

# Recovering spirit: exploring Aboriginal spirituality

## Preface

This lecture was presented on 2 July 2001 in Queens College, University of Melbourne, Victoria, at the annual conference of the Australian Association for the Study of Religions. I was called on to deliver the lecture at short notice due to the unavailability of the appointed lecturer.

When faced with this challenge of preparing a paper within three weeks, I took the opportunity to write on an issue that I had reflected on for some time without committing my thoughts to paper. For some years I have been concerned about the way in which reference was often made to Aboriginal spirituality with little apparent understanding of the roots of the Aboriginal concept of spirit. In 1991 and 1994 I had done some reading and note taking on spirituality as a visiting scholar at the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World, New College, University of Edinburgh. It was my intention to relate these reflections to a Pitjantjatjara oral story that I had recorded in 1984, but had not transcribed or translated.

Within a day of receiving the invitation to present the lecture, I had completed the transcription and translation and had almost completed the introduction to the paper. In preparing this lecture, I also drew on a recent experience: my participation in the funeral service of a Pitjantjatjara man whose life had exhibited the positive qualities of spirit as understood within both Aboriginal and Christian traditions.

I am grateful to Norman Habel, Penny Taylor, Olga Gostin and Peter Sutton, who read and commented on a draft of the lecture before its presentation. Since then Aram Yengoyan, John Summers and Steve Morelli have offered valuable comments, some of which have been incorporated in this revised version. I acknowledge also the assistance of Wendy Spurrier, from the University of South Australia Library.

I approached this task with some trepidation in view of the realisation that previous Charles Strong Trust lectures had been given by distinguished scholars, and because I, a non-Indigenous person, was intending to speak about Aboriginal Spirituality. I nevertheless offer this contribution humbly as one who still has much to learn about the subject but in the hope that it will stimulate deeper thought about the issues. In addition, I was encouraged by comments made by several of those who heard the original presentation. My thanks to Norman Habel for his encouragement, Shirley Wurst for editorial guidance, and to the Charles Strong Trust for this opportunity to contribute to this ongoing discussion and reflection about Aboriginal understandings of spirit.

Bill Edwards, October 2001

## Introduction

It was my sad privilege, on 22 May 2001 at Ernabella in far north-west South Australia, to take part in the funeral service of a man who had in recent years been recognised as a senior custodian of the Aboriginal sacred site known as Uluru (formerly known by its European name, Ayers Rock). I first met this man in 1958, when I was a young missionary at Ernabella mission. He was one of the young married Aboriginal men at the mission. I could not have imagined then that when he died 43 years later, his passing would be reported in news bulletins in England, the USA and other parts of the world; and that a minister of the Federal Parliament of Australia and a representative of the Leader of the Opposition would be present at his funeral service, joining with hundreds of Aboriginal people and visitors, including many park rangers from Darwin, Kakadu, Uluru, Alice Springs and Adelaide.

The news that circled the globe centred not so much on the man but on the attempts of some politicians to prophesy doom for the tourist industry because the climb at Uluru was closed during the period of mourning. However, I am told that when politicians went to Uluru to protest, tourist operators told them not to interfere as they had spent years establishing good relationships with the Mutitjulu Aboriginal community, of which this man had been chairperson. Tourists, despite being denied the opportunity to climb Uluru, found that the aura surrounding this iconic place was enhanced by the prohibitions—including blotting out of the man's name on signs and displays—and by the ceremonies and general atmosphere at the Uluru site following his death.

Those who attended the service honoured a man who had lived with dignity, integrity and great understanding at the junction of two vastly contrasting worlds. His ability to do this reflected the depth of his traditional spiritual and cultural heritage and his understanding of the Christian faith. Those who resented the closing of the Uluru climb displayed an ignorance of, and antipathy to, that traditional Aboriginal cultural and spiritual heritage.

The man whose funeral I attended in May was known as Tony Tjamiwa.<sup>1</sup> He was born in the Pitjantjatjara country of north-west South Australia in the late 1920s. His father's traditional site was the area surrounding a small hill, Ulkiya, south-west of the Amata community. According to the Dreaming (*tjukurpa*) story, the *mala* (hare wallabies) were chased from Uluru by the mulga-seed men who had come from further west. The *mala* divided into two groups as they fled. One group went south through the Musgrave Ranges to Ulkiya.<sup>2</sup> Tjamiwa learned this and other stories from his father who passed on to him custodianship for the Ulkiya site and for the story.

When the Ernabella mission was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1937, the family settled at Ernabella. Tjamiwa attended the school and became literate in his Pitjantjatjara language. Following his initiation into manhood, he was involved in

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<sup>1</sup> When the period of mourning ended, his family gave permission for the use of his name in this lecture. See Bill Edwards, Tony Tjamiwa obituary, *The Advertiser*, Adelaide, 23 June 2001: 70.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Layton, *Uluru: an Aboriginal history of Ayers Rock*, Canberra, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986: 5-7.

various aspects of mission work: as a shepherd, shearer, gardener, butcher, and as an assistant on the water-drilling rig. He was baptised in 1958, sang as a tenor in the Ernabella choir, and in 1961 was one of four men elected as the first leaders of the Presbyterian congregation at Ernabella. In 1966 he and the other leaders were commissioned as elders of the church. His experience as a church elder helped prepare him for his traditional Aboriginal role at Uluru.

At the same time as fulfilling his obligations as a Pitjantjatjara man in traditional ritual, Tjamiwa developed skills as a preacher. He had the ability to draw on his Aboriginal knowledge of the traditional physical and cultural world to illumine the stories in the Christian Bible. He remythologised the parables in the Christian Scriptures with stories about *tjala* (honey-ants), *lukupupu* (antlions) and *walawuru*, (eaglehawks).<sup>3</sup> His prayers used the imagery of *walytja* (relationship) and of *kurunpa* (spirit) as *walpa* (wind).

In November 1971, staff from Aboriginal missions and government settlements in the area met at Ernabella to consider the implications of implementing changes designed to lead to the self-management of the local Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal people also met with staff to discuss issues of concern to the local Indigenous peoples. A man known by the name Ulurunya expressed concern that his traditional site was being desecrated by tourists. Tjamiwa and others spoke up in support.

Several events followed from these meetings in 1971. In February 1972 a group of Aboriginal traditional owners of the Uluru site visited Uluru and held discussions with the local park ranger. Some Aboriginal traditional owners also decided to return to live on their lands near Uluru. Eventually negotiations culminated in the handing over of title to the lands around Uluru to the local Aboriginal traditional owners on 26 October 1985. Though he was still living at Ernabella, Tjamiwa was involved in these negotiations.

The older men who lived at Uluru felt that they needed help to cope with the new structures. As they had observed Tjamiwa's care of family, church and community at Ernabella, they asked him, as a custodian of the *mala* story, to join them to provide additional leadership in the Aboriginal community at Uluru.

His subsequent contribution as chairman of Mutitjulu community, founding member and chairman of Maruku Arts and Crafts, and as Aboriginal liaison officer at Uluru, confirmed the wisdom of their decision. As an elder of the Uniting Church<sup>4</sup> he continued to provide leadership of the Aboriginal church at Uluru. Barry Hill, in his book, *The rock*, expressed admiration for Tjamiwa's ability to combine his roles in

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<sup>3</sup> During my years of theological study in Melbourne in the 1950s we were acquainted with Rudolf Bultmann's emphasis on demythologising the Scriptures. Although I was not convinced by this approach, it helped me develop the practice, in consultation with Pitjantjatjara preachers, of remythologising. Most of the parables belonged to a world quite foreign to Aboriginal hunters and gatherers living in Australia. However, the messages in Jesus' parables were conveyed by relating them to familiar aspects of the Aboriginal context and environment in Australia.

