

# THREE ABORIGINAL RESPONSES TO NEW AGE RELIGION: A TEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

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*Contemporary students of indigenous religions begin their inquiries by deconstructing misrepresentations about the people they wish to study empirically. Such scholars simultaneously dismiss the New Age as hegemonic and intrusive or destructive of native traditions. The relationship of indigenous peoples toward the New Age, in this case Australian Aboriginal religionists, is ambiguous by comparison. It is the task of this article to examine the continuum of relationships between New Age religion and Aboriginal religions, and to make clearer some of the reasons for this ambiguity.*

## 1. Methodological considerations

The approach taken in this paper to the examination of the possible relationships between Aboriginal religions and New Age religion takes its cue from the importance of New Age texts to past successful research concerning New Age religion (Hanegraaff, 1996; Heelas, 1996). However, the texts chosen are instead sourced in different kinds of indigenous self-understanding about New Age religion: *The Rock. Travelling to Uluru* (Hill, 1994); *Yorro Yorro. Aboriginal Creation and the Renewal of Nature: Rock Paintings and Stories from the Australian Kimberleys* (Mowaljarlai & Malnic, 1993); *Messengers of the Gods. Tribal Elders Reveal the Ancient Wisdom of the Earth* (Cowan 1993); 'Australian Aboriginal Tradition' (Mafi-Williams, 1999); *Dreamkeepers. A Spirit-Journey into Aboriginal Australia* (Arden, 1994). In all cases, the texts are explicitly dialogical, written as a response to perceived non-indigenous beliefs. Both New Age religion and Aboriginal religions should be treated as emic designations and for both the etic is ultimately what research should elucidate (Harris, 1979, especially 51–53). The aim, then, is to categorise these textual responses according to the degree of adherence to New Age religious understandings; to show something of the continuities and discontinuities of indigenous interpretations of New Age religion with the non-indigenous structure of New Age religion; and finally to attempt to account for Aboriginal New Age religiosity empirically, providing

historical and sociological context for future research, and encouraging falsifiability rather than dismissal as a criteria for explanation.

The main problem with this line of inquiry is that it seems to confirm the criticism that ‘not many students of religion actually do fieldwork’ (Geertz, 1996: 2). In defence, Flood (1999: 223) has recently argued that as religion has two ingredients, text and ritual or binding narrative about non-empirical entities and events, that are often integrated, they cannot be adequately understood if philology and anthropology are quite distinct. Religious studies can combine philological and anthropological interests and methods: anthropology can illuminate texts as textual studies can inform anthropology. Such work can be ideally done under the umbrella of religious studies.

## 2. Definition of terms

If ambiguity seems to characterise the relationship Aboriginal religionists have toward New Age religion, it is also equally the case that most students of indigenous religions have a confused notion of what constitutes New Age religion empirically. For example, Hiatt, to his credit, has opened up a line of inquiry based on the observation of positive relationship: they are interested in each other because they both share a ‘spiritual and mystical conception of the universe’ which distinguishes them in significant ways from Western religion (Hiatt, 1997: 38). Yet, it also amounts to a simplification of complex phenomena rather than an explanation. It makes many unwarranted and unempirical assumptions about what constitutes and separates Aboriginal, New Age and Western religions. It is important, then, before we can begin to catalogue possible responses of Aboriginal religionists to New Age religion to be clear about what is meant by these terms in this article.

A criticism that may arise at this point is that as terms such as ‘Aboriginal religions’ and ‘New Age religion’ – perhaps ‘religion’ itself – are actually just taxonomical designations used by academics to cover a range of intrinsically specific and diverse pattern of behaviour, our central concern should be with the examination of the structure of patterns rather than with their substance (on this controversy and its implications for religious studies as a viable academic discipline, see Fitzgerald, 2000). In terms of the parameters of this study such a position at the very least does not take into account that religions are also a development of contemporary religionist’s emic self-understanding, a transformation of themes historically and empirically already present (Flood, 1996: 8). As this position has arisen out of a well-placed concern for social scientific explanations, it is necessary to emphasise that to defend the notion of discrete categories and the definitions that they depend upon is not a concession to obscurantism. Rather, ‘in the study of religion, social scientific explanations can never be more than partial contributions to historical explanations; for the phenomena of religion are inherently and inalienably diachronic. Accordingly, *social scientific explanations of religion are rightly criticised negatively for being “reductive”, to the extent that they usurp the place of historiography*’ (Merkur, 1994:

227). Definitions, derived as they are from emic self-understandings, should be especially concerned with the formation of a tradition as it unfolds historically instead of the more common fallacy of 'identifying the essence of a religious tradition with its origin' (Smart, 1993).

