

The Ghost of Space

Reflections on Warlpiri Christian Iconography and Ritual ¹

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Time... is nothing but the ghost of space haunting the reflective consciousness. (Bergson 1910:99)

The mind can fancy to itself an order [of space] made up of genealogical lines, whose bigness would consist only in the number of generations, wherein every person would have his place. (Leibnitz, 18.8.1716 in Alexander, ed. p. 70)

To say that the Warlpiri have indigenised Christianity is to say everything and nothing. Having transposed Baptist missionary teachings into designs and rituals which are at first difficult to distinguish from more traditional forms, the Warlpiri themselves feel little further theological commentary is necessary. To me, on the other hand, these new religious manifestations spoke no more than the question: what does it mean for these people to indigenise Christian beliefs?

I confess I began with the prejudice (in Gadamer's sense) that Christianity did in fact mean something to the Warlpiri, and that this something was very different from its meaning to non-Aboriginal Australians.² There were many times when I felt tempted to abandon this "pre-judgement". The Warlpiri do not advocate syncretistic beliefs³ and despite their clearly indigenous Christian *forms*, evidence seemed to amass that there was little that was particularly Warlpiri in their understanding of biblical myth and doctrine, which they had adapted with few conspicuous narrative modifications, or even errors. Short of achieving the impossible and actually sharing another peoples' religious perceptions, I began to think there was no way that I could "pass beyond the anterooms of meaning" (Stanner 1959-63:60) of Warlpiri Christianity.

This was a conclusion to which I had almost become resigned when I sat with some old Warlpiri men to discuss the activities of Adam, Moses and Jesus. I was, as

usual, impressed by their accurate knowledge, although I secretly hoped for some slight shift from orthodoxy. Curious to know how well they could locate each of the events within an overall biblical chronology, I asked which of these men had lived first. The question was received with puzzlement. I was then told, quite simply, that they all lived on the “one day”.

God’s prophets and son had been dislodged from a lineal history and incorporated into an atemporal Dreaming.

I then realised what I should have seen from the very beginning. I returned to the iconography and ritual understanding that the medium was indeed the message, and that all along I had been confronted with bold and discrete statements about the relationship between time, Space and place in Warlpiri Christian thought.

When the Warlpiri indigenised Christianity, everything stayed the same — and nothing.

Introduction

Mircea Eliade once wrote:

The reality and enduringness of a construction are assured... by the transformation of profane space into a transcendent space... [and] also by the transformation of concrete time into mythic time. (1942:20f.)

To this, Bergson might have added the qualification that the notion of concrete time is merely consequent upon a surreptitious introduction of the divisions of space into time (*supra*). By analogy, in this article, I am going to develop the theme that when the Warlpiri, through their iconography and ritual, transform the Christian God manifest in historical time into a mythic time, they simultaneously transform God into space. By way of introduction, I will briefly clarify the essential differences between traditional Warlpiri and certain post-Enlightenment Christian views of ‘space’ and ‘time’.

Traditional Warlpiri cosmology denies any hierarchical distinction between this world and an *otiose* heaven, let alone the Euclidean notion of homogenous abstracted Space which is reflected in some post-Deist theology. The structure of space in Warlpiri thought is concerned with qualitative horizontal demarcation. That is, it acknowledges concrete place rather than geometricised Space. (I will use the capital ‘S’ to distinguish undifferentiated universal ‘Space’, from ‘space’ which I use with all its usual English ambiguity). J.Z. Smith refers to this distinction I am trying to establish as the dichotomy between the locative and utopian visions of the world — the latter term being used in its strict sense to mean a valuation of being in no place (Gk. *ou not*; *topos* a place) (Smith 1978:101). The socio-religious implications of these two ‘visions’ will become clear as this article unfolds. For the moment I will merely add that if we simultaneously bear in mind the personal affiliations Warlpiri have with their country it becomes evident that there is a congruence between spatial and social demarcation. In a rather different context, Leibnitz evoked a most apt image — a genealogy of place (*supra*).

The Aboriginal notion of time is a more sensitive and controversial issue. Romantic mutterings about a “timeless people”, and hackneyed criticisms of

Aboriginal punctuality have led some writers to minimise the differences between Aboriginal and European temporal perceptions (see, for e.g. Holm 1971; Holm and McConnochie 1976; Harris 1984; Partington 1985.) These defenses unfortunately presuppose the "naturalness" of a lineal, historical orientation (but see Ricoeur 1985) and at best, pay a backhanded compliment with conclusions such as:

a sense of historical time is not totally absent from traditional Aboriginal thought and..., in so far as it is weak, this is a condition to be challenged and transformed rather than to be accepted as an immutable necessity. (Partington 1985:38)

Rather than making a virtue of changing a misconstrued necessity, it seems more fruitful and less arrogant to enquire as to why Aborigines value an ideology of changelessness; for despite the indisputable evidence that theirs is a highly dynamic culture, and that Aboriginal people are in no way incapable of historic reasoning, it is equally indisputable that they traditionally cultivated the notion of an unchanging ahistorical cosmic and social order.

