

# **ABORIGINAL SPIRITUALITY: A BASELINE FOR INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES DEVELOPMENT IN AUSTRALIA**

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

Aboriginal spirituality is the philosophical basis of a culturally derived and holistic concept of “personhood,” the nature of relationships to others and to the natural world and the core of Indigenous Knowledges for the country and the people. It is crucial for applications in academic research and all areas of Aboriginal and Australian development. It is defined by privileging the voices of Aboriginal people, demonstrating how Aboriginal spirituality is exemplified in everyday life and cultural expression. Indigenous knowledges have informed ways of being, and thus well-being, since before the time of colonization, when subsequently demeaned and devalued. As well as informing about appropriate ways of living with country and other people, Aboriginal knowledges stand in particular relationship of critical dialogue with introduced knowledges, sometimes oppressive, thus providing an important position from which to develop new ways forward.

La spiritualité autochtone est le fondement philosophique d'un concept holistique à caractère culturel d'« identité individuelle », de la nature des liens avec les autres et avec le monde naturel et des éléments fondamentaux des connaissances indigènes. Elle joue un rôle décisif dans la conception des recherches universitaires et dans tous les secteurs de développement des Autochtones et de l'Australie. Elle est définie en privilégiant les voix des peuples autochtones qui démontrent comment la spiritualité autochtone se manifeste dans la vie quotidienne et l'expression culturelle. Les connaissances indigènes ont une influence sur les façons d'être, et donc sur le bien-être, depuis bien avant l'ère de la colonisation, mais elles ont été dévaluées et rabaissées. En plus de proposer un mode de vie approprié avec le pays et les autres, les connaissances autochtones établissent des liens particuliers de dialogue critique avec les connaissances venues d'ailleurs, parfois oppressives, et occupent ainsi une position importante qui permet d'élaborer de nouveaux moyens de progresser.

*We are really sorry for you people. We cry for you because you haven't got meaning of culture in this country. We have a gift we want to give you. We keep getting blocked from giving you that gift. We get blocked by politics and politicians. We get blocked by media, by process of law. All we want to do is come out from under all of this and give you this gift. And it's the gift of pattern thinking. It's the culture which is the blood of this country, of Aboriginal groups, of the ecology, of the land itself.*

-- David Mowaljarlai, senior Lawman of the Ngarinyin people of the west Kimberley, addressing a gathering of White people in his country. (ABC Radio 1995)

*Many Australians understand that Aboriginal people have a special respect for nature.... That they have a strong sense of community.... That we are people who celebrate together. There is another special quality of my people that I believe is the most important. It is our most unique gift. It is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to our fellow Australians. In our language, this quality is called Dadirri. This is the gift that Australians are thirsting for.*

-- Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann (Farrelly 2003)

### **What is Aboriginal Spirituality?**

Indigenous spirituality derives from a philosophy that establishes the wholistic notion of the interconnectedness of the elements of the earth and the universe, animate and inanimate, whereby people, the plants and animals, landforms and celestial bodies are interrelated. How this interconnectedness exists and why it is important to keep all things in healthy interdependence is expressed and encoded in sacred stories or "myths." These creation stories describe the shaping and developing of the world as people know and experience it through the activities of powerful creator ancestors. These ancestors created order out of chaos, form out of formlessness, life out of lifelessness and, as they did so, they established the ways in which all things should live so as to maintain order and sustainability. The creation ancestors thus laid down not only the foundations of all life, but also what people had to do to maintain their part of this interconnectedness – the Law. The Law ensures that each person knows his or her relationships and responsibilities for other people (their kin), for country including water sources, landforms and the species, and for their ongoing relationship with the ancestor spirits themselves.

As part of the research for a project on the connections between Indigenous well-being and cultural heritage in 2006, a focus group of

members of the Aboriginal community in inner-city Redfern, New South Wales, identified “spirituality” as the foremost factor affecting their well-being. This group was representative of the most urbanized contemporary Aboriginal people in Australia and the summary of their definition of spirituality indicates the enduring nature of this belief system despite more than 200 years of colonial rule in NSW:

Spirituality is a feeling, with a base in connectedness to the past, ancestors, and the values that they represent, for example, respect for elders, a moral/ethical path. It is about being in an Aboriginal cultural space, experiencing community and connectedness with land and nature including proper nutrition and shelter. Feeling good about oneself, proud of being an Aboriginal person. It is a state of being that includes knowledge, calmness, acceptance and tolerance, balance and focus, inner strength, cleansing and inner peace, feeling whole, an understanding of cultural roots and “deep wellbeing.” (Grieves 2006a: 52)

### **Creation – “Originating from Eternity”**

The basis of this philosophy is the idea of creation, the time when powerful creator spirits or spirit ancestors produced the life forms and landscapes as we know them and then sometimes lay down to rest or took to the sky (Johnson 1998; Tripcony 1999; Andrews 2004). Many non-Aboriginal writers and some Aboriginal people have recorded these creation stories from different parts of the country, characterizing them as “Dreaming” stories.

It is important that the English words are not equivalent to the meaning that exists in Aboriginal languages for the basis of the philosophy, that is, the laws laid down at the time, nor to the active and powerful ongoing work of these sustaining spirits. Spencer and Gillen in the late nineteenth century translated the *Arrernte* words *altijira ngambakala* as “dreaming” as *altijira rama* means “to dream” (Spencer and Gillen, 1899). The linguist T.G.H. Strehlow, who grew up the son of missionaries amongst *Arrente* at Hermannsburg in Central Australia in the early twentieth century, noted that the word *altijira* also means “eternal” and so the idea of dreaming also includes the “seeing” of eternal things during sleep. Thus the more accurate translation would be “originating from eternity” (Stockton 1995: 54). Nevertheless, the term “Dreaming” has become a gloss used within Australian English.

As the creation stories contain the blueprint for all life, some Aboriginal Elders prefer to use the English word “Law.” The Dreaming or the Law is much more than either term can convey in English, and much

more than a philosophy confined to “religion” in the Western understanding, but in English there is no equivalent word. These English terms carry the burden of communicating what life itself is all about, in every manifestation and meaning, in all time, and as such they are not at all equivalent to the Indigenous words to convey this meaning.