<sup>4</sup> In 1977, the Uniting Church in Australia was formed; it drew membership from the existing Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational churches in Australia.

traditional Aboriginal life, church leadership and local Aboriginal community administration and liaison, recognising

his ability to affirm and present the *Tjukurpa*, a passion that rests, I had belatedly discovered, on his imaginative application of Christian Law, just as it did on his faithful reception of that first translation which linked the Word of God with the *Tjukurpa*.<sup>5</sup>

I have presented this brief history and account of my recent experience as an introduction to this lecture for two reasons. Firstly, I wish to offer this lecture as a tribute to this Aboriginal man: we worked closely together for many years and learned much from each other. Secondly, his life epitomises much of what I wish to present in this lecture.

## The present condition

In my review article of the book, *Rainbow Spirit theology*, I commended the attempt to express the Christian message in terms meaningful to Aboriginal people. I also expressed some criticism of the text as an ‘Australian Aboriginal theology’.<sup>6</sup> My concern was that the Aboriginal concepts presented did not appear to reflect traditional understandings, but rather focused on statements commonly used by people who have lost some of the knowledge of their Indigenous languages and their cultural underpinnings.<sup>7</sup> I suggested that a deeper exploration of traditional language and concepts will offer a more substantial contribution to a wider interpretation of the Scriptures and to the contemporary Australian search for meaning.

I am pleased to have the opportunity, in this Charles Strong memorial lecture, to explore one of these concepts more fully: the concept of spirit in Aboriginal culture. I speak as a non-Aboriginal person—but as one who has frequently heard traditional stories, often observed and was allowed limited participation in traditional rituals, and visited many Dreaming sites. I worked for twenty years as a missionary in Aboriginal situations, preaching and teaching in an Indigenous language. I have also lectured in Pitjantjatjara language and culture; operated as a translator–interpreter in Pitjantjatjara land rights negotiations, in hospitals, courts and for a Royal Commission; and have written extensively on Aboriginal culture, history, religion, language and education.

My experience has been mainly with Pitjantjatjara people and I do not claim to have deep knowledge of other Aboriginal groups or situations. In my attempts to understand Pitjantjatjara ways of thinking and expression, I am constantly reminded of the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

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<sup>5</sup> Barry Hill, *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru*, St. Leonards, Allen & Unwin, 1994: 262.

<sup>6</sup> The subtitle of the text makes this claim: *Towards an Australian Aboriginal theology*.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Edwards, ‘Rainbow Spirit Theology’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 11, 2, Spring 1998: 137–46.

Oh, the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall,  
frightful, sheer, no-man-fathomed.<sup>8</sup>

In this lecture, I make no claim to plumb the total depths of the Aboriginal understandings of spirit.

The situation that many Aborigines live in today could be described as one in which there has been a considerable loss of spirit. Many of the reports from Aboriginal communities focus on the violence, alcoholism, drug abuse, petrol sniffing, family breakdown, severe health problems, suicide, low educational standards, high levels of unemployment and lack of adequate social controls. Report after report details the high incidence of incarceration of Aborigines in prisons. One of the anomalies is that this loss follows decades in which attempts have been made to redress some of the past wrongs through granting land rights and recognising native title; handing over settlements and missions to local incorporated councils under a policy of self-management; and the establishment of Aboriginal controlled health councils, land councils, legal rights movements and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). However, the two centuries of white settlement in Australia with its dispossession, massacres, introduction of new infections, discrimination and other forms of physical and psychological abuse has left this legacy of malaise from which escape is not easy.

As we celebrate the centenary of federation in Australia in 2001,<sup>9</sup> we are conscious that much more needs to be accomplished in the early years of the second century of the Commonwealth than has been done in the hundred years of the first century. More needs to be done despite the advances for Indigenous peoples in Australia since the 1967 referendum approved the inclusion of Aboriginal Australians in census figures and enabled the Commonwealth to make special laws in relation to Australia's Indigenous peoples.

I am not forgetting that there are many Aborigines who have made great achievements in education, sport, politics, art and other aspects of Australia society in recent decades. However several recent studies suggest that the situation in many remote communities is deteriorating. Noel Pearson has expressed the pain of his people in North Queensland: 'The nature and extent of our problems are horrendous. I will not reiterate the statistics...suffice to say that our society is in a terrible state of dysfunction.'<sup>10</sup> Given his materialist interpretation of history and his focus on class, Pearson does not refer to a loss of spirit; but he notes 'the resilience and strength of our values and relationships', and that 'it is a testament to the achievements of our grandparents that these values and relationships secured our survival as a people'.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, Sonnet 41, in RS Thomas (ed) *The Penguin book of religious verse*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1963: 90.

Editor's note: the use of 'man' as a generic term reflects the historical period and linguistic practice of the author cited, and is not a reflection of the condoning of exclusive masculine terms as incorporating the feminine by the Charles Strong Trust.

<sup>9</sup> 1 January 2001.

<sup>10</sup> Noel Pearson, 'The light on the hill', Ben Chifley memorial lecture, Bathurst, 12 August 2000: 1.

<sup>11</sup> Pearson 2000: 7.

Richard Trudgen, a community worker in Arnhem Land, has drawn attention to the problems arising from the past lack of cross-cultural understanding. He agrees with Pearson's emphasis on the impact on Aboriginal Australian peoples of the social welfare policies of the past three decades.

Welfare leads to a level of dependence that is crippling and creates loss of roles, loss of mastery and above all, hopelessness. And hopelessness in turn translates into destructive social behaviour—neglect of responsibility, drug abuse, violence, self-abuse, homicide, incest and suicide.<sup>12</sup>

In his foreword to Trudgen's book, Djiniyini Gondarra, a Uniting Church minister in Arnhem Land, writes of the confusion resulting from attempts of his people to understand the *balanda* (white-person's) world. 'This confusion still exists today and is killing our people.'<sup>13</sup> The recently released film, *Yolngu Boy*, deals with these problems in an Arnhem Land setting. A review of this film in *The Advertiser* was headed: 'Spiritually uplifting journey'.<sup>14</sup>

Peter Sutton repeated these themes in his lecture given at the annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society in 2000. Reflecting on his close personal and professional associations with a remote community in north Queensland since the mid 1970s, Sutton asserts:

the contrast between progressive public rhetoric about empowerment and self-determination on the one hand, and the raw evidence of a disastrous failure in major aspects of Australian Aboriginal affairs policy since the early 1970s, is now frightening.<sup>15</sup>

Each of these writers refers to earlier periods in their Indigenous communities when there was the possibility of employment in meaningful work, a pride in achievement, and high levels of school attendance. These could be seen as evidence of a state of spiritual wellbeing in Aboriginal people and their communities.

The contemporary descriptions of the current situation resonate with recent experiences of Aboriginal people living in Pitjantjatjara communities in north-west South Australia. Although I now live 1500 kilometres from the Pitjantjatjara lands, I keep in touch with the consequences of this dysfunction when I meet with Pitjantjatjara people and interpret for them in courts, prisons and hospitals.

As I was writing the last paragraph, the telephone rang. It was Mona Tur, a woman of Irish–Antikirinya descent living in Adelaide, who shares with me the role of interpreting and teaching Pitjantjatjara language in South Australia. She had just returned from Umuwa, the headquarters of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara, near Ernabella, where she interpreted at a meeting of the people with heads of South Australian

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<sup>12</sup> Richard Trudgen, *Why warriors lie down and die*, Darwin, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc. 2000: 7.

<sup>13</sup> Trudgen 2000: 2.

<sup>14</sup> *The Advertiser Weekend*, Adelaide, South Australia, 5 May 2001: 18.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Sutton, 'The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s', *Anthropological Forum*, 11, 2, 2001: 125–55.

government departments. She spoke of the concerns expressed by Pitjantjatjara–Yankunytjatjara<sup>16</sup> people as they contrasted the contemporary situation on their communities with the times of their grandparents when they had little in the way of material goods and money, but had few social problems.<sup>17</sup> They said the present circumstances are ‘killing our children’.

