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Nativistic Movements in Aboriginal Australia

Creative Adjustment, Protest or Regeneration of Tradition

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Few societies under foreign domination accept that position in silence. Objections are indicated in a collectively anti-colonial mood, and in more specific movements of emancipation. From the Ghost Dance amongst North American Indians in the 1870s to the Black Power movement in modern America, from the Negritude of West Africa to the Cargo Cults of New Guinea; wherever we look in the colonial and post-colonial world, we can see rapid restructuring of traditions threatened by western culture, reorganisation of both thought and expectations of dominated people in the face of annihilation.

One notable exception in a world wide sample of colonised peoples is that of the aboriginal cultures of Australia, where such phenomena are apparently rare. So unusual is this fact that many authorities with first hand experience begin to wonder if it is so, or whether the absence is assumed more than real. Is it, indeed, an *a priori* omission? Working through what is published in this area, casual references do occur, yet there are, with some exceptions, few coherent reports of anti-colonial activity, especially as these imply changes in thought. The assumption seems to be both that there was little real expression of resentment, and also that there was little real change in Aboriginal thought.

Thus Petri, one of the earliest modern field-workers to observe intellectual responses to white intrusion which involved a non-traditional aura of eschatological expectations (Petri 1950), remarked that, "Attempts which are based on an anti-colonial orientation seem to be *a novum* on the Australian continent" (Petri 1968:305). He describes the various movements which do occur in north Western Australia, to which I shall refer in more detail below, and cites the Molonga movement of Queensland, reported by Siebert in 1910, as being one of the most notable anti-European precursors of modern opposition.

Another acute observer, F. Rose, comments that "Australia has not usually been considered to show manifestations of so-called cargo cults". His reluctance to use the term cargo-cult has perhaps much to do with the specificity of his definition. What occurred on Angas Downs station in the Central Desert, which he felt had only the seeds of ideas which could "blossom into full cargo cults", was that Aboriginal people there believed that war-time American soldiers would return, bringing trucks loaded with flour, sugar and tea, which together with the trucks, were, in their opinion (and maybe in reality too) appropriated by the whites there. As the truck-drivers were negro, the Aborigines considered them their own kind.

The questions, then, which must be considered are two. First: is our definition of 'real' intellectual opposition so narrow that it fails to encompass the extent of Aboriginal feeling against the invaders? Various anti-colonial, or anti-domination movements have as one aim a return to a perceived reality of original times, to the true roots. Whether it is labelled revivalism, millenial, messianic, renascence, reform, rebellion, revolution or nativism, common to all is the hope for self-respect and positive self-identity. I shall take the broadest definition, that of nativism, to encompass the return to an older, traditional, truly indigenous world-view, whether or not that can really be substantiated. Some such movements are violent, some quiet, some lead to action, others to contemplation. All have a strong element of revivalism (divorced from the Christian use of that term), and while some do occur as a response to internal colonisation, I shall restrict myself here to dealing with that more typical interplay between alien coloniser and colonised.

Using this broad definition, we should still be able to go through the literature with a fine tooth comb and find the evidence, or be more aware that it did once exist.

The second question we must ask is: is it the case that we have few reports because such movements of opposition are well-hidden secrets, now more secret even than truly traditional knowledge? Such strategies would be understandable, for two hundred years of suppression teaches a people to hide feelings: tossing a morsel to the dominant society and its guardians of knowledge, its scholars and missionaries, keeps them away from the true picture of antagonism. The people who should and would normally be in the best position to perceive and observe anti-colonial movements over a long period, the missionaries, are unfortunately nearly always disqualified from learning secrets through their own professional interests, and actually often disqualify themselves by intentionally ignoring new cult activities in aboriginal society (see for instance reports by Lommel 1950). As Strehlow once put it succinctly: "Anger, scorn, and bitter ridicule are not the best heralds to prepare listeners to accepting the gospel of universal brotherhood' (Strehlow 1964:9). While we do of course find exceptions in this quarter were we only to look, for example, at the perceptive interpretations and collections of religious practices by E.A. Worms, the general view that Aborigines have no religion but fear, that they rank lower than the 'lowest Africans' (such were Rev. Kempe's views in 1885, quoted from Albrecht 1927 by Strehlow 1964:11) was repeated almost verbatim until very recently by a variety of missionaries. The attitude of missionaries to indigenous intellectual re-adjustment often runs counter to the official policy statements of many church bodies which encourage workers to "protect all that is sacred in aboriginal society" (thus the 1978 Catholic Social Justice Statement).

