

ACCESSING THE ETERNAL: DREAMING “THE DREAMING” AND CEREMONIAL PERFORMANCE

by *Lynne Hume*

Abstract. Australian Aboriginal cosmology is centered on The Dreaming, which has an eternal nature. It has been referred to as “everywhen” to articulate its timelessness. Starting with the assumption that “waking” reality is only one type of experienced reality, we investigate the concept of timelessness as it pertains to the Aboriginal worldview. We begin by questioning whether in fact “Dreaming” is an appropriate translation of a complex Aboriginal concept, then discuss whether there is any relationship between dreaming and The Dreaming. We then discuss Aboriginal ceremonial performance, during which actors are said to *become* Dreaming Ancestors, using as a frame of reference the “flow” experience explicated by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi together with Alfred Schutz’s “mutual tuning-in relationship.”

Keywords: Aboriginal ceremony; alternate realities; consciousness; flow; ritual time, timelessness.

The central feature of Aboriginal cosmology and epistemology that is reiterated throughout Australia, despite regional variations and the vastness of the continent, is The Dreaming and its integral link between humans, land, and all that lives on the land. Various referred to as The Dreaming, Dreamtime, Eternal Dreamtime, and the Law, The Dreaming is the sacred knowledge, wisdom, and moral truth permeating the entire *beingness* of Aboriginal life, derived collectively from Dreaming events. This article addresses (1) the origins of the English translation “Dreaming,” (2) whether in fact this might be a mistranslation, and (3) the accessibility of “The Dreaming,” as an experience of alternative reality, through both dreams

Lynne Hume, an anthropologist, is Associate Professor in the School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics at The University of Queensland, St. Lucia, Brisbane, Australia 4072; e-mail l.hume@uq.edu.au.

[*Zygon*, vol. 39, no. 1 (March 2004).]

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and ceremonial performance. While it is recognized that not every ceremonial performance accesses The Dreaming (especially in contemporary times when some ceremonies are performed in public and for tourists), there appears to be enough evidence to support the notion that access to the Eternal is, or was, possible in certain contexts.

Generally, the concept of The Dreaming refers to a founding drama, a period during which a formless land was given form (sometimes referred to as the creative period, although not *ex nihilo*), that is nevertheless eternal and atemporal. It is a spiritual reality to which historical significance is attached. Although creative events occurred, it is nevertheless timeless. It has been referred to as "everywhen" to denote this timelessness (Stanner 1979, 24). In the creative period Dreaming ancestors rose up from beneath the earth to give shape to an existing, yet amorphous, world. These ancestors were self-created and creative, possessing special powers that they could use for good or for harm. As they traveled over the land they left tangible expressions of their essence in the shape of some site or rocky outcrop, tree or water hole, metamorphosing a part of themselves into some feature of the environment or imprinting themselves onto cave walls or into ritual objects. Where the ancestors bled, ochre deposits were created; where they dug in the ground, water flowed and springs formed; where they cut down trees, valleys were formed. Not only did they put form to the formless, but also they instituted tribal laws, customs, and rites and left an essential part of themselves, an essence, in certain places and in ritual objects. When their work was done, they returned to where they had emerged. Their power, however, was not diminished. The ancestors were and continue to be an intrinsic part of the land over which they moved. The two are inseparable. Almost everywhere across the continent of Australia, the land is crisscrossed with a network of tracks along which these beings journeyed. Because all things are imbued with the Dreaming ancestors' spiritual essence, all share a common life force that is sacred. The Aboriginal world is alive with evidence of the creative ancestors and the metamorphosis of ancestor into country, animal into human, and spirit into matter.

Max Charlesworth (1992, 9–10) writes that The Dreaming is a plurivocal term with a number of distinct yet connected meanings. It is a narrative mythical account of the shaping of the world; it is the embodiment of the spiritual power of the ancestral heroes in the land; it is a general way of life, a law, and it is individual in that each person is connected to The Dreaming through his/her clan membership and spirit conception to a particular site. W. E. H. Stanner wrote that it is a "kind of logos or principle of order transcending everything" (1979, 24). The early ancestral beings are ancestors in the sense of their having produced, through their own bodies or efforts, the progenitors of all Aborigines and indeed, of all things, changing the formless into the formed. Although the ancestors rose up from

below the earth and sank back down again after their travels, their influence is still felt, and their past actions are still vital in the present.

The Dreaming, expressed through myth, ceremony, and song cycles, demonstrates that the cosmos constitutes a living system. The goal of this system as a whole is to reproduce itself as a living system, and this goal is attained by each part of the system maintaining a balanced relationship with all other parts. The balance is achieved by each part being aware of the other parts and acting morally toward one another. Deborah Bird Rose (1987, 263) explains this as a “reflexive moral relationship of care” between all things, both sentient and nonsentient: humans, animals, sun, earth, wind, rain. In sum, all that is included in this system. Other consciousnesses exist, have their own “cultures,” and are subject to the same moral principles of response, balance, symmetry, and autonomy.

Although all researchers agree that The Dreaming is of the utmost importance in Aboriginal life, its deeper meanings still remain elusive. Stanner ([1976] 1998, 7) tentatively put forward the idea that there is an implicit theory of something very like the unconscious in the notion of The Dreaming and that elemental forces operate below the level of the waking, or conscious, mind by continuing perennially through sleep and dream. He went further to say that the imagery of the ancestors as earth-sleepers suggests immanence rather than transcendence. Perhaps if we search back to the early English translations of this complex Aboriginal concept we might begin to unravel a part of its mystery. Could there in fact have been another, more adequate, interpretation, one that might more easily translate into a conceivable Western concept today? In order to answer these questions we look at the earliest recorded translations of some Aboriginal terms.

THE *ALTJIRANGA NGAMBAKALA*

“The Dreaming” is an English translation of the Arunta (Aranda) term *altjiranga ngambakala* (Spencer and Gillen [1927] 1996, 306). Elsewhere in Australia the same concept is referred to as *djuguba* or *djugurba* (*tjukubi*) (throughout the Great Victoria Desert), *duma* (in the Rawlinson Range), *djumanggani* (in the Balgo area), *ngarunggan* (eastern Kimberley), *tjukurtjanu* by the Pintupi, *bugari* (around La Grange and Broome), *ungud* (among the Ungarinjin), and *wongar* (in northeastern Arnhem Land).

