1
Elegy

Jack Bruno

Transcription, translation from the Yir-Yoront,
editing, and commentary by Barry Alpher[1]

In this country right here,
long ago,
people passed away,
one by one.

People of these times,
we ourselves here in this place,
these young men, these little children,
will each pass away, in the fullness of time.

We, the old ones here,
will die first,
we who are old men.

The country,
the little ones will be taking it,
in due time, this country here.

Holding this place,
looking after the country,

We, the old ones,
the old men,
will all pass away.

In due time, as always,
the white people in just the same way
will each pass away, in due time.

The young whites will be taking things on,
in due time, down there.

Those countries to the south,
to the west, and to the north,
they will be taking them in due time.

The old men will each pass away,
sooner or later.

In that other time,
what's-it-called,
the Ancestors set the world down as it is.

Therefore we will each pass away,
in the fullness of time.

As for these young ones,
just as before,
they will each pass away,
in due time.

Then, having been
little children,
we will be carrying on for them,
at this place,
in due time.

To the north and to the south
the Ancestors up above here
set down the world,
they who are up above here.

Our father created this world,
and those people,
the aforementioned younger generation,
will be looking after the country in due time.

Then the young men will be taking it on,
in due time, the young men.

It is most assuredly they
who will be taking the country.

Young women,
they'll each marry,
in due time.

We here,
the old men and women,
the old ones, will each pass away.

The old men too,
we will each pass away,
in due time.

Then the young men will be taking the country,
in due time.

The world,
long ago,
the Ancestors set it in place as it is.

We human beings most assuredly would have stayed alive
forever.

We'd have stayed alive.

But the Ancestors,
the people up above here,
the Ancestral people killed him,
our father.

They killed our father, up above here.

We here on earth will each pass away,
as always.

Little girls, teenage girls,
newborn babies,
will each pass away, in due time.

The Ancestors set down the world as it is.

If they had not killed that man,
we here would have stayed alive forever.

We would have remained;
alive.

But because the Ancestors set down the world,
for us,
so we here on earth will each pass away,
little children, teenaged girls,
young men, old women,
therefore each will pass away.

———————————

Larr inhqa nh, worryvrrl vnh,
pe-peqerre warrmvlhvnh.

Nhan ng'n, oq vnh ngopol an vnh,
pam-therr an, martuwvl an,
wirrirrvm moq vnh, poyvn vnh.

Karntl an ngethvn,
kanpa nh warrmvlhwal,
morr-karntl vnh, ngethvn vnh.

Larr, martuwthalt yolyowvl,
poyvn vnh, oq vnh.

Pirirdl oq vnh, larr kolkowvl.

Ngethvn kanam morr-karntl
moq vnh wirrm.

Poyvn vnh, kar-yorronngorvm
wangvrr, yorrarruw,
wirrirrvm poyvn vnh.

Wangarr martuwthalt yolyowvl,
poyvn nh i kowl vnh.

Larr awr, parrthiwvrr, parrkuwvl.
parrkurr, yolyowvl poyvn vnh.

Morr-karntl kanam
moq vnh wirrirrvm, poyvn vnh.

Olowr nh el, larr nganthon vnh,
pam-Ngulqlvl thurr.

Ngulvw wirrirrvm nguwvl, poyvn vnh.

Therr an vng'n,
kar-yorronngorvm wirrirrvm, poyvn vnh.

Ngul lerrn martuwthalt yolyowvl,
opol oq vnh poyvn, pilvnhvn.

Parrkurr, parrthiwvrr,
larr pam-Ngulqlvl thurr, an kan.

Ping apvlan, thurr olowr,
ngul olowr, larr vnh kolkowvl
poyvn vnh—

Ngul pelmurr yolyowvl,
poyvn nh, pelmurr el.

Angan pinn, larr yolyowvl.

Warrchuwrr martuwl ng'n,
merritharrarr pinn poyvn vnh —

Opol an morr-karntl warrchuwrr,
kanam, moq wirrirrm.

Pam-morr-karntl lon,
ngethvn, moq wirrirrm, poyvn vnh.

Ngul larr pelmurr yolyowvl,
poyvn nh.

Larr worryvrrl,
pam-Ngulqlvl thurr —

Pam vnh nguwvl
kunq aw nhenhenele —

Kunq vnh nhenhenele nguwvl.

Ngul pamvl-Wolhvlomvn, pam an kan,
pamvl piw ungvnh, pam-piyrr ngapvnn.

Ping ngapvnn piw an kan.

Ngopol olowr wirrirrvm,
kar-yorronngorvm.

Lerrn-keperr, monqlarew,
lerrn-therr-nguthvrrvnh,
wirrirrvm poyvn vnh —

Larr pam-Ngulqlvl thurr.

I pam kar vnh powvlvnh ungvnh,
opol an kunq vnh nhenhenele.

Nhenele ngopol vnh; kunquw.