David Tacey, drawing on his contacts with Aboriginal cultures in his observations about spirituality in Australian society, asserts: ‘The degradation that can be witnessed in certain parts of Aboriginal society is living proof of the idea that when religious vision is lost, the people perish’.<sup>18</sup>

In contemporary discourse about Indigenous issues in Australia, there are frequent references to Aboriginal spirituality and to a belief that a return to this spirituality can restore hope, purpose and vitality to Aboriginal communities. My concern is that these references often reflect modern ideas of spirituality rather than the Aboriginal concept of spirit. In his lecture to the Australian Anthropological Society, Sutton concludes that

what might be called cultural redevelopment on a deeper level than the merely superficial is also a precondition of radical improvement in people's chances of ending the suffering that it currently going on.<sup>19</sup>

Brown refers to the same need in relation to the Indigenous peoples in the United States of America where the ‘struggle of both Indians and non-Indians to find answers to their respective situations has led to increasing attempts to regain contact with the roots of their traditions’.<sup>20</sup>

In the light of the comments of Sutton, Brown and others, my central purpose in this paper is to explore the roots of Pitjantjatjara tradition in order to convey a deeper understanding of the Aboriginal concept of spirit than is, in my view, apparent in contemporary writing about Aboriginal spirituality in Australia.

## **The concepts of spirit and spirituality**

One of the interesting paradoxes of modern Western societies is the growing interest in spirituality at the same time as allegiance to established religions is reportedly declining. For example, Muriel Porter, writing about religious experience in

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<sup>16</sup> Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara are two dialects of what is identified as the Western Desert language group. Other dialects in this group include Antakarinya, Ngaatjatjara and Ngaanyatjara.

<sup>17</sup> They recalled the receipt of small amounts of money as bounty on dingo scalps in the middle decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>18</sup> David J Tacey, *Edge of the sacred: transformation in Australia*, East Melbourne, Harper Collins, 1995: 8.

<sup>19</sup> Sutton 2001: 151.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph Epes Brown, *The spiritual legacy of the American Indian*, New York, Crossroad, 1982: 49.

contemporary Australia, notes the ‘seeming contradiction between church-going and personal spirituality’.<sup>21</sup> According to Philip Sheldrake,

despite frequent comments about secularisation in Western society and a decrease in Church membership, there is widespread evidence of a hunger for the spiritual...The interest in spirituality is certainly not confined to churchgoers or those commonly identified as religious people.<sup>22</sup>

Any search of the worldwide web will unearth a plethora of sites related to spirituality, including sites focusing on spirituality for today, transgender spirituality and spirituality as opposed to religion. According to Edith Humphrey,

spirituality, then, is back in fashion...Yet one is surprised to see so many people riding the new wave, often oblivious to its inconsistencies and without regard for a careful integration with the rest of life.<sup>23</sup>

In contemporary discourses, there are frequent references to eco-spirituality, feminist spirituality, Celtic spirituality, New Age spirituality, Eastern spirituality and of course to Aboriginal spirituality. Terms related to spirit are also increasingly applied to experiences in sport: a report in *The Australian* of a test cricket match between Australia and New Zealand in 1993 observed: ‘Most encouraging was McDermott’s 4-24 from 10 overs, by far his best performance statistically and spiritually in this series’.<sup>24</sup> The *Adelaide Review* regularly has advertisements headed ‘Wealth and spirituality’. The term ‘spirit’ and ‘spirituality’ are now applied so widely in contemporary Western societies like ours that there is a danger that if everything is seen as spiritual, nothing is spiritual.

I suggest that there is a need to deconstruct the contemporary usages of the term ‘spirit’ and its associated concepts, and to examine their basic meanings in both Western and Aboriginal traditions so that the terms can be used in a more informed way in contemporary discourse. Placide Tempels provided a model for such a deconstruction in his seminal study of Bantu philosophy.<sup>25</sup> This deconstruction is required for the following reasons.

1. As I have suggested above, contemporary references to spirituality are often vague and ill-defined. Sheldrake comments: ‘Spirituality, as an area of study, must be capable of definition. If it has no conceptual limits, effectively it means nothing.’<sup>26</sup> On occasions I have asked Aboriginal colleagues what they mean when they use the term ‘spirituality’. They have replied using statements such as, ‘it is my identity’, ‘it

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<sup>21</sup> Muriel Porter, *Land of the spirit: the Australian religious experience*, Geneva, WCC Publications, 1990: 84.

<sup>22</sup> Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and history*, London, SPCK, 1991: 1.

<sup>23</sup> Edith Humphrey, ‘It’s not about us: modern spirituality begins and ends with the self’, *Christianity Today* 45, 5, 2001: 67.

<sup>24</sup> *The Weekend Australian*, Canberra, 4–5 December, 1993: 30.

<sup>25</sup> Placide Tempels, *Bantu philosophy*, Paris, Presence Africaine, 1959.

<sup>26</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 32.



is a feeling'. It seems to me that these ideas lack the sense of relationship to some Other or to other forces or powers that are essential to a Western understanding of the concept of spirituality.

2. There is an implicit assumption in many of the references that 'spirit' and 'spirituality' are good and positive qualities, in contrast to 'material' or 'physical', which are seen as bad or negative. This ignores the fact that in both Christian and Aboriginal traditions, spirits and spiritual forces are conceived of as both good and evil. Jesus is presented in the Christian Gospels as one who casts out evil spirits.<sup>27</sup> The Christian<sup>28</sup> Epistles refer to the battle against spiritual powers.<sup>29</sup> While some contributors to the book, *A spirituality of Catholic Aborigines*, reflect this view of spirituality as implicitly good, one who is nearer to traditional life, Boniface Perdjert, warns against this romanticising of traditional religion.

I want to make it clear that I am aware of the bad things in traditional religion. It was not something full of good things...The Dreamtime figures had their vices and their very human failures.<sup>30</sup>

Fear is an important element of Aboriginal religion often overlooked in romanticised presentations. As Stephen Neill expressed it,

there is one aspect of life in the old order to which the anthropologists rarely refer and to which they have paid less attention than it deserves. That is the element of fear.<sup>31</sup>

In Aboriginal societies this fear was related to the threats of punishment by the spirit powers or human agents if taboos were broken.

3. At times Aboriginal people express their belief that they are spiritual beings in a way that suggests that they are different in essence from other humans. For example, a contributor at the workshop, on which *Rainbow Spirit theology* was based, said: 'Aboriginal culture is spiritual. I am spiritual.'<sup>32</sup> Having overcome the earlier Western scientific racism that denied the common humanity of Aborigines, there are dangers in any ideology that suggests this kind of difference. There are of course, major cultural differences between Aborigines and Europeans, but as anthropology has emphasised over the past century, culture is learned behaviour and not a genetic inheritance. There is too much of physical substance in Aboriginal persons and culture to allow such statements without questioning them. The statements may be seen to imply a dualism that is not present in traditional Aboriginal thought. Tacey, warning against projecting Western layers of understanding of spirituality upon

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<sup>27</sup> Luke 4.35, Mark 5.1–20.

<sup>28</sup> This part of the Bible—the Christian Scriptures—is more commonly known as the 'New Testament'; the New Testament includes several types of texts: 'Gospels', and 'Epistles' or letters.

<sup>29</sup> Ephesians 6.12, 1 John 4.1.

<sup>30</sup> Joan Hendriks and Gerry Hefferan (eds) *A spirituality of Catholic Aborigines and the struggle for justice*, Brisbane, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Apostolate, 1993: 39.