Although the Aranda-speaking areas of Central Australia were entered for the first time by Europeans with the explorer John MacDouall Stuart in 1860, the probable first documentation of the term *altjira* was in a paper written by the Lutheran missionary Louis Schulze in 1891 (Strehlow 1971, xxxiii). Schulze’s paper was based on information he obtained while being stationed at Hermannsburg mission in the Macdonnell Ranges. Schulze (quoted in Spencer and Gillen [1927] 1996, 591) admitted the difficulty of conveying Western notions of Christianity and God to Aborigines, as there existed no words to express these ideas in any Aboriginal

language. One could adduce that Aboriginal notions of spirituality were equally puzzling to Westerners and that a term such as *dreaming* might have been common grounds for all.¹

Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen first became acquainted with the terms *Alchera* and *Alcheringa* in 1896 when they were observing the daily life and ceremonies of the Arunta. "For four months in succession and without interruption," wrote Spencer and Gillen, "we witnessed a wonderful series of ceremonies, all connected with the doing of the far past ancestors and the mythic times in which they lived. These mythic times, and everything associated with them, were continually spoken of as *Alchera*" ([1927] 1996, 306). They noted the all-pervading nature and importance of the term *Alchera* very early in their investigations into Aboriginal culture and wrote of the difficulty of correctly translating all the nuances of the term into English. They wrote that the term *Alchera* includes many things, that it is "of vague and wide import" and "difficult to define with anything like absolute precision" ([1927] 1996, 304). *Alchera*, they said, was always, and only, used in reference to past times during which the ancestors of the different totemic groups lived and wandered over the country. Yet, in everyday language *Alchera* was also used for "dream": to dream is *alcherama*—that is, to "see a dream." Because, to them, it seemed to indicate a past period of a vague and "dreamy" nature they adopted the term *dream times* to express as nearly as possible the meaning of *alcheringa* (*alchera*, a dream, and *ringa*, a suffix meaning "of" or "belonging to").

However, while it was associated with the time in which totemic ancestors came into existence, lived, and died, it also included many other things, including individuals, communities, and all that is associated with them. Schulze pointed out that *Altjira* implied something associated with past times and was not the name of any person or individual. He defined *Tmara altjira* as the place where the mother was born, whereas Spencer and Gillen defined it as the place where the spirit lived and entered the mother when she became pregnant.

T. G. H. Strehlow, who grew up among the Arunta people of central Australia and spoke fluent Western Arunta, was aware of nuances in the various Arunta dialects. He was critical of Spencer and Gillen's methods, saying that their ignorance of the Aranda language rendered suspect much of their data. Strehlow particularly criticized Spencer's attempt to ascertain the meaning of the word *alchera*. He accused Spencer of inventing nineteen English sentences, each containing the term *alchera*, and suggested that Spencer's interpretation of his informants' pidgin English replies were colored by his familiarity with the theories advanced by James Frazer in *The Golden Bough* and other anthropological texts (Strehlow 1971, xxxi). Strehlow was also critical of his father's (C. Strehlow) use of *altjira*. "It is a rare word," writes T. G. H. Strehlow, "whose root meaning appears to be eternal, uncreated, sprung out of itself" (1971, 614). He noted that

the root *altjira* means “eternal,” so the verb “to dream” draws upon the idea of seeing eternal things. Also, the noun should have been translated as “originating from eternity.” No linguistic derivation could be found for the word *Altjira*, and *Alchera* (*Altjira*) does *not* mean “dream” although it greatly resembles “to dream” (*altjirerama*). He added that *tmara altjira*, or, more correctly, *tmara altjirealtja*, means “the place of the totem connected with me.” He said that the term *altjirangamitjina* is compounded of *altjiranga* and *mitjina* and may be regarded as the equivalent of “*Alcheringa* ancestors,” and that *Altjiranga* is compounded of *Altjira*, or *Altjera*, and the suffix *-ringa*, which means “of” or “belonging to.” Although Strehlow agreed with Spencer and Gillen on many essential matters regarding Aboriginal culture, there was a very great difference between them on the true meaning and significance of the term *Alchera*, or *Altjira*.

Spencer and Gillen discussed the word *Altjira* with another missionary at Hermannsburg, H. Kempe, who wrote a grammar of the Arunta language (published in 1891). Kempe said that the word *Altjira* does not mean “God” in the sense that Europeans used the word, namely, as a personal being, but that it has the meaning of “old, very old, something that has no origin, mysterious, something that has always been so, also, always” (cited in Spencer and Gillen [1927] 1966, 596). He continued, “Were *Altjira* an active being, they [Aborigines] would have answered ‘*Altjirala*’: the syllable ‘la’ is always added when a person exercises a will (force) which influences another being or thing. We have adopted the word ‘God’ because we could find no better and because it comes nearest to the idea of ‘eternal.’” Kempe believed that “eternal” was the true meaning of the word *Altjira*.

Alcheringa and *Alchera* were sometimes used interchangeably, and the word *Alchera* was used as both a substantive and a qualifying term (Spencer and Gillen [1927] 1966, 304). In attempting to offer as correct a translation as possible, Spencer and Gillen asked their English-speaking Aboriginal informants to translate their understandings of the terms into English. Their direct translations ([1927] 1966, 305–6) demonstrated the multiple contexts in which the term could be used and that it included a cosmogony, a cosmology, an epistemology, and a complete philosophy about humans and their place in the total scheme of things.

Spencer and Gillen concluded that *Alchera* or *Altjira* “is a term used in reference to everything associated with the far-past, mysterious and mythic times that ‘belong to dreams’, that always existed, and in which their early ancestors, endowed with powers far greater than their descendants now possess, came into existence, lived, moved about and died, leaving behind them their spirit parts, which have since given rise to the natives of the present day” ([1927] 1966, 596).