In the following pages I will re-examine existing data indicating nativistic moods in Aboriginal Australia. As Petri and Petri-Odermann's paper focusing on

Christian themes in Kimberley millenialism has been translated for this volume and precedes the present paper, I will avoid repetition by offering a broader theoretical and ethnographic context in which to place the specifically Christian themes discussed by the Petris. I begin by defining those qualities of Aboriginal religiosity which scholars have mistakenly interpreted as evidence of ontological immutability, and proceed to examine the data which clearly undermine such claims. In the final section, I then offer an analytic framework with which to interpret these new religious developments.

From Immutable Order to Immobile Religious System

In contrast to Christianity or to Islam or any other founder and missionising religion — and only in contrast with these is the image useful — Aboriginal religiosity seems to have a certain timelessness, immutability and in-built determinism. The Dreaming does contain the notion of the continuation of the acts of creation which were once done, but less to develop or evolve them than to continue them in their original form and design, in the here-and-now, by literally re-creating the universe. This is done through reiterating the same deeds in ritual and recitation as were done by the creator heroes *in illo tempore*. The human agent becomes the double of the hero of the Dreaming when, by action and word, he goes through the ritual motions of assuring the continuation of fertility and prosperity of nature and humanity. Through dreaming he propagates his own kind of humanity when the spirit-essences left by the Dreaming heroes enter human bodies in a continuous reincarnation. Where Dreaming heroes created the shape of the world through the externalisation of their own dreaming, individual and groups now, in those same totemic centres, internalise the external as well as spiritual world and its powers. Similarly, through re-touching paintings which were left as imprints by the Dreaming heroes, contemporary Aborigines maintain the universe properly. This cyclical notion of re-incarnation, which could fruitfully be compared with the classical Platonic as well as the Indian systems of ontology, together with the inherently static notion of the maintenance of a world created with unchanging features can easily lead to the perception of a static world which does not, and cannot, evolve (see Koepping 1987).

If we note too that most religious systems on the Australian continent have no eschatology or salvation belief, no paradise or state of ultimate happiness, defined as being free of the inconsistencies, injustices and unhappy condition of mortality (as evident from the beliefs about death as the ultimate end with the concomitant feature of second burial), then the description of the Aboriginal religious systems as static and immutable, allowing for no change or development, whether collectively or individually, towards a peaceful millenium of the equality of all people, may seem to have a certain validity. It also seems logical that if there is no paradise and no hell, no reward and no punishment, and if humanity is but a re-incarnation of Dreaming heroes, with the faint notions of an all-powerful creator-deity as *deus otiosus* scarcely ascertainable from the existing sources as the ultimate transcendental source of power and judgment (as *deus absconditus*), that under these precepts the universe with its existing features does not require any effort of people to become better or more god-like. Against such a background, it is inappropriate to perceive humans as fallen creatures who must work their way up to that state of Grace existing before the Fall, for the world with all its animate and inanimate objects is

perfect as it stands, and as long as people are the faithful agents of re-creation, the universe will not end, but carry on into the eternal present, the everlasting future.

Up to this point, authorities on Aboriginal religion seem to work within the framework of Aboriginal ontology. However, the notion of the immutability of the world as the inside ontology of Aboriginal people has given rise to the erroneous notion that Aboriginal religion, and therewith Aboriginal thought, is incapable of adjustment or change, or innovation or creativity. This, I would like to argue, carries the exegesis of Aboriginal thinking beyond what can be substantiated. It is this very confusion of what the Aboriginal system itself perceives to be the case with the reaction of its thinkers to changing conditions, which has made it difficult to assess the form and degree of accommodation which Aboriginal thought had to accomplish in order to survive and communicate in the world of the past 200 years. This effective decision by researchers that Aboriginal thought categories are immobile, or their unquestioned acceptance of this view, has led to, or been accompanied by, a lack of interest in the diverse forms of protest against mental imperialism.

The Dynamic View of Aboriginal Religion under the Influence of Cult-migration

Probably nobody has expressed the view of the immutability of Aboriginal religion more strongly than Strehlow when he remarked: "The thoroughness of their forefathers has left to them not a single unoccupied scene which they could fill with the creatures of their own imagination. Tradition and the tyranny of the old men in the religious and cultural sphere have effectually stifled all creative impulse; and no external stimulus ever reached Central Australia which could have freed the natives from these insidious bonds. It is almost certain that native myths had ceased to be invented many centuries ago... They are, in many ways, not so much a primitive as a decadent race" (Strehlow 1947:6).