<sup>31</sup> Stephen Neill, *Christian faith and other faiths*, Downers Grove, Intervarsity Press, 1984: 113.

<sup>32</sup> Rainbow Spirit Elders, *Rainbow Spirit theology: towards an Australian Aboriginal theology*, Blackburn, Harper Collins Religious, 1997: 12.

Aboriginal people, states that ‘if Aboriginality equals spirituality, then we have not really seen Aboriginal people at all’.<sup>33</sup>

4. Whereas the Aboriginal concept of spirit was part of the given and accepted body of knowledge of the group, much of the contemporary rhetoric about spirituality reflects the modern emphasis on the self. Various aspects of current spirituality appeal to the ‘I–me’ generation with its stress on individualism.

In contrast, as Yengoyan comments,

The reason why the spirit is so deep and meaningful to the Pitjantjatjara is because they have a deep sense of the collective, a set of ideals/rules/norms/morals which are binding on the individual.<sup>34</sup>

Houston draws attention to the fact that movements associated with spirituality are often protests against what are seen as formal beliefs and practices. Spirituality is perhaps ‘most characteristic of times of great social change and cultural upheaval’.<sup>35</sup> Traditional Aboriginal societies had little place for protesters or innovators who attempted to change what is believed to be given by the Dreaming.<sup>36</sup> Any analysis of contemporary Aboriginal spirituality needs to take account of the degree to which it reflects the traditional beliefs and values of the collective in contrast to evidence of the influence of Western individualism.

5. One of the dangers faced by Aboriginal cultures is the appropriation and subsequent distortion of their concept of spirit; as a consequence, Aboriginal people themselves may be confused about their traditional heritage. During the Simpson Desert (Wangkangurru) land claim in 1997, the then Aboriginal Land Commissioner, Justice Gray, commented:

I mean, sometimes you hear (Aboriginal) people speak in what I would describe, if I were being offhand, as a sort of New Age spiritual way about these things. I don’t mean to disparage those people, they’re obviously sincere but they speak in a way which suggests that they have absorbed influences which are not Aboriginal and which they apply to the re-learning of the knowledge.<sup>37</sup>

Julie Marcus drew attention to the attempted cultural appropriation of Ayers Rock and Mount Olga by New Age pilgrims and feminist mystics in 1987.<sup>38</sup> At the time the Aboriginal custodians of Uluru refused to sanction the request to join in a circling of

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<sup>33</sup> Tacey 1995: 130.

<sup>34</sup> Aram Yengoyan, email communication, 24 August, 2001.

<sup>35</sup> James M Houston, ‘Spiritual life today: an appropriate spirituality for a post-modern world’, in Martyn Eden and David F Wells (eds) *The Gospel in the modern world: a tribute to John Stott*, Leicester, Inter-Varsity Press, 1991: 180.

<sup>36</sup> I am not suggesting that traditional Aboriginal societies were not subject to change. Ecological, demographic and other factors necessitated change. Dreams were a means of validating changes.

<sup>37</sup> Simpson Desert (Wangkangurru) land claim transcript, 3 December 1997: 85.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Marcus, ‘The journey out of the centre: the cultural appropriation of Ayers Rock’, in Anna Rutherford (ed) *Aboriginal culture today*, Sydney, Dangaroo Press, 1988: 65–81.

the rock in order to unleash the power of the crystals that were said to lie under it.<sup>39</sup> Pecotic refers to the

romanticisation of Aboriginal culture as the ancient spirituality which the West has lost, whereby the ground was laid for Aboriginal religion to take its place in an emerging religious pluralism, a place from which the struggle for cultural revival and ownership of traditional lands could be given greater legitimacy and allies in the cultic milieu. I realise that this is a controversial issue, but one I feel that needs to be explored in greater depth with the appropriate cultural sensitivity and concern for misrepresentation.<sup>40</sup>

At this stage of my own exploration of these traditions, the Western and Pitjantjatjara concepts of spirit will be examined.

## Western concepts of spirit and spirituality

Spirit is defined in the *Oxford English dictionary* as the

animating or vital principle in man [*sic*] (and animals); that which gives life to the physical organism, in contrast to its purely material elements; the breath of life.<sup>41</sup>

The same dictionary gives six meanings for spirituality, all of which enshrine the Western Christian tradition. Sheldrake focuses on the third of these meanings, which reflects Western dualistic thought: ‘the quality or condition of being spiritual, attachment to or regard for things of the spirit as opposed to material or worldly interests’.<sup>42</sup>

In the Hebrew Scriptures (often called the Old Testament in the Western Christian tradition) spirit or *ruach* is related to breath and wind, and, in relation to humans is identified as

(a) the principle which gives life to the body, (b) the seat of the emotions, intellectual functions and attitude of will...(c) divinely effected.<sup>43</sup>

The Greek term *pneuma*, used in the Christian Scriptures, also has these connotations of breath and wind. In Kittel it is noted that while the term is strongly spiritualised in the New Testament section of the Christian Scriptures:

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<sup>39</sup> For a recent study of this incident and other attempts to relate New Age religion to Aboriginal religion see David Pecotic, ‘Three Aboriginal responses to New Age religion: a textual interpretation’, *Australian Religion Studies Review* 14, 1, Autumn 2001.

<sup>40</sup> Pecotic 2001: 76.

<sup>41</sup> *The Oxford English dictionary*, 2nd edn, XVI, Scot-Styx (prepared by JA Simpson and ESC Weiner) Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1989: 251, 258; Sheldrake, 1991: 34.

<sup>42</sup> Oxford 1989: 258.

<sup>43</sup> Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich (eds) *Theological dictionary of the New Testament* VI, Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 1968: 360–61.

the constitutive factor of *pneuma* in the Greek world is always its subtle and powerful corporeality. Because of its material character it is never spiritual in the strict sense, as in the NT. It is never wholly outside the realm of sense.<sup>44</sup>

Sheldrake warns against missing this element in the usage of *pneuma* in the Christian Scriptures:

it is important to grasp that, in Pauline theology, ‘spirit’ and ‘spiritual’ are not contrasted with ‘physical’ or ‘material’ (for which the Greek *soma*, in Latin *corpus*, is the root) but rather with all that is opposed to the Spirit of God (for which the word *sarx*, in Latin, *caro*, is used). What is opposed to the Spirit may as well be the mind or the will as the body or material reality. The contrast that emerges is therefore between two ways of life or attitudes to life. The ‘spiritual’ is what is under the influence of, or is a manifestation of the Spirit of God.<sup>45</sup>

Throughout Western and Christian history there has been a tendency to move away from earlier Hebraic and Greek associations of corporeality and sense experience in relation to spirit and spirituality. In *Spirituality and mission*, Michael Reilly refers to ‘the influence which neo-Platonic dualism and anti-materialistic pessimism had upon Christian theology and spirituality’.<sup>46</sup> Sheldrake noted that in fact,

the abstract Latin noun *spiritualitas* (spirituality), as opposed to the adjective *spiritualis* (spiritual), did not make its appearance until the fifth century...It was the influence of a new philosophical trend in theology, known as scholasticism, which began in the twelfth century, that led to a sharper distinction between spirit and matter.<sup>47</sup>

Sheldrake traces the use of the terms related to spirit in following centuries, noting that the word spirituality virtually disappeared from Roman Catholic vocabulary because of suspicion of religious enthusiasm and quietism. It appeared again in the early twentieth century in French Roman Catholic writings and passed into English through translations of these texts.<sup>48</sup> Thus, ‘throughout Christian history, “spirituality” has changed shape, often subtly but sometimes substantially. The word itself...has a relatively short pedigree.’<sup>49</sup> Sheldrake adds later that ‘the word

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<sup>44</sup> Kittel 1968: 357.

<sup>45</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 34. NB In this and the following quotations from Sheldrake, non-English terms italicised by editor.

