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Robert Tonkinson

*University of Western Australia*

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# Dream-Spirits and Innovation in Aboriginal Australia's Western Desert

*Robert Tonkinson*

The University of Western Australia  
Perth, Australia

Among the Mardu Aborigines, dreams (*kapukurri; jukurrpa*) may carry at least the same weight as the events of waking life. 'Travelling' in dream-spirit form enhances the possibility of revelations both dangerous and enlightening. In the Australian case, a major cultural dilemma is to accommodate and rationalize an inevitable dynamism when the dominant ideology is one of timelessness and stasis. Two key cultural symbols, the Dreaming and the Law, still substantially shape worldviews and behaviour of the Martu people, who live in the remote Western Desert region. Much of my focus is on a category of popular, largely public contemporary ritual called *partunjarrijanu* 'from the dream-spirit'. Discussion of how such rituals come into being highlights the notable importance of altered states of consciousness in creativity. However, in role and status individuals are positioned as conduits for the flow of knowledge and power from the spiritual into the earthly realm. Thus distanced from their own creativity, they are not perceived as creators in their own right. I also show that, in Western Desert society, cultural capital accrues to *groups* through playing the advantageous role of host to neighboring groups, using new dream-spirit rituals as a kind of currency within broader regional systems of exchange.

**Keywords:** *Aborigines, adaptation, worldview, religion, dynamism*

The frontier in Australia began with settlement by the British near Sydney in 1788 and ended almost 200 years later in the Western Desert, which occupies one sixth of a continent similar in area to continental United States (minus Alaska), but most of which is arid. The Mardu were among the last Aboriginal people to leave their heartlands and nomadic way of life and settle permanently in communities around the desert's fringes. Of the half-million Australians today identifying as Aboriginal, the thousand or so Mardu are among the groups most remote from the large towns and cities in which about 80% of Aboriginal people now live. The Mardu are a very small part of an Aboriginal population that, taken as a whole, today remains severely disadvantaged in terms of virtually all major social indicators when compared to the rest of the populace, and is heavily reliant on social welfare disbursements. Though the total Western Desert population prior to the British invasion would have been just a few thousand, its inhabitants constituted, geographically at least, the nation's largest Aboriginal cultural bloc; that is, a region populated by people who speak dialects of the same language, follow basically the same cultural practices,

and share very similar values and beliefs. The Western Desert people are among the most tradition-oriented groups in Aboriginal Australia, subsisting at the opposite end of the assimilatory spectrum from indigenous elites such as senior bureaucrats and professionals, most of whom are located within range of the centers of power.

The small desert-fringe settlement of Jigalong, originally a camel-breeding depot on the Rabbit Proof Fence, became home for the small groups of desert immigrants who began drifting in from the desert in the early 1900s and eventually settled there. Their origins in smaller dialect-named entities or so-called "tribes" gradually lost relevance in their new sedentary situation, and a new collective label, "Mardu," arose. Its purpose was to differentiate themselves from culturally very similar groups located in other communities dotted around the edges of the Western Desert. Most men and women found seasonal employment as workers on pastoral stations (ranches) in the East Pilbara district, where today huge mining tenements are being exploited and pastoralism is but a minor industry. From 1946, Jigalong was a Christian mission for 25 years, and became the site of a battle between a small group of

fundamentalists and the strongly tradition-oriented Mardu, who successfully resisted missionary urgings for them to abandon “the work of the devil” and accept the baptism of the Holy Spirit—though some of the children raised in dormitories did imbibe sufficient knowledge of Christianity to become involved with it in recent decades (see Tonkinson, 1974, 2007a).

In the 1970s, government policies in the field of Aboriginal Affairs changed from a dominant paternalism to a markedly more liberal self-management orientation. Some of the Mardu took advantage of their new freedom to make a return to their desert homelands, where they established outstations, two of which later prospered and grew into independent communities, with their own councils and government funding. The hiatus of several decades, when the desert heartlands were virtually empty, was, in Mardu perceptions, only a physical (i.e., not spiritual or emotional) separation. They were making regular return visits—but in *partunjarri* (dream-spirit) rather than human form. From their perspective, these trips had the same truth-value as physical visits, and reassured them that all was well back in their homelands. Certainly, they felt no sense of having abandoned their traditional past or its Law, and were able to visit the sites for which they were responsible. Traditionally, throughout the continent, Aborigines performed brief, informal “increase” ceremonies annually at these sites, aimed at ensuring that the abundant plant or animal resources, believed to be living under each site, would automatically respond positively to the request to emerge and be plentiful throughout the region. After the successful passage of national indigenous land rights (Native Title) legislation in 1993, a major criterion for claimants was to prove their continuing presence and use of the land. Despite the time spent living in settlements or on pastoral stations (ranches), the Mardu were largely successful in their claim, evincing (in their testimonies and documents of claim) overwhelming proof that they had retained responsibility for, and a multiplicity of connections to, their traditional homelands, regardless of physical separation, which in many cases flowed from intrusive Europeans impacts.