There would be few anthropologists since the 1950s, including Strehlow in his later works, who would fully subscribe to this view. In the 70s and 80s the scholarly view seems — at least as far as the empirical data are concerned — to point the opposite way; most researchers being now aware of the tremendous vitality and adaptability which is present among Aboriginal religious concepts. They note a lively creativity in thought-processes which do transform alien stimuli with great versatility and originality. One begins to surmise that such adaptability and ongoing change was more the rule than the exception. The strongest impetus for this new perception of Aboriginal religion as a dynamic force comes through the in-depth investigation of the so-called *Wanderkult*, the migration of cults over long distances, through several decades, in particular in the northwest of Western Australia (Petri 1950a, 1950b, 1954, 1967; Petri and Petri-Odermann 1968 and 1970; Lommel 1950, 1952; Kolig 1979, 1981, 1987; Akerman 1979).

As the materials are most abundant in the northwest of Western Australia in regard to the recent cult changes and changes in the belief-system, I shall use this area as exemplary to challenge the notion of immutability, rejecting particularly the linked ideas that the Aboriginal world-view has taken no notice of the changing circumstances of the people's lives or that Aboriginal thought has reacted in a comparatively "sluggish" way as Kolig has called it (Kolig 1987:255), to the challenge of a new reality. On the contrary, I think that the evidence, in particular the data

gathered over two decades by Petri (whose experience stretches back to 1938, thus giving us the depth of one researcher's continued attention over almost 40 years for a limited number of ethnic groups in their varied reaction to changing circumstances), is so overwhelming that we can invert the dictum of Strehlow: not only is Aboriginal world-view not stagnant, but it adapts with great, and almost feverish speed to new challenges, and certainly does that at a faster pace than traditional Christianity ever did. For in spite of all claims to hermeneutic adjustments to changing audiences, Christianity has relied on essentially immutable ritual performances and fixed belief-structures for over 2000 years (notwithstanding the "reformation" or renewal half a millenium ago). It may indeed be more adequate to state, with Petri, that the changes in the cult practices among Aborigines did not always find their stimulus in the civilising influences of white society, and therefore require of us a rethinking of our ingrained concept of an ultra-conservative society (Petri 1967:32). Maybe it is indeed the case that our view about Aboriginal religiosity reflects Aboriginal reality less than it does our own image, our own wishful thinking about the research subjects. This point has been made by anthropological methodological criticism in recent years, and was anticipated by Strehlow in the Australian context in 1964: "their articles reveal more about the writers themselves and their own minds than they do about the professed subject matter" (Strehlow 1964:8; see also Burridge 1973:116 f.).

Cult Innovation and Pessimistic Eschatology in Northwestern Australia

Among the groups of the Ungarinyin, the Worora and the Unambal with which the members of the German Frobenius expedition worked in 1938, as well as during their first post-war research period in 1950, there appeared a phenomenon which seems unique in the context of Aboriginal reactions to the perception of a wider world. Among these groups, Petri found the emergence of a cult movement which became known under the term *kurangara*. The elders of the tribes were, in 1938, concerned about a "poison" which came on trade-routes from the south and southwest, from people of the West Australian deserts, in a country called Warmala or Waneiga. As usual with cult exchanges and "imports", a range of ritual items together with song-cycles and dances about heroic deeds of spirit beings called *D'anba* (or *Djanba*) were introduced in this region which until then had relatively scarce contact with any white population (all information from Petri 1950a, 1950b and 1954). The spirits giving power and essence to the cult were visualized as humanly shaped, skeleton-like beings of superhuman dimensions and cannibal habits, who were invisible, always thirsty, bearded, light skinned and immortal, throwing no shadows, as they moved only in moonless nights or at the height of the day. These *D'anba* were considered to be full of dangerous power which was transferred and deposited in the sacred objects which were stored in special magazine places called *marale* ("deadly"). The spirits' power came from their genitals like the *ya-yari* or spirit-essence of the traditional medicine men of the region.

With the arrival of the cults, a new system of "bosses" parallel to the traditional medicine men took shape and special ceremonies were held which merely involved body paint instead of body-operations to initiate men into the cults. While in 1938

the representatives of the cults were insisting that the new powers were following the traditional "Law" of the region, that they were representatives of the traditional Walanganda (the *deus otiosus* of the region) and obeying the laws of the *Ungud* (snakebeings) and of the *Wondjina* which were iconically represented in rock-paintings (the traditional increase or fertility-centres as well as dream-centres for spirit children of all species), the traditional elders were extremely apprehensive about these cults. The traditionalists claimed that the arrival of this cult would mean the end of the older religious laws. The traditional belief and practice of retouching the paintings of the *Wondjina* and of performing increase-ceremonies at the *Ungud* water-holes to re-create the cosmos, as deeds established in the Dreaming by Ungud, Walanganda and a pair of Dreaming heroes, was now re-interpreted. The elders saw the possibility that the new cults would let the old order wither away, and with this thought arose a new eschatology of extreme pessimism. The arrival of the new cults was perceived as the beginning of the ending of the world, since failure to follow the old law would lead to a desiccation of the land (the thirsty *D'anba* spirits of the desert sucking the land dry), and subsequently to a cessation of reproduction among mankind and all nature. In the final stage of this *Goetterrdaemmerung* the pillars beyond the ocean which hold up the heavens will crumble into dust, eternal darkness as at the beginning of the Dreamtime will descend again and the high god Walanganda (who is the guardian of the Law in the Milky Way) will die.

