

The Incarnation of Nambirrirma

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When we first came to Angurugu on Groote Eylandt in 1969 my wife and I were welcomed with great enthusiasm by the Aboriginal people there. We had come, said Nandjiwarra of Amagula, to write their Bible. The Aborigines felt at a great disadvantage in debate with the local Church Missionary Society (C.M.S.) who proclaimed the written word of the Bible as original, unchanging, Revelation in contrast to Aboriginal belief which, they said, changed from generation to generation because it was passed on by word of mouth.

How could I live up to the Aborigines' expectation? I had no idea what an Aboriginal Bible might look like since there was no historical record from which to establish and evaluate their traditions. Now, nearly 20 years later, I do realize what *their* Bible would look like, and realize that, inadvertently, I actually wrote it in the form of my book *Tradition and Transformation* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies), though whether it is up to Aboriginal expectations is another matter. In it I set down the story of the man Nambirrirma, from his teachings derived a model of Aboriginal society, traced the connections inherent in the model eastward from Amagalyuagba (Bickerton Island) where the story is set to Groote Eylandt (for which there is no Aboriginal name) and westward to the adjacent mainland, afterwards showing something of the philosophic-religious underpinnings of the model in the songs of the local Aborigines. From here I went on to show how the model and its practice had been modified by Mission contact, in particular the role of Mission contact in causing some Aborigines to question traditional notions of life, death, social organization and so on.

What I didn't realize at the time was that the Nambirrirma event is a "Christ event". In fact, I didn't realize this until June of 1987 when I revisited Amagalyuagba and the site of Nambirrirma's incarnation. Prior to that I had treated the Nambirrirma story as a "myth", even though the Aborigines called it *amandungwa*, true, or *amamalya*, real, as distinct from *alawudawara* or relating to events of the Dreaming. It isn't the first time anthropological theory had overridden Aboriginal knowledge to its detriment but at least it wasn't done intentionally. The same cannot be said,

however, of the missionary endeavour — to the detriment not only of Aboriginal knowledge but also of Christianity.

I have treated the Nambirrirrma tale three times in print. The first, in *Tradition and Transformation*, simply set down the story verbatim as recorded from Galiyawa of the Wurramarra and, as I said, built from it a model of the Aboriginal traditional culture, using this thereafter as a standard against which to evaluate Aboriginal practice — as the Aborigines themselves did.

The second time was in *Dialectics in Tradition*, an Occasional Paper written for the Royal Anthropological Institute, in which I analysed the story in Lévi-Straussian fashion as dealing with the problem of how to maintain an abstract relation to one's own "country" in the face of production necessities which took you to other "countries" in association with their "owners". I dissected the story into geographic, territorial and sociological "bundles of relations", as Lévi-Strauss calls them, to show that a distinction between "owners" and "residents" constituted the main theme of the tale. An extreme situation was imagined only to be rejected: the existence of a potential claim to land by the "owner" of another territory who came to occupy a fishing and hunting area "owned" but unoccupied by others. The situation was mediated by Nambirrirrma who arrived to establish a rival claim to the hunting area, apparently through residence and fictive kinship ties. The ambivalence apparent here was, however, dissolved when Nambirrirrma sent for the true "owners" who returned to confirm their own claim as well as Nambirrirrma's status as a member — or at least an associate — of their "group".

The reason for the tale — how it came to originate — I posited, was the impending emigration of one of Amagalyuagba's four "groups" to Groote Eylandt. The "group" in question, the Warnungwadarrbalangwa, were, in fact, singled out for special attention in the story, having come to occupy land that another "group" "owned". It is they who were one of the two instructed by Nambirrirrma about the rules of relationship of the culture and, finally, they are the ones "forced" to provide Nambirrirrma with a wife by the other "groups". The emigration of one "group" where it takes four to make a system (the marriage rule being to marry the same group in alternate generations) would have constituted a crisis of considerable magnitude. My genealogies showed that such a migration had taken place in the mid to late 1800s, and that it was by the "group" singled out in the Nambirrirrma tale. The event did not result in a crisis in the culture, at least for long, however, as another "group" emigrated to Amagalyuagba from the adjacent mainland in turn. In my paper I even went so far as to speculate that Nambirrirrma might have been a Macassan visitor from Indonesia whose peculiar status actually allowed him to mediate between the Aborigines in the manner outlined in the story. The Macassans had been visiting the area for at least 200 years in search of trepang and pearl shell before their sojourns were finally banned by the Australian government in 1907. Nambirrirrma had arrived "on the rain"; the rainy season was "West Wind" time; West Wind time was when the Macassans arrived in their praus from Indonesia.