In spite of its atemporality, there was nevertheless also a time of “founding drama, a fixation or instituting of things” (Stanner [1976] 1998, 23)

when everything, including humans with their good and bad properties, took on an enduring form. Speculating on why Aborigines might consider “dreaming” as the nearest equivalent in English, Stanner suggested that it might be “because it is by *the act* of dreaming, as reality and symbol, that the Aboriginal mind makes contact—thinks it makes contact—with whatever mystery it is that connects The Dreaming and the Here-and-Now” (Stanner [1976] 1998, 23).

Let us now try to distinguish between The Dreaming, and dreaming dreams during sleep, taking examples from other Aboriginal linguistic groups.

THE DREAMTIME AND DREAMING

The dreams that occur during sleep and “The Dreaming” as a philosophical concept are sometimes related, sometimes unrelated terms. The Walbiri term *djugurba* is the basic term for “dream” and also denotes the creation period when the ancestors lived, as well as the stories about them in that period, and the ancestors themselves (Munn 1964, 91–92). Events can be *djugurba* in the ancestral sense as well as in the sense that they are dream experiences. Personal dreams provide a means of getting into contact with The Dreaming. In the Yolngu dialect, however, there is no apparent lexical relation between words that refer to concepts of The Dreaming and terms that refer to dreams that occur in sleep (Williams 1986, 25). The Murinbata also make a distinction between the two. For them The Dreaming (*demnginoi*) *was*, and still *is*. Men of mystical ability who draw special powers from the existent Dreaming “do so not by thought (*bemkanin*) which is like a dream in the head, but by dream (*nin*) itself . . . which lets them cross all the divisions of time, space and category” (Stanner 1963, 266). This comment demonstrates that although a dream is not the same as The Dreaming, it is nevertheless a way to access Dreaming reality, which is exactly what Stanner speculated.

Others also have postulated that there is some connection between dreams and The Dreaming. Nancy Munn (1971, 145) writes that, according to Walbiri myth, the ancestors themselves first dreamed their objectifications while sleeping, visualizing their travels and the song associated with the country before they externalized. The ancestors also dreamed their own designs, “seeing” them during sleep and not simply when awake. A personal dream can provide one of the ways through which designs may be directly viewed, and the assumption is that the dreamer is in direct contact with The Dreaming. They are thus *djugurba* in the ancestral sense as well as in the sense that they are dream experiences. The idea is that the ancestor himself transmits the design to the dreamer (Munn 1964, 91).

R. Berndt and E. S. Philips (1973, 117) noted that certain men in the Kimberley claimed to communicate with the *wandjina* during dream ex-

periences and that communication by dreaming also allowed new events to be incorporated into creation stories. Robert Tonkinson (1978, 16) commented that Mardudjara Aborigines of the Western Desert sometimes communicate with spiritual powers from The Dreamtime (*manguny*) during dreams (*djugar*). Christopher Anderson and Françoise Dussart (1988, 19) noted that while Dreamtime refers to the ancestral beings and their actions and journeys as well as to the ancestral past, it also could refer to night dreams in which sequences of the ancestral past are disclosed. Dussart (1988, 35) wrote about several categories of night-dream experiences, one of which had as its theme a specific Dreaming story. During these dreams, songs are revealed, and the dreamer might "see" a body design and "learn" the songs.

The Pintupi contrast the Dreaming (*jukurrtjanu*) with events or stories that are said to be *yuti* (Myers 1991, 48–52). *Yuti* signifies visibility or some other form of sensory presentation to a subject. Something that is hidden from view might become *yuti* when it emerges into view. For example, an animal that has been hidden behind bushes becomes *yuti* when it emerges from behind the bushes and becomes visible to the onlooker. However, the contrast between *yuti* and *tjukurrpa* does not depend on a person's actually seeing an event but on whether it is, in principle, witnessable. The Dreaming constitutes the ground or foundation of the visible, present-day world, but it is not *yuti*. According to Myers, the Pintupi distinguish between whether an occurrence is in the phenomenal or noumenal realm. The Dreaming is in the noumenal. To the Pintupi, Dreaming events are true; they really happened, and this fact is evidenced by the world around them. They can see the places that the stories depict; they can witness where events happened. A phrase noted by Myers which represents the passage between the noumenal and the phenomenal is *tjukurrtpanu mularrringu*, which means "from The Dreaming, it becomes real" (Myers 1991, 49).

The Pintupi speak of conception and birth as the emergence of an individual from the noumenal plane of The Dreaming onto the physical, phenomenal plane of existence. An individual is said to have been "sitting as a Dreamtime being" (*nyinama tjukurrrpa*) and then to have become visible (*yutirringu*):

Alternately, the transformation may be characterized as "becoming body" or "becoming a human being" (*yarnangurringu*). Individuals are thought of as being "left behind" (*wantingu*) by The Dreaming and subsequently to emerge into the present-day world. Birth thus represents a movement from the significant, invisible, temporally prior situation to the present, visible one; and quite unambiguously, the spirit of an individual pre-exists, autonomously, apart from parental contribution. (Myers 1991, 50)

A person's Dreaming-place is the place from which his or her spirit comes, and the person is an incarnation of the ancestor who made the place.

Waking life and dream life, though recognized as distinct, nevertheless have a kind of unity. Humans can link into The Dreaming *through* dreams, although the two concepts are seen as distinct. The Pintupi experience of dreams is discussed as “seeing Dreaming,” yet The Dreaming remains a different order of reality.

Myers reports that the common Pintupi view of what happens in dreams is that one’s “spirit” (*kurrunpa*) travels apart from the body and observes things not ordinarily within the field of sensory presentation. Sometimes, in dreams an individual might come into contact with ancestral figures of The Dreaming, at which time they may give them special knowledge, such as information about songs and ceremonies. What one sees in relation to The Dreaming is believed to have always existed. The Dreaming, then, seems to be a space, or place, that is separate and apart from an individual’s dream experience, yet during a dream the *kurrunpa* can be transported to this plane. Similarly, Munn (1973, 33) tells us that the Walbiri theory of dreams is that in the dream the spirit (*bilirba*) leaves the body and journeys around. Both dreaming and The Dreaming are forms of non-ordinary reality.