While this dark picture was painted, the reality in 1938 did not indicate that traditional practices were being given up. However, Petri concluded that the notion of evil magic, of dangerous powers, was indeed a new phenomenon, in particular in the form of *imbal*-singing connected with *Kurangara* (a complex ritual designed to inflict sickness or death).

That some indescribable threat was perceived by the traditional thinkers is clear from a parallel account in this area by Lommel. He encountered among the Unambal the version that newly initiated cult-members were careful only to receive so-called "male" *D'anba* sticks full of the power of the desert spirits. Yet, so the members believed, in the near future they would receive the female sacred boards, and then new laws would become effective and the end of the world would be near at hand. All power would then be in the hands of women, men would not be able to sleep with them except when the women wished it, and men would have to perform all work. If the men did not follow these new dictates, the mother of all *D'anba* would transform them into trees (Petri 1950a; see also Lommel 1950). Lommel further reported that in the 1950s the people of the area believed that their groups were facing physical extinction as the men were now unable to dream at the traditional spirit places, and hence were unable to procreate or transfer the spirit essence (Lommel 1950).

Lommel's account reveals an all-pervasive pessimistic despondency about the loss of knowledge, of tradition and of the Law, which had taken place by 1950. As Petri points out, the end-result of the introduction of the new cult was indeed, by the 1950s, the end of traditional local totemic practices and of normal initiation procedures. However, he also points out that his previous research into the traditional order had shown several layers, like a geological formation, of myth structures where one series of Dreaming events and personnel was overlaid with new ones which were incorporated into the all-over structure, partly through omissions, partly through re-interpretations. Petri recognized that a process which in past centuries must have

gone on in this area, was actually being witnessed in the present time. These innovative features, which he called the phenomenon of "Wanderkulte" (moving cults), were however not the main surprise, though the description was to become seminal through follow-up studies in adjacent regions by other researchers in regard to the developing notion of Aboriginal religious dynamic thought.

The unique feature in Petri's and Lommel's description is the presence of an outspoken eschatology, though one without an openly stated nativistic, revivalistic or anti-White theme. While Petri is hesitant to label this movement and the developing mood nativistic, he perceives the possibility that — even without direct contact with the white population or influence from missions — the eschatology in connection with the arrival of new cults could be linked to a general disturbance of the intellectual balance of these groups (Petri 1950a:264-65).

At the same time, the new cult has the effect of lessening the importance of the local totemic ties and introducing religious concepts which span several ethnic and local groups, groups which originally were sharply delineated in an extreme ethnocentrism, finding expression in the minute differences of ritual (Petri 1950a:265; similarly stated for the Fitzroy area by Kolig 1981).

The movements described by Petri and Lommel clearly had traditional elements which may qualify them as revivalistic, and they are possibly nativistic insofar as they represent a definite response to changed conditions, such as station work, which involved the concentration of people in one camp from different ethnic groups, creating over time the solidarity of a "mob", but also the necessity of concerted work and action, of aligning belief and ritual practice (elaborated by Kolig 1981).

Dynamic Revivalism and Aggressive Nativism take Shape

In the 1960s the situation in the region changed again. While the time-slice we have from early observations might give the impression of a dying culture (see Petri's title *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest Australien* 1954), the situation between the Kimberleys and the coastal stations of Anna Plains, down to the Pilbara and east along the Fitzroy River developed a tremendously dynamic revivalism between 1960 and 1980. Without going into the economic preconditions (which are described by Kolig 1981), the dynamics of change in religious action and belief are indeed confusingly complex. I shall concentrate on the picture *in situ* on the borders of the Western Desert as described by Petri. Three phenomena are to be distinguished which developed almost simultaneously. Firstly, an acceptance of the *Kurangara* traditions, accompanied by a revival of so-called *dingari*-traditions about the migrations of Dreaming groups of people and creator spirits which researchers believed to have been forgotten for over 40 years. Secondly, a diachronization of different layers of Dreaming stories, a kind of historicising of the timeless events, of putting them into sequences; thirdly, an aggressively new secrecy and a nativism influenced by Christian concepts (the following descriptive data follow Petri 1954, 1956, 1965, 1966 and 1967; and Petri and Petri-Odermann 1964 and 1970).