Although I will not be able to explore the issue in depth here, this paper works from an understanding that the Warlpiri do not passively drop things from cultural memory. Nor have they developed collective amnesia through an atrophy of their historical faculties. Both of these explanations dwell unnecessarily on the shadow of a very real and positive dimension of Aboriginal epistemology. Significant events are not left to decay and be forgotten, but are rather stripped bare of their historic content as they are absorbed into places already saturated with mythic value. In other words, I am suggesting an ideology of temporal change is to a large extent incompatible with a metaphysic of spatial immutability.

In light of this, it is particularly unfortunate that the Warlpiri word *Jukurrpa* and its cognates elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia are still frequently mistranslated as *Dreamtime*. Bain (1978-9:319) has cogently shown that in a related desert community the word *Jukurrpa* contains no time referent but is rather used to refer either to myth constellations (including associated rituals), or ancestral sites. These dimensions could best be highlighted by the renderings *Dreaming event* (a qualitative rather than temporal distinction) or *Dreaming place*.

My own experience confirms that the Warlpiri use *Jukurrpa* with a spatial rather than temporal emphasis. It is, of course, true that in one (weaker) sense *Dreaming* is spoken of as a 'past' era, but the very nature of this pastness undermines temporality. *Jukurrpa* is in no way fixed to a specific moment in the 'past' which continually recedes with the passage of time. The impression gained by an outsider is that *Dreaming* is a couple of generations behind the oldest present generation, which is precisely where it will still be in another ten generations time (cf. Bell 1983:91). The emphasis here is therefore not on the *Dreaming* ancestors as progenitors to whom people can trace an ever-extending lineage, but simply on the fact that *Dreaming* is a reality outside of, and qualitatively distinct from, a chronology of succeeding generations of living people. And this highlights a most important element of their view of the 'past'; for although the Warlpiri do not trace an unbroken genealogy to *Dreaming*, they nonetheless stress the importance of affiliations between particular ancestors and specific individuals. This identification, as we shall see, is only achieved through the mediation of the land. What links the *Dreaming* 'past' and the present is, therefore, not time but place.

The so-called “pastness” of Dreaming is further undermined by its nowness. It has been suggested that “ancestral present” might also be a satisfactory rendering of *Jukurrpa* (Michaels 1985:508). This is little better than “ancestral past” if we understand the present as an instant in time. If, on the other hand, we bear in mind William James’ famous reflection on the saddle-like thickness of the experience of now, and add to it Augustine’s dictum that eternity is the ‘now’ of God (*Confessions*, chap.13),⁴ then *Jukurrpa* might indeed be termed an ancestral ‘present’ or, much better, an *ancestral now*. We are reminded of Bergson’s rhapsodic description of Pure Duration which “forms both the past and present... into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another” (1910:100).

Jukurrpa then is spatially specific and differentiated, but is temporally homogenous. Warlpiri speak of Christianity as the white people’s *Jukurrpa*, and it is the spatial and temporal implications of this assertion that I will be exploring in this article by reflecting upon their Christian iconography and ritual.

My exposition falls into three sections. I begin by showing that, as might be anticipated, the Warlpiri have *attempted* to translate Biblical history into ubiquitous religious forms. Had this been readily achieved, Christianity might have been easily accommodated, but I go on to demonstrate that attempts to fix these beliefs in the land were not entirely successful. Traditional cosmological structures could not subsume Christianity, or for that matter, white settlement, without adaptations to its locative world-view. In the second section, I therefore suggest that while the Warlpiri have rejected the notion of a God involved with a lineal history they have nonetheless been influenced by the Christian notion of a utopian, undifferentiated world Space. God then is manifest neither in historical time (the orthodox Christian view), nor place (the unsuccessful Warlpiri view), but is, in Bergson’s evocative words, the ghost of Space.

It would indeed be naive to imagine that the intrusion of the notion of Space would not be disruptive to Warlpiri life. It has been literally dislocating, but in the third and final section I offer some evidence that the intrusion is best understood not as a conquest, but as an alliance — an alliance socially between Aborigines and Whites, cosmologically between Dreaming and God, and ontologically between place and Space.

Time and Space in Iconography and Ritual

Western religious art has almost exclusively focused on portraying single significant moments from the history of their tradition. This is not to propose that paintings and sculptures are fixed in time. The hermeneutic interplay between a work of art and its interpreter is one that entails temporal extension (Gadamer 1960:256-67). Nonetheless, Western artists have acknowledged the temporal confines of their work and attempts to circumvent these constraints have periodically erupted. Futurism and cubism provide some obvious recent examples (see Kern 1983:22ff.) Iconography during the Middle Ages explored several possibilities. One was to develop a series of narrative panels which collectively depicted all the significant moments of a biblical episode. This method of translating time into spatially organised icons finds its most notable current form in the Catholic stations of the cross. An interesting Aboriginal interpretation of this artistic orientation is found in

Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann's *Australian Stations of the Cross* (1984) depicting the fourteen panels she painted for the Daly River Church in 1974-5. In terms of some of my arguments later in this paper, it is worth noting that the stations were originally actual places of pilgrimage and may in fact have developed from the tradition that Mary, mother of Jesus, had visited such places after his Ascension.

The medieval panels were on occasion abandoned in order to achieve further aesthetic integration. In some cases a single panel depicted several sequential episodes which were divided by various types of subframes. This has (perhaps superficial) compositional similarities with some art from Northern Australia, and it is interesting to note that the unrecorded Aboriginal artist from Aurukun who produced the bark "Crucifixion and Resurrection" (in Maughan *et. al.*, opp. page 22) chose to depict four phases of the crucifixion of a black Jesus by RAAF servicemen using aesthetically related subpanels.