The distinction between dreaming and The Dreaming is also taken up by Douglas Price-Williams and Rosslyn Gaines (1994). These researchers distinguish between the two terms by referring to a sleeping person’s experience as “night dreams,” as compared to the capitalized “Dreaming,” which indicates the entire worldview. During their fieldwork they interviewed thirty-seven Aboriginal artists (both males and females) in the Northern Territory to discover whether dreams played any part in their creativity. They subsequently discovered that there was, indeed, a connection. As one person commented, “If I had a dream: for example, women and men dancing, I would get up in the morning and start working. As I go along [work on the painting], the dream comes back to my head, and I paint and design” (Williams and Gaines 1994, 378).

Apparently this is not an unusual occurrence. While some artists speak freely about their dreams and their art, others are more reluctant, especially women artists. Price-Williams and Gaines were told by the men that women did not use their dreams to carve or paint, but two of the women artists that they spoke to admitted to carving and painting what they had dreamed.

Another man recounted to Price-Williams and Gaines that he would “walk through” all parts of the painting he saw in his dream, and when he woke up he would remember all the colors and patterns. Some artists said that they felt required to paint things seen in such dreams. The artists made distinctions between ordinary night dreams and special dreams that they later translated into artwork. One painter said that the term *mawa* was used for dreams in general but that he distinguished firmly between ordinary and special dreams. He said, “We know the difference between

them [but] do not tell anyone about the special dreams, except [the] old men" (Price-Williams and Gaines 1994, 379). The special dreams characteristically were highly salient and realistic and involved many senses. They were said to be so vivid that the dreamer could "see, hear and feel the rain" of the dream. Another man explained the difference as being very difficult to differentiate between reality in the everyday world and the reality of the special dream. Some said that they were aware of being in the dream. It would appear that these dreams fall into the category of lucid dreaming, where one is aware that one is dreaming and the events are vividly depicted. They are so vivid, in fact, that they seem more real than waking reality.²

Five of the thirty-seven artists interviewed by Price-Williams and Gaines linked their dreams with The Dreaming. A Yirrkala painter said that night dreaming enabled one to "go back into the Dreamtime," and another old man said he reaches The Dreaming through "special" dreaming (Price-Williams and Gaines 1994, 381). From their research, Price-Williams and Gaines suggest that a special type of night dreaming occurs which enables the dreamer to reach a place and time called The Dreamtime. This place is always there and is, as it were, distinct from the subjective mind. Similarly, Wally Caruana (1993, 10) states that The Dreaming does not refer to unreality but rather to "a state of reality beyond the mundane." Caruana's statement seems to mirror that of philosopher Gordon Globus (1994, 24–27), who suggests that dream life and waking life share more similarities than differences and that both are thought into existence. Globus posits that different life-worlds are associated with different brain states. The absence of sensory constraints during dreaming opens wide the possibility for worlds which are realized in lived dreams. Further, dream life is our own formative creation, and dreams are *de novo* constructions of actual perceptual worlds.

Tony Swain (1988) and Nancy Williams (1986) both pose questions about the terms The Dreamtime and The Dreaming. Swain (1988, 454) addresses the mistranslation of the Warlpiri word *Jukurpa* as Dreamtime. He points out that *Jukurpa* contains no time referent and would be more appropriately rendered as Dreaming event or Dreaming place because the word is used to refer either to myth constellations, including associated rituals, or ancestral sites. Even when *Jukurpa*, in one sense, is spoken of as a creative period, it is not fixed in the past but is a reality outside of time. Williams reflects on Stanner's earlier speculation that it might be through the *act of dreaming* that the Aboriginal mind makes contact with the mystery of The Dreaming. She poses the question, "Does this speculation assume that Aborigines have chosen 'dream' from a number of fully known and logically possible English language alternatives, to translate an Aboriginal concept that joins time, spirit and supernatural event?" (Williams 1986, 235)

Most authors agree that the translation of a complex worldview into "The Dreaming" is an inadequate and rather unfortunate choice. Nevertheless, in spite of its inadequacy, the term does convey the sense of a realm (or realms) that is dreamlike, an eternal and abiding metaphysical realm which we in the West insist upon separating from the physical world of matter. This Western dichotomy, which has become so important to scientific thought, has led to endless controversy and misunderstanding about the real worlds of others.

As communication between Aborigines and non-Aborigines becomes less problematical (as far as language is concerned), the former are using English terms to more clearly articulate concepts and ideas that are now more frequently and openly discussed by Westerners themselves. For example, Diane Bell reports that Aranda speakers who have become fluent in English often use the term *power* rather than *Dreaming* (Bell 1984, 353). David Mowaljarlai, a Kimberley man, is able to articulate the subtle nuances in different types of dreams. He says that for Aborigines there are two kinds of dreams: "One is *yarrri*, things that come down (they descend) when you are quiet and soundly asleep. The other kind they call *burraal*, when the mind is not in a deep sleep, when you are awakening quickly and certain pressure changes make you feel giddy, you see things with your imagination. The idea of *burraal* is light headed, flying up and about" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, 38).

A major problem in deciphering the multiplicity of meanings behind an Aboriginal concept has been that attempts have all centered on translating these meanings into a single term. If we accept that The Dreaming is a cosmogony, a cosmology, a way of being, a moral system, and, as Stanner proposed, "a continuing highway between ancestral superman and living man, between the life-givers and the life, the countries, the totems and totem-places they gave to living men, between subliminal reality and immediate reality, and between the There-and-Then of the beginnings of all things and relevances and the Here-and-Now of their continuations" (Stanner, quoted in Williams 1986, 25), we might be able to move into a discussion of one or some of these parts that make the whole we call The Dreaming. The Dreaming, in the sense of a past time of original creation, has interfered with The Dreaming in its sense of subliminal reality or alternate reality. We, in the West, have only recently begun to think and write seriously about multiple realities that include alternate states of consciousness, which are dreamlike but not dreams.