In the first stage, before 1963, the investigators found a new awareness of so-called *dingari* traditions which centred around the famous sacred hill-site of "Badur" This site played an important role not only for the Dualin and Walmadjeri of the Fitzroy River region, but also for tribes in the Eastern Goldfields over 2000 miles

away, and for Garadjeri and Njangomada; it was a cultic centre surpassing tribal, ethnic and linguistic boundaries (Petri 1966 and 1967:2f.). From there, totemic ancestors of the Dreaming moved on different tracks toward the mythical location *Dingari*. As Petri reports, the Garadjeri and Njangomada could not, or would not, remember any myth-song-cycles concerning the *wandji kurangara* wanderings in 1954. From 1960 to 1963 however Petri collected in La Grange, Anna Plains, Broome, Derby, Port Hedland and Myroodah several dozen song-cycles relating to the mythic migrations which ended in Dingari. As he also points out, discussions between members of diverse tribal groups did not always lead to agreement (1967:3).

These very traditions were reported (though without clear content) by Daisy Bates as prevalent in the southernmost areas of the Great Western deserts in 1913 (see Bates 1938:125-127). The present-day stories relate how the people, without cultic objects or rituals and without ritual meals moved from a water place (a cult centre of the Western Desert south of Lake Disappointment) in a northeasterly direction in order to reach the salty ocean. These beings were the fully initiated men and mythical creator women of the *kurangara* time, the eternal night, when women were still in equal possession of sacred power and sacred objects which were later to become the prerogatives of men. The leaders were two ancestral heroes who appear in diverse versions among different groups: Djanba and Bredjare. Their aim was to reach "Bilbara" ("the place of light", today Pilbara) in order to leave their symbols and to have a ceremonial feast (in other words, to institute their Law). The interesting aspect is not only the sudden re-emergence of mythic and cult knowledge which was presumed to have been forgotten, but also the alignment of many different traditions of wandering heroes of the Dreaming of different tribal groups. The major importance of the re-traditionalised *dingari-kurangara* song-cycles is the disappearance of the variety of ancestor heroes of different periods of the Dreaming into the ground, while they give their vital essence, their power, either to objects which return from the place of their merging into the ground, or to other wandering groups. The mobility both of these cults and of their mythic instigators is the typical pattern in the region between the Central deserts and the ocean of Western Australia, a constant to-and-fro between coast and desert.

What emerged in the period after 1963 was a major geographic reversal: a fullyblown messianic movement approached the coastal settlements from the Fitzroy Basin. In the East, *Jinimin* (Jesus) revealed himself to Aborigines, giving them the new Law, called *worgaia;* in 1963 only the first few song-cycles had reached the coast. These cycles showed the return of ancestors from the mythic land *Dingari* in the East where — as we know from previous song-cycles of *wandji-kurangara* traditions between the 1920s and 1950s — the ancestors of various kinds went into the ground. While the traditional complexes were "full of fun", the researchers found themselves surrounded by new forms of secrecy, of negative attitudes toward themselves and the whole of white society, and a mood of seriousness with strict punishment for infringement of rules. The main dissemination to the coast was traced to a Walmadjeri man from Fitzroy Crossing who saw himself as a new Noah who owned a sacred vessel (an ark, identified with a sacred board of traditional background) filled with crystal and gold. This ark would be the refuge of Aboriginal people who had embraced the new law when the "holy water" would rain from heaven to drown all white people. The vessel would also give future wealth to

Aboriginal people (Petri and Petri-Odermann 1970:262-65). Kolig documented similar cults in the area of Fitzroy Crossing and connected them with a *worgaia* tradition but without the messianic, millenarian and anti-white component (Kolig 1981). In the Fitzroy region the *worgaia* movement is perceived as a festive event, a "Big Sunday", with plenty of fun. The strongly millenarian component on the coastal region might possibly be explained through influence from labour union movements among Aborigines of the Pilbara region, spread by the activist Don McLeod (Petri and Petri-Odermann 1970:259). As Petri found strong connections in previous myth-cycle migrations of the *wandji-kurangara* constellation between the Pilbara and Broome regions, this influence is plausible. Yet it does raise the question of the difference in economic and social conditions in particular places at specific times, or the perception of such conditions by diverse ethnic groups, and it raises furthermore the problem of the influence of Christian lore upon new cult movements. In neither the coast (including the Pilbara), nor the Fitzroy region, are the economic and historical data sufficient to show what correlations could be drawn, and furthermore such queries have not been addressed by the respective researchers (Petri as well as Kolig only cover part of the data, Petri more the content of cult practices, Kolig more the re-alignment of tribal groups and their movements), so we must make educated guesses from the accumulated materials. If we consider some of the known features, I think we can come to a preliminary conclusion about the function or role these cults fulfil and see in which way they can all be subsumed under anti-acculturative and nativistic forms of resistance.