A more adventurous solution during the Middle Ages is to be found in Hans Memlings (c.1440-1494) *The Passion of Turin* in which some 20 different periods of duration (from the Entry into Jerusalem to the "Noli me tangere") are combined into a single aesthetic whole — almost as if portraying all of the significant sites of pilgrimage (at this period not set at fourteen) with each station containing an embodied Christ. To do this, I would suggest was to represent time as place.

Warlpiri art shares this later essential ubiquitous quality. If we look at the particularly fine portrayal of the Passion which hangs behind the altar of the Yuendumu church (plate 1), we are immediately struck by the ease with which it has avoided the temporal restrictions of Western iconography. The entire Easter chronicle curves into a coherent aesthetic whole. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that the artist has solved the Western problem of injecting time into a two dimensional surface. I would rather say that Warlpiri artistic forms are unconcerned with what we recognise as moments in time, and hence Christian history has been spontaneously interpreted in terms of place.



PLATE 1: *Passion* painted by Neville Japangardi Poulson

This may sound somewhat less esoteric if I describe the way Warlpiri understand their own designs. The main word they use for most men's graphic representation is *kuruwarri*.⁵ This is a very rich and multi-faceted word to which I shall refer again. For now, only two meanings need concern us. At one level, *kuruwarri* are the myriad natural formations which Warlpiri see as the tracks (*yirdiyi*) or transformed remains of Dreaming ancestors. At another level, *kuruwarri* are designs which are used to symbolise these marks. As Nancy Munn says, this reflects a "circle of reality and reference so characteristic of Walbiri thinking about design and ancestral events: designs are among the marks made *by* ancestors in the country and they also represent such marks" (1973:126). Their paintings thus replicate the activities of Dreaming ancestors in the land (*walya*). The Easter *kuruwarri* has likewise interpreted the events leading up to the crucifixion and resurrection as a meandering path through space.

Some may feel that this example is unrepresentative of Warlpiri thought. Paintings, after all, are an essentially spatial art form. It could be argued, on the other hand, that music and dance of necessity unfold in time and hence imply temporal sequencing. An analysis of this issue will bring us to the most unique and conspicuous aspect of Warlpiri Christian life: their church *purlapas* or 'corroborrees' which re-enact key episodes of the Old and New Testaments.

As with the Christian paintings, the *purlapas* have been composed using traditional artistic and ceremonial forms. The tunes are conventional men's and women's (*yawulyu*) melodies⁶ and the words are constructed in fairly archaic Warlpiri. The dance steps, bodily paintings, and most ritual paraphernalia are also to be found in non-Christian ceremonies (see Laughrin 1981).

Most Warlpiri rituals are said to have originated in the Dreaming. They are thus seen as unchanging and unchangeable. *Purlapas*, however, are an exception. They are performed partly for entertainment and are acknowledged as having been introduced by humans. This is not to say that people have created these ceremonies. Rather, the *purlapas* are said to have been 'caught' or 'found' by an individual's spirit whilst dreaming. The usual explanation is that the dreamer is initially attracted by a creature belonging to a class of spiritual beings which, in effect, mediate between Dreaming and now (usually referred to as *kurruwalpa*). He or she then follows the track of an ancestor as the songs and sacred designs are revealed. In the process, the dreamer virtually merges with the ancestor (Munn 1973:133).

Christian *purlapas* are also discovered in dreams, although in this case the *kurruwalpa* is replaced by *Wapirra* or God (lit. 'father'). In one account, it was added that prayer was a necessary preliminary to the dream. As with *jukurrpa purlapas*, the emphasis is not on individual creativity but upon the faithful repetition of the revealed ceremony. Thus, for example, when God 'gave' a dreamer the Easter *purlapa*, He warned there would be dire repercussions if the performers strayed from the disclosed version. The painting we have already looked at was in fact imparted as a pictorial equivalent to the correct form of the *purlapa*.

The first comment to be made about this brief description is that although the actual performance of *purlapas* extend through time, they are seen by the Warlpiri participants as in fact uniting them with a timeless Dreaming. I was provided with a clear instance of this following a very elaborate performance of their Passion. Some of the older men said they hadn't liked the ceremony and were considering discontinuing it. I assumed at first there was some dispute over ritual detail as there

had been in previous years. But no, there had been no errors. One man then added that it made him sad to keep on killing God. Another was even said to have become mildly ill from the performance. Thus, for at least some of those present, the crucifixion was a contemporary reality instead of a past event that was merely being dramatically portrayed.

Recent ethnomusicological analysis supports the view that Aboriginal ritual music can alter the singer's consciousness of time (Ellis 1984). This phenomenon perhaps finds parallels in all musical traditions. Levi-Strauss' comments are pertinent here.

He writes:

myth and music... unlike painting—[require] a temporal dimension in which to unfold. But this relation to time is of a rather special nature: it is as if music and mythology need time only in order to deny it. Both, indeed, are instruments for the obliteration of time... [By] listening to music, and while we are listening to it, we enter into a kind of immortality. (1964:15f.)



