

The Dreaming and Social Change in Arnhem Land

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The Dreaming in Anthropological Discussion

"The Dreaming" has long been regarded as a central component of Australian Aboriginal religion, both in anthropological, as well as popular literature. Pioneer anthropologists Spencer and Gillen coined the term and outlined some of its key features (1927:304-354), although they themselves preferred to use the Aranda term *Alchera*, and its derivative *Alcheringa*. It seems they wrongly believed that "The Dreaming" was a translation of *Alchera* (see Strehlow 1971:613-614). Radcliffe-Brown used the term "World-Dawn", and also described what he regarded as some of its characteristics (1952:166ff.)¹. Stanner's perceptive discussion, simply called "The Dreaming", first appeared in 1956, and has survived as a classic study of the concept. Elkin's 1969 article, "Elements of Australian Aboriginal Philosophy" was an important milestone, and Munn's seminal study "The Transformation of Subjects into Objects in Walbiri and Pitjantjatjara Myth" (1984/86, first published in 1973) has proved to be a useful elucidation of a key aspect of Aboriginal religion.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the wide acceptance of the term in European Australian mythology about Aboriginal people, the term "The Dreaming" is not universally known to Aboriginal people across the continent, and in some areas, notably in north-eastern Arnhem Land, the term elicits considerable puzzlement, as it does not neatly translate any one Yolngu² term; *madayin* (= those things which pertain to the realm of the sacred) being the nearest equivalent. In other parts of Australia it appears that the field of meaning covered by the anthropological term "The Dreaming" does approximate to a field of meaning involved in a vernacular or creole term. *Djugurba* in the Western Desert, and *ngarangani* in the Kimberleys are well known examples. Elsewhere, "the Law", or "Business" has gained wide acceptance among the Aboriginal people.

At the risk of grossly oversimplifying the subtle expositions of the various ethnographers who have tried to come to grips with a concept so very different from anything in the Western philosophical heritage, I wish to condense the present understanding of the term "The Dreaming" into eight propositions, in order to highlight the particular problem I wish to address. They are as follows:

- A. The ordered world, both social and natural, came into being in The Dreaming.
- B. Supernatural beings inhabited The Dreaming and caused the ordered world.
- C. The Dreaming is in the past, but its power reaches through into the present.
- D. Attributing natural and social phenomena to The Dreaming counts as an explanation for their existence and continuance.
- E. Consequently laws of nature as well as social norms are believed to have been laid down once for all in The Dreaming.
- F. Various types of transformations of the supernatural beings make present The Dreaming. These transformations may take the form of sacred sites, totemic emblems, images, objects or tracks.
- G. Rituals link the actors with The Dreaming.
- H. Power emanates from The Dreaming to the present day world by means of those things associated with The Dreaming.

The issue I am particularly concerned with here, then, is this: If the ordered world was instituted in the long ago past (Proposition A) by the supernatural beings (Proposition B), and the power of The Dreaming interpenetrates the present order of things (Proposition C) in such a way that present day phenomena may be explained adequately by reference to their having been instituted in The Dreaming (Proposition D) in a final and definitive way (Proposition E), so that those things of significance emanate from The Dreaming (Proposition F) through ritual (Proposition G) and the appropriation of power (Proposition H), then how do Aboriginal people cope intellectually with the fact of social change? It appears *prima facie* that there is no possibility of innovation or even reform at all, given the definitive once-for-allness of The Dreaming.

Up until recently, there have been two broad schools of thought in the literature about the relationship between religion and social change among Australian Aboriginal people, neither of which account adequately for the facts as we now know them. The first view is that no real social change is possible; the Aborigines' religious views prevent it. I call this the "no change theory". The second theory is that minor changes may be incorporated into a basically stable and unchanging structure. I call this the "change by incorporation theory".

The "No Change" Theory

A number of anthropologists have argued for the static and unchanging nature of Aboriginal society, and have usually attributed this to the Aborigines' view of The Dreaming. Although Charlesworth calls this "the standard view" (1984/86:383), it is doubtful that many contemporary anthropologists continue to cling to it.

T. G. H. Strehlow at one stage spoke of Aboriginal religious expressions being "firmly fettered by rigid bonds of tradition" (1947:6) and of the fact that "[t]radition and the tyranny of the old men in the religion and cultural sphere have effectively stifled all creative impulse" (*loc. cit.*).