Ngul larr pam-Nhingangvl
pamuw thurr; ngapvnn;
ngul olowr wirrirrvm nguwvl,
lerrn peqerr, monqlarew,
pelmomvrr, monqyow,
wirrirrvm nguluw.

Jack Bruno

Jack Bruno (Ngerr Thuy) lived at Mitchell River Mission (Kowanyama), an Anglican settlement, for much of his life. Born in 1909 in an area outside the white sphere of control, he went through the first degree of initiation in the bush but spent much of his early adulthood in Palm Island or Stuart Creek Gaol, imprisoned for a non-crime and a small crime and for several heroic and innovative escapes from Palm Island. He died in 1981. When he recorded this essay in 1966, he had the status of morr-karntl (old, senior man), and there is a wistfulness in the telling of it. There is as well an irony in the similar treatment of whites and blacks, and probably a play on the word yow, which can mean 'get' or 'take' in the ordinary English sense as well as 'take' in the Aboriginal sense of entering into legitimate succession to rights and obligations in country.

Non-Aboriginal readers of this piece tend to see Christian syncretism in it. But what syncretism there is is of a subtle sort. Most of the motifs have impeccable indigenous credentials, however well they appear to echo elements of the stories of the Fall and the Passion. The curse of the loss of immortality is in fact an episode of one of the Moon myths, in which the Moon, about to be consumed by flames set in retaliation for outrages he has committed, intones lines very like some in this essay: death will be the lot of newborn babies, young women, young men, all people.

The geographic spread and uniformity of Aboriginal Moon myths containing a curse of mortality are such as to preclude any hypothesis of an origin in Biblical doctrine.[2] Ancestral beings of one category (pam-Wolhvlvm or pam-Ngulgl) do indeed live in the sky; those of another (pam-Nhing) live on one's own site and are related to one in the male line.

Jack Bruno's clan was Head-to-the-East (Par-Poq Kawrr), also known as Nhawrr-Pam-Kitha 'name belonging to corpse'. His own name, Ngerr-Thuy, can be glossed 'soul', with a fair degree of fit to the English concept. Although the Moon story alluded to above does not belong to his country, matters having to do with death in general do, as well as matters having to do with Europeans.[3] The subject matter of this oration is therefore directly within his traditional responsibilities.

For all that, the 'our father' of lines 16, 26, and 27 has no concrete precedent in the attested Yir-Yoront mythic literature; the Moon is not 'our father', and the form Ping 'Father' as used here is a proper noun (such as might be used in direct address). And the particular way in which all these motifs are configured suggests Christian influence (creating an interesting heresy in the process).

During the period of my association with him, 1966-78, Bruno never struck me as a practising or churchgoing Christian. He was, however, confirmed into the Church of England in 1971, and there is little doubt that his motivation was genuine.[4] In 1978 he dictated to me a statement on the origin of the world in which the *pam-Wolhlʋm* have become decidedly singular in number. To the best of my knowledge, Yir-Yoront was never used in church services, nor was any attempt ever made to set up a formal equivalence between terms like *pam-Wolhlʋm* and God.

The rhythmic effect of this piece spoken aloud is striking. In a language where the most frequent rhythmic structure is a stressed syllable together with a single unstressed one, the narrator has produced a number of sequences of dactylic feet (stressed syllables followed by two unstressed ones) that in fact approach very closely to the classical elegiac metre.[5]

Notes

1 I am indebted to Diane Bell and Deborah Bird Rose for comments and suggestions on the translation. The designation 'Elegy' was originally suggested by Lauriston Sharp, but the responsibility for any inexactness in its use as a title lies with me. I have edited the hesitations out of the text, and I have translated fairly freely. In this presentation, lines of text separated by blank lines correspond one-to-one from the original to the translation. Those who wish to study the original text in detail can find it with full interlinear translation and notes as to possible alternate readings in Alpher (1988), along with the full text of the Moon story mentioned above.

   The countries referred to 'down there' (line 8) and 'to the west' (line 9) are in the Cairns area and the Northern Territory, respectively.

2 See for example 'Punishment for Greedy Children', a Moon story from Northeast Arnhem Land (Berndt and Berndt 1985:397-9). A recent pictorial publication of such a story from eastern Cape York is Trezise and Roughsey (1984).

3 See Sharp (1952) for an account of the concerns of the Corpse Clan.

4 I am indebted to the Reverend Philip Freier, Church of the Ascension, Kowanyama, for this information.

5 Readers of the Yir-Yoront text who want to get a feeling for the metre should pay attention to the shwa's (written *ʋ*), unstressed vowels similar in quality to the *a* in *about* or the second *e* in *telegraph*. When two items are written with a connecting hyphen, the second has greater stress than the first.

References

Alpher, B. (1988), Yir-Yoront Texts, draft on deposit at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies Library, Canberra.

Berndt, R.M. and C.H. Berndt (1985), *The World of the First Australians* (revision of 1964 edition), Adelaide: Rigby.

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