PLATE 2

Watiya wanta-wantarla warra-warra-kangulpalu
Tree cross-on saw they
(The Disciples saw Jesus crucified)

However, what I — following Bergson — would like to add is that when *Aboriginal* music ‘obliterates’ the divisions of time in order to actualise the Dreaming it simultaneously reacknowledges the ancestral creation of the divisions of space. The order of the song sequences is determined by the order in which an ancestor proceeded through the land. It is therefore entirely appropriate that the Warlpiri word for a song sequence is *yirdiyi* which literally means track or path. To sing a song is to sing an ancestor through the land.⁷

From Place to Space

I have thus far merely tried to show that indigenising Christianity has involved the Warlpiri in an *attempt* to place the new beliefs within an essentially locative religious ecology. It would not overstate the point to say that they have struggled to adapt Christian teachings into a religious outlook best labelled *geosophical* — that is, a view acknowledging that all wisdom and truth is fixed in the earth.

To some extent, however, these attempts to locate Christianity have failed. The iconography and ritual I have described have place-specific *forms* but they lack a content referring to identifiable sites. For the Warlpiri, biblical narrative ultimately remains utopian.

Elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, Judaeo-Christian myth has occasionally been placed (e.g. Kolig 1980, and this volume; Turner 1974:150-153). This perhaps would also have occurred with the Warlpiri, but for the fact that, since Christianity is considered to be White people’s Dreaming, Whites are acknowledged to control this religious domain.⁸ This is not to say that Warlpiri never enquire as to the possible

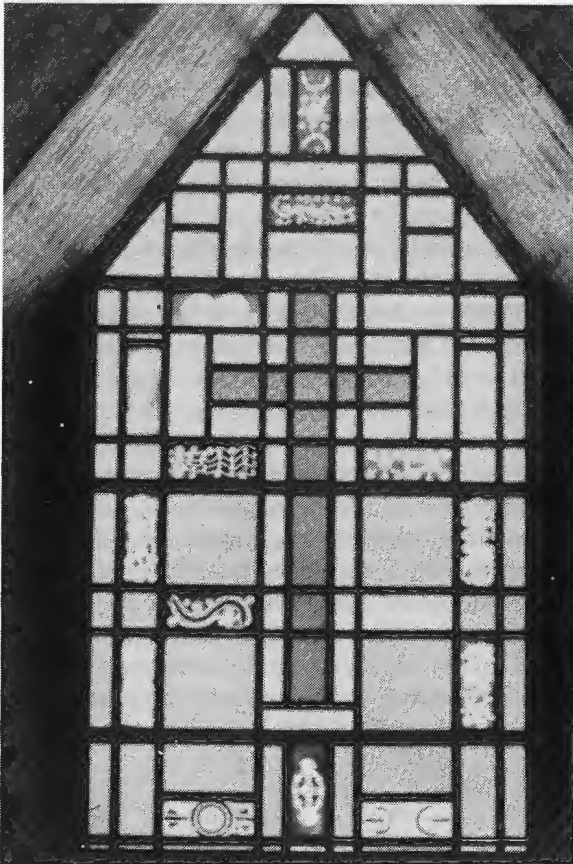


PLATE 3
Stained glass window

location of biblical events within the country they know. To give but a few examples, I was asked: whether Moses travelled in the Tanami Desert; if the drowned Egyptians had turned into dugongs off the coast of Arnhem Land; whether Moses' act of striking a rock and hence producing water was the same as a site-specific Warlpiri rain-making ritual; and if the serpent depicted in the Church window (see plate 3) was also the serpent of Eden. The point to be emphasised about each of these enquiries is that I, as a White person, was asked to give an authoritative ruling on each of these syncretistic hypotheses. Put simply, the Warlpiri feel Christian myth cannot be located in their country without the consent of the mythic custodians. Beside the historic fact that Christianity is not autochthonous to Australia, missionaries are unlikely to condone the fixing of their message in Warlpiri territory as they are at pains to emphasise the utopian nature of their doctrine.

This, I feel, is the central dilemma in the Warlpiri-Christian encounter: how to incorporate a God of universal, undifferentiated Space into an ontology of place. The issue is important. It is often assumed that Aborigines are reluctant to become Christians primarily on doctrinal grounds. Although this is sometimes true, it is frequently overstated. The cardinal concern of the Warlpiri has not been whether White people's Dreaming is cosmologically true but rather whether it is something to which they have legitimate access and responsibility. This latter formulation is synonymous with saying that the Warlpiri need to locate their religious beliefs within their country.

Let me corroborate this point by returning to the word *kuruwarri*. I have already shown that it refers both to ancestral marks visible in the land and to designs representing these marks. A third meaning can be roughly glossed 'fertility essence'. This is affiliated with the other two meanings insofar as the essences were deposited at specific locations by the archetypal Dreaming wanderings. *Kuruwarri*, in the third sense, are responsible for all fecundity, including human reproduction. This explains a point to which I have already alluded. Despite the fact Warlpiri do not trace an unbroken lineage back to their supernatural progenitors, they nonetheless have an immediate kinship with them which is *mediated by the potency of the land itself*. It thus follows that Warlpiri religious identity is more a question of geography than theology.