The creation stories vary from region to region, in content and emphasis. They contain, however, the same basic elements: the creative beings are responsible for the features of the land and the entire natural world including the species and plant life. Their creative activity was formative; they created the whole world including the species, landform, water, and so all of these have special sacred meaning. And they continue to be imbued with their life force and interconnectedness. These creative acts took place over a period of time but the creator spirits pre-existed this work and continue to live in forms that are visible only to those with the ability to see. Creator spirits, in bringing all things to life, taught the people they created how they were related to the animate and inanimate world around them, and to the spirits themselves. These relationships are ones of custodianship and responsibility, including ceremony (Tindale 1953; Stockton 1995; Havecker 1987; Marshall 2004; Unaipon 1929, 1930; Nannup Karda 2006; Tripcony 1999; Hammond and Fox 1991; Mudrooroo 1995; Robinson 1968; Charlesworth 1998; Stanner 1968, 1984; Blundell and Woolagoodja 2005; Andrews 2004; Rose 1992; Neidjie 1989, 2002; Sveiby and Skuthorpe 2006; Voigt and Drury 1997; Bell and Roberts 1987; Insight SBS 1998; Edols, 1975; Koorie Heritage Trust and ABC; DEWR; Kleinert and Neale 2000; Organ; ABC Online 2007; et al).

There are many different words in Aboriginal languages to describe this time of creation; for example, the word *Burruguu* is used by the *Nhunggabarra* people (Sveiby and Scuthorpe 2006: 2-3). There are many creation ancestors and they interacted as they travelled. Perhaps one of the best known is the Rainbow Serpent. Although found in most parts of Australia, the Rainbow Serpent is of great importance in some areas but a lesser spirit in others. It is associated with watercourses, rivers, creeks and billabongs and is represented in rock art up to 6,000 years old.

Another powerful creator spirit, one among many others who all play a part, is a spirit sometimes referred to as a Sky God or a Supreme Being. Any apparent similarity to Christian beliefs assumed by the use of these English terms is misplaced. *Baiame* is important for creating people themselves and when he completed his creative work he returned to the sky behind the Milky Way. Fellow creator spirits can be seen in the night sky where they too returned. The people of south-east Australia – including but not restricted to *Kamilaroi*, *Eora*, *Darkinjung*, *Wonnaruah*,

*Awabakal, Worimi, Wiradjuri* and also into NW NSW for the *Nhunggabarra* people (Sveiby and Scuthorpe 2006: 3) – commemorate places particularly associated with *Baiame*, such as a famous rock painting near Singleton, in the Hunter Valley (Matthews: 1893). For the *Nhunggabarra* he is the first initiated man and the lawmaker (Sveiby and Scuthorpe 2006: 3). There are different names for these creation ancestors in different areas, and sometimes the stories differ according to the beliefs of people in specific places. For the people on the adjoining midnorth coast—*Biripi, Ngaku, Daingatti, Gambangirr*—it is *Ulidarra* who made the tribes and their boundaries and whose son, *Birrigun*, made marriage Law (Ryan 1964; GLCG 1992).

Stanner, an anthropologist who learned of the deep meaning of the creation stories in the lives of Indigenous Australians of Central Australia, has written:

The Dreaming is many things in one. Among them, a kind of narrative of things that once happened; a kind of character of things that still happen; and a kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything significant for Aboriginal man.... It is a cosmogony, an account of the begetting of the universe, a study about creation. It is also a cosmology, an account or theory of how what was created became an ordered system. To be more precise, how the universe became a moral system. (Stanner 1979: 28)

Indigenous Australian spirituality has been described as embodying a reverence for life *as it is* – it does not promise a life after death, salvation, nirvana or similar that is offered by other religions. For Aboriginal people, this is as good as it gets. Life is as it is, a mixture of good and bad, of suffering and joy, and it is celebrated as sacred. Living itself is religion. The remarkable resilience of Aboriginal people is partly explained by the legacy of a spirituality that demonstrates “an enthusiasm for living, a readiness to celebrate it as it is, a will to survive and to pass the baton of life to the next generation” (Stockton 1995: 77-78).

Death as a part of life, the means of transfer of life is respected, and assent to life is assent to death. Rose has reported the story of the Dingo and the Moon as told by the *Yarralin*, which explains how death came to humankind. It is simply because of the opportunity to live life to the full that we become mortal, like the dingo:

Dingo, like his human descendents, is open to life, sharing the finality of life and the continuity of parts.... We are not descendents of the moon; he has none. Our ancestor dingo, opens us to the world, requiring that we come to an understanding of our place in it which is radically different from

the moon's.... Death and its corollary, birth, open humans to time and the sharing of life: we kill and eat, and our bones nourish country, giving life back to the places and species that sustained us...and death, for all that it may be unwelcome, is one of life's gifts. (Rose 1992: 105)

Similar beliefs are expressed in the wish of urbanized Aboriginal people in the southeast, that when they die they be buried back in their own country. Stockton describes "a stock of meanings and understandings quite different from those applied to the same words by the wider community" and later found the same had been recorded in the anthropological record – "a reverence for life, an assent to life as it is given, an enthusiasm for life and a keenness to pass it on to the next generation" (Stockton 1995: 80).

Western religions are understood to establish a disconnection between the sacred and the profane: the profane characterized as "wholly other." Usually the sacred is understood to be of another world, such as the idea of "paradise" or of "heaven," whereas our contemporary world is the profane, chaotic and unreal. The sacred is in the role of providing order, founding the world, setting the standards, out of chaos (Bradbery, Fletcher and Molloy 2001: 101-102). In Aboriginal cosmology there is not this distinction between the sacred and the profane; the sacred, while being a paradigm for "proper" existence, is also present in the contemporary world. It is the thread of interconnectedness between the Dreaming, humans and the natural world.