A majority of Mardu now live in three communities, Jigalong, Parnngurr, and Punmu, which have electricity, television, telephones, computers, supermarkets, workshops, well-equipped schools, and adult-education facilities (Tonkinson, 2007b). Organized along Western-oriented administrative lines, these

settlements possess elected Mardu councils, which are charged with running them and mediating bureaucratic relations with the outside world. Every community employs non-Aboriginal staff in key positions such as manager/administrator, mechanic, accountant, and there are also public servants such as teachers, nurses, and specialists running training programs. Despite a quarter century of access to television and other mass media, the worldviews of most Mardu are heavily biased towards their own affairs, and suggest that they are largely indifferent to what transpires beyond their region, apart from sport (Tonkinson & Tonkinson, 2010). Their mobility has increased now that they have reliable vehicles, and their extensive travels (mostly by SUVs these days) are predominantly to visit relatives and participate in “Law business” with other Western Desert people in north-western Australia; or to seek hospital treatment, which sometimes takes them far south to the state capital city of Perth. Even for Mardu living in towns, most encounters with non-Mardu are confined to formal transactions in shops and government service organizations, though for the minority involved in Christian churches there is a degree of interaction with pastors and some non-Mardu parishioners. Even today, after decades of contact with ideas, people, and things Western, Mardu worldviews are focused heavily on their Western Desert Aboriginal world; and there is a marked lack of interest in trying to become more like other Australians. They appear to deem it wiser to hold on to what they have rather than abandon their cultural integrity for lives of uncertainty and struggle in a society that is largely unwelcoming and unmoved by their multiple disadvantages, often preferring to blame the victim.

#### **The Centrality of Kinship in Traditional Aboriginal Australia**

Every person is born into a universe of kin, and his or her obligations and responsibilities to all other members of the society are encoded by kinship. The relevant terms are in constant use when addressing or referring to others, providing everyone with a ready-made, mutually understood interactional code. Children are exempted from the behavioral rules, but as they mature they learn the system and in their early teens will begin conforming to its rules. Everyone with whom one interacts is classified and known by a particular kin term, and adult social interaction is modeled on a set of behaviors that ideally characterize the kin

relationship involved. Regardless of whether some other person is loved or hated, admired or envied, patterned kin behaviors provide a measure of predictability in social encounters. Since all others are kin of some sort, feelings of security, well-being, mutual obligation, and responsibility predominate. Traditional Aboriginal life was thus played out in a world of biographies, and strangers existed only beyond the limits of one's society. True, men possess more rights than women and their responsibility for vital aspects of social reproduction is never in question (cf. Bern, 1979; Tonkinson, 1998, 2000). In everyday social life, however, the ethos of egalitarianism is strongly held, and it is noticeable that when men boast about their superiority to women there are no females present.

Most kin relationships carry with them a degree of permissible variation in their behavioral content, and say nothing about the emotional closeness or distance between the two interacting individuals. Yet these status relationships cannot be abandoned; it would be difficult to ignore them and negotiate very different relationships—but not impossible, as, for example, in the case of “wrong marriages” between two people who are not related as “spouse.” There is no absoluteness of individuality in the eyes of the Law; all is relational, and embedded, and the relative kinship positions are concretized. Rather, how people treat every other individual adult (children are universally indulged to a degree unheard of in most Western societies) is significantly determined by kinship (Tonkinson, 1998; Dousset, 2011). For every punisher, there is a protector (in different situations, key kin, such as a male's elder brother or female's elder sister, can be both), for every critic, a defender, and so on.

In terms of social control and conformity, desert children have virtually free rein to test the limits of their environment and engage in emotional excesses; yet, by the time they reach puberty, they have become more tractable and dependable in fulfilling their various social responsibilities. The explanation for this transformation is *kunta*, “shame, embarrassment,” which is vital to self-control and conformity in Aboriginal societies. Desert people are typically quick to anger, but also quick to calm down again after giving loud voice to their agitation and its source, sometimes with physical exchanges using weapons or fists. Others rapidly intervene and verbal shaming may prove sufficient to subdue high emotions. Kinship dictates who does what in controlling such conflicts. People might break rules or have grievances

that need to be settled, but mechanisms exist to manage disputes and punish the guilty. Traditionally, with a local organization based on bands, it was easy for people in trouble to leave and join another until things cooled down, or, if sufficiently serious, to have the matter definitively resolved at a subsequent big meeting.

### **Religion:**

#### **The Dreaming and the Law**

Understanding the place of altered states of consciousness in Aboriginal Australia depends on knowing something about the concept of the Dreaming, particularly. Desert worldviews reflect a kind of “religious confidence” (Stanner, 1960/1989), which perhaps compensates to an extent for the harshness of the natural environment. Seen from the outside, desert societies appear to be dangerously fragile, poised constantly on the brink of starvation or thirst in a highly unpredictable and resource-poor environment. However, rather than tense and anxious, people's normal disposition tends to be relaxed and confident in their survival abilities. Everyone who works with desert people remarks upon their sense of humor—a characteristic that would surely not exist if every day were a grim battle for survival. What matters most is fealty to the Law, a fundamental assent to the master-plan of the Dreaming, which furnishes an enabling flow of power and fertility into the human realm. It also keeps mature men, particularly, very busily engaged with “Law business.” To ignore the dictates of the ancestral creative beings would, in their belief, mean the end of the world.