Lauriston Sharp's well known and much reprinted article "Steel Axes for Stone Age Australians" (1952), although allowing that some minor innovation may be possible (*ibid.*:80), finally concludes that:

... the totemic system must serve very effectively to inhibit radical cultural changes. The closed system of totemic ideas, explaining and categorizing a well-known universe as it was fixed from the beginning of time, presents a considerable obstacle to the adoption of new or the dropping of old cultural traits. (*ibid.*:86)

He argued that the introduction of the steel axes had a series of destructive effects which resulted in:

a mental and moral void which foreshadows the collapse and destruction of all Yir Yiront culture, if not, indeed, the extinction of the biological group itself. (*ibid.*:85/86)

Similarly, Stanner seems to have held such a view of Aboriginal religion. In his article on "The Dreaming" mentioned above, he argued that the overwhelming mood of Aboriginal religion is one of "abidingness" so that:

sameness, absence of change, fixed routine, regularity, call it what you will, is a main dimension of their thought and life... They place a very special value on things remaining unchanging in themselves, on keeping life to a routine which is known and trusted. (1972:276)

The result of this for Aborigines, according to Stanner, is devastating:

The cost in a world of power and change, is extinction. What defeats the blackfellow in the modern world, fundamentally, is his transcendentalism. (*ibid.*:275)

This is because Aboriginal people see life as a "one possibility thing" (*loc. cit.*).

Stanner subsequently revised his position during the 1960s, as we shall see. Nancy Munn, however, has argued for this position in an otherwise excellent paper, as late as 1973:

The living Aboriginal ...is confronted with a *fait accompli*, a fixed topographical structure within which he must operate. (1984/86:64)

She then went on to say that "the ritual actions fix the creative autonomy to determinacy in a closed system of permanent symbolism" (*ibid.*:79).

It seems that there were two factors which contributed to this view being developed and maintained: the prevailing structural-functionalist orthodoxy (in which the overriding model of society was one in which the various institutions functioned to maintain the stability of the social system), and the fact that Aboriginal people themselves present their religion as ancient, permanent and unchanging.

Yet there is, and has been for quite some time, ample ethnographic evidence for change in Aboriginal religious beliefs and practices. This paradigm has therefore come under increasing threat, although no clearly formulated alternative has as yet appeared.

The "Change by Incorporation" Theory

The second view held by anthropologists is that change in Aboriginal religion can and does occur, but this change occurs by the incorporation of new elements into a basically stable and fixed system. The changes are therefore not structural; they are changes of accidents rather than of substance. Charlesworth sums up this position, which he regards as the newest variation on orthodoxy, as follows:

Within the framework or "canon" provided by the foundation charter of the Dreaming there is a good deal of innovation and change and re-interpretation and adaptation in Australian religions. (1984/86:386)

A number of anthropologists have presented ethnographic evidence for religious change both before and after European contact. Generally they have simply asserted that such innovation is not structural, while at the same time failing to offer any real theory of the relationship between religion and social change.

Lloyd Warner saw evidence of change in mythology. Not only had Macassan elements been incorporated into Yolngu religion, but he noted that:

[a]t present there is a tendency to substitute the white man and his civilisation for the Malay in the totemic system. (1932:493)

Nevertheless, in spite of this, he was at pains to point out that "[t]he Malays but slightly influenced Murngin [Yolngu] mythology" (*ibid.*:491), and concluded that there was a "strong resistance of the Murngin culture against outside influence" (*ibid.*:481).

Donald Thomson discovered in Arnhem Land a number of totems which were obviously of Macassan origin, yet he somehow saw this as confirmation of the Aborigines' conservative nature (1949:60).

R. M. Berndt recognized that the Gunapiipi ceremony had been introduced into the Yolngu area via southern Arnhem Land, but it had nevertheless "been coordinated with local religious mythology and philosophy" (1951:144, see also p.73). Elsewhere he has said:

Reference to this particular dimension, not limited by time, and often translated by the words "Eternal Dreaming" underlines the Aborigines' traditional reliance on a body of knowledge and belief that is relevant not only to the past but also to the present and the future. Within this scheme is provision for change and individual interpretation *within a relatively closed system*. (1984/86:176, my emphasis)

In Stanner's *Oceania* articles, collectively called *On Aboriginal Religion*, we see a departure from his earlier position. He recognizes religious change both pre- and post-contact, but within limitations: "only those changes were accepted that would fit in with the established ritual forms" (1963:267). He therefore regards "...the rite as obligatory and constant, whereas the myth is discretionary and variable" (1960:249).