<sup>46</sup> Michael C Reilly, *Spirituality for mission*, Manila, Loyola School of Theology, 1976: 37. Reilly defines spirituality as follows: ‘Spirituality, therefore, is the basic, practical, existential attitude of man [*sic*] which is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his existence and the meaning of reality. It is the way he acts or reacts habitually throughout life according to ultimate objectives which flow from his worldview’ (1976: 24). Houston defines it as follows: ‘Spirituality refers to those attitudes, beliefs and practices that animate people’s lives, to make them more sensitive to divine realities’ (1991: 180).

<sup>47</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 35.

<sup>48</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 36.

<sup>49</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 32.

“spirituality” is used so frequently nowadays that it comes as a surprise to find that its pedigree is very short both in theological and secular writing’.<sup>50</sup>

I suggest that there are dangers in using the term ‘spirituality’ in reference to Aboriginal world views if the hearer’s understanding is overly influenced by these more recent interpretations rather than by the earlier Hebraic and Greek perceptions of spirit as having hints of corporeality and being open to sense experience. Muriel Porter has stated that the dominance of secularism in Australian culture makes it difficult for churches to reach people ‘unless they can prove that they have something concrete to offer to a race that likes to see itself as essentially down-to-earth’.<sup>51</sup> There are certainly elements of earthiness in Aboriginal concepts related to the world of spirit.

### **Aboriginal concept of spirit and spirituality**

In the Pitjantjatjara–Yankunytjatjara dictionary, the noun *kurunpa* is defined in English terms as ‘spirit, will, self. Seen as vital to a sense of purpose.’<sup>52</sup> Reference is made to sickness being caused by the *kurunpa* leaving the body, premonitions coming from the *kurunpa*; the term is also used to indicate things that affect a person deeply. An adjective *kurunitja* refers to things related to spirit. For example, a place may be described as *kurunitja* because spiritual essence resides there. There is no direct equivalent in Pitjantjatjara to the abstract noun ‘spirituality’.

Based on her extensive fieldwork among the Yarralin people of the Victoria River region in the Northern Territory, Deborah Bird Rose has expressed a concern similar to mine in relation to the absence of any notions of Western dualisms in traditional Aboriginal views of spirit and physical.

I use the term ‘spirit’ with some trepidation. The English term cannot but signal a body–soul dichotomy which is inappropriate to the Yarralin context. Were I able to find a better term, I would avoid ‘spirit’ altogether, but as it is, I must state emphatically that spirit is immanent in body and even death does not wholly disrupt this immediacy. Death terminates the unique, separating out different parts, but spirit lives and continues to be embodied. As we will see, Yarralin people believe that a human being embodies several spirits at least one of which remains embodied on earth; this idea is widespread across Australia.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Sheldrake 1991: 34.

<sup>51</sup> Porter 1990: 84.

<sup>52</sup> Cliff Goddard (compiler), *Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara to English dictionary*, Alice Springs, Institute for Aboriginal Development, 1992: 47.

<sup>53</sup> Deborah Bird Rose, *Dingo makes us human: life and land in an Australian Aboriginal culture*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992: 58; cf the comment of an African theologian: ‘to Africans, the material has no meaning apart from the spiritual; it is the spiritual that informs the material and gives it whatever quality and meaning it has’. See E. Bolaji Idowu, *African traditional religion*, SCM, 1973: 125.

In his study of Kukatja concepts that underlie terms used in relation to body and soul, Anthony Peile expressed a similar reserve about using the term ‘spirit’.

I am not using the English word ‘spirit’ as, in common speech, it reflects a complex of ideas that go back to Greek philosophy as refined by medieval scholastic philosophy. This sees the soul as immaterial and immortal. Aborigines also have detailed information and understanding of life essence in their cultural terms. For those brought up in a different cultural milieu, knowledge of the Aboriginal concept of life essence is necessary to gain greater insight into their traditional religious life.<sup>54</sup>

Bruce Rigsby, in commenting on Professor Stanner’s references to the Aboriginal spiritual relationship with land, adds the following in a footnote:

Note that this view of what constitutes a spiritual relationship to land differs considerably from the popular notion that has great currency. I think that the popular notion uncritically confounds deep feelings of attachment with those of religiosity (i.e. ‘spiritually’ in one popular sense) and generalizes them to Aboriginal and certain non-Aboriginal people alike. However in the traditional Aboriginal view, if a person does not come from the land and share spirit with it, there is no spiritual relationship, and the person is a ‘stranger’.<sup>55</sup>

In order to focus on some aspects of the Pitjantjatjara concept of spirit, I include here a shortened version of a story related by a woman, Kitty, about her husband, Lanky, which I recorded at Amata on 17 August 1984.<sup>56</sup>

### **Kitty’s story**

A while ago I was looking after Lanky when he was sick. His spirit had left him and was wandering around at night. This powerline wire hit his spirit and put it up on top of the power pole and his spirit was sitting up there on the pole—poor thing! I awoke from sleep with a start and looked. ‘Hey! What’s happened to you? Why are you vomiting?’

And he said, ‘I don’t know. I am very weak.’ And he was vomiting—he was going to the toilet and vomiting continuously and I gave him some tea and he drank it and brought it up again.

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<sup>54</sup> Anthony Rex Peile, *Body and soul: an Aboriginal view*, Perth, Hesperian Press, 1997: 92.

<sup>55</sup> Bruce Rigsby, ‘Aboriginal people, spirituality and the traditional ownership of land’, *International Journal of Social Economics* 26, 7–9, 1999: 970. Rigsby adds the following as an example: ‘I recall the case of a young Aboriginal man from Sydney who attended a meeting of claimants for the Lakefield National Park land claim just after the 1993 Laura Dance Festival. When he introduced himself, he said that he was “a very spiritual person” but of course he was a stranger and had no spiritual relationship to the Lakefield land.’

<sup>56</sup> Kitty and Lanky were born in the early years of the twentieth century; Lanky was a few years older than Kitty. They lived for many years at Ernabella Mission where he was employed in the sheep industry and she worked as a cook and baker. They had no biological offspring. They spent a few years at Amata Community and their last few years at Uluru, where they died and are buried. I recorded this story in 1984, and transcribed and translated it for this lecture in 2001.

I didn't know what was happening. I went off in a dream and I was walking around on the road, going in a dream as I slept. And I said, 'Woman!' I saw two women and I said, 'Woman! Have you two seen that man?'

And they said, 'No! We haven't seen him.'

I woke up again and gave him tea and he kept vomiting and going to the toilet. And I was moving around in a dream looking for him. And I asked the Father, because he was continuously vomiting. And it started to rain and it was raining and I was dreaming and he was very wet and water ran down from his hair and I was dreaming. And as I dreamt I saw these beings dressed in white, here and there, everywhere: a big mob. And I was dreaming.

And he sat in this water and I dreamt and I was surprised. I was asleep and I heard, and someone in white was asking Father, praying to Father. And this loud voice came down from heaven and we all heard. I also heard as Father said this: 'He is becoming well now'. And I was surprised and I thought, 'Hey! Father has said a good word'. And I arose again another night and it rained for two weeks. And the beings clothed in white went away—they were finished, those white robed ones—and I woke up alone. 'There was a multitude here.'

And I went to sleep again at Amata and while sleeping I was dreaming. And I was going around by the school, past the two water tanks and I came near the church, and approaching the church I saw this white fellow coming from the church. He came and passed ahead and was saying 'Hello'. And he said, 'Hello Lanky'. I thought ignorantly that he must be on the ground but he was up the pole. And I was thinking, 'I saw him when he came here'. And he saw the pole and prayed and I in turn prayed and saw. 'He is sitting up that pole, that tiny spirit is sitting there, Lanky.' And when he had prayed he became invisible and disappeared. And I saw this—poor thing—and I was dreaming. 'Hey! How did it climb up there, how did it climb that slippery pole?' And I was seeing this small thing, this small spirit. And this spirit was standing there. I was surprised and I went again and I saw him when I was lying asleep.