How then have the Warlpiri managed to become Christians? In the remainder of this article I will explore the changes that have occurred in Warlpiri ontology which have allowed the accommodation of Christianity. As I indicated in the introduction, these changes take two forms. On the one hand, there is what at first appears to be a fundamental reorientation in Warlpiri thought: a shift from a ubietous to a ubiquitous understanding of their religious universe. As I will argue in the final section, however, the notion of Space has as yet only intruded into restricted domains of the Warlpiri cosmos, and a more careful analysis reveals an ontological co-existence rather than a conquest.

The divorce of beliefs from place in Warlpiri thought was documented twenty years ago and almost inevitably was occurring long before that. It is difficult to believe that wholesale slaughter in the late 1920s, and the herding of people into settlements after World War II, could have not been immensely disruptive to the ritual maintenance of a site-based religious life. Myths too seem to have become less fixed. In an article on the Warlpiri understanding of the cause of toothache, M.J. Barrett quotes an informant as saying the ancestor of the serpentine culprits emerged

from one Dreaming place leaving its offspring to “go through the world — all the world. Not only in the Northern Territory, Australia, but all over the world — everywhere” (1964:97). The story was accompanied by the design in Figure 1.

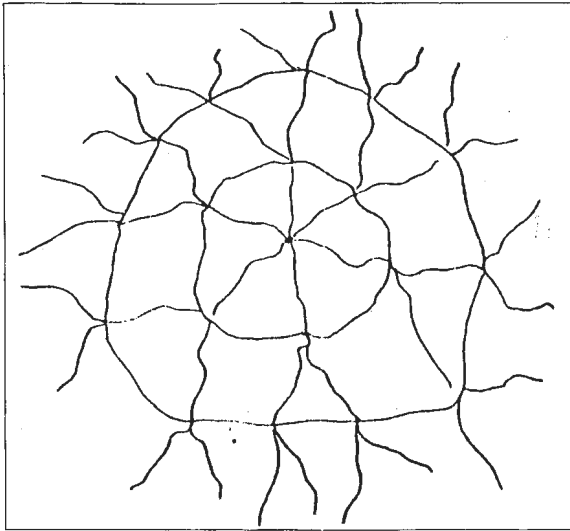


FIGURE 1
The spread of the wilki
ngarunu, after an
illustration in Barrett
(1964: 98)

T.G.H. Strehlow made the very pertinent observation that this account and the accompanying *kuruwarrri* revealed a dissolution of the traditional locative nature of Dreaming events (1964:101). Although emerging from a specific place the serpent seems not to have transversed any particular track and its influence radiated indiscriminately to cover the world entirely. It is a myth simultaneously in the realms of place and universal Space.

Utopian tendencies are even more accentuated in designs affiliated with Christianity and other phenomena of non-Aboriginal origin. Some rather evangelical graphic representations of the relationship between God and all people throughout the world also takes the form of ubiquitous radiations from a central point. With one important exception these have few structural dissimilarities from fig. 1. The exception is that, although not evident without Warlpiri exegesis, they have reduced further the locative emphasis by introducing a vertical, non-worldly dimension. It is interesting to note that one Yuendumu artist has produced virtually identical designs to depict both the spread of the Holy Spirit and the transmissions from the AUSSAT satellite! (cf. Michaels 1986:143 and cover). This graphic analogy is perhaps unintentional, but is nonetheless inspired, for in both cases a new form of message, potentially available to all people, is sent from Space — in both senses of that word.

Another drawing of the Warlpiri Christian cosmos which more explicitly emphasises this non-worldly shift was produced for me by two elderly men (Figure 2). It also reveals their new Christian understanding of the relationship between individual humans and the world. The drawing and accompanying key are, I hope, self-explanatory.

Although drawn by men prestigious in Dreaming based religious life, this picture is fundamentally at odds with traditional belief. In traditional thought the

human spirit or *pirlirra*, itself a part of the ancestor, was said to return at death to a site associated with that ancestor. In a superb paper on "The Spatial Presentation of Cosmic Order in Warlpiri Iconography" Nancy Munn highlighted the importance of the fate of the *pirlirra* in a discussion of motifs representing "coming out" and "going in". These themes, she says, articulate an oscillating process in which Dreaming power is born of and later returned to the earth as, for example, "when the Dreaming ceases to be physically embodied at the end of a ceremony, or when the *guruwarri* [my *kuruwarri*] powers are released into death" (1973a:214). What is immediately evident in Figure 2 is that the spirit, and hence the ancestral aspect, is not returned. Rather there is, so to speak, a constant drain towards heaven of the ancestral power residing in the earth.

The transference of sacred power to heaven, the new understanding of the fate of the spirit and some other revealing features of Warlpiri Christian cosmology are further indicated by two dreams related to me by one of the men who produced Figure 2. It must be emphasised that, although 'dreamed', these events were described as being very 'real', and despite the fact that he had the dreams several decades ago, they were recounted with intense emotion. The following slightly edited extract from my fieldnotes of 1984 is an impoverished and lifeless summary:

A long time ago J. had a frightening dream. In retrospect he thought it was God punishing him for his unChristian behaviour. In it he heard a loud rush of wind, like an aeroplane. Two large doors appeared in the sky (c. 50 x 50 metres) and opened to reveal a lush, green city which was equated with Jerusalem (also located by this man to the south). Jesus (*Wapirra*) emerged from the gates. He was young (c. 30), white and had a glistening neat red beard. He wore a yellow jumper and shirt and white trousers and shoes. All his clothes were new. He was approximately 4 metres tall.