If, at the time of the early documentation of *Altjira* and its associated terms, non-Aborigines had been discussing notions such as multiple realities, alternate realities, metaphysical realms, pure consciousness, and the collective unconscious, misconceptions about the nature of The Dreaming might have been somewhat less problematical to a Western understanding. These notions were virtually absent from the discourse of the early settlers

and explorers and certainly not included in the vocabulary of the missionaries. If we do use terms such as these, the notion of what Aborigines were trying to convey might more aptly describe their worlds to a Western audience that needs to categorize and separate kinds of realities.

Stanner's notion of The Dreaming as that which is "between subliminal reality and immediate reality" is the position I shall explore further. Subliminal reality is often referred to as alternate reality and immediate reality as everyday consensus reality. Bearing in mind the multiple nuances of *Alchera*, this alternate reality is only one aspect of The Dreaming, albeit an intriguing one. Also, such distinctions are not as important to Aborigines as they are to the Western mind. To return once again to Stanner, he proposed that to see *altjira* is to see eternal things, to perceive sights and shapes that could be seen only by a soul that had left its human body behind temporarily.

In recent times, Mowaljarlai also alludes to this aspect of *altjira* when talking about Jagamurro, a *banman* (clever man) who is the healer in his community (near Warmun community, Turkey Creek, Western Australia) and can make rain. Jagamurro, says Mowaljarlai, has *inner eyes and power for astral travel*. This statement of Mowaljarlai now suggests that the notion of separation from the body is one that has been present in Aboriginal thought and becomes pertinent for a Western understanding of one aspect of the *Altjira*. Without reducing complex Aboriginal cosmology to anything like an equivalence with any Western alternative spiritualities, one cannot help but remark on the similarity between this notion of separation from the body and what have been called "out-of-body experiences."

Mowaljarlai was about ten years old when German anthropologist Andreas Lommel carried out fieldwork in the Kimberleys in the 1930s. In 1938, Lommel wrote that a medicine man must "be able to separate his soul from his body" and when he speaks with the spirits of the dead, "this takes place by his soul leaving him while he is asleep and wandering about the country" (Lommel and Mowaljarlai 1994, 282). Although these ideas were present and reported as early as the 1930s, they were never linked with what are termed in the West out-of-body experiences and astral travel. However, in the 1990s, these terms are quite frequently used, and most English-speaking people know what they mean, at least in theory. In 1993, the adult Mowaljarlai coauthored an article with Lommel, and the discussion again focused on the ability of the clever man (*banman*) to cure after he goes into an apparent trance state. It transpires that the particular medicine man of whom they speak went into trance—left his body and went "flying in the sky" while his physical body remained lying on the ground. The following are excerpts of a conversation between the interviewer, Alan Rumsay (A. R.), one of the editors of *Oceania*, David Mowaljarlai (D. M.), and Aborigine Paddy Womma (P. M.).

- A.R. Did he, uh Sidney and maybe that Allan too, did they uh go into some kind of sleep or halfway sleep where they could then leave their bodies and fly in the sky?
- D.M. Yeah. They do that. They been doing that.
- A.R. How did they learn how to do that?
- D.M. Well, ah.
- P.M. Riding the snake.
- D.M. Yeah they ride that snake. They fly away.
- A.R. When they, uh, people like Allan and Sidney, went riding on that *Wungud*, what did they see?
- D.M. Oh, they see everything.
- A.R. Like from long way off.
- D.M. Yeah. They can see, oh say America, or anywhere. *Barnmarn* people different.
- A.R. And when, when they are doing that can you still see them lying there or, can you still see that person in his body there?
- D.M. Yeah he still laying down when his spirit travelling.
- A.R. He looks like he's asleep does he or what?
- D.M. He look like sleep.
- A.R. You can see him breathing?
- D.M. Yeah. You see him breathing but he gone. He travelling. And that's how uh they compose corroboree there. *Juunba*. When they get all the story belong to every *Wungud*, snake story, *Wondjina* story, any animal. We dance now. They teach us now. That how he go. It's all round the nature power. Power all belong nature. We get all the power from land. That's why it's important.

During these incidents medicine men sometimes bring back knowledge, such as new dances and songs. This also contributes to the sacredness of certain songs and dances.

Anthropologists Ronald and Catherine Berndt (1964), A. P. Elkin (1977), and A. W. Howitt ([1904] 1996) have all recorded stories of moving into the world of spirits by means of "flying," or with the aid of a magical rope or cord, and of individuals being able to separate themselves from their physical bodies. Berndt and Berndt wrote that medicine men south of the Murray could travel through the air on a cord projected from their own bodies, and the medicine man's body could float up and down in the horizontal position with no movements of his hands or legs. Howitt was told that ascent to the sky country via a cord could be achieved by the individual leaving his body during sleep. The Mardu people of the Western Desert informed Robert Tonkinson that during dreams they would sometimes travel in dream-spirit form to their homelands (Tonkinson 1997). They saw this as one way of maintaining presence in their country, no matter where they were living. Dream-spirit journeys thus enabled them

to continue their vital role in fulfilling their religious duty of caring for country.³

This same idea exists elsewhere in Australia. For example, Wandjuk Marika, a Yolngu man, talks about “mind medicine” in addition to herbal remedies and massaging. Mind medicine involves the use of objects such as magic stones from sacred sites that are imbued with certain power as well as other practices. One account that obviously refers to the same sort of phenomenon described above by Mowaljarlai mentions flying:

Then there is the stone, *milirrk*, that’s not the medicine, but the magic. What I’ve been know since about 19 years of age, and then my mind was working, sometime I used to in a dream (not really in a dream but in the night) I have been fly away just like a superman. I used to fly different part of world. I used to fly in the night and see back home with that one, *milirrk*, see what going on, what happening there, and I still do the same thing, but this time my mind is going back to home and I know whoever the person passed away, and every time I ring back home, and ask them what going on what happening, nobody ever told me but I always ask them what going on there, who passed away. Sometime I used to ask, “Is it so and so, is passed away?” I mention name and they always answer “Yes.” (Wandjuk Marika 1995, 129)

Similar accounts from yet other areas of Australia confirm reports of flying or journeys out of the body. Hilton Deakin’s fieldwork in the Kimberley Ranges (Western Australia) reveals that “Each person possesses a dream totem, and like the *panman* [*banman*], is able to journey in sleep out of himself/herself whenever the dream totem appears” (Deakin 1982, 108).