I treated the story a third time in my book *Life Before Genesis* (New York/Bern: Peter Lang) where I located the underlying logic of the tale. Though the story can be analysed in terms of binary distinctions such as "owner"/resident, north-west/south-east, these distinctions never really emerge as opposites — cause conflict — in the tale. The geographical distinctions, for instance, are neutralized by movements and counter movements; the "owner"/resident distinction is mediated by

Nambirrirma before it becomes a problem. In fact unless you knew in advance that claim to “country” on the basis of residence or occupation was unthinkable in this society, you would never even realize the *potential* problem with which the tale is dealing. Two men simply journey independently across Amagalyuagba, meet a man who has descended from the sky, work out how they’re related to him, affirm how they are related to others, bring back the people in whose “country” they are situated, work out some more interrelations, provide him with a wife, then go home. He has a son and later dies. The only way you would know that claim to “country” on the basis of residence or occupation is unthinkable is to know that claim on some other basis is sanctified. But nowhere is this mentioned in the text. In other words, the story contains a hidden context, lack of knowledge of which renders the tale undecipherable.

The logic of the tale runs: *mediation* → *weakeners* (removed) → *opposition* (begins to emerge) → *separation and withdrawal* (from the potential problem). This logic of thought proceeds from an already-mediated socio-cultural environment where differences have not so much been resolved as accommodated one to the other. In such an environment, mediators like Nambirrirma should be unnecessary. They are necessary, though, when the socio-cultural or institutional mediations in question are threatened, as they are here when land claims on the basis of residence or occupation begin to be asserted against those established on a theological basis. In *Life Before Genesis* I reiterated my previous point about Nambirrirma possibly representing a Macassan visitor and about the story originating in the circumstances of the emigration of one of the Bickerton “groups” to Groote Eylandt.

I returned to Amagalyuagba in 1986 and again in 1987. I was taken to the spot where Nambirrirma “sat down” (another name for him is Nanarrbarrenga, “he who sat down”). The place wasn’t where I had put it on my map in *Tradition and Transformation*, or in my *Occasional Paper*. It was deep in the bay rather than over toward the eastern side. I had mapped this and the surrounding sites at a distance from the mouth of the bay in 1969. Now, whether the site was intentionally misplaced or whether I recorded it in the wrong place because of the distance, I can’t be sure. But I never knew old Galiyawa, who was with me at the time, to lie and I did have other places in the bay somewhat skewed out of position to the east.

In any event, as a check I walked the places in question with an Aboriginal companion in 1986. I was taken to Nambirrirma’s landing place as a matter of course, without even my asking. This puzzled me somewhat considering the overwhelming importance attached to the spot in 1969. I also learned that the place where he sat down is not only the place where he is buried but also where his son is buried. The spot consists of a depression in the ground, back from the beach, in which are situated a number of old bailer shells, said to be those from which Nambirrirma and his son drank water. Women are allowed to see the site but not to enter the depression. We lit fires as we approached, or rather I did in my capacity as “boss” over the Wurramara man accompanying me within whose country the site is situated. The Wurramara are the “group” to whom I am “married”. This was done explicitly to make the place safe for the Wurramara man whose spirit was in danger of being “pulled” into the site as we approached. The smoke temporarily clears the area of much of its spiritual essence.

When I returned in 1987 I did so with a European friend from Darwin, John McLaren, whom I had invited over for a holiday. I thought it would be interesting

to show him the site myself while we were on Bickerton. We set off down the beach, but it wasn't long before I realized I had lost my bearings. I wasn't sure exactly where the site was located. After unsuccessfully searching about on the higher ground back of the beach for a bit I was about to call it quits and went back to the beach to meet John. I was embarrassed to say the least. As we walked along the beach I chanced to turn and look out at the bay. I funny feeling suddenly swept over me. There was a certain unreality to what I was seeing; as though there were another dimension to the bay I had never seen before. And then I realized that I was at a point of perfect symmetry. John realized it too.

"This is where it is," I said.

I turned and walked directly inland up off the beach and there was the site — the depression and the bailer shells. I looked up to the escarpment, now in front of me, and then turned and looked back at the bay. The same feeling swept over me again. I can't really put it into words. But this was a special place.

When we returned to the outstation, Milya:gburra, I took out my copy of *Tradition and Transformation* and showed John the Nambirrirrma story. Then I turned to the two drawings of Bickerton Island executed for me by Galiyawa and "Crosby" Wurraramara.

Immediately John said, "That one was drawn from that spot we were just at on the beach," pointing at Galiyawa's representation of Bickerton as a "horseshoe". I had realized the previous year that Galiyawa had drawn Bickerton Island as the *water* of the bay and added the inland "countries" as islands around it. But I hadn't realized that it had been drawn from the perspective of someone looking out from the place where Nambirrirrma had sat down.

"It is the only way someone would see the curvature of the bay without the advantage of an aerial perspective," John had said.