## 2.1. New Age religion

It has been noted that two distinct approaches in religious studies have emerged to account for New Age religion: a social scientific approach that examines how the conditions of the (post-)modern Western world both frames and influences the ways in which New Age thought is itself structured and organised; and a historical approach that locates elements of the New Age in even earlier traditions and that seeks to define its historical origins as a religion (Iwersen, 1999). These approaches have been pioneered by Heelas (1996) and Hanegraaff (1996) respectively. Both have aimed at a comprehensive examination and description of the New Age as a very real and significant contemporary religion. However, to determine this kind of definition, Hanegraaff is necessarily the more useful.

Baldly stated, his thesis is that New Age religion can be defined as a movement based on popular culture criticism expressed in terms of a thoroughly secularised esotericism (Hanegraaff, 1998a: 379).<sup>1</sup> The meaning of this definition is not readily evident and requires some explanation. He began with a systematic survey of New Age literature which revealed that New Age religiosity fell into a few, clearly demarcated categories (Hanegraaff, 1998a: 364–370). However, we give here only a brief summary, subject to simplification and emphasis; readers after a more exacting account are directed elsewhere (Hanegraaff, 1996: 23–110): (1) *channelling* (see Klimo, 1987); (2) *healing and spiritual growth* (see Beckford, 1984); (3) *holistic science*, the best known examples being Frithjof Capra's *Tao of Physics* (1983) and James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis (1979); (4) *New Age neopaganism* (generally, see Adler, 1986; for most recent though not historically oriented Australian study, see Hume, 1997), which forms a relatively autonomous subculture; and (5) the expectation of a *New Age in a restricted*, i.e. a passive expectation of imminent renovation, and a *general sense*, i.e. a diffuse millenarianism which subsumes all the other elements. Generally, the restricted sense refers less to a new era than to the development of a new form of spirituality done in full consciousness of its novelty, and leads to usually weak forms of world-reforming idealism.

Nevertheless, New Age religion as a whole displays little positive unity or structure. By looking at what New Age religionists reject, however, it is possible to define it indirectly or negatively. All forms of New Age religiosity, then, are united in their presentation of holistic concepts as alternatives to the dualism and reductionism perceived as dominating modern western society.

The precise forms of holism are best seen as a wide variety of competing treatments (Hanegraaff, 1998a: 370–372).

Moreover, this notion of culture criticism provides a clue to understanding the

relation between New Age religion and western esotericism, a cluster of traditions as defined and circumscribed by Faivre (for a more detailed analysis, see Faivre, 1998; for two recent histories of this newly demarcated field of the academic study of western esotericism as a subset of religious studies, see Faivre and Voss, 1995 and Hanegraaff, 1998b). This, in turn, makes it possible to define the relative coherence of New Age religiosity with more precision.

Such traditions were rooted in post-Renaissance syncretic Hermeticism and intimately related to *magia* or 'natural' magic, alchemy, and astrology which also became part of the new systematisation of older but distinct traditions.

Though influential, these traditions were marginalised because they did not seem to conform to either mainstream Christianity mediated solely by divine scripture or to long-standing western traditions of rational inquiry which culminated in an intellectual tradition that supported the emergence of modern science. Taken simply in an heuristic sense (Hanegraaff, 1994), Quispel's fundamental distinction between the three "basic components" of European cultural tradition – "reason", "faith" and "gnosis", in which primacy is accorded to experience over reason and faith (Quispel, 1988; see also Hanegraaff, 1998c: 19–21) can be highly useful in order to put the "culture criticism" into perspective. It became a reservoir for all those ideas that have been felt to be incompatible with dominant trends of western culture, what Campbell had earlier labelled, using sociological indicator of deviance: the 'cultic milieu'. This milieu is dominated by the ethos of 'seekership' (1972: 122). It is understandable that this tradition also became a resource for modern 'seekers' who felt there is something fundamentally wrong with mainstream western culture. That the central belief systems *both* of western esotericism and of New Age religion might technically be referred to as 'holistic gnosis' confirms this (Hanegraaff, 1998a, 374).