Further, it would be wrong to characterize the Dreaming as a wholly past event, it is "everywhen" (Stanner 1990, 1979: 78), that is, in "all the instants of being, whether completed or to come." It can be characterized as an "underlining reality" and the term "Dreaming" is often used to stand for Aboriginal peoples' "experience and knowledge of the manifestations and the secrets of Divinity." Though this can be construed as two coexistent realities, that is ordinary and Dream realities, Sansom (2001) argues that there is "a single supervening reality that has 'inside' and 'outside' truths and stories" and therefore "Dreamings and people are co-presences in one world, treating knowledge as the great discriminating and modifying force." While humans cannot hope to grasp the full knowledge of truths that are embedded in the Dreaming, they have the opportunity to develop as visionaries, that is, "clever" men and women who have a privileged understanding and can "see right through" their vision penetrating "all the way" to the "inside."

However, this idea of knowledge "allows each person the opportunity to live a life of progressive revelations" and "anyone who lives a fortunate life should come to participate more and more fully in the unity

of the Dreaming” without being necessarily a person of great insight. In fact, sudden and unasked for revelations of the power of the Dreaming can occur, what anthropologists call “irruptions,” and these are met with joy, manifest as laughter in the cases Sansom reports (Sansom 2001: 2-3). In southeast Australia the reaction is of agreed and pleased recognition and often the remark “Well there you are, see?” meaning there’s the proof of the reality of the Dreaming in our lives.

While the form of these creation beliefs will vary from place to place across Indigenous Australia, and the depth and quality will depend on the status of the Indigenous informant, and often the way it is represented by Westerners who have collected them, the fundamentals of interconnectedness and the reality of the Dreaming in ordinary time are the same. From this belief system flows morality, ethics, governance, natural resource management and social and familial relationships that are designed to ensure sustainability and effective governance and sociality.

### **Connections to Land, Sea and the Natural World**

*Sacred place. All over our Aboriginal land was sacred, but we see now they have made a map and cut it up into six states.*

-- Myra Watson (Gale 1983: 35)

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people say they have a spiritual connection to the land, sea, landforms, watercourses, the species and plant life, this connection exists through the Law developed at the time of creation. Thus each person or specific plant or place is linked to the spirit of its creation and thus to each other, which is a relationship of “mutual spirit being,” often referred to as totemism, though again, Aboriginal words exist to describe this relationship. The word “totem” comes from the Ojibwa people of the north central USA and south central Canada and was adopted by western scholars as a term used universally, when Indigenous people in Australia have their own terms to describe this relationship (Hiatt 1996). While some groups in Australia have problems with the use of this term, some Aboriginal groups have indicated that they can accept its usage (Rose, James and Watson 2003: 2; Rose 1996: 28). The anthropologist Elkin summarized its importance: “Totemism then is our key to understanding of Aboriginal philosophy of life and the universe – a philosophy which regards man and nature as a corporate whole” (Elkin 1933). Stanner developed the definition:

What is meant by totemism in Aboriginal Australia is always a mystical connection, expressed by symbolic devices and maintained by rules, between living persons, whether as in-

dividuals or as groups or as stocks, and other existents—their ‘totems’—within an ontology of life that in Aboriginal understanding depends for order and continuity on maintaining the identities and associations which exemplify the connection. (Rose 1996: 28)

The attitude of people when approaching the totemic ancestors is not one of “reverent humility...as passive mortals humbly receiving gifts from condescending, if kindly, supernatural beings” (as in the Judeo-Christian tradition) but rather, in this way:

The central Australian totemites certainly spoke of their totemic ancestors with an air of deep reverence and respect. But they had no need of prayer or sacrifice when approaching them: they themselves, after all, were composed of a large part of the same substance as the supernatural beings whom they honored in their totemic ritual. During the performance of totemic ritual, transient Time and timeless Eternity became completely fused into a single Reality in the minds of all participants. (Strehlow, quoted in Stockton 1995: 55)

The totemic relationship requires that people must learn how to take responsibility for relationships with the species and the totemic site, or sacred site, in the landscape and connected to the totemic ancestor.

The call for “Aboriginal land rights” is often misunderstood by the settler colonial society whose main concern with land is as an economic resource, to produce a surplus and so gain capital. Tasmanian activist Jim Everett explains:

Aboriginal land rights does not simply mean that the people are entitled to land. Nor does the term mean that the land owes anything to the people. Aborigines do not justify land rights in terms of economy, accommodation or possession. Rather land rights represent a whole set of responsibilities, among which is the obligation to preserve the unique essence of their Aboriginal law. Aborigines have the responsibility to be custodians of land, sea and sky. They must remain accountable to the ecological world, which accepts Indigenous intrusion and use of that ecology only on sound practices of interaction with the spirit of the land, manifested in strict rules of respect and tradition. (Everett 1994: xii)

When describing the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal Australia, Rose says “once a multiplicity of nourishing terrains, there is now a multiplicity of devastations. And yet, the relationship between Indigenous people and country persists. It is not a contract but a covenant, and no

matter what the damage, people care" (Rose 1996: 81).

As the man famously called "a meddling priest," by a Prime Minister of Australia, in his attempts to support Aboriginal people's rights to land, has asked: "Why does it remain so unthinkable that [Aboriginal people] should make some decisions for us when those decisions relate to their country?.... We might then discover the full life-sustaining capacity of the land which is sacred" (Brennan 2005: 245).