The next day I got up and said to him, 'Did you go out during the night when you were lying asleep dreaming?'

And he said, 'No'.

And I said, 'I saw you sitting up that pole after Father showed me'. I said, 'Father showed me your spirit sitting up that pole'. And I told Tjulkiwa and Tjulkiwa went to get the *ngangkari* (traditional healer). And I said, 'His small spirit is sitting up that pole. Father showed me.'

And in the morning he went and got that spirit from the pole—the *ngangkari* got it and brought it here. The fire was burning and he was lying on the bed, and having brought it he put it back in him, warming him and shaking him. That's what *ngankaris* do—they

warm people—and he warmed him and put the spirit back in him and when he put it back I gave him some tea and he drank tea and did not bring it up again. It was finished. The vomiting was finished and he again drank a lot of tea, and didn't bring it up again. Father looked after him. Poor thing.

I have finished talking. Father gave him back his spirit happily so that he could work again. And I am now happy.

That's it. Finished.

The story has a mixture of traditional Aboriginal and Christian images. Kitty was baptised at Ernabella in the 1950s and while Lanky had attended services at Ernabella and had taken part in Christmas pageants for many years, he did not seek baptism until the late 1970s, following a dream in which the Lord had appeared to him. In the story as it is related, it is difficult at times to distinguish clearly between the world of dream and of daily life. The Pitjantjatjara word translated as 'dream', *tjukurpa*, is also used to translate the English terms 'word', 'story' and 'the Dreaming'.

## The Dreaming

The *tjukurpa*, glossed as 'the Dreaming', refers to the complex of stories that enshrine Pitjantjatjara explanations of their beginnings and of their relationship to the environment, to other people and to other species. The Pitjantjatjara understanding of their beginnings, as is the case with other Aboriginal Australian peoples, assumes a pre-existent substance—in desert regions, a sandy waste, and in coastal areas, a swamp area—within which spirit beings lay dormant. The Dreaming refers to a time<sup>57</sup> when these spirit beings became animated, emerged from this substance, and assumed the identities and forms of the various animal and plant species which inhabit the different regions. Most of these beings had also a human identity as, for example, *wati-malu* (kangaroo-man), *wati-kaḷaya* (emu-man), *minyma-ikarka* (bowerbird-woman), *wati-ili* (native-fig-man) and *minyma-Kutungunya* (*Kutungu*—the first mother). As they moved across the face of the pre-existent substance, they performed the actions of these species—and in so doing, they shaped the landscape, leaving the present-day features of hills, creeks, caves, sand hills, trees and waterholes. In some instances, the beings themselves were metamorphosed into rocks, hills or trees; in others sites, they left their imprint as a winding watercourse or a crack in a rock surface; and in other places they left tools or substances from their bodies which became piles of stones. These spirit beings died and entered back into the earth at significant sacred sites. However their living presence is said to remain within these sites.<sup>58</sup>

According to Pitjantjatjara beliefs, these spirit beings are the ancestors of the various species inhabiting the regions, including humans. Thus each group is associated with a specific species as kangaroo-people, emu-people or zebra finch-people. The same

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<sup>57</sup> Although I use the English word 'time', I am aware that the Western concept of time can be misleading when applied to the Dreaming.

<sup>58</sup> For a longer explanation of the Dreaming, see WH Edwards, *An introduction to Aboriginal societies*, Wentworth Falls, Social Science Press, 1988: 12–25.



spirit essence is present in the sites, and in humans and all other animal and plant species linked to these sites by their Dreaming.

The ancestor spirit beings are recorded in the stories and songs as having performed the daily activities of both humans and the particular species. They dug for water, hunted, made implements, cooked food, performed rituals, married, cheated, fought, killed, hopped over sand hills, defecated and punished offenders. These activities provide the pattern for daily life in the present. Life is to be lived as it was lived in The Dreaming. This is not depicted as a life of perfection, but, as Stanner suggested, it enables people to reflect on the total conditions of life and make decisions on the basis of this reflection. Aboriginal 'religious belief expressed a philosophy of assent to life's terms'.<sup>59</sup>

The accompanying diagram is an attempt to portray the centrality of these beliefs to the whole of Pitjantjatjara life and culture. No discrete area of Pitjantjatjara life is defined as 'religion'. Land, people, animals, plants, daily activities, languages, rituals, songs, painting and all aspects of culture are seen as the legacy of the Dreaming.<sup>60</sup> In the Aboriginal world, the spiritual is ever present in the physical. There is no spirituality as an abstract notion divorced from the material world. Turner expressed this in reference to primal religions in general:

We note the conviction that the 'physical' acts as the vehicle for 'spiritual' power, in other words, that man [*sic*] lives in a sacramental universe where there is no sharp dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual...The one set of powers, principles and patterns runs through all things on earth and in the heavens and welds them into a unified cosmic system. This monistic view may be qualified by an ethical dualism in respect of good and evil, but even here the sacramental functions of the physical remain.<sup>61</sup>

Pitjantjatjara people walk over the earth with care, respect and sometimes with fear as they have a consciousness of spirit presence in all that surrounds them. There is also a sense of relationship to all aspects of the environment as they recognise a common descent from the same spirit beings. I once asked a boy why he had thrown a stone into a water hole in a rock crevice near Angatja in the Mann Range as we approached it. He replied that the *wanampi* (water serpent) who created the water hole could be lying asleep within it and, if suddenly awakened, might swallow us. To the west of this site I have been warned not to camp among a clump of trees as they represent cannibal men who moved across this area. Near Kunamata, to the south of the Mann Range, a man pointed at large rocks at the base of a saucer like depression and exclaimed, '*Nyangatja ngayuku tjamu!*' (That is my grandfather). These rocks were to him the original native-fig spirit beings. They had died there at the end of their

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<sup>59</sup> WEH Stanner, 'Religion, totemism and symbolism', in Max Charlesworth et al (eds) *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, Brisbane, University of Queensland Press, 1984: 145.

<sup>60</sup> Robert Tonkinson, *The Mardudjara Aborigines: living the dream in Australia's desert*, New York, Hold, Rinehart and Winston, 1978: 16.

<sup>61</sup> HW Turner, 'Primal religions and their study, in Victor Hayes (ed), *Australian essays on world religion*, Adelaide, Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1977: 32.

journey but their spirit was still there to be activated through ritual. At another site on the southern side of the Mann Range I witnessed Lanky rubbing a large rock that represented *parkilpa* (parakeelya) to ensure the maintenance of this food source.

## The Dream–spirits

Lanky and Kitty were enculturated into this Pitjantjatjara world view. They accepted that they had been given birth through spirit conception as well as through human interaction and that their spirits would again enter into the spirit world following death. Their story illustrates the Pitjantjatjara belief that the health and wellbeing of the physical body depend on the presence of the spirit. As Janice Reid expressed it,

Health, to Aborigines, is not a simple matter of good fortune, a prudent lifestyle or good diet. It is the outcome of a complex interplay between the individual, his territory of conception and his spiritual integrity: his body, his land and his spirit.<sup>62</sup>

To do something wholeheartedly is to it *kurunpa winki* (with the wholeness of spirit).

The spirit must be free to wander in the spirit world as the person sleeps. Men sleep on their back or side so that the spirit is able to leave through the navel or stomach area and wander across the land.<sup>63</sup> The anthropologist, Robert Tonkinson, drew attention to the importance of the dream-spirit beliefs for the Mardu people of the Western Australian central desert who resided at Jingalong mission. The people living at the mission were far from their homelands and were unable to visit them regularly.

