The stars in the night sky are also interpreted as law-books for the Indigenous Australians, telling people how to live on Earth. The Yolngu people of Arnhem Land say that the constellation of Orion, which they call Jilpan, is a canoe. They tell the story of two brothers who went fishing, and caught and ate a fish that was forbidden under their law. Seeing this, the Sun sent a waterspout that carried the two brothers and their canoe up into the sky where you can still see them.

As they were looking south with the bright sky rising, the Southern Cross appeared, which was Dhul Dhul; the shovel-nose ray, and the two pointers; the two warriors in their canoe.

Where you look due south toward Hinchinbrook (Muddamuddanaayny; pronounced Mudda-mud-a-nah-me) from Dunk Island (Coonangalbah; pronounced Koanang-gol-bar), two boys paddled out in a canoe and dropped their stone anchor. The elders had told them not to fish on that sand spit because there was a big shovel-nose ray (Dhul Dhul; pronounced Doo-ee Doo-ee) that lived there. The boys fished anyway. The ray bit their line and started to tow them around in the canoe but the boys wouldn’t let go of the line. It towed them around the ocean for a while before going down the Hinchinbrook channel. They disappeared into the horizon. By then it was getting dark and everyone was worried about the boys.

On the banks of the Murray River, north of Adelaide, is a site called “Ngaut Ngaut”. It belongs to the Nganguruku people, and engraved images of the Sun and Moon testify to its astronomical connections. Close to the engravings are a series of dots and lines carved in the rock, which according to traditional owners, show the cycles of the moon. This oral tradition has been passed throughout the generations from father to son.

One of the most beautiful sites in Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, close to the Elivina Track, features a finely engraved emu. The male emu was of great significance to Aboriginal Elders. Just as the male emu plays a vital role in producing young emus by sitting on the eggs, the Elders play a major role in initiating boys into manhood. The Emu’s head is a dark shadow called the Coal Sack that sits next to the Southern Cross. Its neck passes through the Pointers, and its body lies across the constellation Scorpio.

The Wurdi Youang stone arrangement in Victoria was built by the Wathaurung people before European settlement, but all records of its use have now disappeared. This egg-shaped ring of stones, about 50m in diameter, has its major axis almost exactly east-west. At its western end, at the highest point of the circle, are three prominent waist-high stones. Some outlying stones to the west of the circle, as viewed from these three stones, seem to indicate the setting positions of the Sun at the equinoxes and solstices. The straight sides of the circle also indicate the solstices.