He carried a chair with him and sat to look at the world below. Four red beams "like torches" shone from his chair. The world turned red. From the trees hung small shiny objects shaped like bullroarers.

J. said that when he dies he will go to that city.

J. then added that Jesus had "come to Yuendumu twice". On the other occasion the earth was again turned red and was washed by a "really clean rain". J. was hit in the back of the neck by lightning which put Jesus' power into him. This power explained why he is still alive today although most of his peers have died. The lightning is still inside him.

These dreams, like the designs, emphasise that despite the evidence that they have strained toward locating European religious belief (sect. 2 *supra*) the locus of Christian power is ultimately seen by Warlpiri to be non-earthly and hence, utopian and universal.

If this were the end of my exposition, the reader might well be concerned, for the shift from an ontology in which religious truth is geographically fixed and person-specific, to one in which it is indiscriminate and omnipresent would seem to indicate a fundamental reorientation in which little that was traditionally Warlpiri

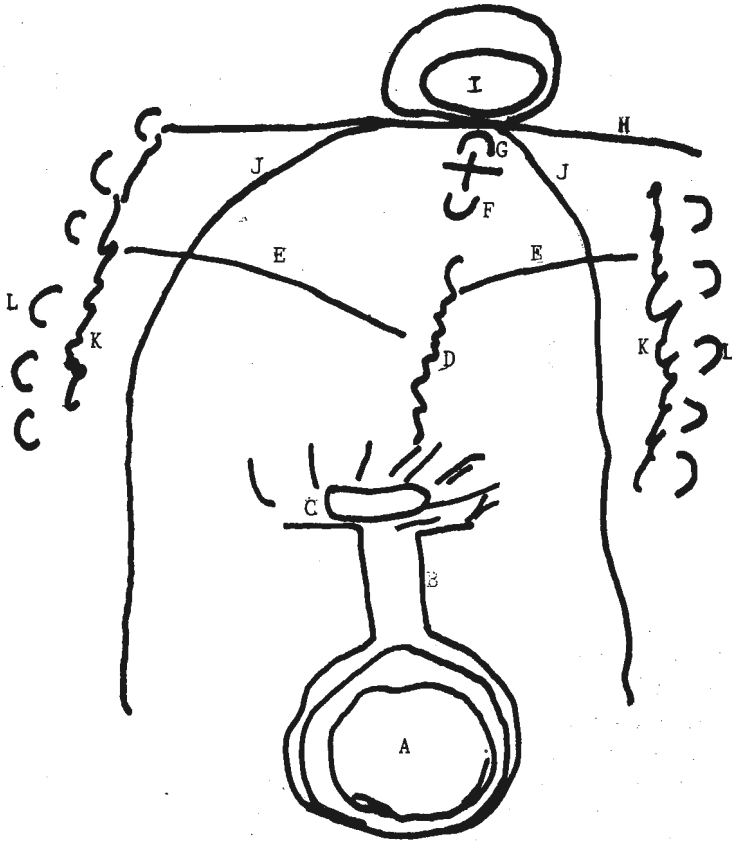


Figure 2. The cosmos as drawn by two senior Warlpiri men

Key

- A. World/Earth. (The concentric circles do not represent a spherical world. They are a traditional motif simply indicating, in this case, a place.)
- B. tree.
- C. platform burial.
- D. ascending *pirlirra* (from corpse's navel).
- E. two roads of bitumen.
- F. the deceased with Jesus.
- G. *Wapirra* (father= Jesus/God) judging D. (By looking in his/her eye)
- H. large gates.
- I. Jerusalem — a cool, green country.
- J. sky studded with stars.
- K. fires.
- L. sinners. (gamblers and drinkers)

* Hills were said to lie beyond L. on either side. The fire I was told, didn't burn (a rendering of eternal burning?) and the Devil looked after people with food and drink. It was added, perhaps in an attempt to counter my growing incredulity, that there were also toilets out the back.

could survive. Indeed, it could even indicate that the Warlpiri had internalised one of European society's most unattractive dispositions. Michel Sorres puts this most coherently:

To be pluralistic means that truths are always local, distributed in a somewhat complicated way in space. In other words, there are always singularities. The opposite of pluralism is to say that a single truth obtains for the entire space... There is a difference between a homogeneous space, entirely occupied by a single truth, and a complex space where the whole task consists in passing from one singularity to another... On the other hand, to have everything all at once, to occupy the whole space abruptly, ... this is what these ideologies do. After all, what does it mean, a universal space... It is an imperialism.⁹

The Alliance of Space and Place

I have now explored two facets of the meeting of a locative and a utopian world-view. In the first section, I examined the conservative response — an attempt to place Christianity within the pre-existing order of the world. This, as we saw, was largely unsuccessful. Next, I gave some instances of what might at first be seen as a sign that the traditional outlook is disintegrating — the transformation of place into undifferentiated Space. Both of these positions are, however, essentially static. They postulate, at a structural level, complete traditionalism or unimpeded conversion.