The Role of Women and Destructive Magic in the Creator Dreamtime Traditions

The plethora of cult movements which were found over the period from 1938 to the middle 1960s by Petri on the borders of the Western Deserts of Western Australia and over the whole stretch of the Northwest from the Pilbara to the Kimberleys cannot readily be ordered sequentially, nor does acceptance or rejection of the diverse movements fit easily into a theoretical scheme. While the new cults of *kurangara*, originally looked at with great suspicion in the Kimberleys in the late 1930s, were more or less accepted by the 1960s, in the Kimberleys and coastal plain, revived cycles of *wandji* traditions, presumed to be forgotten, began to emerge. These were in diverse ways aligned with the *kurangara* traditions, and tracks or lines of ancestors merged and crossed over traditional group boundaries between the Pilbara and the Kimberleys in the early 1960s.

Informants of different background (Ngangomada, Dualin, Yulbaridja), mostly of desert origins, but including coastal people, largely rejected the new *wandji* traditions, as was the case with *kurangara* among the Kimberley groups between 1938 and 1950. The reason given was also similar: all *wandji* traditions were seen as part and parcel of the poisonous and detrimental *kurangara*, and a number of different groups in the lands between the Pilbara and the coast of Broome were instead trying to revive and support the Two-Hero traditions. However, some very old and traditional leaders enthusiastically accepted the revived *wandji*-traditions. Petri called them "non-conformists at advanced age" (Petri 1967).

Petri raises the intriguing question of the role of women creator beings in the Dreaming in the diverse traditions. While he admits that we do not know whether

the revived *wandji* tales and ritual cycles are the same as those reported for the South at the turn of the century, (Daisy Bates does not specify the content of the then prevailing cults), he does show the difficulties of disentangling the different tracks of the creator women mentioned in these new *wandji* and other related *kurangara* traditions. However, I think that his accounts point to an interesting reason for the rejection of the cult-innovations, when seen in the context of new attempts of Aboriginal thinkers to synchronise the different desert traditions occurring at the same time (the following from Petri 1965 and 1967).

It appears in summary that the women who travel in the *kurangara* period of creation time, when it was still dark, were originally benevolent beings full of creative essence, as were men. They lost their Dreaming power at their final destination, where the young men accompanying them were initiated, the secret traditions laid down, and the festive ceremonial meal held. The women then went into the ground, handing over their Dreaming power to the men. These are the *traditional* versions. In the "new" *wandji* traditions, however, these women while accompanying Dreaming heroes are dangerous: they look like "half-castes", are more powerful then men, and live on today as ghost-like beings (called *djurawin*). They are unable to have sexual intercourse and can use black magic (*imbal*) against anybody disturbing them. They had acquired this magical power on their travels through the land of the medicine men (supposedly located south of Port Hedland for Pilbara informants, in Roeburne and Onslow for informants from La Grange and Anna Plains). The women also send forward from their vaginas snakes, scorpions and millipedes who could make their victims sick or kill them. These women travelled to Dingari, went into the ground, and will return in our time with the help of the great red kangaroo.

I think the parallels with the accounts of Lommel are quite stunning, as in both cases an inversion of the traditional order is indicated and in both cases destructive, instead of creative, power becomes the focal point. Even if, as has been suggested, these myths about female creators can be connected to cycles existing in Arnhem Land (which spread from Lloyd Warner's times in 1929 from Eastern Arnhem Land through the central and western parts in the form of Kunapipi cycles, as reported by Berndt, and have now reached the Kimberleys; see Akerman 1970), the general tendency of these creator women is different in the region under discussion. As Stanner's reports on the Murinbata show, the notion of women going wrong in the Dreaming is in itself unexceptional, and may be more widely distributed than we know, but the change from on originally benevolent version of creation to one of complete negativity does seem to me to point to a unique reinterpretation.