## Law

*Our law is not like whitefella's law. We do not carry it around in a book. It is in the sea. That is why things happen when you do the wrong thing. That sea, it knows. Rainbow knows as well. He is still there. His spirit is still watching today for law breakers. That is why we have to look after that sea and make sure we do the right thing. We now have to make sure whitefellas do the right thing as well. If they disobey that law they get into trouble alright.*

-- Kenneth Jacob, Wellesley Islands, 1997 (quoted in Grieves 2006a: 38)

While the creation stories connect the elements of the earth, the weather patterns, the species, plant life, landforms and people, they also show the sacred Law and the penalties for not following that Law. It can be explained thus:

The rules of behavior take shape in the creation stories at the point where the elements of the earth are created, when the chaos becomes order and the ways of maintaining that order are communicated from the creation ancestors through the stories. The pathways are connected by the animals that are the metaphors for different groups of people, both within the same language group and those beyond. Encoded within the shapes and markings of ancestral animals and plants are the plans of the sanctioning of the Laws and customs. (Drew and Harney 2004:96)

Mowaljarlai has spoken of the gift of pattern thinking. An Indigenous lawyer, Kwaymullina of the *Bailgu* and *Njamal* people of the Pilbara in Western Australia, explains it:

Imagine a pattern. This pattern is stable, but not fixed. Think of it in as many dimensions as you like – but it has more than three. This pattern has many threads of many colors, and every thread is connected to, and has a relationship with, all of the others. The individual threads are every shape of life. Some—like human, kangaroo, paperbark—are known to

western science as 'alive'; others like rock, would be called 'non-living.' But rock is there, just the same. Human is there too, though it is neither the most or the least important thread - it is one among many; equal with the others. The pattern made by the whole is in each thread, and all the threads together make the whole. Stand close to the pattern and you can focus on a single thread; stand a little further back and you can see how that thread connects to others; stand further back still and you can see it all - and it is only once you see it all that you can recognize the pattern of the whole in every individual thread. The whole is more than its parts, and the whole is in all its parts. This is the pattern that the ancestors made. It is life, creation spirit, and it exists in country. (Kwaymullina 2005: 13)

While there is this complex connectedness, the foremost value under the Law is the autonomy of individuals and groups. Those who are taught the meaning of creation and the means of ensuring the responsibility passed down through that Law is carried out are the ones to see to that "business." It is not appropriate to concern oneself with the "business" of others, as they are the ones to be in a position to know. If there are connections and intersections through Dreaming, and intermarriage, then there is an opportunity for negotiation and accommodation. The objective of behaviors to ensure autonomy is peace, settled and harmonious human relations, as opposed to "noise," that is, conflict (Stockton 1995: 73).

This philosophy encompasses a realistic view of human behavior and recognizes that the range potentially includes the negatives as well as the positives. Therefore conflict is not an aberration as such but is inevitable and so allowed to be expressed, but also limited, by high levels of negotiation and ritual. On occasions when differences are such as to lead to fighting, there are understandings about the degree of blood-letting that will allow the dispute to "finish." And finish means just that: it is done with, the issue does not get trawled over again. One side does not destroy the other but only contains it, while extracting sufficient retaliation (Langton 1991; Macdonald 1988, 1990; Stockton 1995: 73).

### **The Role of Women**

It seems almost superfluous to include a section on the role of women because Aboriginal women well know that women's spirituality and social power is strong under the Law. A discussion of this aspect of Aboriginal social and cultural life also illuminates further aspects of spirituality and its endurance over time. While there is evidence of women's

power having been diminished through coming into the ambit of the patriarchal colonial state, perhaps the greater damage has been through misconceptions and assumptions about a lack of power that arise from colonialist constructions of the nature of Aboriginal society and the role of women in it.

Aboriginal society is a gendered society – the roles and lifeways of women and men are separated by the realities of maternity, pregnancy, childrearing and gendered ways of relating to the natural and social world. The landscapes are gendered in accordance with the Law. While early white male anthropologists, coming as they did from a strong patriarchal cultural base, originally documented issues such as women not participating in ceremonies with men as an indication of the lower status of women, later female anthropologists have been able to restore the balance from being able to work with the women (Bell, 1983; De'Ishtar 2005; Ryan 2001; Bell 1998; McConchie 2003; Rose 1996). The first of these was Kaberry with her classic ethnography carried out in the Kimberley in 1935-6 and published as *Aboriginal Woman sacred and profane* (Hiatt, 1996). This work was groundbreaking in that it portrayed the Aboriginal woman as a full human personality with agency, a complex social personality with her own prerogatives, duties, problems, beliefs, rituals, and point of view.

Nonetheless, the previously established anthropological orthodoxy, that women were excluded from any role in the important affairs of Aboriginal societies, endures in some quarters (Moreton-Robinson 1998). There has been a common misconception that the culture has embedded in it the systematic victimization of Aboriginal women by their men (Windschuttle 2002, 2006) and this has been addressed by several writers as without foundation (Grievies 2006b). Historical records of Aboriginal men offering their women to colonial men has raised speculation about the sexual trade of Aboriginal women as normative (Windschuttle 2002: 383-385) and this has been rejected by Aboriginal women as myth. Such trade rather reflected the imperative for accommodation of the demands and expectations of white men who outnumbered white women by as much as 7:1 in the early colonies where this was reported (Atkinson 2002: 62; Grievies 2003: 16; Grimshaw, Lake, McGrath and Quartly 1994: 138).

Langton (1997) has drawn attention to the role of women in spiritual connection to land and the inadequacy of the (former) anthropological orthodoxy that descent was patrilineal or at least determined by patrification. She argues this is negated by the role of women who:

...maintain Aboriginal traditions relating to land ownership by their politicking on matters to do with the constitution of

contemporary customary corporations and nurturing of the social relations of the land tenure system. (Langton 1997: 85)

Her experience is that “women retain bodies of knowledge pertaining to the spiritual landscape” and that grandmothers have authority to make decisions “with a mind to the future of their descendents,” including the longevity and stability of social and territorial entities, their own power within structures of authority, the recruitment of kin to their own skin groups or allocate them to others and decisions concerning marriage arrangements, a key part of Aboriginal land law.

When analyzing Indigenous women’s life writings, Moreton-Robinson identifies the importance of spirituality and relationality, though subjugated, in their social relationships. Indigenous spirituality comes from a moral universe distinct from that of Europeans: “Indigenous women perceive the world as organic and populated by spirits which connect places and people.” Unlike constructions of Christian spirituality, she argues “Indigenous spirituality encompasses the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans and physiography” and “the spiritual world is immediately experienced because it is synonymous with the physiography of the land.” Moreover, “(spirituality) is a physical fact because it is experienced as part of one’s life” and it leads to an understanding of personhood in very different ways to what is perceived as the norm. Life writings of Indigenous women are not concerned with motivations and intentions but are reflective of a wholistic, interconnected, understanding of themselves, their life contexts and events as being “an extension of the earth, which is alive and unpredictable,” and a construction of self that extends beyond the immediate family (Moreton-Robinson 2000: 18-21; Thomas 2001; Fredericks 2003).