This is in contrast to R. M. Berndt's position, which saw Gunapipi as an introduced ritual becoming associated with a local myth. While this is correct, it seems that every effort was being made to preserve the theory of The Dreaming's constancy. Similarly, when discussing the impact of the Macassans on the Yolngu, R.M. and C.H. Berndt argue that the Yolngu:

seem to have maintained a fairly well integrated pattern of culture, absorbing or discarding new ideas without seriously disturbing its basic structure. (1954:22)

R. M. Berndt nevertheless gives us an important clue for our understanding of religious change when he observes that the Yolngu:

dream additions to their rituals and totemic designs... Many sacred designs are altered and added to because of dreams. (1951:72)

But even here he felt constrained to add, "the sacred pattern is retained" (*loc. cit.*).

The "no change" theory and the "change by incorporation" theory are both deficient in my view. In order to suggest a more adequate relationship between religion and social change in Aboriginal Australia, I now turn to a consideration of some ethnographic data based on my field work at Galiwin'ku on Elcho Island, Arnhem Land. This will in turn permit us to adjust our model of The Dreaming to account more adequately for the facts as we presently understand them.

The Galiwin'ku Data

In March 1979 an exuberant Christian movement began among Aboriginal people at Galiwin'ku. It was led by Yolngu people, including Rev. Terry Djiniyini Gondarra, a local Yolngu man who had been ordained by the Methodist (now Uniting) Church and Kevin Rurrumbu Dhurrkay, the main evangelist. This movement subsequently spread through Arnhem Land, was transported to Warburton in Western Australia, and from there diffused across the Goldfields and Kimberley regions. In Western Australia the Movement came to be known as "the Black Crusade" and was widely reported in the media. But as the Movement had a different character in the various centres where it was accepted, I focus on the place of its origin, Galiwin'ku.

Ritual Innovation

At Elcho Island the Movement was marked by nightly "fellowship" meetings which in the early stages went until after midnight, but ten to eleven p.m. later became the more usual finishing time. These meetings evidenced four distinct phases. The first phase was marked by cheerful and light-hearted singing, usually led by one of the Yolngu church elders, as more and more people arrived. These songs were sung in



*1. Baptism -
Galiwin'ku*



*2. Baptism -
Galiwin'ku*



*3. Congregation
at Baptism*

English and one or more Yolngu dialects. Many were action songs and were about God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit. Next, the leader called for “items” or “testimonies” and individuals or groups briefly addressed the meeting, or sang a previously rehearsed number. All the participants were then encouraged to stand in a circle as the singing continued. Songs sung in phase two were quieter, more reverent, than those sung in phase one, and were generally addressed to God, rather than being about him. In phase three, someone, usually the minister, read a Bible passage and preached a sermon in which the perceived relevance of the text to the local situation might be elaborated. Finally, in phase four, the singing recommenced and the intensity of the mood was heightened as people sang more fervently. Usually some would come and kneel in the circle which had been reformed and waited for the elders or the minister to come and lay hands on them and pray for them. Often some people would swoon and fall to the ground in a trance-like state, while the singing continued. Finally the meeting was closed by the minister pronouncing a blessing.

These meetings bore a strong resemblance to traditional Yolngu ritual. In fact many features are more similar to traditional ceremonial than forms of worship introduced by the Methodist missionaries since the commencement of the mission station in 1942. These traditional features are:

a. The meetings employed a Yolngu, rather than a European notion of occasion. They were held in the evenings, the traditional time for song and dance. Chaseling, who lived in Arnhem Land in the 1930s, noted that “most of the night was spent in singing and dancing” (1957:29). Punctuality did not matter. If some people arrived half an hour, or an hour after others, singing was already under way. People simply joined in as they arrived. After dark was also a more private time. People could walk through the town without necessarily running the gauntlet of community gossip. Those who were self conscious about attending meetings could stay at a distance.

b. Meetings were held out of doors, with people seated on the ground, rather than on pews in the church building. People could sit in family groups on blankets or sheets, rather than being forced by the necessities of European architecture to sit in rows. Children could sleep in the family group as they became tired. Restlessness on the part of the young ones was less disturbing out of doors.

c. Meetings were held in different places in the town. Those who felt that the church building was not part of their normal range could participate when meetings were held in territory familiar to them.