The dream-spirit has thus assumed a vital role in their lives by providing the only convenient means of communication with their homeland, and has enabled them to maintain contact and identity with ancestral and other spirit beings, totemic creatures and so on. Dream-spirit journeys supply them with proof that these beings are still active inhabitants of the Aboriginal cosmic order and remain interested in the affairs of their human counterparts, whose lives may still be affected by their actions.<sup>64</sup>

Kitty's story draws attention to an element of corporeality in the Pitjantjatjara concept of spirit. Those with special gifts, the *ngangkari* (traditional healer), can see the spirit sitting on top of the power pole. *Ngangkaris* have the special gifts to enable them to return the spirit to the physical body. *Ngangkaris* discern that others have similar potential gifts and take their spirits on a journey to a sphere—sometimes represented as a place of bones—where they receive the special *ngangkari kurunpa* that enables them to assume this role.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Janice Reid (ed) *Body, land and spirit: health and healing in Aboriginal society*, St. Lucia, University of Queensland Press, 1884: xv–xvi.

<sup>63</sup> Personal communication, Rob Amery, 26 June 2001. This was told to him by a Pintupi man.

<sup>64</sup> Robert Tonkinson, 'Aboriginal Dream-spirit beliefs in a contact situation: Jigalong, Western Australia', in Ronald M Berndt (ed) *Australian Aboriginal anthropology*, Nedlands, University of Western Australia Press, 1970: 287.

<sup>65</sup> Personal communication, Paul Eckert, 26 June 2001.

Death implies that the spirit has left the body to return to the realm of spiritual stuff. Care was taken in mortuary ceremonies and subsequent life to ensure that the spirit did not harm others. When the body was interred in the ground it was not covered with dirt but with spinifex, rocks and sticks. A spear or digging stick was placed next to the corpse to enable the spirit to climb out of the grave and to move around to rejoin the spirit realm. During this period the living kept away from the site to prevent the wandering spirit affecting them. Footprints of the deceased were obliterated and his or her belongings destroyed so that the spirit of the person, which might still be present in them, could not molest living persons. A second burial ceremony, during which the grave was covered with earth, ended this period of avoidance.

In contrast to Western belief systems where an attempt is made to rationalise and present a logically structured framework, understanding of the Aboriginal concepts can be arrived at only through listening to the stories, singing the songs and participating in the rituals. Lowitja O'Donoghue expressed this in opening an art exhibition, *Exploring Australian Spirituality*, in Adelaide in 1998:

I believe we need to recognise that for many tens of thousands of years the Australian Aboriginal peoples have had a very profound and coherent spirituality. It has been the core of their being. It has integrated and given meaning to all aspects of their lives. It has been expressed visually, musically and ceremonially in very powerful and significant ways.<sup>66</sup>

And it is through these forms that the ideas and meanings are expressed. Those of us who have had only a limited experience of these activities cannot have a deep knowledge of their meanings. Western thought has been influenced by the Cartesian dualisms associated with Descartes famous dictum, '*cogito ergo sum*'.<sup>67</sup> It suddenly occurred to me about three or four years ago that if Descartes was Pitjantjatjara he might have exclaimed '*canto ergo sum*'.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

I have attempted to provide insights into Aboriginal peoples' understandings of spirit and spirituality and to emphasise that there are significant differences between Western and Aboriginal meanings for these terms. The Pitjantjatjara world of spirit is ever-present in the physical world; it has elements of corporeality; it is a sphere of both good and evil; it is a world that can give rise to both comfort and dread; it is a dangerous sphere to those who enter this world without the knowledge of how to deal with it. Some Pitjantjatjara men claim to have a special eye that enables them to see the spirits. These ideas contribute to the substance of the Aboriginal concept of spirit,

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<sup>66</sup> Jennie Teasdale, *Exploring Australian spirituality: a resource package*, Adelaide, Flinders University and Adelaide College of Divinity, 2000: x.

<sup>67</sup> 'I think therefore I am.'

<sup>68</sup> 'I sing therefore I am.'

and make it significantly different from contemporary Western understandings of spirits expressed in tradition religions.<sup>69</sup> Those who refer to Aboriginal spirituality in modern discourse must take account of this substantive difference. As Peile discerned from his study of the Kukatja concepts,

Aborigines do not have a purely spiritual concept of their spirit beings, mythical beings or characters. They are seen as both tangible and intangible, as material and spiritual—they are personal and social...Rather, the Aborigine sees the spirit as something immanent, indwelling and pervading not only the human body, but also the universe or 'sections' within it.<sup>70</sup>

For some readers, my attempts in this paper to deconstruct contemporary understandings of the terms 'spirit' and 'spirituality' in both Aboriginal and Western contexts may appear dismissive of Aboriginal spirituality. However, this is not my intention.

What I am advocating is a more informed and deeper exploration of the concept so that what is brought into modern discourse is a truer reflection of traditional patterns of thought and expression. Aboriginal cosmology can then make a genuine contribution to the modern search for meaning. This contribution may lie particularly in the areas of the definition of spirit, the relationship of spirit to the environment and in relationships between people, with other living things and with the world around them.

As I have demonstrated in this paper, Western understandings of 'spirit' and 'spirituality' within the Christian church and in the wider society have changed throughout history. While Tacey suggests that we 'need to develop not pre-modern mysticism but a *postmodern spirituality*',<sup>71</sup> the root meanings of spirit in both Western and other traditions must be kept in mind. Christians may find that the Aboriginal concept has something to offer to their interpretation of spirit in the biblical record. While cultural differences have been emphasised by many writers, Turner draws attention to the affinities between Christian and the primal traditions.<sup>72</sup> As Andrew Walls concludes,

Each stage of the journey has seen expanded understandings of the significance of Christ as he was translated successively into the languages and cultures of the peoples where he was received by faith. The study of the signposts irresistibly suggests that there are

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<sup>69</sup> Since presenting the lecture it has been suggested to me that there may be a closer understanding of 'spirit' as embodied and physical in the contemporary Western mediums of television, film, and popular writing (eg, in the films 'The sixth sense', and 'The outsiders'). However, this is not a point I am pursuing in this paper. My understanding of 'spirit' and 'spirituality' is informed by the Western Christian tradition.

<sup>70</sup> Peile 1997: 92.

<sup>71</sup> Tacey 1995: 3.

<sup>72</sup> Turner 1977: 37.

yet further expansions of the understanding of Christ to be expected from his present engagement with the cultures of Africa and Asia.<sup>73</sup>

We could add ‘Aboriginal Australia’ to the list at the end of this quotation.

This enrichment is not a one-way process but can be mutually enriching to both Christianity and to traditional cultures. The Zambian theologian, Lamin Sanneh, has noted the sometimes unintended consequences of missionary translations that ‘have appealed to the very roots of these societies, touching the springs of life and imagination in real, enduring ways’.<sup>74</sup>

In the face of the environmental problems we face in Australia as our land’s resources are increasingly exploited, contemporary writers direct our attention to Aboriginal attitudes to the land and environment as world view that offers valuable insights. Tacey suggests that the ‘only way to develop a spiritually powerful culture in Australia is to enter more into the psychic field of nature’, and that in ‘this important aspect we must take our cue from the Aboriginal people and not from Western Europe’.<sup>75</sup> HW Turner drew attention to this possibility in the 1970s: ‘I will start with an aspect of primal religions that has attracted the attention of Western man [*sic*] in recent years, the ecological aspect’.<sup>76</sup>

This aspect is now the subject of research through the Earth Bible Project based at the Adelaide College of Divinity. To be true to traditional Aboriginal concepts this must go beyond the common focus on the Aboriginal view of the ‘Earth is my mother’, an assumption that Tony Swain has shown has little support in the ethnographic evidence.<sup>77</sup> Although I frequently came across references to relationship of people to sites and relationships between ancestor spirit beings among the Pitjantjatjara people, I did not hear this phrase. A warning against accepting this phrase as the ultimate in expressing Aboriginal peoples’ relationship to land may enable a search for deeper meanings in many aspects of Aboriginal culture.