I looked at "Crosby's" drawing beside it. It consisted of two straight lines in the form of a cross with a curved line extending from the focal point to the north-east and a straight one extending from the bottom of the vertical line directly west. Dots on the line marked "totemic" sites, I had been told. But it had always puzzled me that different sites on the same line sometimes belonged to different "groups". Now I realized: the focal point was the place where Nambirrirrma had sat down. The lines traced the various episodes in the tale. Nambirrirrma *constructed* physical space for these old men. Lamentably, they had now passed away. I couldn't check it out and deepen my understanding; but then there was no need to. I now *knew*.

It was then that it occurred to me to take the Nambirrirrma tale at face value, forgetting about the theory of the Macassan visitor, about the possible historical context of the story, about searching for *any* materialist explanation. What had happened? A man had come down from the sky, on the rain, to two men who recognized him as a different kind of person, though one speaking the same language as they did and knowledgeable about their culture. This man set down the law, then he married, had a son, died and was buried. As I had found out since, the son also married but had no children and died. As in Nambirrirrma's case his body was placed on a platform and the bones buried at the site.

Taken at face value the story follows this course: *nothingness* → *being* → *relationship*. Expressed even more abstractly: *anti-thesis* → *thesis* → *plurality* or *complementarity*. This, as we'll see is also the course of the "Christ event".

I hadn't bothered to translate the word at the time, but at the point in the tale when the two Aborigines were puzzling over where this stranger had come from, Galiyawa had inserted, "*nalarra wurragina God dugwa*". This is, "perhaps he fell from God". I took this as Galiyawa's own embellishment, something he had picked up from the missionaries, though he spoke very little English. To that point in the story debate had centred on whether Nambirrirrma had come from the adjacent mainland or from north-east Arnhem Land, indicating that if he was a different kind of person, he was at least a different kind of *Aboriginal* person (there is no mention in the story that he might have been Macassan). Apart from this, it never occurred to me to have the *English* in his story translated, or what that translation might reveal. When I returned in 1987, though, I asked his son, Murrabuda, what his father would have meant by "God" in the context of the story.

"He meant Nambirrirrma is *amawurena*", he said. There was no English translation really. The missionaries at Angurugu, however, have translated *amawurena* as "holy spirit". "Jesus Christ" is Jesus and "God" is God. "God" is also translated as "Nungwa (Father)-Nenugwa (Son)-*amawurena* (Holy Spirit)". From my point of view the missionaries have selected the right terms but have put them back to front. But before I can explain what I mean by this we will have to examine the content of Nambirrirrma's Revelation and compare it to Jesus'. To do this I will have to retell Nambirrirrma's story, at least in outline form, and to do this I will first have to specify the "hidden context" behind it, the implicit meaning of the concepts it contains. The reason why I used quotes around the English terms "country", "owner", "group" (and elsewhere, "clan", among other words), is that these English concepts fail to do justice to the Aboriginal reality.

The Nambirrirrma tale begins, "*Wurramarrba nalegarna augwalyuwa angaluba...*". It isn't enough simply to translate this as «a man from the Wurramarrba group/country/totem was going fishing from this way». The term "Wurramarrba" is virtually untranslatable in simple, or for that matter, complex English, that is, by terms like "group" / "country" / "totem". To say it means "They people of *amarrba*", which it does, doesn't help much, because you still have to translate *amarrba*. *Amarrba* can mean the east-south-east wind; it can also mean "blow holes" in the cliffs by the sea through which the wind whistles and the water sprays. The term connotes *arrerrerra*, the burnt smell carried by the wind in the aftermath of a fire. This, in turn, connotes a place of the same name on the south point of Bickerton Island. The place brings to mind a whole constellation of other places connected with wind and fire. These, together, connote the Wurramarrba people. "Wurramarrba people" in turn connote these places, *are* these places. Their spiritual identity originates in the Wurramarrba *numera:nawiya* ("grandfathers") whose spiritual identities originated in and returned to these places. Finally, place and spiritual identity merge into *amawurena*.

Galiyawa is a particular manifestation of a particular brand of *amawurena*. At one level the *amawurena* is of Wurramarrba places and people as a whole. At another the *amawurena* is of particular sites and of particular people who are Wurramarrba.

Before people began singing a person's spirit permanently to the Land of the Dead, his or her *amawurena* would reappear in his or her grandchild. (*Numeraraga* is "grandfather" as well as "grandson", but also refers to anyone in one's own "Clan?", "Countrywo/men?", "People?", two generations above and below oneself whose mothers are in one's own mother's "Clan?...etc.").

The essential point is this: the land is imbued with Eternity; so are People and Natural Species. *Amawurena* impregnates them all. *Amawurena* is something you can't touch, you can't see, you can't feel, but it's there. Sometimes you can see it in your mind. It's like a shadow in your brain. It can take the shape of country, of natural species, of *numerarga*. It assumes different form in different countries, in different species, in different *numerarga*. It is transmitted through a kinship link — father to children — sanctified by marriage. A differentiated part of it is in each of us in both an individual and a collective sense. Everyone in his or her own collectivity has a differentiated part of it as does the collectivity as such. This is what makes us all "like" each other, that is, "alike in our differences". In its differentiated form, *amawurena* is what we worship.