Yet it is also evident that the two do not share the same worldview. This was due to the post-Enlightenment developments of esotericism known collectively as 'occultism', an essential watershed in this development is period of second half of the eighteenth century and the first decade of the nineteenth. (Hanegraaff, 1998a: 375; see also Godwin, 1994). Esoterists living in the post-Enlightenment period were profoundly influenced by the new rationalism, positivism and scientism. In defending their esoteric views they used a terminology that would be understandable to contemporaries. The result was a collision between two different and inherently incompatible worldviews: the organicist worldview of esotericism based on "correspondences" and the post-Enlightenment worldviews based on instrumental "causality" (see Tambiah, 1990: 105–10). With the conflation of the two systems of thought, esoteric ideas underwent subtle but far reaching changes.

The Theosophical traditions, explicitly founded by H. P. Blavatsky, along with its 'Christianised' offshoots in the form of Rudolf Steiner's Anthroposophy and Alice Bailey's Arcane School collated the varied forms of occultism and provided the basic ideas of the *New Age* (see Ahern, 1984; Campbell, 1980). This element, found in the countercultural communities of England that flowered after the 1960s, consisted of

world-reformers who actively seek to create a New Age based on the centrality of the New Age in Bailey's speculations. *New Age* in its contemporary form came to be formed at the end of 1970s and the beginning of 1980s when more and more people began to perceive an inner connection between the various kinds of alternative ideas, initiatives, and practices that had flowered since the sixties. In contrast to original movement, typical American so-called metaphysical movements, such as New Thought, with their transcendentalist backgrounds, were prominent, and there was little millenarian expectation (Hanegraaff, 1998a: 362-3).

## 2.2. Australian Aboriginal religions

Although Australian Aboriginal beliefs have always been central to the development of anthropological theories (see Swain, 1985 and Hiatt, 1996), being considered *ab origine*, "from the origin," it also means being imagined into existence in terms that have satisfied Western territorial needs, whether colonial, conceptual, or observational (Gill, 1998: 312). It comes as no surprise, then, that despite such attention it was not until the late 1950s that religion was recognised as central to Australian Aboriginal culture (Charlesworth, 1984: 5). Since then a great body of literature has arisen about what comprises Aboriginal religious concepts. This research has since given rise to a widespread scholarly consensus and found in commonly used collections (in this instance Charlesworth, 1984: 9–10). Central to this consensus is the concept of "the Dreaming", expressed in various indigenous and therefore emic terms, as the one great and fundamental feature of all Aboriginal religion. It is characterised by several distinct though connected meanings: (1) a narrative mythical account of the foundation and shaping of the entire world by ancestor heroes who are uncreated and eternal; (2) embodiment of spiritual power of the ancestor heroes in the land, in certain sites, and in species of fauna and flora; (3) "the Dreaming" denotes the general way of life or 'Law' – moral and social precepts, ritual and ceremonial practices – based upon these mythical foundations; (4) "the Dreaming" may refer to the personal 'way' or vocation that an individual Aboriginal person might have by virtue of her membership, or virtue of her spirit-conception relating her to particular sites.

While a useful simplification, the consensus view is a confusing mixture of essentialist and formative understandings. For instance, the notion of "the Dreaming" rather than that of discrete "Dreamings" is a common etic misrepresentation. The Aboriginal people, for example, of the Victoria River district, understand the autonomy of the parts of the whole cosmos to be one of the most important moral principles (Rose, 1987: 266). Munn points out that the iconic representations of ancestors in the art of the central desert Walbiri do not refer to the centre of the world as a whole, but only to a single place; even more so when the individual centres are found not to exist separately, but linked together by paths (Munn, 1973). The basic pattern of these ancestors/Dreamings is that they came out of, moved across, and went back into, the earth (Munn, 1970).