d. Meetings allowed for Yolngu patterns of leadership to find expression. The less formal setting allowed for more people to contribute by playing guitars, presenting song items, giving “testimonies”, leading community singing etc.

e. Ritual responses were frequently employed. The leader and the congregation would often alternate in shouting standard responses as occurs in other Yolngu rituals. In these other ceremonies such responses include terms which refer to the activities of the creative supernatural beings. In the Christian ritual, one form of response was:

Leader: Praise the Lord
 Response: Praise the Lord
 Leader: Hallelujah
 Response: Hallelujah

Leader: Amen
Response: Amen
Leader: Thank you, Jesus
Response: Thank you, Jesus.

f. Meetings allowed for greater physical participation. Many songs were acted out, or were "danced" with arm and body movements such as clapping, swaying the arms over the head, beating out the rhythm of the song with the foot. As happens in other Yolngu ceremonies, "women dance individually to the men's singing, standing on one spot" (Keen 1978:191). A further expression of this physical participation may be seen in the formation of a tight circle towards the close of the meeting as was mentioned above. *Djiniyini* was very conscious of the importance of active physical involvement in worship:

Aboriginal people have been in bondage to the European style of worship... We want to make worship that is alive and involved, that has Aboriginal spirituality. Everyone is energetic, active. We want to see the didgeridoo and clap sticks used. (Ainsworth 1986:14)

g. The meetings allowed for greater creativity than was usual in the church services. Songs could be presented in a series of dialects. Some of these were rough translations of English songs; others originated afresh from among the Yolngu Christians.

The ritual forms therefore display many distinctively Aboriginal features, and indeed reflect an indigenization of Christianity.



4. Thanksgiving Weekend

Symbolic Continuities

When we turn to a consideration of the intellectual formulations of the movement, we again notice some remarkable continuities with traditional religion. But while the new ritual forms represented a break with mission practices, continuities in ideology had in fact been encouraged by the mission.

The Methodist mission Superintendents in Arnhem Land from the 1930s to the 1960s, notably T.T. Webb, W. Chaseling, A. Ellemore, E. Wells and G. Symons had had some training in anthropology and were, on the whole, highly tolerant of traditional forms of religious expression. They encouraged an integration of traditional religion with Christianity at an intellectual level, seeing Christianity as a fulfilment, rather than a replacement, of traditional religion. The Yolngu actively continued this process. I mention just two examples.

As we saw above, the Yolngu, like Aboriginal people elsewhere in Australia, regard the epic stories of the travels of the supernatural beings (*wangarr*) as the most sacred of their myths. These beings travelled across the land giving order to the natural world and assigning language, ceremonies, social practices and tracts of land to different groups of people. From the time of the first translation of the Lord's Prayer into the dialect of the Gupapuyngu Daygurrurr clan in 1929, God had been referred to as *Wangarr*. He was thus regarded by most Yolngu as at the apex of a cosmogenic hierarchy which included the other supernatural beings of both moieties³. God was regarded as having a certain pre-eminence over the others because he created the land *ex nihilo*. When the other *wangarr* moved across the land and waterways, the land itself was already there, although not organized or bearing social significance. Furthermore, the activities of the more traditional *wangarr* are localized, while the activities of God are universal in scope. God was therefore thought to transcend the otherwise all-embracing distinction of social and natural phenomena into two separate moieties, called Dhuwa and Yirritja.

Probably the most important traditional *wangarr* in north-eastern Arnhem Land are the Djang'kawu Sisters (Dhuwa moiety). Djiniyini once ruminated:

I see the signs of the Djang'kawu and I really struggle with this. Why do we talk about Djang'kawu? The land was already created. We read in Genesis that there was a void and God created the land from the void. Djang'kawu was given responsibility. They give names to things. They travel from one place to another and give water to this clan. Djang'kawu is the *djaamamirri*, the manager, or the *djaagamirri*, the caretaker. That is different from the *bunggawa*.

He was drawing an analogy from the way in which ceremonies are organized in Arnhem Land. This requires the co-operation of the clan which is the 'owner' or 'boss' (*bunggawa*) of the ceremony with members of the opposite moiety (usually in the relationship of sister's sons to the owners), who are the 'workers' (*djaamamirri*, or *djaagamirri*). The point of the analogy then is that God is the owner/boss of the world and the Djang'kawu were the workers. There is a role for both. Other Yolngu have similarly worked out relationships between Biblical personages and those in their traditional cosmology.