In this final section I suggest that a deeper, more dynamic and, I believe, somewhat less pessimistic interpretation is possible. Although there is inevitably a price to be paid by admitting the concept of Space into a locative understanding of the world, it does not seem, in the Warlpiri case, to take the form of a wholesale ontological revolution. While Christianity is clearly understood in terms of universal Space, and while some traditional religious beliefs are becoming less fixed, an important core of religious knowledge has managed to retain its site specific nature. I would now suggest that Christianity and the notion of a Spatially universal belief, has been adopted (consciously or unconsciously) as a buffer to protect, as well as might be expected in a colonial context, as much as possible of religious cosmos dependent on place. It is, then, not place being subsumed by space, but an alliance in which neither entirely dominates. This is expressed when the Warlpiri, like many other Aboriginal communities, emphasise that in both the political and metaphysical sense that they are a people with "two Laws".

The complementary nature of their dual cosmology is evident at several levels. It is, for example, manifest in their use in the Christian context, of reciprocal ritual terms to identify people's country and ritual affiliation.

In the broadest sense the Warlpiri will state their spiritual association with their land in terms of two comprehensive categories (when used in their widest sense). Those belonging to the patrimoiety which shares the spirit (*pirlirra*) of an ancestor will say that they are 'father' (*kirda*) for a site and its accompanying ceremonies. Members of the other patrimoiety have the reciprocal role of *kurdungulu* who must prepare ritual paraphernalia and ensure the 'father' group does not stray from

correct ritual procedure. It should be emphasised that both groups have equal and complementary roles in ritually maintaining the country.¹⁰

Although the division of patrimoieties plays no formal role in Warlpiri Christian ritual, the distinction between 'father' and *kurdungulu* has been extended into what is known as 'church business'. God, of course, is referred to as 'father'. (The actual term used is *Wapirra*, which lays more stress on classificatory Fatherhood than does *kirda*.) All Christians, on the other hand, are called *kurdungulu* as a paraphrase of 'disciple'. The word *kurdungulu* has earned a reputation for being notoriously difficult to translate (see Nash 1982). To some extent, it corresponds to our idea of a disciple who works on behalf of someone who calls God 'father'. However, *kurdungulu* are far more directive than disciples, since it is their responsibility to ensure that the 'father' group does not deviate from the law established by the Dreaming (see Bell 1983:139f.) Although I have not heard it explicitly formulated, there is evidence of an underlying assumption that because Warlpiri are now God's *kurdungulu*, He in turn would reciprocate by acting in accordance with the Warlpiri site-based law.

At the iconographic level, the complementary nature of 'two Laws' is revealed by a stained glass window depicting a large central cross surrounded by Dreaming *kuruwarri* representing the four patricouples which structure much of Warlpiri religious life (Plate 3).

This symbolic juxtaposition is not unique in Aboriginal Australia. Other well known cognates are the Elcho Island "adjustment movement" memorial (Berndt 1962; Morphy 1983) and the Yirrikala Church panels of traditional Yirritja and Dhuwa designs (Wells 1971).

Commentators on these phenomena have pointed out several implications of such displays; for example, the formation of wider political alliances, overtures in establishing exchange relations with Whites, and attempts to educate Whites in the ways of indigenous land tenure. The Warlpiri data does indeed support these suggestions and, as with the Northern examples, the window *kuruwarri* were offered at a time when Warlpiri ownership of the places associated with the designs were beginning to be negotiated with government bodies (see Fleming n.d.:40).

It is, however, important to emphasise that the presentation of *kuruwarri* was not seen by Warlpiri themselves as an act whose significance lay primarily in the socio/political domain. Rather it occurred at a metaphysical level. The alliance was not between Aborigines and Whites, but between *Jukurpa* (through its human custodians) and God.

The words of one old man are revealing. He said, whilst pointing to the panels:

"We give it for *Wapirra*, that's why we been give it. We been give it this one too. We been give it whole lot. Well, *Wapirra* know 'im now. He can talk Warlpiri."

For God to have *kuruwarri* is for Him to be cognisant of the locative nature of Warlpiri Law. There is a revealing song in the Warlpiri Galatians *purlapa* which sheds light on this issue. In a rendering of Galatians 3:28 it says:

Kuruwarriwangul / Kuruwarrikirli mardarni kangalpa.
Kuruwarri-without/Kuruwarri-with having we

Jintangkajuku Wapirrarluju
one-in-still Father

(with or without *kuruwarri*, we are nonetheless one in God.)

At one level this reinforces the view that the place specific *kuruwarri* designs, which link people with both ancestors and land, are irrelevant to a utopian Christianity. But as a rendering of 'Jew', *kurruwarrikirli* also emphasises that these designs are the foundation of a traditional Law which is not totally incompatible with the new Law. At face value the man commenting on the window had said the Warlpiri had 'given' God an equivalent of a divinely revealed Old Testament — with, however, an important difference. In this case it was not God's own Word, but the 'Word' of the Dreaming: "He can *talk* Warlpiri".

The window then makes a symbolic statement about the mutual relationship between a utopian God and the locative Dreaming ancestors. God has been brought into Warlpiri land by being, as it were, initiated into their already existent understanding of the structure of the country. As 'father' and *kurdungulu*, God and the Warlpiri now co-operate in maintaining an order established by the Dreaming.

If my interpretation is correct, then a final question immediately begs to be answered: Why have the Warlpiri chosen to overlay their accounts of the formation of their lands with a seemingly redundant cosmology concerned with the single creation of all that exists?