### **Indigenous Spirituality and Christianity**

*My mother said, they close their eyes in church...they go in there and they talk to spirit...this one they call God must be the same one belong you and me, and they started to work out that there spirituality here...its abit different and she couldn't understand they make a grand building especially to go in on Sunday to talk to this spirit, and every other day of the week they can do whatever they wanted to. And she said, poor silly buggers, they make a house for this one to go in and talk he's not going to lock up there he's everywhere, he's in the bush, he's where we're fishing, he's where we're hunting; every second of the day we're answerable to that spirit.*

-- Mrs Wadjuelarbinna, Elder, Doomadgee (ABC Radio 1999)

In contemporary Australian society some Aboriginal people express their spirituality through participation in Christian churches, and others choose a secular lifestyle with a strong undercurrent of belief in Indigenous spirituality (Pattel-Gray 1991, 1993, 1996; Grant 1996; Pike 2002; Kneebone 1991; Rainbow Spirit Elders 1997; ABC Radio 1997, 1999; Dodson, Elston and McCoy 2006; McDonald 2001). Many Christians are sympathetic to Aboriginal concepts of creation and in particular the social justice issues that have arisen from the colonization of Aboriginal lands (Brennan 2005; Trompf 1993; Hammond and Fox 1991; Slattery 2002; Gallagher 2002; Stockton 1995).

In the 2006 Australian census, of a total of 455, 023 Indigenous Australians, almost 64% identified themselves as Christian and 33% registered as having no religion, did not state a religion or followed an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander religion (5,206 people) (ABS online). For those Indigenous Australians who observe aspects of the Christian faith, it is often a way of continuing with their own spiritual beliefs and cultural lifeways. Many Aboriginal people of high degree do not reject Christianity but rather incorporate it into their existing belief structures. A telling example of this is illustrated in the film *The Serpent and the Cross* where highly respected Lawmen from the Kimberley carefully explain how Christianity presents no theological difficulties; in fact, it fits with existing Dreaming stories (Hilton and Nolan 1991).

Edwards, a missionary with *Pitjanjatjara* people, has paid tribute to the late Tony Tjamiwa, whose dreaming connects him to Uluru, and who was also a pastor in the Presbyterian Church. Tjamiwa was remarkable for having been an initiated man and baptized into the church, becoming a church Elder, preacher, and fulfilling his responsibilities as a Pitjanjatjara Law man, including in ritual. "He remythologized the parables in the Christian scriptures with stories about *tjala* (honey ants), *lukupupu* (ant lions), and *walawuru* (eagle hawks). His prayers used the imagery of *walytja* (relationship) and of *kurunpa* (spirit) as *walpa* (wind) (Edwards 2002: 3).

Edwards warns against assuming that there is an Australian Aboriginal theology within Christianity because the deeper exploration of language and culture reveals a more substantial contribution to the contemporary Australian search for meaning (Edwards 2002: 7). Indigenous spirituality cannot be grafted onto western ontology as a "perspective" and essentially a part of the same belief system – it is a vibrant and enduring tradition in its own right. It is important to consider parallels with other Western belief systems in this context, such as modern psychology. Edwards, too, warns that most of the contemporary rhetoric about spirituality reflects the modern emphasis on the self, individual-

ism, with little or no consideration of others. In contrast to this he quotes Aram Yengoyan, who says:

The reason why the spirit is so deep and meaningful to the Pitjanjatjara is because they have a deep sense of the collective, a set of ideas/rules/norms/morals that are binding on the individual. (Edwards 2002:11)

More than this, the “spiritual” is not compartmentalized into one section of life or a time for observance as it is in other societies. The concept of spirituality pervades everything; it is ever-present in the physical, material world.

There are aspects of Christian ritual and the story of the life of Jesus that resonate with Aboriginal spiritual values. One of these is the concept of sharing, generosity and fair dealing, that is not confined to goods and services but the meaning exists on a deeper level: it means a minimization of personal power over things and others, of making things “level.” Ungunmerr-Baumann speaks of the meaning of Christmas “in that Jesus shared our whole human experience from birth to death and he in turn shared gifts and blessings, ultimately himself, with us, even down through the ages in the Eucharist.” She speaks for many Aboriginal people who call themselves Christian when she says:

{Jesus] lived and taught a life of sharing because he loved all without exception. Such love is the measure of true sharing...the sharing of Jesus strikes a resonance in my Aboriginal self and is a cause for rejoicing and celebration.... As an Aboriginal I have life shared with my clan group. We received this life from our original Great Ancestor. It is the basis of our clan system. Even our animal totems in some way share this life, so that we call them ‘brother’ and ‘sister’.... Jesus shared his life with us. We share his life with one another... (Stockton 1995: 71-72)

### **Cultural Expressions of Spirituality**

Ceremony, called *keepara* in some languages of SE Australia, and many other names across the hundreds of Indigenous languages, incorporates stories, music, song and dance, by which the characters and events of the “eternity” or “everywhen” are brought into the sacred space. Ceremony is the commemoration of the actions of creation. The act of identifying as part of these totemic ancestors releases a surge of life force and so it is ceremony that keeps the life forms, originating from within “eternity,” living. The ceremonial ground, *bora*, becomes the creation place itself, filled with the life force of the totemic ancestors. “The dancer, painted with the same designs of his Dreaming, becomes a liv-

ing icon, a pure embodiment of the Dreaming ancestor” (Stockton 1995: 54).

While ceremonial life is a deep expression of spirituality in itself, Aboriginal culture has adapted and changed with colonization and Aboriginal people take up new ways of expressing spiritual connection through art, literature, film, dance and song. In these works, the essential expression of spirituality continues. The excellent reference *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture* is recommended for a comprehensive coverage of Aboriginal spirituality and its cultural expression, what the editors describe as “the significant influences that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures have brought to bear on Australian history and society” (Kleinert and Neale 2000: v). What follows is by way of a short introduction to the ways that Aboriginal people express their spiritual belief in cultural expression.