Every student of Aboriginal Australian religion is to some extent intellectually indebted to the work of anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner (1979, 1960/1989; see also Hinkson & Beckett, 2008), whose writing on this topic has no equal. The general outline that follows owes much to his insights. The twin indivisible pillars or key symbols of almost all traditional Australian Aboriginal societies were “The Dreaming” and “The Law,” and it is interesting that Aboriginal people so often use these two English terms in reference to them; clearly, they see parallels between the two institutions in both cultures. The Dreaming explains how things came to be as they are, and the Law specifies how life should be lived and what should happen if people break it.

First came the Dreaming, along with its magnificent creative beings, who were variously human or animal in form, some possessing both elements and able to change at will. The creators discovered a flat,

featureless, continent devoid of life of any kind, and populated it with the ancestors of today's Aborigines, giving each group a distinctive territory, language, social structure, and culture. These beings also left their "tracks" so that, as people traveled in search of food and water, they would be constantly reminded of how their world was created for them. Most of the creative beings were at times given to excessive behaviors, such that not all their actions were part of the legacy they imparted to their human descendants. The ancestral beings bequeathed to each society a set of moral precepts, ideal behaviors, and sanctions that collectively constitute "the Law." It is all-encompassing, and principles and practices concerning justice, punishment, and retribution are embedded within it. The agents of punishment are other humans, because the spiritual powers have long since withdrawn into their own realm. Under normal circumstances, though, kin-based obligations and the inhibitory power of shame typically combine well to minimize violence. Even when spiritual sanctions exist, human agents are generally essential for their execution, and such sanctions are limited to specific ritual infringements. The great power or life-essence believed to reside in sacred objects and in certain songs, dances, and localities is believed to be extremely dangerous for some sections of the society. For example, in the Western Desert region men believe that, should women somehow see such objects or trespass into men's sacred areas, they would soon sicken and die. Failing this outcome, men would be chosen to kill the hapless offenders because of the grave nature of their offence (I have recorded firsthand accounts of such punishment). There are also dangerous consequences for men who breach female sacred spaces.

The huge burden for each generation is to absorb all extant knowledge and transmit it effectively to following generations; and the fact that theirs is an oral culture means that the capacity to "create" (in their view, to receive) new knowledge will guarantee dynamism and a constantly vivified cultural life. Western societies tend to assume an interrelationship between religious and moral systems, but in many small-scale societies this may be tenuous or non-existent. In the Western Desert, myths may describe acts that were neither moral nor acceptable in terms of the blueprint bequeathed by the creative beings to those first humans they placed on the country. Some creative beings were unpredictable and perverse and extremely violent or sexually aberrant, but most of their behavior was concerned with instituting

social norms. In some Mardu myths where there is mayhem, yet the perpetrators go unpunished, the narrator ends with a statement affirming that what has transpired should forever remain only in the Dreaming, being specifically *not* for humans to emulate. Alternatively, should an event involve the instituting of something that is to endure forever, one of the characters may say so. Mardu mythology seems at least to suggest a moral element in much Dreaming behavior, particularly through its concern for the instituting of, and demanding adherence to, a Lawful way of life by the descendants. It may well be, though, that immoral acts are safely bracketed within the category of myth to function as bad examples, harmlessly accentuating the unspeakable as a reminder of what is morally acceptable.

The Dreaming is the most complex concept in a religion suffused with complexities. It is most aptly designated by Stanner (1979) as the "everywhen," which encapsulates past, present, and future into an abiding timelessness. Among many remote-dwelling Aboriginal people, the Dreaming's reality, power, and truths remain unquestioned, despite many decades of school instruction and Christian proselytizing. Distinctive shapes and features in the landscape, as well as human happenings therein, were undoubtedly the inspiration for much of the mythology that has evolved. Once the ancestral beings were done with their worldly endeavors, they ceased to exist in bodily form, becoming features of the landscape or night sky, while their indestructible spirits eventually returned for good to the spiritual realm, lying somewhere out in the cosmos. Importantly, though, the power or "life essence" they contained was contagious, remaining on earth in everything they had touched and as an animating force. The desert people believe that these beings retain their concern for human affairs, and remain watchful. Through ritual, their power is available to human actors, via spirit-beings that assume the role of intermediaries between spiritual and human realms. Berndt (1974) identified them as those "who bring life out of the Dreaming, conferring this precious substance on man as on all natural species" (p. 24).

The great beings of the Dreaming were not punishing gods, but what they had established was a kind of compact, both implicit and binding, between them and the human world: everything would continue to operate as ordained in the Dreaming and encoded in the Law for as long as humans kept their part of the bargain. Implicit in this positive prescription is a literally

world-shattering consequence for human failure to “hold onto the Law”: cessation of the flow of enabling ancestral power, committing the earthly realm and everything and everyone in it to oblivion. Life’s master plan as bequeathed by the creative beings was understood as fixed and immutable, and their Aboriginal descendants were charged with its faithful reproduction. This is a burden willingly borne, principally by older men and women, who share major responsibility for ensuring the Law’s full and faithful transmission to succeeding generations. The abiding human disposition comprised acceptance of things as ordained by ancestral dictate and faithful reproduction of the status quo. Anything akin to “progress” would be literally unthinkable; as one Arnhem Land man put it, “we are always running to catch up with what has been done before” (Morphy, 1988, p. 249).