This ability is not restricted to “clever” men. Another account of out-of-body travel is the following account given to Bell by Veronica Brodie, a Ngarrindjeri (South Australia) woman:

Grandfather Dan used to do a lot of this transcendental travelling. He’d go into the wurley down by the lake, Lake Alexandrina. Down by the jetty there, they had a wurley, him and Grandmother Bessie. He’d tell her, “you sit outside my wurley; don’t let nobody touch me for a couple of hours.” They believed if you touched them while they was in this travelling, they could die. He’d say, “I’m going to see my people.” Couple of hours later he’d come out and he’d tell her who he’d been to see, how they were, and so on. He’d come back into his body. He practised a lot of this sort of stuff and he said, “I learned it when I was a little boy on the Coorong and Kingston way.” He was a man of many surprises and skills. (Bell 1998, 330)

Could it be that Aborigines are talking about the same experience as (some) Westerners—of being able to move into another reality under certain circumstances? Although the basic experience might be reported as similar, each one would be contained within a particular cosmological framework that enables the individual to interpret the experience according to his or her own hermeneutical understanding of the event, translating the symbols and sensations according to separate cultural and ontological understandings. Does this mean, then, that The Dreaming might one day be understood by Westerners?

MUSIC AND DANCE

To pursue the argument further, there also is evidence that The Dreaming is accessible not only via the medium of dreams but also via the media of music and dance. Music and dance, for the Yolngu (Northern Territory), aid in the transformation of a Dreaming event into a now event, of Dreaming ancestor into a living human descendant, the reincarnation of the never-dying spirit part of an ancestor (Williams 1986, 187–88). Dancers become material manifestations of particular ancestors because they share a common spiritual essence with the ancestors. Only people who are connected to an ancestor may dance the particular ancestral event. Repeated performances aid dancers in acquiring more of the ancestor's essence and becoming more like them with each performance. Similarly, Alywarra men's dances, writes Richard Moyle (1986, 71, 125, 254), who did fieldwork with the Alywarra (Central Desert) in the 1970s and 1980s, are dances of transformation in which the dancer becomes someone else. In a very literal sense, the dancers are *not themselves* while they are performing. Their attire reflects the nonhuman nature of that transformation. The dancers' movements are rigidly defined by Dreaming precedent and reinforced by tradition and long, arduous training. The performance itself must be a flawless execution in order to be considered worthy.

Both music and dance are of crucial importance in performance, and good dancers are those who know and perform the dance so well that they are able to induce a strong affective response in the audience. Using material from the Walbiri, Munn (1973, 185–91) writes that during a Walbiri *banba* ceremony, performed by men to ensure fertility, ancestral beings are said to “get up” (as from sleep), or that ceremonies “pull out” the ancestor from the country. Ceremony becomes the process by which the invisible is given material embodiment. The dancer is identified with his ancestors and in effect “gives birth” to the ancestors, or reembodies them as a child reembodies essential ancestral powers when it is born. But while a child contains the powers (*guruwari*) inside his body, the dancer wears *guruwari* on or over his body. *Guruwari* designs have a masking quality such that the dancer's personal identity is overlaid by his ancestral (*guruwari*) identity or persona. The term *balga* is often used in the context of the *banba* ceremony. *Balga* denotes physical presence, flesh or body, as well as material plenty. Expressions such as *balga-djari*, “to be born,” or *balga-ma-ni*, “to bring into being,” “to make physically present,” may be used to refer to the ceremonial construction of *guruwari*, “ancestral essence” (Munn 1973, 185).

Guruwari are said to have originated in the interior world of dreams. They are reproduced outside of dreams in the waking world so that they may be observed by others and where they may become part of a process in which actors relate to each other and to the ancestors. The shift from interior dream to exterior reality is important in binding the inner imagi-

nation to the outer social world, the inner self to the external social order:

In the concept of *guruwari*, notions about social relationships and external form mingle with those referring to interior experience and invisible sources of life energy. *Guruwari* are the visual sedimentations of a movement connecting individual consciousness or bodily being and the outer, social world. They are both the body's interiorized life energy and the transbodily social forms that objectify this energy. (Munn 1973, 216–17)

The removal of headdresses and other paraphernalia used during the performance signals that the ancestors have gone back into the ground and the ceremony is over.

The notion that the reenactment of an event of cosmological significance is *equivalent* to that event is contrary to Western ideas of temporal restrictions. Certainly, the annual reenactments of the Passion by some Christians would not have the same connotations. But for Aborigines, to reenact is to live again, in a very real sense. A modern example of this principle of becoming the event in the present is the following Warlpiri (Warlpiri) example, taken from Tony Swain's data (Swain 1988, 457–58).

PURLAPAS

Purlapas (corroborees), which are performed partly for entertainment, are an exception to the notion that rituals originate from The Dreaming and are unchanging and unchangeable. Aborigines acknowledge that *purlapas* have been introduced by humans, yet communication with spiritual beings through dreams is an essential component of a *purlapa*. An individual's spirit "catches" or "finds" a *purlapa* with the assistance of spiritual beings (*kurruwalpa*) who mediate between the Dreaming and the now. During such a dream, songs and sacred designs are revealed to the dreamer by these spirit beings, and in the process the dreamer virtually merges with the ancestor. Faithful rendition of the revealed knowledge is crucial. The Warlpiri *purlapas*, although "dreamed" of in the present, are considered by the Warlpiri participants as uniting them with the timeless Dreaming.