We in the same company are different to a degree, not kind. For instance, "smoke" and "fire" are also given to the Durila and the Warnungamagadjeragba besides the Wurramarrba, but in a metaphorical rather than a literal sense (which I will not discuss here). This renders the three, "one company", *like* people of the same "Clan?..."

There are four such "companies" of "Clans?..." in the Groote Eylandt area, and there are four "Clans?..." on Bickerton, each in a different "company". Besides the Wurramarrba, the other three on Bickerton are the Wurramara ("they of the rain from the rainbow which brought Nambirrirrma to earth", "of the rock holes which catch and store the rain", "of the frogs which inhabit the holes" etc.), the Warnungwadarrbalangwa ("they of the country linked by the *wurramugwa*, or spirits of the dead who travelled down the west coast of Bickerton" etc.), and the Wurrengilyangba ("they of *wurruwa:ba*, or parrot, country which was visited by Yandarranga, or Central Hill" etc.) on the eastern side of the island. It was the Warnungwadarrbalangwa who migrated to Groote Eylandt, though retaining jurisdiction over their Land on Bickerton. The mainland People who replaced them were the Warnungamadada (from the place *armadadi* there), who were given Land on the north coast of Bickerton, likely a part belonging to the Wurrengilyangba.

The Nambirrirrma tale assumes a knowledge of all this and much more — much too much for me to delve into it here. It forms the "hidden context" of the tale. With it in mind you can tell what the Nambirrirrma tale is about without its being mentioned explicitly in the tale. Without it in mind you will have no idea what the tale is about. With only *some* of it in mind, you will misunderstand parts of it. You can see how it would be possible to keep the meaning of such a tale secret, without denying anyone the right to hear it.

Given a knowledge of context, it is possible to locate the nature and significance of the *relationships* that Nambirrirrma establishes amongst the four principle Bickerton "Clans?..."

Nambirrirrma begins his conversation with the Wurramarrba and the Warnungwadarrbalangwa men (actually the proper way to refer to these men in the singular would be Namarrba and Nenungwadarrbalangwa) by asking them the whereabouts of the people in whose Land he has appeared and with whom he has identified himself. They are on the other side of the island in the Land of their "mother", that is, in the Land of the Wurrengilyangba, says the Wurramarrba man. The Warnungwadarrbalangwa man now points out to Nambirrirrma his own Land on the west coast of Bickerton. Nambirrirrma then asks the whereabouts of his Land and is shown by the Wurramarrba man who also points out the whereabouts of

Wurramarrba land. What is established from all this is that *no-one* is in their own Land, not even Nambirrirrma technically-speaking, and that there is a reason why at least one People is in another's Land.

From the information available at this point Nambirrirrma concludes that the Wurramarrba are his "mother-in-law's" People, his (potential) "wife's mother's" People. The Wurramarrba man agrees and tells Nambirrirrma that the Warnungwadarrbalangwa are his (the Wurramarrba man's) "wife's" People. Nambirrirrma retorts that this means he calls them *N/daberaga* (*N* is the noun class for males, *d* for females), that is, also "wife's" People but in the succeeding generation. This establishes that the Wurramarrba and Wurramara marry the same People in alternate generations and do not marry each other. Recalling that the Wurramara are in their "mother's" People's Land, we (Nambirrirrma) know that they marry the Wurrenggilyangba when they are not marrying the Warnungwadarrbalangwa in alternate generations. It follows that the Wurrenggilyangba and the Warnungwadarrbalangwa marry the same people in alternate generations — that is, the Wurramara and Wurramarrba — but not each other. Nambirrirrma correctly marries a Warnungwadarrbalangwa woman, as arranged by the Wurramarrba, his "mother-in-law's" People.

Though there is much more to the story than this — and not a few puzzles to decipher — this summary will suffice for our purposes. Two principles are at issue here: the first is that people can occupy Lands they do not "own" (hold primary jurisdiction over) so long as they are in a specified "alliance" relationship to the "owners" of that Land. The second is that even though resident in someone else's Land they still retain "ownership" of their own Land elsewhere. This is, in fact, the point Nambirrirrma, the story, is trying to impress on the other actors and the audience. The "specified alliance relationship" in question is *marriage*, past or present. Marriage places a part of one Land/People in the form of a "brother/sister", in another Land/People as spouse, and vice versa without loss of integrity of either.

In sum, the model Nambirrirrma is establishing is of four abstract, eternal jurisdictions, each seemingly autonomous and independent but bound to one another through having placed, or being in the process of placing, a material part — a manifestation — of one in the other. People move in space, taking their "jurisdiction" with them all the while leaving it behind to come home to. This is what being imbued with *amaawurena* accomplishes. At a deeper level again, this is what the story is "about". This is what Nambirrirrma is "on about".