Swain, on the other hand, is among the few students of Aboriginal religions who underscores “history and the importance of chronicling the emergence of beliefs” (Swain, 1992: 23; see also Kolig, 1981). It is imperative to introduce history into the study of Aboriginal traditions (Swain, 1993: 39). The notion central to this approach is that the presence of ‘strangers’, non-indigenous peoples, has had an historical impact upon Aboriginal ontology, makes two logical and diachronic assumptions: First of all, as all the outsiders were from agricultural traditions and came by the sea to coastal areas, it follows that the desert interiors of Australia would be the last places to have their old order disturbed (Swain, 1993: 7). The understanding of the Walpiri is paradigmatic. All cosmology focused on discrete, known, observed sites. The basic and only unit of Aboriginal cosmic structure is the place (29). Aboriginal ontology rests upon the maxim that a place-being merged, moved, and established an abode; moreover, a Dreaming being is simultaneously present in all the places that it abides (32). Aboriginal understandings do not recognise the cosmos as a unified arena in which events occur; one cannot speak of space of any kind in the singular (29). The land as a whole is the immanent presence of a multiplicity of these Dreaming Beings. A radically pluralistic cosmology, it recognises neither hierarchy amongst the Ancestors, nor any overriding unity to space (6-7). Based upon this ‘local site-kin pluralism’ assertion, Swain argues for a ‘transcontinental ontology of place’ as the worldview of indigenous Australians religions (14). Aboriginal conception beliefs are so consistent in their basic orientation that they reveal a common core of Aboriginal ontology (Montague, 1974).

Secondly, Swain took the basically desert-derived model and compared it with the evidence for other regions, such as the Kimberley, Arnhem Land, Cape York, and the south-east; in each of these regions he found the same pattern as found in the desert, although accompanied by other, sometimes conflicting and posterior traditions (Swain 1993: 8). These traditions, in which could be found non-locative powers and a tendency towards social and spatial transcendence, emerged, in varying degrees, as Aboriginal people sought to accommodate outsiders and make a place for strangers. He derived this model from Smith’s typology of a locative vision of the world, which emphasises place, and a utopian vision of the world, that is, the value of being in no place (1978: 101).

For example, Swain reexamined the early accounts of Aboriginal religions in southeast Australia in their ethnographic context, that is, in terms of death and dispossession specific to the region. Indeed, Swain argues that our ethnography has been recorded in an historically silent context (1993: 5). Depopulated by disease and compelled to leave traditional lands by encroaching colonisation, southeastern Aboriginal peoples were forced to form new social aggregates incongruent to the pluralistic, place-based ontology (Swain, 1990: 196). If any sort of indigenous religion was to survive in south-eastern Australia, adaptations would had to have taken place so as to accommodate the devastating effects upon the social and territorial organisation: the theme of a single male creator who leaves the earth is solidly

supported by the ethnography for this region (Swain, 1991, ch. 13; Blows, 1995).

Swain has sought to demonstrate how those of “European descent and fourth world peoples” have come to share a “cosmology transcending boundaries, imagined or real”, have ended up “uniting under one banner what had been deemed polarities” (Swain, 1992: 22). Applying Douglas (1991), he acknowledges that “this is a dirty thing to do” (Swain, 1992: 22). With allusions to a “denigratory assumption” and variously affirming “the existence of a pre-contact structure of cult belief and practice strong enough to survive the immediate impact of colonisation” (Hiatt, 1996: 199 n.51), critics of Swain have rejected a model which has greater explanatory power (Keen, 1993: 100; Blows, 1995: 67; Hiatt, 1996: 104; O’Rourke, 1997: 181).

### 3. Applying the categories

Having now established a basic formative definition of both New Age religion and Aboriginal religions, it is evident that Hiatt’s original equation of the two as ‘mystical’ and ‘spiritual’ does not add up. New Age religion is at base a *holistic gnosis*, focuses on inner experience and was formed by a clash between a pre-Enlightenment organicist ‘correspondence’ and a post-Enlightenment instrumental ‘causality’ worldview. Aboriginal religions are at base *radically pluralist*, focus on discrete, known, observed sites and is continuing to be formed by the maintenance of two ‘Laws’, the pre-colonised locative and the post-colonised utopian. The radical plurality of place requires that while a location be autonomous, it is also unique and hence not equivalent to a larger whole (Swain, 1993: 35), and therefore incompatible with the notion of correspondence. Due to the antithetical nature of holism to radical pluralism, the question is no longer one of ascertaining the nature of Aboriginal New Age religiosity but rather varying degrees of dialogical response toward New Age religion.