The integration of the central symbol of Christianity, the cross of Jesus, within a complex of symbols surrounding traditional ceremonial poles⁴, provides a second

example of intellectual harmonization between two formerly separate religious complexes. The cross is frequently regarded as similar to, or the same as, the sacred design of a clan which was prominent in mission affairs at Milingimbi, Elcho Island's parent mission station. The "headman" at Milingimbi for many years, Makarrwala, was a member of this clan.

Men of other clans have fashioned and worn crosses made with the brilliant red/orange breast feathers of the rainbow lorikeet. In the ceremonies celebrating the cosmogenic activities of the Djang'kawu Sisters, the actors wear long strings of these feathers, which are in fact public representations of the secret ceremonial poles. Some Christian men have also woven crosses of rainbow lorikeet feathers into their sacred dilly bags. In Yolngu thought, the feathers are associated not only with the secret poles, but also with species of trees and the bone and flesh of the *wangarr*. There is, in fact, a cluster of associations with various levels of meaning. One evokes the other. The depth of any individual's knowledge depends on his level of initiation. The cross is now included in this symbolic complex.

Response to Social Conditions

But somewhat paradoxically, while the participants of the Movement were anxious to establish intellectual and ritual continuities with traditional religion, the Movement can equally be seen as an attempt to respond to the new social conditions which confronted them in at least five different ways.

a. The establishment of the Elcho Island mission resulted in a steady but voluntary immigration of Yolngu people from the bush and from other neighbouring mission stations during and after the Second World War. Population statistics are available from 1952, and these show a growth in population from 422 in that year to 1291 fifteen years later. There were, however, no indigenous political structures in north-eastern Arnhem Land to enable the organization of large numbers of people at a permanent settlement. While the missionaries were the agents of law and order, they were able to provide the necessary structures for the administration of a township of this size, as well a number of outstations.

From the early 1970s, however, the mission began to pass over local authority responsibilities to the Yolngu Town Council. Within Yolngu society there was, however, no underlying ideology, no commitment to, the sorts of values about representation which are assumed in the Western political process. Traditionally, clans were linked through marriage and ceremony, but political units wider than the clan did not exist.

The Movement sought to come to terms with this by propounding the essential unity of the Yolngu. Many of the songs were on this theme of unity. One of the most commonly sung ones, for example, had these words:

Father make us one
Father make us one
That the world may know
The Saviour's love
Father make us one.

b. Secondly, during the 1970s, immediately prior to the commencement of the movement, there was an increasing threat to Yolngu lands and culture. The Northern Territory became self-governing in 1978, and its Country Liberal Party government saw the future economy of the Territory as being based primarily on mining and tourism, both of which the Yolngu saw as inimical to their own future. In particular, the proposed Arnhem Highway and the increasing incursions of commercial fishermen into coastal waterways caused considerable unrest.

The Movement also propounded a unity between the Yolngu and Australians of European descent. As Djiniyini said:

This is not only for Yolngu, but also for Balanda⁵, not just staff [non-Aboriginal people employed in Aboriginal towns], but others too. It is bringing the two people, the two races, together as brothers and sisters in Christ. Skin [colour] does not matter. Language does not matter. Christians have a common love for Jesus and live together as one people.

This is not to say, of course, that the Yolngu Christians saw themselves as being assimilated into white society. On the contrary, they believed that their movement pointed to new directions for whites as well as Aboriginal people. It was inclusive of all people, but on the terms laid down by the Movement. In other words, the Movement was assimilationist, not in the sense of accepting the values and practices of white society, but in asking white society to accept the values and practices of the Movement. The unspoken assumption was that in coming together in Christian brotherhood and sisterhood, greater understanding and appreciation of the Yolngu position on the part of white Australia would result.

The Christian Movement also responded to the threat posed by white society by affirming the justness of Yolngu claims for recognition in European Australian law of their affiliation with traditional lands. The Movement did not seek to legitimize particular groups' relationships with particular tracts of land; it is not land-based in that sense. Rather, there was a general affirmation of the traditional system of land tenure (which then in turn legitimized each clan's relationship with land), and a general belief in the rightness of Yolngu claims over against that of the Balanda, who appeared to offer no religious basis for their claims, apart from the appeals to the necessity of economic development. After all, God worked through the *wangarr*, who assigned tracts of land to the various clans.

c. During the 1970s there was increase in the abuse of alcohol by Elcho Islanders. Children also engaged in petrol sniffing. This did not reach the same proportions as it did in some other centres, but it was nevertheless alarming to the Yolngu.