The story is ironic in its ending: Nambirrirrma had a son named Badjuini by this Warnungwadarrbalangwa (properly Dadungwadarrbalangwa) woman. Badjuini in turn married, but *also* to a Dadungwadarrbalangwa woman. This is "too close", though not so close — *warnigarangbidja* (wife's mother and husband's father in same Land and generation) — that it would be prohibited. It is close because it repeats an alliance with the same Land in consecutive generations. It is ironic because Badjuini's father Nambirrirrma has just laid down the law that one marry the same land in alternate generations. But there is a hint in the story that a close marriage of the type contracted by Badjuini had already occurred just before Nambirrirrma arrived on the scene "to straighten things out": in the tale, the Wurramarrba man calls the Warnungwadarrbalangwa man "wife's brother", indicating that he is married into this Land and implying that Nambirrirrma should really be marrying Wurrenggilyangba.

The significance of the ending to my informants as well as to myself, is that it introduces an element of pessimism into what appeared up to this point to be a successful exercise in social engineering. Once Nambirrirrma the prophet has departed the scene, it isn't long before ordinary people begin backsliding. It turned out that Badjuini and his wife have no children — a punishment for backsliding my informants said. There is then recognition that such mistakes should not continue. In their ability to judge right in the face of wrong, there is yet hope for mere mortals.

What is also significant about the Nambirrirrma tale/event, is that there is no mention at all in it of so-called "totemic" beings, Dreaming Creatures. Nambirrirrma "happened" in a different sense from Yandarranga, Central Hill, from Yimaduwaiya, Stingray. More significant — I can find no other example of it in the culture — is the fact that Nambirrirrma belongs to one Land and People but speaks to all. He is simultaneously particular and general, self and other, a part and the whole. Though I cannot go into it here, in this aspect Nambirrirrma represents the basis of the Aborigines' system of classification: the way they order the human and natural environment as well as their symbolic culture. In short, Nambirrirrma embodies "truth" in all its aspects.

The sequence of that Truth is *Holy Spirit* → *Father-Son*. Father-Son is the means by which Holy Spirit is transmitted and made manifest in humans over time (though the means could equally be, and in some parts of Australia actually is, Mother-Daughter).

In my book *Tradition and Transformation*, I went on from a presentation of the Nambirrirrma tale and a construction out of it of the ideal model of Aboriginal inter-relationships to show how Bickerton Island culture linked to others to the east and west on Groote Eylandt and the adjacent mainland respectively. I traced "mythological linkages" between People and their Lands in the region to discover a coherent pattern predicated on a base of four, the base of the system on Bickerton. The Bickerton Wurramara, for instance, were linked through the Dreaming travels of Rainbow Snake to the Warnungamagula and Warnindilibala of Groote and the mainland respectively and through the journeys of Hawk to the (now extinct) Warnungmurugulya of Groote. The Wurrengilyangba of Bickerton were linked to the Ngalmi of the adjacent mainland, as well as to the Warnunamadada, formerly of the mainland and latterly of Bickerton and now Groote, and to the Warnungangwurugwerigba of Groote, by the travels of Central Hill. The Wurramarra were linked to a different cohort of People and Lands by different Beings, as were the Warnungwadarrbalangwa by yet another cohort. None of the Bickerton People, save the recently arrived Warnungamadada, however, were mythologically linked to each other.

Mythological linkage is linkage *in* myth by symbol exchange. Here a cultural part of one's "abstract eternal jurisdiction" is placed in the other and vice versa without loss of integrity of either. From this the material fact of trade flows. People recreate these linkages in the context of ceremonies and in the process obtain goods they cannot, or will not, obtain locally. By contrast, from the marriage exchange flows hunting and foraging activities. ("Exchange", though, is perhaps not the right word to be using here, implying as it does a negotiable process. The relations I am referring to flow from the eternal and immutable.) How a part of one jurisdiction is placed in the other is to me one of the most intriguing and beautiful aspects of the whole culture.

The Beings in question, as they move, leave something of themselves behind and deposit something of themselves where they pause to Create (albeit a slightly different something from what they left behind). In this they both differentiate People and Lands from one another *and* define them as “companions”, “like People in the same Land” and therefore “unmarriageable”. These kinds of inter-jurisdictional linkages, if they are not so intense that they actually carve out for you a jurisdiction of your own within someone else’s Land, impose a qualification on the exercise of your own jurisdiction as such, allowing others at least some say in certain of your affairs.

Humans, by the way, do a somewhat similar thing to these Dreaming Beings when they move; that is they leave parts of themselves, *amawurena*, in their wake. This is why the songmen (Song — Tune more than Word — is the human creation most closely resembling Spirit) revisit and smoke the places where a deceased person has lived during his or her lifetime: it is to gather up the “stuff” they have left behind and deposit it in life’s after-dimension along with the spirit of the deceased as such. We can treat all this merely as “religious belief”; or we can say “it is true”. Whatever, we can all admit that there is awareness here of a profound sociological truth. We *are* the sum of our experiences of the others we encounter as we move through life. Aboriginal theology, at the very least, sanctifies this truth, indeed, predicates a whole way of life upon it. This brings us to the question of the relationship of Nambirrirrma to Jesus. No matter what your religious beliefs, or lack thereof, we can all agree that Jesus is about relationship to “other”.

