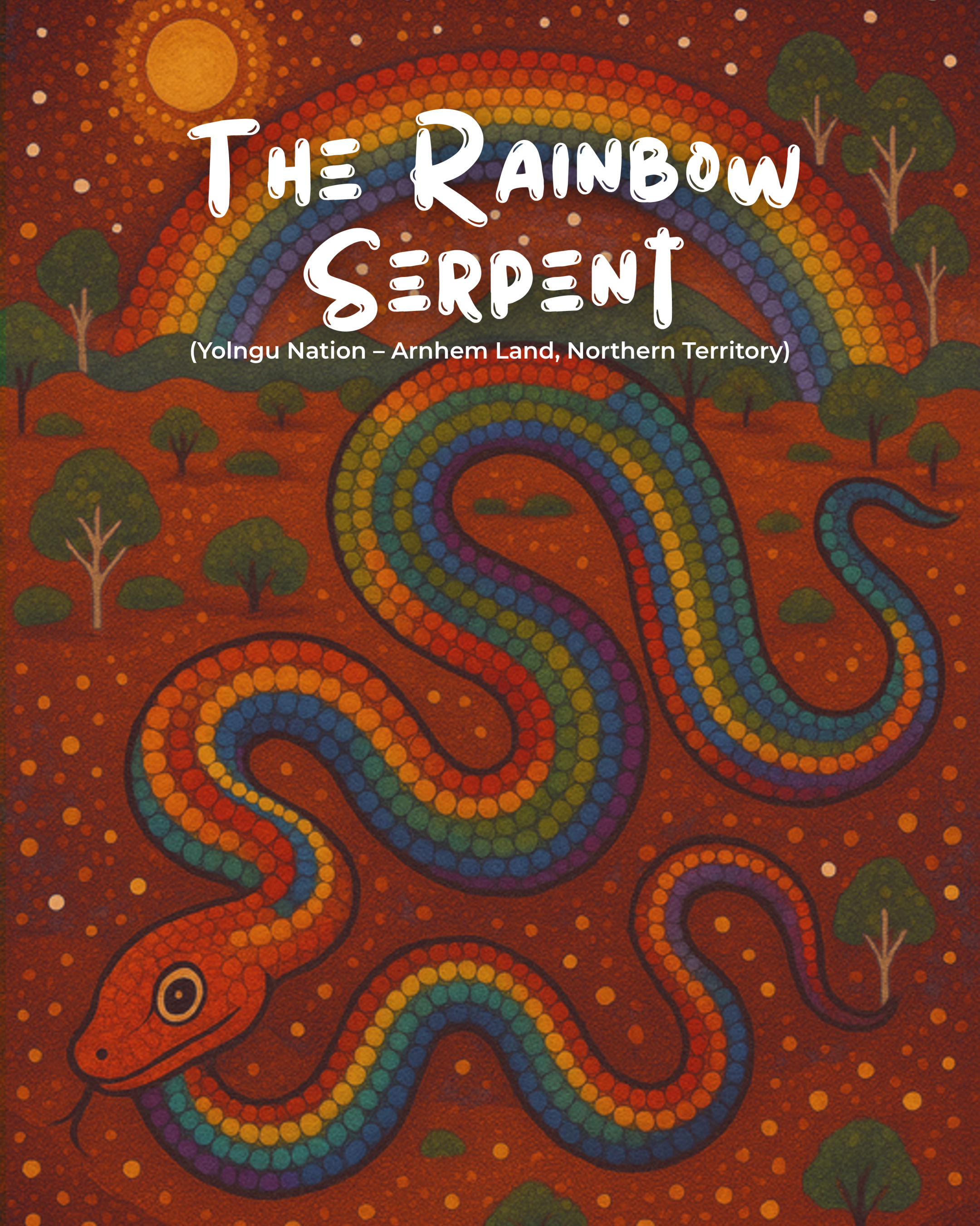
The Rainbow Serpent
(Yolngu Nation – Arnhem Land, Northern Territory)

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A long, long time ago, before the world was as we see it now, the land was flat and still. There were no mountains, no rivers, no trees or animals. Beneath the surface of the earth, deep in the darkness, slept the Rainbow Serpent.

For countless ages she lay curled, her great body shimmering with the colours of red, blue, green, and gold. At last, she stirred. She stretched her coils and rose, breaking through the surface of the land.

As the Rainbow Serpent moved, her body carved great tracks across the earth. She pressed down to form valleys, and she lifted high to create hills. Where she slid along, deep channels were cut — these became the rivers and creeks. Where she rested, her great body made hollows that filled with waterholes and lakes.



The world, once flat, was now shaped and alive.

The Rainbow Serpent looked around and saw that it was still empty and silent. So she called out to the creatures sleeping beneath the ground. “Wake, my children,” she sang. “Come forth and live upon the land I have made.”

And so the animals stirred. Kangaroos leapt out, emus stretched their legs, fish wriggled into the new rivers, and birds spread their wings and filled the air with song. The land was alive with movement and sound.

The Serpent was pleased. She gave each creature a place to live and a way to survive. She told them, “The rivers are precious. The waterholes must be respected. Share what the land provides, and all will live well.”

For a time, the animals listened. They drank only what they needed, hunted fairly, and cared for the country. But soon, some grew greedy. They wanted more than their share. They trampled the grass, muddied the waterholes, and took food meant for others.

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The Rainbow Serpent saw this and grew angry. Her eyes flashed like lightning, and her voice rumbled like thunder. She rose high into the sky, her body stretching from one horizon to the other, and she sent down storms and floods.
The rivers overflowed. The animals ran to higher ground. Those who had followed her law were safe, but those who disobeyed were swept away or turned into stone, left as reminders across the country.



When the storms ended, the land was fresh and green. The rivers sparkled, the billabongs brimmed with water, and life returned in balance.
The Rainbow Serpent looked down at her children. “Remember my law,” she said. “Care for the rivers and the waterholes. Do not take more than you need. For I am in every drop of water, every stream, and every rainbow that shines across the sky.”

And so, even today, the people say that the Rainbow Serpent still lives in the land. When rain falls and a rainbow appears, it is her body stretching across the heavens, reminding all to respect Country, to share fairly, and to live in harmony with one another.