Several researchers, including Petri, connect the new cult-movements to the only other strong millenarian expectation reported in the literature, the Molonga movement which spread at the turn of the century from Northern Queensland to the far south and the southwest. The difference between the Molonga movement, which was reported by the German observer Siebert (Siebert 1910), is not, as Eliade suggests that in the Queensland case it is the great creator woman from the sea who will swallow all white intruders, while in the Northwest of Western Australia it is the desert-originating *kurangara* tradition (Eliade 1973). That is only a peripheral difference. The true difference seems to me to lie in the negative orientation of the northwestern cults. Before the coming of the *worgaia* around 1963 to this region, no overt anti-colonial or anti-white orientation can be discerned, notwithstanding my

contention that all these movements are deeply nativistic. Both the *kurangara* traditions of the late 1930s and the revived *wandji* traditions of the mid-1960s *depict a cosmology which is turning against the Aborigines themselves*. This is clearly contrary to the religious mode once described so fittingly by Stanner as a "mood of assent to living": the whole picture becomes one of an evil creation, an infertile one, a *Dreamtime* which has become a *Nightmare*. It is for this reason that we may find so much opposition over the last 40 years in these regions to *wandji-kurangara* among some traditionalists.

Aborigines have obviously also pondered the problem, and have tried to come up with a revised chronology of Dreaming events. According to Petri's information, the historisation of diverse traditions in the middle 1960s among coastal people as well as desert migrants takes the following shape. The Dreaming consists of several stages. In the beginning was darkness: through carving, "Crow" makes the then-existing humanity into true human beings, as they had no orifices. In one version he is the originator of those initiations which normally occur in the Two-Hero Cycle. After his deeds another being, Gurgur, the great fertility divinity, forces innumerable other beings (*djaramara*) to create the waterholes and deposit their vital essence. Then follow as the third stage the groups of *kurangara* beings, male and female, who, still in the age of darkness, carry on with the creative deeds on the "fertility trail" as one could call it. At the end of the Dreaming, the ritual power and division between women and men is established. The Two Heroes come from the ground, erect pillars (sacred poles, *birmal*), separate heaven from earth and create day and night, sun and moon. These four sequences show a tremendous recognition by the Aborigines of inconsistencies in their diverse traditions and the attempt to align them. This appreciation was influenced by the tremendous migrations over the last fifty years, their concentration into large groups on cattle stations, missions and in townships, which not only enforce joint living, but also require an aligning of the traditions as people move into foreign, sacred and therefore dangerous territories. This shows a great versatility, adaptability as well as mental agility for coping with new stimuli. It shows a truly historical understanding which so far has rarely been acknowledged in the literature of hunter-gatherers under contact situations.

Innovation in Religious Thought and Practice as the Germ of Ethnogenesis

The developments described in field-reports for the area under discussion certainly force anthropological theorists on Aboriginal religion and Aboriginal concepts to re-evaluate their own premises, in particular that widely disseminated image of the immutability of Aboriginal attitudes toward the sacred. The continuing innovation in religious concepts and ritual practice in the demographically fluid region between the Kimberleys, the Canning Basin and the Pilbara bears out Petri's early suggestion that the traditional image of the static nature of Aboriginal thought has to be revised (Petri 1967:31). The materials also point to the difficulties of generalisations derived from studies in a particular region: while Petri's studies show a new seriousness and a degree of animosity to white domination almost unheard of previously (in the early 1960s), Kolig found the same cultic movements (the *worgaia*) surrounded by an atmosphere of a holiday spirit, or what he called so aptly, of "graceful playfulness and esthetic enjoyment" (Kolig 1981:180).

However, the differences and the innovative features do not stop there: as more recent reports of the area show, the trend which Petri as well as Kolig observed, namely the decrease in traditional ritual practices, has again been reversed; people from the Kimberleys as well as from the Fitzroy and Balgo regions have carried out rituals in unprecedented numbers: there have been extended periods of seclusion and instruction, followed by new instalments of the *worgaia* cycle, with participants coming from as far as Yuendumu (for the period of 1977-1978, reported by Akerman 1979:236).

We may have to admit with Eliade that modifications of "primitive" religions cannot be anticipated (1973:183), or more generally that innovations of any kind, including transformations of traditional systems of thought, cannot be predicted as to their direction, intensity, duration or emphasis. We may have to be satisfied with the general acknowledgment that the mental processes of groups — which are always high-level post-hoc abstractions, but abstractions which anthropology cannot do without — show unexpected metamorphoses, the relevance and existence of which even trained observers might not always perceive. Being preoccupied with establishing mostly "traditional" patterns of life in order to make sense of the chaos of individual actions, anthropologists all too often cannot gauge the significance of certain activities, moods, statements and reactions and their place within such patterns.