I can hardly do justice to the complexities and subtleties of the story of Jesus — the “Christ event” — in these few pages. However, I am saved some space by the fact that I don’t have to retell the story. It should be familiar to everyone. As I said, the “Christ event” too follows the *anti-thesis* → *thesis* → *plurality*, or, nothingness → being → relationship scenario. However, Jesus is moved this way twice, the initial sequence ending with his death at the hands of his enemies whom he loved. The second begins with his crucifixion, proceeds to his resurrection and reaffirmation of his relationship with his disciples, and ends with his ascension. To me, the death and resurrection part of the sequence are significant for their form, not their content. There may be many more ways to be “nothing” and then “being” than to die as an adult and then be reborn as an adult three days later. To me, what is important is that a statement is being made about the necessity of transcending our material circumstances or limitations. There may be many ways to do so other than by actual death and rebirth.

In the context of “sequence”, then, death and resurrection/nothingness and being, are equivalent sets of terms. Nambirrirrma, insofar as he represents an Incarnation of *amawurena*, is structurally equivalent to Jesus (he is also physically equivalent insofar as, like the resurrected Jesus, he appears as a “different kind of person” to those around him, to those who should know him). In the context of “sequence”, “crucifixion” and “ascension” in the “Christ event”/story are equivalent terms. To me, their occurrence in the “Christ event”/story, like the Badjuini part of the Nambirrirrma tale, are significant as a statement of pessimism, a recognition of the odds against permanently establishing “the Kingdom of Heaven” here on earth, a recognition of the vulnerability of, in Jesus’ case, Love. What were the grounds for this pessimism in Jesus’ case?

Those closest to Jesus in kinship/ethnic/religious and even class terms, those we would have expected to love him the most, to be the most receptive to his message, the Jews (apart from the disciples, though in the end there were ambivalences even here) loved him least, rejected his message and engineered his death. Those farthest away in these terms, those we would have expected to love him least, to be the least receptive to his message, non-Jewish Gentile pagans and even Romans, came to love him most, were most receptive to his message. (Here we locate another parallel with Nambirrirrma: like his Aboriginal counterpart, Jesus belonged to one group yet spoke to all.) The other ground for pessimism is predicated on the theoretical knowledge that *anti-thesis* → *thesis* is the path to Redemption. This is not to be interpreted as implying that death as such is the path to everlasting peace (though parts of the New Testament can be read this way). It is more that the *threat* of death prompts people to behave toward each other in Redemptive-like ways. The Jews under Roman rule should have been a model of *pluralism* in their own internal dealings, a Redemptive vanguard, a lesson in Love. Yet they engineered the death of one of their own who did nothing more than profess Love as a lesson. If such is the fate of Love amongst the oppressed, what chance amongst those *unoppressed*?

Nambirrirrma was not put to death by his fellows, own or other, but he did die, though nothing is made of this in the tale. It is his son's life that ends on a pessimistic note. What is the basis for this relative optimism compared to Jesus? Nambirrirrma's was an *institutional* solution to the problems of his People; Jesus' solution was personal. Why Jesus did not go the institutional route we may never know. Perhaps he was so appalled by the idea of a Chosen People in a Promised Land that he failed to see how the idea could be pluralized on a world-wide basis. Perhaps he realized that on theoretical grounds even the idea of Chosen Peoples in promised Lands was bound, in the end, to fail. All we do know for certain is that there is no mention of Peoples and Lands in the singular or plural in the New Testament; there is virtually no mention even of the appropriate religious institution within which Jesus's ideas could be contained and continued, that is, of a Church. "All" there is, is "Love one another as I have loved you" (John 13:34). How — or whether — you generalize and apply this beyond the personal is apparently up to you.

Jesus' first appearance, his birth and life on earth thereafter, is, we might say, low on "incarnation", high on "relationship". His second appearance, after his crucifixion, is high on "incarnation", low on "relationship". By this I mean that, in the first instance, Jesus is a manifestation of "God" but born of a human agent, Mary, if not Joseph. In his words and his deeds thereafter Jesus, however, exemplifies Love in the sense of concern for "other", to the absolute point of giving up his life, not for those who love him, as we might expect, but for those who hate him. His second appearance is directly out of death itself without the intervention or mediation of a human agent. His words and deeds on this occasion are, however, minimal. Save for a brief sojourn with the disciples, more to establish his Presence than to re-relate and reiterate, Jesus departs, somewhat hastily to my mind, for Heaven.