If all this sounds like a mutually reinforcing, closed circle, it certainly accords with Dreaming certainties, but as Stanner (1960/1989) made clear, this state is hypothetical, an impossible goal; even if equilibrium was established, it cannot be but transitory because human behavior is an uncontrollable variable. New knowledge of some kind is constantly being generated, but in the Aboriginal case everything in existence must have been put there by the creative beings during the creative epoch. It is discoverable, yet eludes human efforts to discern and uncover it. The dominant traditional ideology of stasis is thus itself illusory.

#### **Spirit-Being Intermediaries**

A second key avenue of discovery is the activities of spirit-beings that act as intermediaries between the withdrawn creative beings and the human realm (see also Berndt, 1974; Wild, 1987). During altered states of consciousness such as daydreams or sleep-dreams, new information may pass between the spiritual and human realms. The responsible spirit-intermediaries are called *jijikarrkaly*. In many desert dialects, *jiji* is a word for child, suggesting that these messengers are small. During dance performances, the level of intensity achieved by some of the more accomplished performers suggests an almost trance-like state that opens them to communication from these mediating beings. This state is attained without the use of substances or other common methods employed in many cultures to induce trance. In all major rituals, Mardu men spend long hours (often almost until dawn) singing secret-sacred song-lines, while beating wooden batons on the ground, inducing tension and excitement as each round of singing reaches

its climax, but their chatter between songs precludes any possibility that their intention is to attain a trance state.

Beliefs surrounding the role of the spirit-messengers are indicative of how Mardu are able to connect to the spiritual realm. While Aboriginal Australian religious systems are neither mystical nor preoccupied with the occult, they are notable for the way human actors are positioned as conduits, passive receivers of knowledge emanating ultimately from the spiritual realm. This status says nothing about personality, though, and in no way suggests that people are lacking in character or individuality. The crucial point here is that, by attributing knowledge to ancestral powers, people are largely divorcing themselves from the products of their own creativity, thus ironing out the creases caused, for example, by differences in ability or creativity. People are positioned in relation to society as reproducers rather than producers, posing no threat to either the dominant ideology or the social hierarchy. As anthropologist Ken Maddock (1982) noted about people’s place in the cosmos: “It is the powers alone who are conceived of as creative, men being passive recipients of unmotivated gifts. As men deny the creativity which is truly theirs, they account for their culture only by positing that to create is to be other than human. To be human is to reproduce forms” (p. 119). In other words, innovation is nowhere to be seen on any list of human motivation, and Aboriginal religions are alike in creating new rituals by combining already existing ritual “bits” into novel wholes, while varying certain elements like body decorations and dance tunes and steps, and ratios between public and secret-sacred elements. Retention of the *gestalt* thus renders them somehow familiar, and easy to learn and reproduce.

Children begin to acquire an understanding of the Dreaming from a very early age, largely through older relatives pointing out notable landscape features and relating the associated mythology. The young will steadily acquire knowledge via myths, rituals, song-lines, and portable objects of many kinds that function as symbolic “vehicles” (as Stanner, 1979, p. 137, put it) for conveying the truths of the Dreaming. All its notable marvels are embodied in one or more of these media. Landforms bear the indelible marks of these founding dramas, and myths recount how the first beings, either by accident or design, imprinted themselves on the physical world in the course of their wanderings and adventures (see, e.g., Munn, 1970). Dreaming events are dramatized

in dances, while songs similarly condense world-ordering acts of creation and adventure, and portable carved, painted, or red-ochred sacred objects symbolize country, founding dramas, and the creative beings themselves. Landforms, as the vivid imprint of creative Dreaming energies, provide palpable reminders of ancestral world-building and firmly link the Dreaming to the present. Through the media of song, story-telling, and dance, communication with the spiritual realm is enhanced and the continued reproduction of life on earth is guaranteed. Myths reveal the nature of the founding design and of its creators; and totemic beliefs impart life-sustaining links between individuals, groups, specific sites, and ancestral beings.

### Totemism

Totemism, which is more highly elaborated in Aboriginal Australia than anywhere else in the world, posits an enduring and indissoluble unity of substance or flesh between people (both as individuals and members of groups), flora, fauna, and other elements, including minerals, which constitute the natural environment. The relationship between humans and nature is a close one, expressed and affirmed in their totemic beliefs, which constitute a fundamental element of people's worldviews. Individuals are linked to the Dreaming powers through enduring, indissoluble, and multiple totemic associations. The intimate connection that exists between humans and animals is also reflected in people's conceptions of the creative beings: almost all had the ability to assume either form, and the associated behavioral characteristics when the occasion demanded. The Mardu may be emphatic about the essential "humanness" of Marlu the Kangaroo, for instance, yet in relating the exploits of this major creative being, a person may use the verb "hop" to describe Marlu's mode of locomotion. For all this intimacy of association linking animals and humans, though, Aboriginal people were at pains to underline their uniqueness from other animals in one fundamental aspect, as Burrige (1973) made clear: animals are incestuous, copulating with parents and siblings; humans are not, because the dictates of kinship make this act, structurally at least, impossible.