In the modern Western world, individual rights take precedence over social obligations and there is abundant evidence of the breaking down of relationships. It is in this sphere that an understanding and appreciation of Aboriginal values and structures can inform and contribute to the wellbeing of other cultures and their understandings of relationship. For example, the Pitjantjatjara term for relation, *walytja*, refers not only to family relationships between people but to the connection with the earth, with story and place, with other species and with the spirit beings; the Pitjantjatjara refer to Christians as *Jesuku walytja* (relations of Jesus). Relationships

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<sup>73</sup> Andrew Walls, ‘Old Athens and the new Jerusalem: some signposts for Christian scholarship in the early history of mission studies’, *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 21, 4, October 1997: 153.

<sup>74</sup> Lamin Sanneh, *Encountering the West: Christianity and the global cultural process*, New York, Orbis Books, 1993: 141.

<sup>75</sup> Tacey 1995: 7, 24.

<sup>76</sup> Turner 1977: 30.

<sup>77</sup> Tony Swain, ‘The mother earth conspiracy: an Australian episode’, *Numen*, 38, 1991. It should not be forgotten that the concept of ‘mother earth’ has been known in the West. Eg, see the translation of a hymn by Francis of Assisi, hymn no. 3 in *The Australian hymn book*, Sydney, Collins, 1977.

involve a range of rights and responsibilities that govern most daily behaviours. As the ancestor spirit beings are seen as providing the pattern for all of these relationships, they provide a spiritual basis for such human interaction. Tonkinson has expressed it in relation to the Mardujarra as follows:

The bonds of shared kinship are central, as are friendships and alliances founded on marriage, religion and common notions about what is fundamentally important in life. Aborigines view the world in deeply spiritual terms, and believe that every major facet of life and culture has a spiritual basis.<sup>78</sup>

Secularised Western societies with their contemporary problems of widespread relationship instability and breakdown may well learn from the models of kinship in Aboriginal societies with an emphasis on rights, responsibilities and the underlying spiritual imperative and support.

Having expressed concern that the contemporary interest in Aboriginal spirituality is often based on a superficial understanding of the Aboriginal concepts of spirit and spirituality, I have attempted to provide some insights into their perceptions of both concepts and to provide some substance to the notion of ‘spirit’ from an Aboriginal Australian perspective. One of the enduring memories of my childhood in the 1930s in the Victorian Wimmera district was being driven on the dirt roads over the dry plains, and seeing the mirages that gave unfulfilled promise of water ahead. My concern is that people—both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal—who seek enlightenment through Aboriginal spirituality will find their search fruitless unless it embraces this deeper knowledge of Aboriginal concepts as expressed in story, song and ritual.

We should not survey the prospects of mutual enrichment of Aboriginal and other traditions in meeting the challenges faced by societies today with romanticised optimism. While we may learn some things of value from these Aboriginal traditions, we must recognise that their societies are also being rapidly transformed through ongoing contact with a stridently pervasive Western mainstream culture. Although societies such as the Pitjantjatjara were protected for many decades by the security of distance from the intense culture contact that oppressed other Aboriginal groups, their life has been radically changed in the past few decades. The Aboriginal artist, Banduk Marika, warns of

a romanticised view of her home in northeast Arnhem Land as a ‘cultural picnic ground’ where outsiders come to satisfy themselves that Aboriginal culture is alive and well but avoid seeing what is actually happening.<sup>79</sup>

In remote Aboriginal communities today, time that in the past would have been spent on visiting sacred sites is taken up by attendance at council meetings and other demands of Western government bureaucracy. Families sit glued to video screens instead of sharing stories around the camp fires. Rock-and-roll bands drown out the

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<sup>78</sup> Robert Tonkinson, ‘Mardujarra kinship’, in WH Edwards (ed) *Traditional Aboriginal society*, 2nd edn, South Yarra, Macmillan, 1998: 145.

<sup>79</sup> *The Australian*, 26 June 2001: 1.

sounds of traditional singing. Participation in football occupies the time once spent by youths and young men in learning traditional knowledge. Social problems are intensified by the tensions resulting from conflict between these new influences and demands and the persistence of traditional cultural values. Earlier in this paper, I quoted Humphrey's warning to those who in the modern world are riding the new wave of spirituality 'without regard for a careful integration with the rest of life'.<sup>80</sup> The kind of Aboriginal world views that I have outlined developed within particular settings as hunter-gatherer societies adapted to the various ecologies of Australia. Aboriginal world views are changing as their material and social environments change and their expressions of spirituality must inevitably reflect this. In my analysis of the concept of 'spirit' and 'spirituality' I have highlighted the significance of language and the need to understand the meaning of Aboriginal words and concepts. However, the Aboriginal languages themselves are under threat. Linguists prophesy that of the 6000 languages spoken throughout the world, half will die out early this century, with languages that have less than 10000 speakers under extreme threat. This latter prediction has particular relevance to all Australian Aboriginal languages, all of which have far fewer speakers than this number.<sup>81</sup> A concerted effort is required on the part of government agencies, Aboriginal organisations and educational institutions to counter this predicted decline and to work for the survival of the traditional Australian Aboriginal languages. This is a challenge for both Australian governments and people at the beginning of the second century of federation. The death of Aboriginal languages will necessarily mean the death or stifling of part of the Aboriginal spirit.

My approach to this topic is obviously influenced by my relationship with an Aboriginal society that has retained a high level of continuity with traditional beliefs, practices and values—although these are under increasing threat in the modern world. Since moving to an urban situation twenty years ago to lecture in Aboriginal Studies' subjects, I have had increasing contact with Aboriginal people who are more removed from their traditions. A common response from many of my Aboriginal students has been 'I have lost my culture'. I have reminded them that as human beings, belonging to social groups, they have a culture—albeit, one considerably transformed from that of their Aboriginal grandparents. My advice to them has been to build on those aspects of their present cultural life that have value. They may find some persisting traditional values that can be meaningfully blended with positive features of their present cultural milieu. For example, in her research into contemporary Wiradjuri society in New South Wales, Gaynor MacDonald has focused on the continuity of

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<sup>80</sup> Humphrey, 2001: 67.

<sup>81</sup> Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine, *Vanishing voices: the extinction of the world's languages*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000: 8–9. The editors of *Macquarie Aboriginal words*, Macquarie, NSW; Macquarie University, 1995: xii, observe that most Aboriginal languages are spoken by 'usually less than 100' adults, and that there are only '20 really viable traditional Australian languages...being used as the normal vehicle of communication within their community and are being passed on to their children. These viable languages are all in northern and central Australia.'

values associated with land and kin in a society that has undergone considerable transformation.<sup>82</sup>

Tony Tjamiwa was a man who knew his language, his land, his relationships and his obligations. He used this knowledge to maintain his culture, to illumine understanding of his Christian faith, to care for his land and people and to share with others who visited Uluru. He exhibited a type of a genuine Aboriginal spirituality that other Aborigines are searching for today. The challenge for other Aboriginal people—who do not have the same experience of traditional culture—is to develop integrated and satisfying spiritualities that genuinely reflect their cultural, historical and social experiences.

### **The author**

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<sup>82</sup> Gaynor MacDonald, ‘Continuity of Wiradjuri tradition’, in WH Edwards (ed) *Traditional Aboriginal society*, 2nd edn, South Yarra, Macmillan, 1998: 297–312.

<sup>83</sup> In 1991, the South Australian colleges of advanced education joined with the Institute of Technology to form the University of South Australia.