Yiriwala (1894-1970s), ceremony Law leader, Law carrier and healer of the *Gunwinggu* people of Arnhemland, was a pioneer in the Aboriginal arts movement that was just starting around the time of his death. He received many honors and praise: Picasso said on viewing his work that it was what he had been trying to achieve all his life. For Yiriwala, his paintings were not “art” in themselves and he remained disappointed that the mindless dealing in Aboriginal art and artifacts degraded Aboriginal religion and Law. His art was like the pages of a sacred book: the stories of the travels of the creator beings. His concern went so far as to ask Holmes, an anthropologist, into his clan and ritual and to have her collect his painting and stories into a book “to make balanda understand” (Holmes 1992). One hundred and thirty nine of his paintings are now held in the National Gallery of Australia.

Contemporary Australian Indigenous desert art that emerged in the new medium of acrylic paint in the 1970s and which has excited world wide attention from collectors is also showcasing the spiritual beliefs and lifeways of the people (Drury and Voigt 1999; Crumlin and Knight 1991; Langton 2005; Crumlin 1998; Tjakamarra, Marika and Skipper 1991; Holmes 1992; Myers 2002). Langton goes so far as to say that the magnificent artistic tradition of the desert societies, including *Papunya Tula*, imbued with ideas about belonging to a place and:

...engaging with the flora and fauna with which they share these wondrous landscapes, combined with their vivid iconography of a glowing, arid landscape, have crossed the boundaries of post-modernism with its attendant cynicism and ultra relativism. (Langton 2005: 138)

The paintings are in fact the sacred geography of these peoples, that is, authentic statements of “their emplacement and embodiment in spiri-

tual landscapes” which is of greater concern to artists, such as Johnny Warangkula Tjupurrula, than any financial remuneration (Myers 2002: 1). This has resonance with the argument of Australian philosopher David Tacey, that the Indigenous artistic tradition, coming as it does out of a deep sense of spirituality, is a foil to the developments in European where artists despair in the existential void and “God is dead” (Tacey 2003: 246).

Contemporary urban Indigenous artists also have spirituality as a constant theme in their work. For example, Julie Dowling, a *Badimaya/Noongar* artist from Western Australia, has connections back to land and country that have been interrupted by her family’s dispossession from their traditional lands around Paynes Find and Yalgoo in the Gascoyne region. This family history of dispossession is the sub-text of much of her work, documenting the impacts on her family. The intimate familial activities of her life become a statement of the broader issues of loss and of retrieval of spiritual connectivity. For example, the black, wedge-tail eagle *Warridah* is a significant creation being for Dowling’s family and its proud profile is a central image amongst her work. Another shows her great grandmother standing resolutely in the landscape casting a bird-like shadow in the moonlight – family and country merging together (Snell 2004).

Aboriginal writers are continually inspired by spirituality. This poem by Martiniello expresses the possibility of new birth of knowledge, as the seeds captured on the necklace sprout, even after being “pierced and strung.” Her poem is an expression of the longing for spiritual knowledge that is shared by many contemporary Indigenous people. It is also a statement of certainty of that knowledge being alive, of never being “adrift from nature” and by implication nature’s beginnings that never end.

## Knowledge

my necklace seeds  
are sprouting subtle  
grooves appear divide  
smooth shiny shells -  
the black cleft of hearts  
against themselves

golden yellow tendrils  
like pre-birth antennae  
wind out along the string  
swell split black pods

between beach pearls  
do not know they are  
adrift from nature  
the island women  
say they don't know  
why my necklaces sprout  
shouldn't happen they say  
once the seeds are pierced  
and strung

in my grandmother's country  
earth is mother woman  
is earth she lives from inside  
the land like she lives  
from inside her body

perhaps  
it is in the nature of seeds  
to know this  
*@Jenni Kemarre Martiniello*  
- Martiniello, J. K. *Kemarre Arts*

While there are far too many examples of such work to include here it is important to note first of all that the expression spirituality by Elders is naturally poetic and containing deep feeling, even when it is written down. One of the most celebrated of these works is the wisdom of the late Uncle Bill Neidjie, *Gagadju* man:

*I belong to this earth.  
Soon my bones become earth...all the same.  
My spirit has gone back to my country...my mother.  
Now my children got to hang onto this story...  
I hang onto this story all my life.  
My children can't lose it.*

*This law,  
This country,  
This people,  
All the same...  
Gagadju.*

(Neidjie 2002: 13).

In contemporary times many Aboriginal people have been developing song about their own places and their spiritual attachment to them.

Some bands such as the Warumpi band from a settlement called Papunya sing in their own language about issues that are important to them. For example, the song *Warumpinya*:

*Yuwa! Warumpinya!*  
*Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya*  
*Nganampa ngurra watjalpayi kuya*  
*Nganampa ngurra tjanampa wiya*  
*Nganampa ngurra Warumpinya!*  
*Yuwa! Warumpinya!*  
*Yes! Warumpi!*  
*They always say our place is bad*  
*They always say our home is no good*  
*It's our place, not theirs*  
*It's our home, Papunya!*  
*Yes! Warumpi!*  
 - composed by Neil Murray/Sammy Butcher  
 © Rondor Music [Australia] Pty Ltd.

In an interview in 1988 Neil Murray explained the origins of the band and the song:

[Warumpi Band is] a name that was given to us. We were just a band from Papunya and the proper name for Papunya is Warumpi. It refers to a honey ant-dreaming site...the... important place there is not the buildings and the settlement, but rather the land. The most significant feature of that land to Aboriginal people is the nearest dreaming site, which is Warumpi, a small hill nearby where the honey ants come out of the ground. There's a waterhole there and there are places in the landscape people can show you that are charged with the story of the ants. (Dunbar-Hall and Gibson 2000)

This is but one example of the ways in which Aboriginal musicians continue to express their spirituality and opposition to the dominant Western culture.