The compression of both time and space between the Dreaming and the present is evident in many elements of Mardu belief and worldview, a few of which I have already noted. Every individual is endowed with a singular, personal totemic connection to the spiritual realm. In the Mardu case, conception totemism under-

pins individual uniqueness, and dreams are usually integral to the identification of the form taken by the little spirit-being (left behind in the Dreaming by the creative beings as a kind of life-essence) before it finds and enters its human mother. A different but closely related form of totemism is what I have labeled "ancestral." As noted earlier, during their Dreaming travels the creative beings left behind various objects, such as weapons, hair-string, sacred objects, and eagle-hawk down from their body decorations—all redolent of life-force and transformative potential, including spirit-children. Any child conceived or born in the vicinity of the path of ancestral being(s) is attributed with them as her or his ancestral totem. The way to ask Mardu to identify their ancestral totem is "*Nganalunta katingu jurnu yanu?*" ("Who carried you, left you behind, and went on?"). Although a person may possess the same conception totem as some others, every coming-into-being story is unique. Here is one account, with a twist:

N. was working on a pastoral property ("station") with another Mardu man and his wife who knew the area well. One day, N. shot a small kangaroo on a hill where lots of spirit-children were said to live (which is why women not wanting to get pregnant avoided this area), and the three ate it that night, but the wife could not finish her meat because she felt nauseous. The same night, N. dreamt that he saw a small child wheeling a barrow along a road towards him, and when it spotted him it approached and tried to get under N.'s blankets. N. shooed it away, so it ran into the camp of the couple. N. remembered his dream, and a few weeks later, when the woman realized she was pregnant, N. related it to her, thus allowing her to identify the *nyuka* (conception totem). Her husband told N. that the baby was really half N.'s because he had shot the kangaroo. N. told me he was certain that, had he allowed the spirit-child to come into his swag, it would have entered *his* wife and now would be his own.

At the end of life, too, a major concern of the living is to deal with the immortality of the spirit, particularly of those adults who die prematurely and are wont to hang around and cause concern to the living. This fear is why close relatives abandon their camps/houses and cease mentioning the deceased's name. At the end of a burial, the deceased's personal possessions would be broken and also buried, and an elderly close

relative would address the spirit of the deceased directly, urging it to be happy about all that has been done for it, and get going in the direction of the waterhole of its birth. There, satisfied with the send-off it has received, the *kuurti* (spirit) will settle down and be visible to the living only during dreams.

For Aborigines, the spiritual realm and that of humans and nature were essentially one intricately interconnected unity. The effect of all these interdependent religious manifestations is to shrink the distance between the Dreaming and the here and now. Dreams and dream-spirit journeys amplify the essential timelessness and oneness of the desert people's cosmic order.

#### **The *Maparn* (Diviner-Curer)**

Although shamans and trances were unknown in Aboriginal Australia, there were people, generally men, who were recognized as possessing special powers to divine and cure a range of illnesses, generally as a kind of public service. Known in the Western Desert as *maparn*, theirs was the only specialist role in Aboriginal Australia culture, and was at best a part-time one, akin to the "medicine man" in North American Indian cultures. Although they do not possess a monopoly in this regard, *maparn* enjoy enhanced access to the spiritual realm, usually aided by spirit-familiars, which can take on a bird or animal form when moving between the two realms. Within the *maparn's* body is said to be a small magical stone or shell object that can be withdrawn and used when curing sick people, divining, explaining and treating causes of illness, predicting future events, recovering lost objects and protecting the community at large from malevolent spirits and revenge expeditions bent on killing someone. A person may inherit these powers from a parent or is recognized by others as possessing them from birth. *Maparn* are said to be able to travel inside whirlwinds or as dream-spirits or on raft-like arrangements of sacred objects. While respected, and at times feared by *munta* (those without a *maparn* inside them) for their powers, *maparn* seek neither higher social status nor special treatment and are predominantly viewed favorably. They sometimes work in concert against perceived dangers (see Tonkinson, 1991, p. 118-131). According to Mardu men, during rainmaking rituals it was the *maparn*, riding shotgun on the backs of rainbow serpents, who led trips to the home of the old ancestral man-snake, Winpa. The *maparn* are often prominent players in the creation of dream-spirit rituals, discussed in the following section.

