across the forest and sanctioning of tourists' bus to pass through it, which further intensifies the exploitation, through the sighting of the naked Jarawa women and clicking their pictures, with the intention of selling them in the foreign market. To this vulnerability of natural resource and their inhabitants Sekhsaria points out: "They may look impregnable, powerful, un-destroyable – but just see how fragile they really are, how easily they can be decimated" (192).

In many of these above mentioned cases of exploitation, the major threat that these people and their natural habitat receive, are from the 'ruling elite' and the nation, Timothy Clark, in the similar vein highlights that the postcolonial nations like India "often sanction the plunder of [their] hills, rivers and forests to satisfy increasing resource needs, in a quest for development, for modernisation or catching-up" (The *Value of ecocriticism* 141; original emphasis). Clark further points out that in postcolonial nation like India, its multicultural and pluralist society sometimes tend to hinder activism for the support of the cause by stating: "environmental activism in the postcolonial state is in fact often a plural and not necessarily self-consistent matter, mediated through differences of caste, class or gender" (141). However, as a matter of fact, Sheksaria's profile as a restless activist and an author, who tends to sensitize readers and academics about the socio-environmentally fragile islands belonging to his nation through his books and journals, gives him enough claim to be an Indian who despite multiple barriers and hindrances, has created persistent voice that qualifies him as the quintessential storyteller who speaks on behalf of the voiceless and even goes on to threaten those, who presently are a threat to the 'ecology' and to the 'cosmology' as a whole. Wright too approves the role of the quintessential author who could articulate on behalf of the world's tribal culture and communities and resist against exploitation of both, human and natural resources that directly concerns the tribal identity. She asserts thus:

> All of these big law people thought tribal people across the world would be doing the same, and much like themselves, could also tell you about the consequences of breaking the laws of nature by trespassing on other people's land. They were very big on the law stories about the natural world (*The Swan Book* 14-15).

Overall, the two narratives taken from two different multicultural countries aptly depict how democratic principles, upon which the two respective nations' political convictions are based, tend to undermine the fundamental human as well as environmental rights of those at the segregated end of the great multicultural society, that may include the 'tribe' or the natural environment, like the 'swamp' or the 'forests'. This centuries long ignorance or slumber, or

intentional negligence to address such issues could eventually lead to heavy climatic disasters like the disrupting tsunami, as pointed out by Sekhsaria or mass migration resulting in dire poverty due to human induced climate change as in *The Swan Book*.

Notes

1. Dreaming or dreamtime stories are "the oral history of the aboriginal people" (4). These stories are orally passed that narrate the history of the aboriginals from their perception about their lands, including "occurrences during the Great Creation in timeless ages beyond our understanding" (4).

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