The revival Movement was an attempt to deal with the problem. Those who committed themselves to the movement were required to abstain from drinking alcohol in any form. Those who had been drinkers were urged to tell of their conversion as an encouragement to others. Sackett has rightly noted that traditional religion offers no sanctions regarding alcohol abuse (1977), but in north-eastern Arnhem Land an attempt has been made to give abstinence from alcohol a "traditional referent" by declaring the consumption of alcohol to be inconsistent with the practice of Christianity, and aligning Christianity with traditional religion.

d. With the rapidly increasing contact between the Yolngu and the wider world during the 1970s, and a growing awareness that much of Australia, including the Northern Territory government, had little appreciation of, or sympathy for, Yolngu perceptions or priorities, the Movement sought to affirm traditional culture in a way they hoped would be understood by the wider society.

The Yolngu believed that their culture, language and land are gifts from God. God was seen to be at work before the missionaries came. Traditional religion was revealed to the forefathers by the God of the Bible. Just as God had given Balanda people their culture, so he had given the Yolngu people their culture. Ronang, for example, wrote:

Before the white man came, God revealed Himself, to show that He is God. He chose our ancestors and showed them how to make a Law. This was passed on from generation to generation until now. We remember our sacred areas because of this. (Garrawurra 1982)

This acceptance of traditional culture by the Yolngu Christians was not, however, totally uncritical. Djinyini told me, "God opens our eyes to see what is bad in our culture and what is good in our culture".

The universal God was seen to have given each particular ethnic group its customs, language, ceremonies and land. These were not believed to be in any way opposed to a commitment to Christianity, but could in fact be vehicles for it. The Movement was thus able to affirm people's Aboriginality and legitimize their continuation as a unique cultural group.

e. In the 1970s, following the hand-over of local authority functions by the mission to the elected Town Council, the role and authority of the Town Council was problematical. It was limited in its effectiveness because its authority did not gain general recognition and acceptance. The church's motivation in transferring administrative responsibility had to do with Western liberal notions about participatory democracy, the influence of Third World liberation theology and pressure from the Federal Government, rather than an understanding in depth of Yolngu political structures. The Yolngu did not share the belief and value system on which such institutions are based; notions about the rights of all individuals over the age of eighteen to equal say, and ideas about the representation by an individual on behalf of a group and the accountability that that implies, are examples.

There was a high degree of overlap between the leadership of the Movement and the leadership of the Town Council from 1980 to 1983. This may be seen as an attempt to provide some sort of religious legitimization for a secular authority as existed in pre-mission days, as well as during the mission era. It did not provide any lasting solution to the problems faced by the Council. The Councillors found themselves caught between the demands of the funding agencies on the one hand, and the expectations and values of their own society on the other. A number of key leaders of the Movement subsequently moved into Darwin to take up positions with the Uniting Church and the joint Anglican-Uniting Church training centre, Nungalinya College.

What we see in the Movement then, is an attempt to adjust ideology in a way that makes contemporary social realities comprehensible and provides a framework for social action, while leaving the Yolngu with some cultural integrity. Like other Aboriginal people, the Yolngu seek:

a decent union of their lives with ours, but on terms that let them preserve their own identity, not their inclusion willy-nilly in our scheme of things and a fake identity, but development within a new way of life that has the imprint of their own ideas. (Stanner 1969:28)

The Dreaming Reconsidered

We are now in a position to return to the problem of the relationship between The Dreaming and social change outlined above.

The Dreaming is expressed in the form of religious symbols. Such symbols have the following characteristics:

- a. they have to do with meaning, rather than fact;
- b. they deal with ultimate beliefs and values, the final criteria for truth and non-empirical realities;
- c. they are open-ended, multivocal, divergent in their fan of significance and tolerate paradox, rather than being narrowly circumscribed with clear, concise convergent definitions so as to exclude ambiguity;
- d. they appeal to the intuition, imagination and emotions, as well as conveying ideas;
- e. they are expressive and proliferate levels of association by analogy, rather than being discursive and clear-cut.

The data presented above on the changes in Yolngu religious ideology show that the religious system is not closed. While there is a consistency through time in its premises and internal logic, some of its central tenets have been adjusted in the face of challenges from European Australian society, as the data show.