#### **Dream-Spirits and Aboriginal Australia**

#### **Ritual Categories in Western Desert Culture**

Aboriginal ritual is the principal method of gaining access to the spiritual realm and communicating with ancestral beings so as to trigger their reciprocal obligations to the living. It is also the medium through which people can, as spirits, draw closer to the powers inherent in the Dreaming. As pre-existing spirit-children, humans were all once part of that realm and as spirits after death they will ultimately return there, but as living beings on Earth they require access to it if they are to maintain their life-force. Thus a dancer is not merely imitating the activities of a given ancestral being, but *becomes* that being, entering momentarily into the spiritual realm and remaining there until, at the end of the dance, he is tapped on the shoulder by an audience member to bring him back into the physical world. Similarly, desert people would never abruptly waken a sleeping person, lest his or her dream-spirit is abroad and does not have sufficient time to re-enter its owner's body. This is a perilous situation, Mardu men have told me, because a sorcerer or enemy may trap the dream-spirit inside a sealable receptacle, and if not released, the victim will sicken and die.

While it is probably safe to say that all extant rituals in the Western Desert were brought to life by human actors along the general lines described above, the Mardu distinguish two major, interrelated ritual categories: *mangunyjanu* "from the ancestral beings" and *partunjarrijanu* "from the dream-spirits"; the first have been around since time immemorial and are believed to originate from the creative epoch; they are large, complex, pan-Western Desert, and may contain hundreds of songs. For example, the Ngaawayil rainmaking ritual is attributed to the old creative being, Winpa; whereas the Yarrie line (named for the cattle property on which it was composed) exemplifies the second type of ritual, with which the rest of this paper is mainly concerned. This ritual type is contemporary and most often short-lived, has known origins and authorship, and a traceable path of transmission from group to group around the desert. As I indicated at the outset of this paper, the further such ritual travels, the more likely it is eventually to undergo a change of status or category and be received as *mangunyjanu*, originating in the Dreaming epoch.

In addressing the broader political implications of such processes, I have argued elsewhere (Tonkinson,



2005, pp. 32-46) that an important distinction exists in Western Desert society between the potential for *individuals* to convert new knowledge into forms of enduring power and that of *collectivities* to generate or enhance political power from their control of the rituals that ultimately derive from such individual creativity. Here my focus dwells more on the dream-spirit phenomenon. What is perhaps most interesting about the process of bringing a dream-spirit ritual into being is that it is predominantly a shared endeavor, even though the bulk of its songs may in a few cases come from just one person. In such cases, the individual is most likely a diviner-curer (*maparn*), whose skills and defences when “going *partunjarri*” (on a journey in dream-spirit form) afford better protection during such liminal experiences than is possible for the majority of people. The ritual typically remains under the control of those at its point of origin, usually a community, whose elders will assume the politically advantageous role of “host” by inviting neighboring groups to attend performances. As in many other hunter-gatherer societies, visitors, though warmly welcomed, are at a status disadvantage compared to hosts when they are “initiated” into a new ritual. However, once the dream-spirit ritual is “launched” into the huge Western Desert circuit, its creator(s) forfeit proprietorial advantage; as the ritual “floats free” of the particularities of time and place, this no doubt helps accelerate its transition towards the status of an age-old *mangunyjanu* ritual.

Mardu have described the dream-spirit as like an eagle-hawk in form but back to front, with wings replacing legs, eyes replacing testicles and the anus becoming a mouth, in a transformation said to afford better protection against the many dangerous beings (*malpu*) likely to be encountered. In structure, dream-spirit rituals as I witnessed them in the 1960s were structurally homogeneous and required neither long preparations nor a special ground. Performed close to the Mardu camp after dinner in the early evening, they generally last two hours or more, depending mainly on the number of songs that have been “found” or “given.” Earlier in the day, a group of initiated men retire to a creekbed in “men’s country” nearby, which is out of bounds to all others and cannot be seen from the camp. There they prepare the sacred fence-like objects (strung with hair-string and colored wool) that will be carried by the decorated dancers to conclude the performance—at which time all women and children must be face-down

under blankets, lest a glimpse of the objects cause them grave illness or death.

Once everyone is assembled at the dance site, seated men and women begin singing the songs to a boomerang-clapping accompaniment, with each verse being repeated many times. The decorated dancers emerge from their brush hide and (in many such rituals) with slow, heavy, stamping steps they circle in front of the audience. They may make as many as eight appearances. A brief final section, when dancers will be carrying the sacred thread-crosses, is signaled by a firestick thrown into the air, causing a scramble by women and children to hide beneath their blankets. Once the sacred objects have been removed and replaced in the men’s territory, the women and children are instructed to return to camp. Dream-spirit verses are akin to “hit tunes,” and around the camp people would often spontaneously burst into song, with others joining in.

#### **The Form and Structure of Songs**

Songs are a critical element in most desert rituals, whether *mangunyjanu* or *partunjarrijanu*. Only a few words in length, each song is repeated many times in a chorus, and there is little doubt that this highly repetitive structure is conducive to learning. By the time men have reached middle to old age, they have memorized thousands of songs from dozens of rituals. In oral cultures, the ascendant generations carry an enormous burden: to ensure the reproduction of the religious life. If they do not effectively pass on this mass of information, not merely of songs but also the structure and operation of the many rituals they perform and others they learn in the course of cultural transmission around the huge Western Desert, then all will be lost. (Today, however, there is a clear diminution in the part played by the traditional religion in people’s lives as they become increasingly entangled with the wider Australian society.) The key feature of all songs is that they are cryptic—a skeleton that needs to be fleshed out, often via mythology in the case of the major ancestral beings who bequeathed so much of the culture. In the case of dream-spirit songs, one would need to ask the dreamer himself or herself to explain and amplify a song’s meaning, because the structure is one of heavily condensed, cryptic meanings. The following illustrative examples from the Ngaawayil rainmaking ritual are not translated word for word, but each has a Mardu gloss indicating what the dreamers say they saw while traveling in dream-spirit form:

*nyimarrma nyimarrma kayilingkana nyimarrma  
nyimarrma*

whirlwind (with rain) coming from the north;  
distant lightning

*marurranganji ya kitirra marurranganji*  
big black and white birds leading the rainclouds  
along

*warlurmaliny warlurmaliny karpungka karpungka  
minganpula ngarinja yana*

rain clouds approaching during the day at Mingan  
(a place name); clouds like sacred boards lying  
across the chest of Winpa (the major rainmaking  
ancestral being) as he travelled

*kilijimpiri ya ngaru ya gnampulkaraya nyinaya*  
clouds resting all around pool, put there by Winpa; a  
long line of clouds seen in the early morning

*purnunja purnu ngajinya ngaji yuwanya yuwa*  
sacred lightning stones give me back, give me. The  
two great ancestral rainmakers, Winpa and  
Karrparti, met up during their travels in the  
Dreaming and swapped two of these stones each

*walu parrpaku walu parrpaku walu nginji ya*  
The rainmakers see the feather-bundles worn on  
Winpa's head making lightning

### The Creation of Dream-Spirit Rituals

To dream is to enter briefly the timeless and unpredictable realm of the Dreaming, and Mardu choice of words about the experience expresses a directness and absolute truth value—not “last night I dreamed that I was in/at X . . .” but “last night I was in/at X . . .” I have seen people pale and shaken, resting in their camp when everyone else is up and about, after a “bad trip” involving close encounters of the perilous kind. Western Desert people believe that their cosmic order contains feared evil spirits called *malpu*, and close, near-fatal encounters with such beings are akin to nightmares. Dreams are often shared with others so that they can be discussed and variously interpreted for overt and hidden meanings. Men like to talk about them when they are together, away from women and children in men's space, where they sometimes reinterpret women's dreams to get at what was “really going on” by adding a secret-sacred dimension; for example, the missile said by a woman relating her dream to be a spear is actually a sacred wooden board used to “fire” at sorcerers or

enemies from a distance. The notion of “inside” and “outside” meanings is common in Aboriginal societies.

It sometimes happens that two or more people may discover in conversation that they have had thematically similar dreams about encountering *jjikarrkaly*, spirit-children, who reveal a song or dance steps or body design, which then becomes a topic for shared discussion among mature adults around the campfire or with friends in their camps or out hunting game. As if by contagion, other Mardu soon report having dreamed along the same thematic lines. Questions about truth and intentionality are difficult for a field researcher to pose, but in any case it is irrelevant whether or not a particular person reporting a newly received song dreamed it or simply made it up in waking life: the song's truth value is not contestable.

In 1962, at Jigalong, weather phenomena and associated beings were the shared theme and some 120 verses were received from the *jjikarrkaly* spirit-messengers, along with the body designs and forms of thread crosses, secret-sacred to initiated men, to be constructed.

Below is an abridged description given me by Jilyilyal, a senior male, “older brother,” and close friend, of the genesis of the dream-spirit ritual.

Jilyilyal and four other middle-aged men went on a dingo-hunting trip south of the Mission, saw some wild bullocks and killed one. Late that night, one of the men, Jawarru, woke everyone, and sang the song he'd just heard, giving the others the tune and words of the song: *waralpaju pukarrmana kuru yanpiri na pukarulu kanga*. He had been given them by the Ngayurnangalku (“will eat me”) cannibal beings, during his dream-spirit trip. The men went hunting, Jawarru was laying poison for dingoes, and the others split up. One man, Shovel, encountered a Yartangkal (a rainmaking being that travels in clouds and releases lightning from its penis, and blood and sweat, which turn into rain). Meanwhile, Taliwanti, while straightening newly cut spears over a fire, saw a *limpi* (black-fronted dotterel, a major rainmaking bird), with its wings down, dragging on the ground. Taliwanti heard a song about the ailing bird, which he recalled as *mika langu gutu wirilan jura limpi na pujarlu kangu*. The hunters made camp at Pintirintiri, and that night Jawarru and Shovel went *partunjarri* and each got three more songs. The

men collected more spear-wood, and Jilyilyal shot and killed a bullock, skinned it, and everyone ate well. They camped at Pintirintiri again. That night Jawaru and Shovel each received three more songs. En route back to the Mission, Jilyilyal “picked up” two more songs, and Kuwipani one, and the others got more (song totals: Jawarru, 5; Shovel, 5; and Taliwanti, 3).