By contrast, Nambirrirrma appears but once and this appearance is both high on "incarnation" and high on "relationship". He doesn't require a human mediator to be brought into human form. If anything, Nambirrirrma is born through "country": the bay in the depths of which he originated is called *mulgwa* or womb by the Aborigines and even assumes the appropriate physical shape.

Given the structural or sequential similarity of the "Christ event" to the Nambirrirrma event, were their respective Revelations also structurally similar

(disregarding the question of the level to which they were to be applied)? What was this thing Jesus called Love? How were "I" and "You" (to be) related?

Jesus modelled his Love for others, theirs for each other, on his own with his Father's. In John (quotations are from the *Revised Standard Version* "Common Bible") we find him saying:

14:10 Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me...

And again in 14:20:

In that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

There are many more references of like kind, almost all expressing relationships in the form of overlap and concurrence — that is, not quite "unity" (if unity were your intent, why separate "you" and "me" at all?), and yet not quite separation either. The *one* (I think) exception to this rule is revealing. Again, John:

15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you.

The passage is followed almost immediately by another of like kind:

15:11 These things I have spoken to you, that *my joy may be in you*, and that your joy may be full.

The italics are mine. Unlike the rest, these passages locate a type of relationship in which *a part of one* is placed in the other, as in the teachings of Nambirrirrma and in Aboriginal culture in general. *But there is no vice versa* in these passages. No part of you comes *back to "me"*, Jesus; no part of "you" comes to "me" independently of Jesus. It is rather implied that "you" and "I" merge together through common affiliation with Jesus. Not only is unity still implicit, then, but so is hierarchy. Relationships, even of Love, involve *hierarchy?*, one *over* the other?:

14:6 I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.

But, again, as in the language of relationship, there is ambivalence here too: does *through me* mean "me" as a person or what "I" represent? It could be said that Jesus represents "God" and "God" is Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Trinity is plural. Could this mean the path to Redemption is through something like *amawurena*, Spirit in differentiated form? Again, there is a problem. The Christian Trinity runs backwards, as if still building Towers of Babel, still trying to reach transcendent Truth from the ground, from material existence, up.

My point is that in the New Testament there is but a hint of a type of relationship that appears full blown in Nambirrirrma. The same hint occurs at the beginning of

the *Book of Genesis* too, likewise an unreciprocated part of one in the other: Eve is made from a part of Adam but in her attempt to reciprocate she gives Adam, not a part of her self, but one thing for them both to share — the forbidden fruit. For this they are both expelled and doomed to a life of unity as man and wife [*sic*], a Chosen People and so on.

No matter what your religious beliefs, or lack thereof, you must admit that there appears to be something in Nambirrirma, in Aboriginal culture, that clarifies, indeed, completes what is the crucial point of the Christian message. Though I cannot do this issue full justice here, I can at least outline the kind of marriage that is possible between them.

Assuming True Love is of the “part of one in the other and vice versa without loss of integrity of either” kind, that is, without hierarchy; and assuming also that this clarification/completion is acceptable to Christians, we could say that all that is lacking in Christianity is a vision of Love in institutional form. This would be some means of predisposing people to act *as if* they loved one another whether or not they actually did so. Aboriginal culture, for its part, though possessing these institutional means, seems to lack a positive, personal, concept of Love. Love seems directed more at *amawurena* than at people. The difference between a European and an Aborigine, I am told by an Aboriginal friend, is that the European sees a beautiful tree and finds it pleasing to the eye; the Aborigine loves the tree. S/he sees in it shades of differentiation, another dimension reflective of eternity and humanity’s proper place in the scheme of things. This is, appropriately, the object of veneration and Love.

It is said that fear is what held traditional Aboriginal society together. My theory predicts that threat has “redemptive” consequences. Perhaps Aboriginal people were aware of this and manipulated the knowledge to a social end. Christian Love transcends this — seems to suggest that, ultimately, a life built on threat has no future. Add this Love to Aboriginal society and you subtract what Christians seem to find most repelling about Aboriginal culture: the violent aspects of its ceremonial life.

It is said that Christianity can barely hold itself together, let alone a society. Add institutional means predicated on Aboriginal principles of relationship to Christianity and it might just transcend this problem — transcend Christianity’s own brand of pessimism — and take us a step closer to its goal of everlasting life (of the human species on earth). Add this to Christianity and you subtract what is most repugnant about Christianity to Aborigines (and many non-Aboriginal people): its seeming irrelevance to life as lived *on earth*.

But then were such a marriage effected, we would no longer be talking about “Christianity” or “Aboriginal culture”. We would be witnessing a wholly new phenomenon — something which, viewed from within the Judeo-Christian tradition, would be simultaneously pre-Hebrew and post-Christian, something which would satisfy the “religious” and the “secular” alike.