This is a wide issue, requiring at least another article. Here I will merely hint at one answer by summarising into a syllogism a sermon delivered at Yuendumu. It went as follows:

First premise: God made all the world and it all belongs to Him.
Second premise: It is absurd for Governments to be able to buy and sell land which belongs alone to God.
Conclusion: The Government must give the Warlpiri people back their lands.

We immediately see a flaw in the logic — from two apparently utopian premises, a locative conclusion is reached. What I have tried to do in the final section of this paper is to elucidate the third premise which went unspoken. It was assumed by the preacher that God endorses the traditional Dreaming ties the Warlpiri have with their countries. By having God in Space, and by teaching God the meaning of *kuruwarri* and place, the Warlpiri now have, not only their own Law, but also White people's Dreaming to sustain, through troubled times, their spirits in their lands.

Notes

- 1 This article is based upon observations made at Yuendumu, an Aboriginal town some 300 km north-west of Alice Springs, in 1983-4. The research was funded by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. It was discontinued for various reasons,

- including a personal distaste for life as a professional voyeur. Thanks Debbie (Rose), Robert (Bos), Helen (Payne) and Norman (Habel) for your most helpful comments on earlier drafts of this article; Dany (Falconer-Flint) for talking over ideas, editing, and providing some of the data; and David (Turner), for your book (1987) and most stimulating correspondence which changed my way of seeing Warlpiri iconography.
- 2 For what I mean by 'mean' see Swain (1985). Gadamer's hermeneutic theory underlies much of my approach to writing on the subject of Aboriginal Christianity. I do not offer my comments as allegedly objective statements, nor do I subscribe to a particular methodology for the interpretation of this data. If I have in any way managed to make the Warlpiri "horizon of meanings" any more intelligible to our own structure of "pre-understanding", and if I have contributed to the ongoing dialogue evocatively described by Gadamer as a "fusion of horizons", then I will be more than satisfied.
 - 3 At least they do not advocate syncretistic beliefs in the public, church context. There is, however, a new secret cult imported from the west which Warlpiri unambiguously state had Christian and Islamic elements. The men with whom I worked were, however, divided as to whether they were witnessing a new facet of a common Christian discourse, or two entirely different religious scenarios. For reasons of confidentiality, I cannot pursue these issues here.
 - 4 Readers may suspect that I have contradicted myself by referring to God as being beyond temporality. I have not, however, said God is bound by time but, rather, is *manifest in a lineal history*. This raises problems for theologians, and I leave these for them to resolve. For a recent discussion surrounding the dilemma of God's simultaneous atemporality and intervention in history, see Cook (1987). For my purposes, it suffices that the Warlpiri have been evangelised by a Christianity emphasising God's role in time. To quote a missionary to the Warlpiri: "Time is now not cyclic — but directional. Life is speeding towards a climax, culminating in the return of Christ... The Cross we have planted will destroy their 'dreaming'. The church we are planting must now provide fulfilment and purpose to their *total* life — or it will rock them gently back to their cycle of sleep" (Ollerenshaw 1980:53).
 - 5 *Kuruwarri* refers traditionally to men's designs and this article is almost exclusively based on insights gained from men. In numerical terms, women are in fact more conspicuously involved in church life. Attendance numbers, however, can be misleading. Certain men are recognised as "bosses" for "church business", and they are regularly involved in church activities. Other men, avowed Christians, do not feel this is necessary. To say that the latter group are not really Christian would mean, if we applied a consistent evaluative criteria, that most Warlpiri did not really endorse traditional religious practice. This would clearly be absurd. Rather, in both cases, it seems that certain men take on major ritual responsibilities and 'work' for the good of the wider community. Notwithstanding the above, the reader should bear in mind that this exposition omits reference to an equally (at least) important portion of the Yuendumu Christian community.
 - 6 Munn has suggested that men's iconography and narrative is based more on tracks and paths; women's on camps (e.g. 1973:214). In church *purlapas* men's tunes tend to accompany biblical plot and action, while *yawulyu* seems to be introduced in lulls in the action (e.g. between crucifixion and resurrection) and to provide for more theological reflection.
 - 7 Payne (1984) makes the significant observation that Pitjantjatjara women who have forgotten song sequences aid their memories by imaginatively visualising the country through which the ancestor 'is' travelling. At another level, Moyle shows how the Pintubi conceptualise melodic 'time' in spatial terms. Someone who begins singing what we would call too late or too soon, are said to sing on the 'far side' or 'near side'. Moyle comments: "'Far side' and 'near side' describe relative proximity in terms of one particular dimension — physical distance — as a means of verbalising about an

analogous relative proximity occurring in another dimension — melodic distance" (1979:92).

- 8 Referring to my note (3) it is worth mentioning that when syncretistic elements do emerge, it is outside the church domain in a secret cult in which Aboriginal religious authority and autonomy is unquestioned.
- 9 I take this quote from Bernard Faure's excellent article (1987:347). I came across Faure's paper after I had all but completed this one. I regret I could not make more use of his analysis of the importance of Space and place in the interface between Ch'an Buddhism and popular religion in China, but could not resist pirating the superb quote from Sorres.
- 10 I have simplified the concepts of *kirda* and *kurdungulu*. On some occasions, the terms are used to refer to specific individuals within the patrimoieties who have more direct kinship with an ancestor, site or rite. Nonetheless, the two terms can be extended to include the entire Warlpiri community.

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