With this position of simple equation no longer tenable, my first step was to apply the five characteristics of New Age religiosity to see which can be found in each text, and then to identify the reciprocal response of the Aboriginal religionist(s). I discovered that while not all the characteristics of New Age religiosity could be applied successfully, this in itself indicated a trajectory in the texts that could lead to more useful criteria. After a preliminary analysis, I saw quite plainly that there could be at least three different dialogical categories of Aboriginal religionist response: *counteractive*, *cooperative*, and *cooptive*. What they all had in common was a way of dealing with the question of relationship to place.

#### 3.1. counteractive

The text in this case is Hill (1994: 270–271), unusual in that it is not itself a religionist dialogical engagement, but rather is anecdotal. It involved Jose Arguelles’ attempt to make Uluru part of the Harmonic Convergence and the refusal of the Anangu, the traditional owners of Uluru, to that request. The reason specifically given was that the Anangu did not believe in a worldwide network of sacred sites, and that

they saw that idea as irreconcilable with the local depth of belief.

The Harmonic Convergence (16 August 1987) was the ritual high point of the *New Age in a restricted sense*, as it sought to amass enough popular ‘consciousness-raising’ at what they thought to be key planetary to effect a millenarian transformation of the world. Two years after the Handback of Uluru, interestingly described as ‘a moment of cultural recovery’, brings to the fore a tension between the newly acquired sense of site/place towards a millenarian focus, as does their insistence that religious access requires an initiation into the ceremonies that ‘*belong to the place.*’ The denial of the validity of New Age understandings by Aboriginal religionists is what I have termed *counteractive*.

### 3.2. cooperative

The Aboriginal religionist in this case is David Mowaljarli, a Ngarinyin elder from the Kimberley, home of the famous Wandjina paintings. The three texts in which he appears are Cowan (1993), Arden (1994), and one co-written by him, Mowaljarlai and Malnic (1993). Replete with numerous negotiations between an Aboriginal religionist and representatives of the cultic milieu, we can only concern ourselves here with Mowaljarlai’s notion of *bandaiyan*, the body of Australia (Cowan 1993: 174–175; Arden 1994: 200–201; Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993: 190–194).

In general, all three New Age religionists seem to resonate most with *New Age neopaganism*. Of primary concern for Cowan (1993: 4) for instance, is ‘the mysterious “interworld” of nature.’ In Mowaljarlai and Malnic (1993: 81), when she asks him ‘are you saying that the Earth energies come up and balance the energies in the sick person’s body – that Nature is capable of healing itself, and it’s [sic] own’, not only does the *healing and spiritual growth* appear fused with the neopagan, but it suggests a possible for their context of mutual influence. Arden (1994: 53, 146–7, and 182) seems most effected by *New Age in a general sense*, informing his syncretic approach to Native American and Australian Aboriginal religions.

Each text presents a slightly different version of Mowaljarlai’s concept of *banaiyan*, the body of Australia. Even more extraordinary is Mowaljarli’s visual representation of this concept, quite unlike any other indigenous artwork (fig. 1). The basic structure of this ‘body’ is a grid of crisscrossing lines forming a block or unit, corners becoming nodes where the lines intersect. In Mowaljarlai and Malnic (1993: 191), Mowaljarlai explains that the ‘whole of Australia is Bandaiyan ... inside the body is Wunggud, the Snake. She grows all of nature on the outside of her body ... Uluru is the navel, the centre, *wangigit.*’ The connections extend out to the islands, because it was a bigger continent before the Flood. Again, ‘Every Wandjina is part of the tribe that belongs to a particular gridblock. The sum of all Wandjina over the whole grid is the creator himself. He shows himself to us as a Wandjina. We call him *Wallanganda*. He is God. He manifests in everything in the universe’ (63).