Christian *purlapas*, which are also discovered in dreams (though the *kurruwalpa* is replaced by God), must also be faithful renditions of a revealed ceremony, and the dreamer is usually warned that dire repercussions would result if one altered the disclosed version in any way. The extent to which a performance such as the crucifixion is held to recapitulate the actual event is made clear by the reaction of two of Swain's informants. In a very elaborate performance of the Passion, witnessed by Tony Swain, some of the older men said that they had not liked the ceremony and were considering discontinuing it. One Warlpiri man said that it made him sad to keep on killing God. Another said that he became mildly ill from the performance. Instead of merely dramatically portraying a historical event, the crucifixion was, to some Warlpiri, if not all, a contemporary reality.

Catherine Ellis's ethnomusicological studies in central South Australia led her to discover the intricacies of music as an art of communication which, among other things, uses elements of time structure to manipulate the performers' and/or listeners' sense of time. Music becomes a process whereby alteration of time perception can be achieved. She called this *meta-time*: time structures within another dimension of time that gives present-day expression to the timelessness of the Dreaming (Ellis 1984, 149). Ellis discovered that music patterns were learned as a set of formulae, each applicable to changing demands of duration, interlocked with one another to produce a reflection of the timelessness inherent in the beliefs of the performers, and

... the present moment, and its flow through the use of musical techniques, cannot be separated from its results. Provided that this whole process of unfolding does not create personal insecurity, it can gradually or dramatically lead the performer or listener into a completely altered state of awareness, in which time seems in one sense to be "frozen" and in another sense to be "never ending." This unity of time in Aboriginal music is achieved through the manipulation of many repeated patterns, each of which interlocks with others. (Ellis 1984, 159)

She adds that in secret women's song and ceremonial performances, singers in one place and dancers in another place having their bodies painted with the sacred designs say that they are "singing at the same time" even though they are not singing simultaneously in a linear sense. Rather, their "simultaneous" singing occurs for them in a different time span and time awareness (Ellis 1984, 159).

In order to move into this other time, the performer must correctly present all the interlocked rhythmic, melodic, and textual structures so as to draw on the creative power of The Dreaming and bring about change. If the structures are not completely interlocked, the performance fails to tap into The Dreaming. The main feature of Aboriginal thought about the presentation of a complete ceremony, writes Ellis, is that everything must occur correctly and simultaneously for the full power to be effective. This means that the entire performance—design, dance step, song text, and all the musical structures—have to appear simultaneously. In order to maintain power at its optimum, overlapping/interlocking/cyclical processes must occur. These processes tie together a large body of musical material, the intent of which is to alter perceptions of time in order to reevaluate real time and the individual's place within it (Ellis 1984, 159).

Ellis's work on several Pitjantjatjara songs points to the fact that physiological factors may be used as an accurate time-measurement device for Aboriginal performers. The continuous stick-beating accompaniment (*tukultjinganyi*) to their music follows the heartbeat and varies only fractionally. The Pitjantjatjara say that while the breath controls the length of the phrase, the speed of singing and of beating is governed by listening to the heart (Ellis 1984, 156). In the performance of songs that name (and

therefore contain the power of) important sites, the singing is accompanied by the strong beating of sticks (*timpil pulka*), and though patterns of rhythmic segments differ, the background beating is the same. In addition to this beating, however, other factors, such as rhythmic accentuation, also play a part in perception of time. The Pitjantjatjara expression *inma pulka inkanyi*, or "singing in a strongly accented style," describes the performance of important songs that name the powerful sites in a songline. Ellis suggests that rhythmic accentuation is important in the type of experience of time that the participants perceive. In fact, there is a complex process of overlaying patterns which affect a participant's awareness of the musical event, his own personality, and the nature of the time experience through which he is passing (see Ellis 1984 for more precise ethnomusicological details on this).

Another ethnomusicologist, Helen Payne, who has also worked with the Pitjantjatjara, says that women can also tap into The Dreaming through dance and songs, after much rigorous training. A woman is judged to be effective if she sings and dances a rite so well that she conveys to other women that she *is* the Dreaming ancestor she is enacting in dance and song. If her performance is properly executed, she acquires a state of transformation, capturing the essence of the ancestor to the point that she *becomes* that ancestor (Payne 1988). For example, a woman who can dance the crow ancestor so convincingly that she becomes crow to the enculturated observers has tapped into crow essence. Some performances can last up to four days or more.

Ellis recorded a performance by some South Australian women from Indulkana that lasted for four days. The body painting involved in the dance was very elaborate and necessitated much preparation. During the preparation, the women responsible for the singing had to keep the relevant painting song present in the minds of the performers, and the women being painted sang the songs. Although the dance itself might take only two minutes, painting might take up to three hours. Both the preparation and the dance, however, are equally important. Meaning is conveyed through the total activity—the singing of many small songs, body design, dance step, and musical structures—and is tied into the mapping of a particular tract of land (Ellis 1992, 158–59). Full knowledge of the multi-levelled meanings contained within any ceremony might take up to forty years to understand. Even more time is necessary for development and appreciation and to train others.

Ronald Allan writes that Aboriginal music is much more than just the words of the songs, the voices of the singers and dancers, the handclaps and sound of the sticks and (in some cases), the *didjeridu*.⁴ Indeed, the total context in which the music is performed needs to be considered. Because listening to the natural world is an intrinsic part of Aboriginal life, Aborigines' perceptions of that world are acute. The total context in which

music is performed needs to be considered: the precise nature of the weather, the time, location, and tide, the positions of the stars, the degree of cloud, the warmth of the air, the ceremonial restrictions on diet, and even the availability of tea, aspro, tobacco, and cough mixture. All of these will affect the timbre of the voices, the resonance of the *didjeridu*, and, more important, the emotions of the participants (Allan 1979, 20). There is an inseparable link between the musical elements and the conditions in which they are produced.

Each performer is enculturated in "outer time" events so that one small action in the entire performance has highly significant meaning to all participants. In some performances, especially those described by the ethnomusicologists mentioned here, performers in the present are transformed and transported to the ever-present, never-ending Dreaming. It is as if the ancestors reemerge in the present through the bodies of the living. Perhaps the "shared interpretive scheme" or common core of knowledge of The Dreaming enables ceremonial performers to tune in to what Alfred Schutz has referred to as "inner time" (Schutz 1970, 229).