## Everyday Lives

The way that spirituality enters the daily lives of Indigenous Australians is well documented in the range of Indigenous biography and autobiography that is available. Some stories are explanations of spirituality in peoples' lives. Others, while ostensibly concerned with the privations of the marginal and outcast Indigenous minority in Western society, are also invariably stories of triumph over adversity, the restoration of their lives and families and return to country in the face of forces that

would seek to destroy them, a spiritual journey (Derrington 2000; Randall 2003; Keefe 2003; Walker 2003; Isaacs 1995; ABC Television 2007; Clare 1978; Clark 1965; Langford 1988; Miller 1985; Morgan 1994; Morgan 1987; Pilkington 1996; Tucker 1977; Walker 1989; Ward 1991; Reed-Gilbert 2002; Roughsey 1971; Roe 1983; Mathews 1988; Morgan, Mia and Kwaymullina 2007).

Colbung, respected *Nyungar* Elder of the *Bibbulmen* people of SW Western Australia, echoes the message of many of these life stories when he says “the spirit has more strength in it than the pigmentation politics the government has engaged in over the years.” He says:

The spirit in Aboriginal people is very strong. I look at the world and I also see that I am a child of the universe. We are all children of the universe. All around the world there are people of different colors, from different races and we all make up the framework of the universe. We are the human element of the world. What we have to remember is that the spirit works right through. It comes from the earth...

...In terms of what I'd like to see in the future, well, there's one thing our people have to learn, and that's how to live with each other. We have to do that first before we can live with other people. Reconcile with ourselves first and then we can move forward together. We need to make a plan, understand we are part of the rest of the world, part of the universe – we belong in the bigger picture. When we understand that, then the gates will open...that's what we have to do as *Nyungar* elders, pass the heritage on. That's always been the ongoing flow of life. (Colbung 2007: 78)

Uncle Ken Colbung refers here to some issues that exist within contemporary Indigenous societies. It is important to acknowledge that Aboriginal people themselves do not adhere to an idea of human perfection in contemporary society. The template or paradigm for such perfection exists in the Dreaming and there is an acceptance that we are always striving to be as “good” as the old people. Moreover, there are many and continuing challenges to be met, as the Tasmanian Aboriginal leader Jim Everett explains:

Contemporary Aboriginal society is changing at an incredible pace. Its amalgamation with western technologies and its yielding to social and cultural pressures create an immense threat to Indigenous relationships with the world ecological order. Aboriginal people are in the throes of a political struggle to have their land and rights restored. As modern society intrudes into Indigenous minds, introducing dif-

ferent values and directions, Aborigines can be expected to lose sight of certain principles in the process. (Everett 1994: xii)

However, in spite of the various inroads that have been made into its destruction, it is the enduring spirituality of Indigenous people that has allowed them to survive lives of dispossession, poverty and abrogation of their human rights. It also allows the lack of bitterness but compassion and regard, for people as well as their own family and kin and the rest of humankind. The concept of “sharing and caring” is so often quoted as what spirituality means in Aboriginal society so that it is in danger of becoming clichéd. However, it belies a complex system of obligation and reciprocity that ties kin together in ways that leave no-one inconsequential (Macdonald 2000). This is demonstrated in families across the country and is an exemplar of ongoing spirituality. Educationalist Grey discovered that for Aboriginal people of the south-east:

...the family is as tight and resilient a network for all its members as it has ever been with any people. Their family is their great strength – as it is their weakness...the large family of about eighty to one hundred and forty people of all ages lives in a geographically discernible, extensive community. They see the same faces day after day. They know every nuance, every gesture, the walk style, the words of every person in that community.... Family is at times three generations, and at times a four generations group. It is a cousin-aunt-uncle extensive kinship group. Even among the third generation metropolitan living Aborigines, the family is as cohesive, as demanding, as exacting, as nepotistic, and as pondered as it has been anywhere at any time.... Inside the family network children are sure – sure of foot, sure of speech, sure of behavior, sure of belonging, sure of self. Outside of this family they are less sure – stumbling, inarticulate, withdrawn and shy. (Quoted in Stockton 1995: 68)

Folds, whose career has been teaching in remote communities in Central Australia, most recently at Walungurru working within a *Pintupi* community for almost two decades, recognizes his complete lack of education in “responsible behavior” in *Pintupi* terms. He has been adopted into a *Pintupi* family but, being Western, does not observe the rules of obligation and reciprocity to the same extent as others. He recognizes, too, that the central spiritual imperative in the lives of the people, *walytja*, which means family and the principles of obligations and reciprocity, that does not have an equivalent in English, has primacy in their relationships, including with the government. Government persistence in

dealing with the *Pintupi* as a sub-set of social welfare, not recognizing the cultural differences, has policy and possible opportunities for *Pintupi* “development” at “crossed purposes” (Folds 2001).

Aboriginal culture includes relatedness, connection, to all living things: “Nothing is nothing” (Rose 1996: 22-31) or “All persons matter” (Ungunmerr-Baumann quoted in Stockton 1995). In a cultural and social system that puts family and kin first the reception of newcomers to an Aboriginal community is often startling in its difference to Western forms of knowing:

How Aboriginal people are interested in people, how they like to know our names, our families, our country and all about us. Through the process of relating to us, they re-systematize us, make us free, slow us down, show us the stranglehold of red-tape and how it is more important to have good relationships than things. (Stockton 1995: 69)

However, Aboriginal people have problems with “new-age” appropriations of Aboriginal spirituality (Shaw 2003: 256; Bounah Wongee n.d.) and with questions of claims to “Aboriginality” without spiritual, cultural and kinship connections (Everett in ABC Television 2007; Grieves 2008b). The cultural reluctance to involve oneself in the “business” of others has been a factor in the deep consideration of these issues and the period of time it has taken people to act on them.

The endurance of Aboriginal spiritual values is exemplified in many lives, an example being the *Gentle Journey* of Jimmy Little, who is best known as an accomplished and celebrated musician. While a popular singer of gospel songs, he resisted joining any one religious denomination keen to have him in their fold, as he believes that spirituality is for everyone. His life is characterized by modesty and a lack of ostentation or displays of material success, valuing strong attachment to family and spirituality above the trappings of celebrity (Indigo Films 2003).