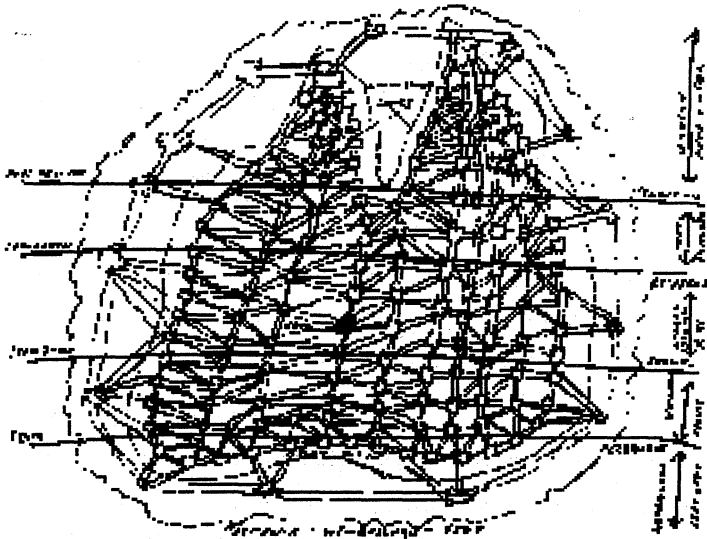


Fig. 1. *Bandaiyan*. Reference: Mowaljarli and Malnic 1993: 205

Mowaljarlai gives Arden a slightly different, more limited picture (Arden, 1994: 200–201). The centre of the body is again Uluru, and he explains that ‘Beyond there, past deep water, we don’t own it.’ Creator Wandjina gave us each a responsibility for a particular place – that place and no other. We’re locked into that place. No other place can be home for us.’ In each grid block or *dambun*, ‘the land belongs to one people, one language ... story lines or song lines ... [it has] tracks the Wandjina made for us to follow ... That land only exists in our stories and in our songs and in our ceremonies.’

The only significant divergence in Cowan (1993: 174), is when he asks ‘Where are the mountains and the rivers?’ hoping, as he puts it, ‘to find some recognisable feature among the lines and the circles,’ Mowaljarli replies:

They’re not important. What we believe is important are the stories ... these little circles ... each one of them represents a story. The lines linking them tells you the direction of where the story goes.

What are we to make of this body? In some ways it seems very locative especially in Arden’s account: ‘we are locked into that place’. Yet the notion of the body as being the Creator Wandjina, who is also the sum of all the Wandjina on the grid, attests to utopian powers and tendencies.

When Mowaljarli says ‘If the land sinks into the ocean, the symbols will still

be there. Only if the whole continent is blown to pieces and nothing is left of it, then it will be finished', we are a little further from a locative tradition to a tradition making accommodations with loss of place (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 1993: 192). On the other hand, if he can still maintain that "The story really doesn't mean anything unless you can tell it at *that place*" (Arden, 1994: 204), then we are dealing with a dual cosmology. The utopian element was not exclusively Christian in this context. As Mowaljarlai readily admits, he did not originate on his own

They never went back as far as the Creation to connect it up to the present. They never put it all together as it was, right up until today. I find out only yesterday, only you and I are doing this. I can tell you, it would take a thousand years to put the whole detail, all the pieces together' (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 1993: 194).

His liberal use of the term 'nature' and his description of himself as a 'servant of nature' (156), with echoes of holism – 'because all is one, and we are in it' (5) – suggest a self-understanding that engages with New Age religion while reaffirming place. This is illustrative of the *cooperative* response.

### 3.3. cooptive

The last text is by Mafi-Williams (1999). Her narrative is but a chapter in a larger text, edited by Freke (1999), that is meant to suggest the existence of a 'universal shamanism', and of the implicit unity of the beliefs espoused by very different African, South and North American religionists – to name a few – who each seems to be primarily involved in the revival of their respective indigenous cultures. This has strong resonance with one characteristic of New Age religiosity: *New Age neopaganism* and its subset *neoshamanism*.

Mafi-Williams is a "high shaman" of the "Australian Aboriginal tradition"; a title that, by her own admission, she describes as a "western term" (Freke, 1999: 135). As Smoley and Kinney have pointed out, "most native shamans do not call themselves that, nor do they think of their religion as 'shamanism'" (Smoley and Kinney, 1999: 157). In the case of Mafi-Williams, we have already seen that she has explicitly recognised that it is a "western term".

It is very difficult to not conclude from the following that she is not specifically responding to several strands of New Age religiosity at once:

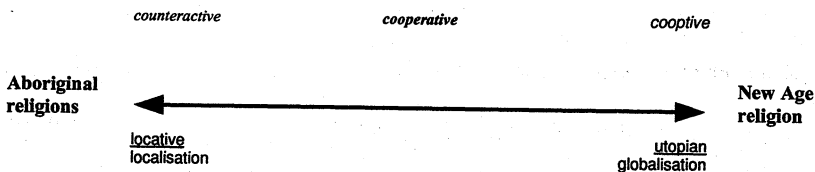
Our specific job on Earth was to maintain the energy grid that keeps the earth in balance ... We simply call it "Baime the Rainbow Serpent" ... Our people simply walked along the Earth and they could find if there was fault in the energy grid. And they were able to energise the grid with crystals, or just with human body energy going into the ground. Because we kept that knowledge we understand that the earth is undergoing changes now. And those changes are related to the creation of a new world ... we believe that the Earth undergoes a seven-thousand-year shift toward a new rejuvenated world. A new Earth. The Australian Aboriginals' job is to maintain the energy grid so that as the Earth shifts it can move in its natural way ... when we learn to become a shaman we have to learn

all this, so that we can help the Earth through its changes and help humanity through its changes. Our everything comes from the Earth. (Freke, 1999: 137–139).

This fits with New Age ideas about “earth changes” which are often from *channelled* material (in particular Edgar Cayce, see Hanegraaff, 1996: 353). Also, notions of an energy grid are to be found in *New Age*. Such a positive response to New Age religion can be termed *cooptive*.

#### 4. Accounting for response

Hiatt has predicted that while “the most dynamic centres at the moment are located in the spiritually destabilised populations of the West, a diffusion of New Age ideas and values to culturally-disoriented indigenous populations of the post-colonial Fourth World has begun, and it will be a matter of considerable interest to see how they fare and to what uses they are put” (Hiatt, 1997: 39). The schema of categorisation developed in this article is in no way definitive but it is an exercise in clarification and organisation of the often ambiguous relationship between New Age religion and Aboriginal religions. Indeed, I hope that I have shown that, due to the antithetical nature of holism to radical pluralism, the question is no longer one of ascertaining the nature of Aboriginal New Age religiosity but rather varying degrees of dialogical response toward New Age religion. Basically, the degree to which, in this case, place/land retains its discrete nature in Aboriginal religions will be the degree to which New Age religiosity is incompatible with Aboriginal self-understandings. The relationship between many of the components discussed in this article are schematised in Fig. 2.



**Fig. 2.** a dynamic typology of the continuum of Aboriginal religionist dialogical responses to New Age religion.

It is important to note that any one of these positions can be held by an individual or community developmentally, sequentially, and concurrently.

Yet, it would be a misunderstanding to isolate the relationship between these two from the larger narratives that have come to be formative of our contemporary religious situation. Closely associated with global capitalism, the contemporary world is characterised by a dual process of localisation and globalisation, both interrelated features of late modernity (Robertson, 1992: 177–81). Globalisation itself can also be divided into a twofold process involving the universalisation of particularism and the particularisation of universalism (100). That the rejection of globalisation is itself a form of globalisation must be borne in mind when assessing Aboriginal counteractive responses to the New Age. The desire to reject is quite rightly understood to be a reaction against hegemony. However, my aim was to show that the context of the formation of Aboriginal religions was and is hybridity.

That Mowaljarlai has said “Today we Aboriginal people got to start seein’ the Wandjinas as part of us, not just as spirit beings painted on rocks like in the old days” can have more than a subjectivizing meaning (Cowan, 1993: 168).

In 1986, he began a government-funded education project, repainting of sacred sites (Mowaljarlai and Malnic, 1993: 41). His attempt had been the subject of bitter recriminations by traditional local elders, who claimed no one any longer possessed the right or knowledge to retouch the old paintings (Arden, 1994: 206). This can help make explicable why certain indigenous leaders ‘court’ or establish relationships with New Age religionists: to get their story out into the wider community and helping to reconstruct their religious tradition. Mowaljarli could be called a ‘neo-traditionalist’, and it would make sense if many more to come would respond cooperatively towards New Age religion in its less millenarian forms. Indeed, one could not see his map of Australia (fig.1) being accepted universally by many indigenous Australians, for instance the Anangu, for similar reasons. There is a conflict, then, between neo-traditionalists who are attempting to overcome the disjunction between local and transcendentalist strategies caused by globalisation, and those who wish to retain the centrality of initiatory education, both attempting to maintain the radical pluralism historically characteristic of indigenous Australian religions.

The neo-traditionalist process of rendering Aboriginal culture consumable, seen in Mowaljarlai’s openness to Arden, Cowan and Malnic, and their own agendas, has often been dependent on a 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. A similar issue has also been the object of other students of indigenous religions; for example, Geertz (1994), in examining the historical formation of Hopi prophecy, has noted how Hopi factionalism lead the millennial Traditionalist Movement among the Hopi to subtly co-author ‘New Age’

European and American stereotypes of Indians. Such studies could provide models for possible research programmes to explore this issue among indigenous Australians.