Schutz was convinced that even factually separated worlds of experience are joined together through interconnections of actual experience to form a single intersubjective world. It is possible for individuals to "share together the same vivid present" at which time they can enter each other's "stream of consciousness" in "vivid simultaneity" (Schutz 1970, 166). Schutz gives the examples of playing a game of tennis, performing chamber music, or making love as being caught in another's vivid present. Probably the best example of such communicative connectedness is a musical composition that was written in another century. The contemporary artist playing that musical composition and the audience listening to the music are interactively involved in the recreation of the experiences of the composer. Thus, to a certain extent, the feelings of the composer are felt by the artist who recreates the mood of the music as determined by the composer. In Schutz's terms, they are sharing inner time; all involved are sharing together the same vivid present. Each is entering the stream of consciousness of the other in "vivid simultaneity" (Schutz 1964, 173).

To elaborate on Schutz's work in the context of Aboriginal ceremony, performers are with others in what Schutz refers to as a common environment within which their conscious lives are intentionally interconnected. The common environment is established by comprehension, which in turn is founded upon the fact that the subjects reciprocally motivate one another in their spiritual activities. Thus relationships of mutual understanding and consent are forged and create a communicative common environment.

Schutz contends that not only do we move many times daily between competing provinces of meaning but that we also can live simultaneously within multiple provinces. For example, while reading a book we may be

aware at the same time of noises in the corridor, or children playing outside, but the individual may pursue one theme as the main theme (reading the book) and the other as the subordinate one (hearing the children playing). Schutz also points out that “any subject participates in several time dimensions: there is first his particular inner time, the flux of immanent time in which the constituting experiences have their place; secondly the time dimension of the constituted experiences, the (still subjective) space-time.” And, although each subject has his particular subjective environment, his private world, there is also (third) an objective intersubjective time that forms a single order of time with all the subjective times (Schutz 1970, 165).

Mowaljarlai, as if to mirror Schutz’s ideas more succinctly but in much the same way, writes, “When your mind is tuned in and directed . . . you are in an ancient state of mind; time stands still, because your mind is in a state where time does not count. It’s not like dreaming seeing things in your sleep. Ancient time is no time” (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993, 67).

We might now integrate these notions of shared inner time within a shared interpretive scheme with a different yet complementary notion, that of *flow*. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s notion of flow is the sensation of acting with total involvement, where one is in control but there is little distinction between self and environment or between past, present, and future. Flow is experienced as a unified flowing from one moment to the next. Self-consciousness is eliminated while action and awareness are tightly and reflexively intertwined, merging together, and there can be a sense of self-transcendence (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 365). For example, an individual who is totally absorbed in the activity at hand (rock climbing, listening to music, or being totally absorbed in a ritual performance) can experience a merging of action and awareness.

In flow, objective clock time loses significance. Indeed, a common feature of flow experiences is a distorted sense of time—hours seem to pass by in minutes, or a few seconds may stretch out into what seems infinity (Csikszentmihalyi 1988, 33). Whenever a person learns to experience flow in a given activity, just starting to get involved in that activity will promote the possibility of experiencing flow.

In an Aboriginal ceremonial performance that is seriously intended to contact Dreaming ancestors, a combination of factors could lead to a performer’s entering what Mowaljarlai calls “an ancient state of mind” where time stands still. Performers are fully immersed in the total life-world of The Dreaming: they are engaged in purposeful activity focused on an expected outcome. Heightened emotional involvement could lead to all actors’ being swept up in a flow experience and becoming involved in what Schutz refers to as an intersubjective stream of consciousness where they share together the same vivid present in vivid simultaneity.

In Aboriginal Australia the dominant belief is that virtually all major power or life-force emanated ultimately from the spiritual realm and is imbued in the land (Berndt and Berndt 1993). It came forth in response to ancestral ritual acts. Ritual acts, then, can be important as a means of access to power, a spiritual power that is intrinsically tied up with the entire environment. It seems that there are a number of ways that Aborigines can tap into their eternal Dreaming, to realize, in their everyday world, the interrelatedness of human with environment, with the cosmos, and with all other species, in a manner that we in the West can only begin to contemplate. As Mowaljarlai says in the title of his book, "everything standing up [is] alive" (Mowaljarlai and Malnic 1993). This is why the land is so important to Aborigines. It connects them, via their own thoughts and actions, stories and mythologies, to the eternal, ever-present Dreaming, a reality that exists alongside that of mundane, everyday reality.

NOTES

A version of this article was presented at the Australian Anthropology Society's 25th annual conference in Sydney, 12 July 1999.

1. The Dreaming contains concepts and events that are not compatible with Christianity, particularly the idea of guardianship or stewardship of the land, which is the heart and soul of Aboriginal spirituality. The land and The Dreaming are one and are linked by a spiritual kinship to the extent that one thing cannot be separated from the other: animals, birds, country, humans, and ancestors are inextricably linked for all time. This notion, together with the secret-sacred nature of ceremony, is an insurmountable obstacle to a true synthesis of Christianity and traditional Aboriginal spirituality, in spite of concerted efforts to do so by Aboriginal Christians.

2. This type of experience is quite common cross-culturally. The Mekeo of Papua New Guinea regard dreaming as another type of "power," and many high-ranking men, especially sorcerers, claim this power. It enables them to do many things, including communicate with dead relatives. Such "dreams" are explained by the Mekeo as being extremely vivid—colors, sounds, sights, and experiences appear even more vivid and intense than waking experience. See Stephen 1982.

3. Such metaphysical presence, however, is at odds with the legal system in Australia and poses all sorts of problems for land-rights cases. The esoteric argument in land cases has so far not been used.

4. The didjeridu is a hollow tube of wood that usually has been hollowed out by termites. Most commonly it is about four to five feet long and two or more inches in internal diameter. It makes a deep resonating sound when blown and is played using circular breathing.

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