What might the “institutional means” in question look like in 1988? As far as form goes, the closest analogy I can think of is Citizenship in a State conceived as the boundary defining its geographical limits rather than the material content it contains, whether this be ethnicity, class, or ideology. Allegiance in such a State, then, would be to “contentless form” in the *amawurena* or “God as Holy Spirit, Father-Son/Mother-Daughter” sense. Citizenship would, like *amawurena*, become something

you take with you while leaving it at home. Away, it would be what defines you as "guest" rather than "interloper"; at home it would be what defines you as "host" rather than "autocrat". In such a State, boundaries would not be barriers. They would be there but in permeable form, allowing matter to flow between them in a controlled way.

As far as relations between forms go, the closest analogy I can think of is The Uniting Church in Australia, a Church with a history very similar to the one I am most familiar with, the (less appropriately named) United Church of Canada. In Australia in 1977 the Congregational, Methodist and Presbyterian Churches (though not all their congregations), dissolved differences of content into differences of form to become The Uniting Church in Australia, much as they had done in Canada half a century before. The differences of content which had heretofore divided them were largely doctrinal and bounded at the Church level; the differences of form into which these were dissolved were largely institutional and bounded at the congregational or parish level. Only now the boundaries weren't barriers. Though membership in The Uniting Church was predicated on membership in a local congregation whose identity as "Methodist", "Presbyterian" or "Congregational" might well be preserved, movement *between* congregations was now possible either on a temporary or permanent basis. Now none of this should ever have been necessary. This is the way the Universal Church *should* work. That it does not is partly the legacy of Jesus' silence on the matter.

Paragraph 2 of The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union*, gropes toward an understanding of what he might have meant, had he commented on the matter of Church organization:

The Uniting Church lives and works within the faith and unity of the One Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. She recognizes that she is related to other Churches in ways which give expression, however partially, to that unity in faith and mission. Recalling the Ecumenical Councils of the early centuries, she looks forward to a time when the faith will be further elucidated and the Church's unity expressed in similar Councils. She thankfully acknowledges that the uniting Churches were members of the World Council of Churches and other ecumenical bodies, and she will seek to maintain such membership. She remembers the special relationship which obtained between the several uniting Churches and other Churches in similar traditions, and will continue to learn from their witness and be strengthened by their fellowship. She is encouraged by the existence of United Churches in which these and other traditions have been incorporated, and wishes to learn from their experience. She believes Christians in Australia are called to bear witness to a unity of faith and life in Christ which transcends cultural and economic, national and racial boundaries, and to this end she commits herself to seek special relationships with Churches in Asia and the Pacific...

"Transcends" national boundaries? Perhaps it should read, "bear witness to a plurality of faiths and lives in Jesus in which boundaries are transcendent". Perhaps in these terms, not only the Church, but also Church and State could be reconciled

(even combined). But then this reading isn't Jesus speaking; it is Nambirrirrma. However, paragraph 3 of The Uniting Church's *Basis of Union* does pave the way for this clarification/completion:

...God in Christ has given to men in the Church the Holy Spirit as pledge and foretaste of that coming reconciliation and renewal which is the end in view for the whole creation. The Church's call is to serve that end: to be a fellowship of reconciliation, a body within which the diverse gifts of its members are used for the building up of the whole, an instrument through which Christ may work and bear witness to himself. The Church lives between the time of Christ's death and resurrection and the final consummation of all things which he will bring; she is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here she does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come...

How is "one to come"? Contributors to the journal *Nelen Yubu* (see, for instance, the Autumn 1981 issue) still debate whether or not the Aborigines have a concept of the transcendence as if Christianity represents the standard against which others should be judged on this matter. Don Richardson's book, *Eternity in their Hearts* (Ventura, California: Regal Books), is currently the rage in "enlightened" mission circles because it does appear to give Aboriginal people (everywhere) their due by positing the concept of monotheism in their midst, as if monotheism is an advanced theological concept. But what if it's monotheism (and its paired opposite polytheism) that's primitive: a personalized "God", a telescoping or hierarchical projection from material existence? Be that as it may, such "respect" is actually debasing: non-Christian people are only being granted monotheism so as to prepare them for the Gospel of Christ. In the end, Aboriginal people are once again reduced to a primitive version of ourselves. What if Jesus merely prepared the way for the Revelations of Nambirrirrma? What if the last really are first and first last?

James Haire, now Professor of New Testament at Queensland University, writing in *Reformed World* (Vol. 38, No. 7), on the meeting between Christianity, pre-literary religions and Islam in eastern Indonesia, writes:

The Christ Event can only truly be present as the same if differently expressed in different cultures... The Church in the acceptance of the Christ Event within its particular culture in each place and yet in the wrestling with that which stands against its own particular acceptance in each place is not called to produce common semantic dogmatics, but rather to be in theological reflection and action, on the one hand, indigenous, catholic and ecumenical and, on the other reformed and yet reforming. (p. 383)

It is but a short step from here to recognition that the "Christ Event" may be roses by different names in many cultures. With recognition of the fact, "we" become subject to the scrutiny of the "other" as well as "they" to "us"; "acceptance" now becomes a mutual, that is a Truly Christian, affair.