Having said all that, it is apparent that the movements among Aboriginal groups in the northwest of Western Australia have a lot to teach us about the versatility of the mental life of groups under pressure from a dominant and domineering culture. Instead of increasing secularisation and continuing acculturation or assimilation to a main-stream culture, conceptual frame-works of minority cultures reassert themselves even after long periods of contact. This has implications for anthropology and culture history as much as for practical policy issues. The phenomena point to the danger of believing in any unilinear, "progressive" movement from tradition to modernity, from sacred to secular, from cultural diversity to cultural uniformity. These wishful images are as much part and parcel of that cultural pessimism so prominent among anthropologists who make a fetish out of the presumed "true" tradition, as of the opportunistic slogans of politicians who perceive a positive value in uniformity and an unspecified threat in diversity.

While attempts at theoretical generalisation are notoriously difficult, in particular in the field of anti-acculturative movements, it appears that the three cult varieties which are distinctively reported by researchers in the northwest of Western Australia, invite some general comment. While the phases themselves cannot be taken as temporal steps of a fixed progression of nativistic movements, the features appearing in the cult movements in this region, when taken into account in their entire spectrum, fit most clearly the concepts usually attributed to nativistic movements. The phases of the *dingari* traditions and of the more recent *worgaia* cultism, demonstrate the almost opposite spectrum of nativistic emancipatory aspirations: the former the strong revivalistic tendencies without the eschatological, apocalyptic or millenarian component; the latter the syncretistic millenarian component with a black and white Jesus as culture Hero and a pronounced cargo-expectation after an apocalyptic event which leaves the suppressed group in control.

The greatest difficulties arise from the content as well as the reception of the early *kurangara* traditions among the Ungarinyin and Unambal. Whereas the most

recent *worgaia* complex is accompanied by a positive apocalypse — positive in regard to the return of a more equitable order for the dominated Aboriginal groups — the early *kurangara* with its inverted magical practices and its reversal of traditional cult practices in regard to male-female power relationships creates a negative utopia for Aborigines themselves. The magical action as well as the fear of the traditionalists about the ending of the world (in the literal physical sense as well as the intellectual and ethnic meaning) are exactly the inversion of those nativistic formulations, in which the oppressor disappears and the oppressed rules the world. However, even this feature of a negative utopia should be subsumed under the label of nativism: considering the context of the time (the late 1930s) with its complete dependency of Aborigines on white station economy and the denigration of Aboriginal life, the development of cults which turn inwards and look for possible enemies within the group itself, is not unusual.

There is for example, the cross-cultural comparison with witch-finding cults and those within the Christian realm which opt for "inner cleansing". It may only be recent influences from the Australia-wide land-rights movement, and changes in the legal and social milieu in general, which permit open hostility to be directed against the oppressing and dominant cultural forces, while under earlier conditions, dissatisfaction and despondency had to find more clandestine venues of expression. The early *kurangara* movement could therefore possibly be located between the desperate search of the South American *terre-sans-mal* phenomenon and the recent Japanese mass-movements which allocate evil with an almost Calvinist rigour to individual failings. The traces of the inverted condition in male-female relations which permeate also a number of *dingari* traditions, may point to the mid-way position of *dingari* between the negative eschatology of *kurangara* and the positively aggressive forms of *worgaia*, of a time where Aborigines could only begin to explore expressions of hostility, or rather assert themselves openly.

On the whole, however, all these movements seem to have one result in common which all researchers in this field have noted: a merging of formerly distinct traditions and a re-alignment through increased contact of diverse groups in this demographically mobile region. The cult-movements which are still ongoing, seem therefore of greatest interest for their potential in creating "supra-tribal" entities and something akin to a pan-Aboriginal consciousness, a new self-esteem and positive identity.

What we are witnessing here, are possibly the value-orientations of a kind of "ethno-genesis", whereby the function which was fulfilled by centralised state-authorities as well as hierarchically ordered sacred authority in the early middle ages for the generating of a Franco-Germanic or Anglo-Saxon "ethnos", are now among Aborigines taken over by migrating cults leading to a proto-nationalism of pan-Aboriginality. While many researchers have pointed out that the new cult-movements are accompanied by, and result in, a lessening of parochial, local traditions which could otherwise become the focus for land-right requests, the unanticipated consequence of large inter-ethnic gatherings and exchange of cultic practices might be that they feed easily into more secular demands for the general land-rights movement, providing the ultimate sacred legitimation of those demands. The discussion among Aborigines about the re-alignment of ancestral tracks and the new self-conscious separatism of the back-to-the-land movements (see Coombs 1974) have to be seen as poles in a nativistic continuum: the cult practices as well as

the legal battles are creating a new distance, and the creation of distance, the assertion of distinctness, is what all nativistic movements are about in situations of unequal inter-ethnic relations.

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