## Ways Forward

*What we see is, all the white people that were born in this country and they are missing the things that came from us mob, and we want to try and share it. And the people were born in this country, in the law country, from all these sacred places in the earth. And they were born on top of that. And that, we call wungud - very precious. That is where their spirit come from. That's why we can't divide one another, we want to share our gift, that everybody is belonging, we want to share together in the future for other generations to live on. You know? That's why it's very important.*

-- David Mowaljarlai (ABC Radio 1995)

Intellectuals are developing strong rationale for the adoption of Aboriginal ways of managing the natural environment (Rose 2004; Langton 2005) and it is clear that developments in the sustainability of natural resources and other cultural heritage, that are increasingly the preserve of government policy and program development, are drawing heavily on Aboriginal law and spirituality (Bradbery, Fletcher and Molloy 2001). Agencies such as the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Water Resources and the equivalents in the states and territory, are relying increasingly on Indigenous knowledges to inform land and natural resource management policy and practice (see, for example, Australian Government 1998, 2004; Smyth and Monaghan 2004). It is apparent from the Indigenous testimony in these reports that Aboriginal Law men are sharing knowledge in order to progress the sustainability of the natural environment.

Aboriginal artistic initiatives are increasingly demonstrating this concern with natural heritage management. Tasmanian Aboriginal Elder and poet *Pura-lia Meenamatta* Jim Everett has collaborated with the non-Aboriginal artist Jonathon Kimberley to produce *meenamatta lena narla puellakanny - Meenamatta Water Country Discussion*, a joint exhibition of Jonathon's art and Jim's poetry. Jonathan says that "through my work, I am questioning and re-evaluating my own cultural heritage, in part by openly exploring the juncture between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal connections with country." Everett sees this collaborative work a product of being "beyond the colonial construct" and of being open to "a deeper understanding of Aboriginality in a modern world, with concepts of place and connectedness" (Everett 2006).

It is appropriate to reflect on knowledge from Indigenous spirituality that informs us of our place in the world and its bearings on our futures. Rose (1998) describes the *Yarralin* idea of the Dreaming as distinguished from "ordinary" or present life in that it came before the last three generations and, unlike transient "ordinary" time and experience, it does not fade away or "die" (Rose: 109-110). The patterns that are laid down by the Dreaming endure and the truth of the Dreaming exists now as always. It can be conceived also as a parallel universe that exists alongside reality and that is sometimes made apparent in dreams, ceremony or in "irruptions" as described earlier.

Rose develops our understanding further from her work with the *Yarralin* – the point at which Dreaming becomes "ordinary" is about 100 years before this generation. From a hypothetical location in the Dreaming, "we would see a great sea of endurance, on the edges of which are the sands of ordinary time...[with] origins in the Dreaming but their existence is ephemeral." Thus:

Dreaming can be conceptualized as a great wave which follows behind us, obliterating the debris of our existence and illuminating as a synchronous set of images, those which endure. (Rose 1998: 110-111)

This means that people existing “now” are able to do so because of that which has come before, the patterns of which contain a template or paradigm for living, and for ensuring the generations that come after. And, people existing now are called the “behind mob” in the sense of always needing to “catch up” with what has come before (Rose 1998: 111). As a *yolngu* man remarked, he was working very hard to catch up with that which had come before, to be as “right” as the creation ancestors had decreed one should be. The *Yarralin* stories reveal that:

...truth is revealed in myth and that people are capable of changing their society to conform to that truth. There is no ‘new age’ or ‘new humanity’ – there is us—and only us—as we are and as we can be. We have only to listen, to learn and to act (Rose 1998: 117).

There is a sense in which the Australian population as a whole is now the “behind mob” needing to work very hard to catch up with that wisdom that has come before.

To add another layer of understanding, Indigenous lawyer Kwaymullina of the *Bailgu* and *Njamal* people of the Pilbara in Western Australia, explains for us the “pattern thinking” that Mowaljarlai also knows is a sacred gift:

This country is a living story. Whether Aboriginal or stranger, we all breathe, sleep, move, live in the world of *Manguny*, and in this country of difference, perhaps the greatest of all is between those who know it and those who don’t. For in the end, all that seeks to uphold the pattern that is creation is the same good; just as all that seeks to destroy it is the same evil. In the learning borne of country is the light that nourishes the world; and if country and the world is to be helped now, it is this light that must shine the way home. (Kwaymullina 2005)

Without deep respect and understanding of what constitutes Indigenous well-being, the centrality of “spirituality” to that concept, and the cultural basis of Indigenous understandings of the context of their lives, there is little opportunity for governments, other agencies and Western educated professionals to work meaningfully with Aboriginal groups in order to bring about appropriate developments, including “healing.” Moreover, the absence of such respect and understanding is deepening the problem that Aboriginal people have with the settler colonial society

and having an immense effect on the social and emotional well-being of the Indigenous population. While many colonized peoples in the world have been able to de-colonize in the period since the Second World War, either by violent overthrow (Indonesia) or with the assistance of the United Nations (Zimbabwe) and even by democratic elections (South Africa), settler colonial societies such as Canada, the United States of America, Australia and New Zealand can only decolonize by the decolonizing of the mind, that is, by developing new understandings and appreciations of Indigenous culture and society – new, respectful ways of relating to Indigenous Australians and the incorporation of their lifeways into the idea of the nation.

The beginning of real change will be an appreciation of the inherent value of Indigenous philosophy, what we call spirituality, the basis of the cultural lifeways of Indigenous Australians, the rationale for ways of being and doing and for relatedness to others and the natural environment. It is imperative that Australian intellectuals, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, recognize the importance of developing knowledges from this ontological and epistemological base. Then, perhaps, Indigenous communities will be resourced to legitimize, strengthen and promulgate existing understandings of Indigenous spirituality and associated lifeways, not only for the well-being of Indigenous individuals and their communities, but for “all” with whom they have kinship, including the whole natural world and all that which is in it.

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