While even cursory examination of contemporary Aboriginal religious literature written in a dialogical context shows the cooptive responses to New Age religion to be a minority position now, it will surely continue to develop. It is not a coincidence that *New Age neopaganism* was the most common characteristic of New Age religiosity that Aboriginal religionists responded to; indeed, as this subculture expands further I expect greater contact between the two. With the development of a “macro-myth bound together by the literally underlying Mother Earth”, a complex that Swain argues is itself of recent origin, such contacts can be more sustained (Swain, 1992: 18; see also Gill, 1987). Again, in the southeast, dispossession has been most brutal; as Mafi-Williams puts it, “we can’t go into the country to the sacred sites where the magic was given to us, because a lot of the places where we received these teachings are now settled on. There are towns and villages on these places” (Mafi-Williams, 1999: 132-3). Historically and textually speaking the first articulated notion of a ‘feeling’ for the land in an indigenous context can be found in Thomas (1987: 90). This is necessarily going to become common, especially in the southeast where settlement, dispossession and death have historically transformed the indigenous population.

For Smith, there is no absolute distinction between the locative and the utopian, and both are operative in different degrees in any given religious tradition. In this graduation lies a creative tension; being “incapable of overcoming disjunction”, religionists engage in the manipulation and negotiation of myths and rites in the attempt to apply them to the situations of life and to adjust life to them (Smith, 1978: 308, 309). The process of secularisation<sup>1</sup>, or the attempt of religionists to hold and/or reconcile antithetical positions, occurs in the creative tension between the locative and the utopian; nowhere more so than among Aboriginal religions. In arguing strongly that secularisation<sup>1</sup> ‘should be the top priority of the academic study of esotericism and New Religious Movements’ and that it ‘is as a result of that hiatus that erroneous theories based on unhistorical presuppositions remain largely unchallenged,’ I feel that Hanegraaff alerts us to the possibility of another chapter in this ongoing process – post-Christian appropriation of secularised esotericism by Fourth World peoples attempting to negotiate their own radically pluralist and localised myths and rites in an increasingly globalised, subjectivised world (Hanegraaff, 1996: 405). What I have termed cooptive responses to New Age religion are the next development in the religious innovation that characterises Aboriginal religions: accommodating holism into fundamentally pluralist (whether locative or closer to the utopian) religious worldviews in order to appropriate New Age religion’s powerful culture critique. As Swain has pointed out, Aborigines have from the beginning been engaged in a hermeneutic process in their encounter with outsiders (1994: 4). My hope is that future research on Aboriginal religions and New Age religion will clarify these issues in much greater depth and ethnographic accuracy than was attempted here (especially the work in progress of Jane Mulcock and Stewart Muir, see Hume, 2000: 34).

## Notes

1. To not put forward at least a working definition of secularisation at this point, after taking issue with the necessity for clarification, would be again to beg the question. Although it had its beginnings in specific theoretical uses, secularisation has become a widely used term in the social sciences and humanities, usually taken as referring to the general process whereby the function of religion moves (or is removed) from the public frame of reference to the private (Tschannen, 1991). The problem here is again taxonomical: if 'religion' itself cannot be defined 'substantially', then we cannot assume that secularisation is a process which acts upon 'it'. More specifically, the main problem of Hanegraaff's notion of 'secularised esotericism' in his analysis of the New Age (1996) is that he assumes such a general process which remains implicit throughout. Through more recent and explicit publications on this matter (Hanegraaff, 1998a; 2000), I have come to understand his use of the term as instrumental rather than substantial, referring to the historical influence of post-Enlightenment rationality and its concomitants upon the reinterpretation of pre-Enlightenment forms of thought and religiosity, particularly as Christianity ceased to be the dominant symbolic idiom and became one of several in a culture dominated by secularity. This has resulted in a situation where *all* religion is now a matter of choice. In fact, the individual manipulation of symbolisms is the prime characteristic of non-institutionally, volitional 'spirituality' as opposed to a shared institutional 'religion' (Hanegraaff, 2000). For the purposes of the article, Hanegraaff's emphasis on the specific historical context of the Enlightenment to this general process is pertinent.

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