Other recent writings on Aboriginal religion also portray The Dreaming as a good deal more open and flexible than was once supposed. According to Keen, who also worked with the Yolngu, "changes occur in agreed truths" (1978:95). In fact a wide range of group and individual interpretation is possible, even among people performing the same ceremony (Keen 1977:39, 1978:160,168). Similarly, John Taylor, who worked at Edward River, speaks of the "resilience" of the "totemic belief system" (1984:600-601). In the Kimberleys, Kolig discovered "changes in Aboriginal consciousness" (1981:4) and concludes that the Aboriginal people there have "reshaped their religious heritage" (*ibid.*:37) by "reinterpreting and manipulating myth" (*ibid.*:43). Speaking of the Mardudjura people, Tonkinson details the various sources of such new religious material (1978:112-115).

What we observe, then, is Aboriginal people incorporating new elements into their religious complex, and at the same time asserting that these are in fact ancient. It is worth noting that this has not only occurred post-contact. It must also have occurred in order for relatively new geographical features such as trees, shifting hills or sand bars at the mouth of rivers to become regarded as having been left in The Dreaming by the supernatural Beings.

Kolig's conclusion about all this is that the Aborigines are engaging in "a sort of mass self-deception" (1981:5). I suggest that another conclusion is possible. If we read Proposition D (above) as

D.1 "All those things which have always been are to be accepted as true",
then it follows that if
X has always been,
then
"X is to be accepted as true"
is a valid inference. But the reverse,
X is true,
therefore
X has always been,
does not follow logically, and Kolig's self-deception theory is correct.

I contend that Proposition D should equally be read as

D.2 "All those things which are accepted as true have always been."
Then it follows that if
X is to be accepted as true,
then
X has always been.

Because D.1 and D.2 are regarded as both true at the same time (i.e. the membership of the set of things which have always been, and the membership of the set of things which are true are exactly the same), then this would account for the readiness with which "new" phenomena are assigned to The Dreaming, be they myths and rituals taken over from other Aboriginal groups, trees, artifacts introduced by Macassans or Europeans, or for that matter, Christianity. That which is new and true is simply a revelation of what has always been.

The Dreaming is expressed in symbolic thought; in symbols which are multivocal and open-ended, and therefore open to different interpretations and adjustment. What Aboriginal culture does is to embrace "an ideology of non-change" (Tonkinson 1984/86:120), but from an anthropological point of view this is not at all the same thing as regarding The Dreaming as unchanged, unchanging and unchangeable.

Aboriginal people protect and uphold the unquestioned and final authority of The Dreaming as the foundation of social existence and the basis for personal meaning structures. Even though The Dreaming is regarded as having been laid down once for all by the supernatural beings, this in no way precludes an ability to come to grips with new experienced realities. These new aspects of the empirically experienced world may, if considered to be significant, come to be regarded as emanating from the supernatural beings in The Dreaming.

The Yolngu have sought to come to grips with the challenges presented by social change. The Dreaming, far from losing its authoritativeness in the new situation, has had its content considerably expanded in order to continue to provide a relevant ideological framework for social practice, and new ritual forms to impress these on the members of the society.

Far from preventing social change as some anthropologists have supposed, The Dreaming may in fact facilitate and enable it by maintaining a body of agreed symbols, as long as these symbols themselves are sufficiently open-ended to be subject to re-interpretation. The Yolngu may well have discovered what we have yet

to discover; how to maintain social cohesion and prevent disintegration in a world which is rapidly changing.

Notes

- 1 Elkin's criticism of Radcliffe-Brown's understanding of The Dreaming (1956:249) is therefore not entirely warranted.
- 2 The word "Yolngu" in this article refers to the people of north-eastern Arnhem Land. In the literature they have also been called Murngin (Warner), Wulamba (R. M. and C. H. Berndt) and Miwuyt (Shapiro).
- 3 Yolngu society is divided into two exogamous sets of clans. The two moieties thus formed are named Dhuwa and Yirritja. All natural phenomena are also classified as belonging to one or other of these moieties.
- 4 At the expense of a loss of concreteness, I have avoided the use of secret-sacred terminology and information in order to keep faith with the Yolngu.
- 5 The word "Balanda" is used in north-eastern Arnhem Land for people entirely of European descent. The term is of Macassan origin.

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