Back in camp, Jilyilyal’s wife Pinabak told him that there was a new “corroboree” (ritual) at the Mission, “found” by four of the older men. That same night, on the creekbank, as men and women began singing the new line, the dingo-hunters also began theirs in the camp, and other Mardu liked the tune. The same night, Bob and Jakan (who had been given a song in a dream, though he hadn’t gone *partunjarri*) found three more songs. Bob got his during a *partunjarri* trip; they sat up and sang them in the middle of the night. Jilyilyal also got one that night, from his own country, way to the east (a mob of men went *partunjarri* there), at Kiriwini, where he saw a decorated Jijikarrkal (spirit-being intermediary), which told the men he was giving them a *yaku* (dancing) song, which they should practice after dinner. The *jijikarrkal* showed Jilyilyal everything: paraphernalia and dance steps, which he conveyed to the other men the following day. That same night, they held the *turlku* (ritual) and danced two *ngurlu* (secret-sacred) dances. Bob and Yalkakata got the next two *ngurlu* dances (they flew as dream-spirits to the Kalgoorlie region, which lies about 600 miles southeast). Mangamanga (an old woman) got a *yakupinti* (dancing song), which the men sang only once, fearing that it might be too dangerous. Two songs of another elderly woman, Jakan, were used. Taliwanti went *partunjarri* to the west and got his dancing objects and sacred stuff.

With the desert people, any unusual phenomenon can trigger emotional reactions and an attitude of hyper-awareness, an expectation that anything could happen, good or bad. Dreaming then fans the flames, as it were, and people are quick to confer, looking for a pattern of encounters or signs from which songs, interpretations, and revelations may flow into and around the human realm. As the above story clearly shows, once the ball is rolling a kind of contagion happens, then a number of revelations given by the *jijikarrkaly* intermediaries are

reported. Wives and other older women become caught up in the train of events, and, inevitably, the necessary structural elements, both mundane and secret-sacred, are imparted—but not exclusively from dream-spirit trips, as the excerpt above reveals. It is important to note that a person does not have to “go *partunjarri*” to receive a song; altered consciousness is sufficient. The details outlined in the above excerpt belong in the Mardu realm of the real, conveyed without any felt need to convince me as a “whitefella” that the phenomena related need back-up, elucidation, or justification.

What follows is taken from my field notebook rendering of an account given me in 1969 by an elder who held a senior rank in the rainmaking ritual’s status hierarchy:

You have to go *partunjarri* at some stage during the Ngaawayil cycle—the number of trips (northeast, to the home of all rain) depends on whether rain comes or not (in response to performances of this ritual). The local *maparn* (diviner-curers) must round up all the people and take them up to Jaramarra [ancestral rainmakers’ country] to bring up [back] the rain. At night, after the performance at the special rainmaking ground in men-only country, several *maparn* (excluding any who are in a bad mood, or else the rain will not come) have to load up the big ceremonial hair-string called a *yungkuyungku* (which becomes a rainbow serpent) and captain the craft when they take all the men who are participating in the ritual on this dangerous dream-spirit journey. The trouble earlier on in this big meeting began when the *partunjarri* mob was circling the camp on their return from Jaramarra: a *maparn* (he names the suspect) cut the string (i.e., the giant serpent, on whose back all the travelers were riding) and everyone on board fell to the ground and “broke” [was injured]. The next day all the travelers felt poorly, and everyone in the camp, including the senior Law-men, knew about it. I learned of the theft of the “snakes” from the sacred rainmaking pile from . . . [a Mardu elder]. Some *maparn* will have to go *partunjarri* (in dream-spirit form) to Winpa and bring the bigfela *jila* [the snake-man, Winpa] himself back here, and the rain will come with him. *Jila* may swallow the *maparn* and the other dream-spirit travelers, then bring them back and vomit them up. Or, the *maparn* mob will

carry the snake back on their shoulders [as in one of the Ngaawayil's secret-sacred dances]. I heard from Ny. . . . [another senior "boss" for this ritual] that on the last night of the ritual, a hair-string being carried by the dancers broke in half; and that started all the trouble—a *maparn* may have cut it.

This story illustrates some of the perils inherent in the liminal state that is dream-spirit travel, and some of the ambiguity surrounding the powers of the diviner-curiers, who work for the public good but are at times suspected of abusing their powers. The tone is matter-of-fact and devoid of anything that would indicate a need to explain or convince me, the listener-recorder, as to the veracity of the events reported. In the Mardu cosmic order, this is simply how things are, and going with the flow is entirely congruent with Stanner's (1979) assertion that the dominant Aboriginal religious disposition is one of assent to the dictates of the Law as laid down in the Dreaming.

#### Conclusion

In their Introduction to *Dream Cultures*, an impressive volume deriving from a major conference held in Germany in 1995, editors David Shulman and Guy G. Stroumsa (1999) stressed that dreaming and the interpretation of dreams by self or other are cultural acts, strongly influenced by the traditions and religious attitudes present in the wider society. I trust that the ethnographic examples adduced in this paper strongly confirm this, though not "a direct link to the divine (or to heresy)" (p. 5), but via dream-spirits as the vital intermediary. I would agree that "by their very liminality, dreams are at the confluence of theology, cosmology and anthropology" (p. 6). I agree that dreams are inherently communicative, and that in the sharing and interpretation of dreams both the context and the status of the teller and listeners may be significant. In Mardu society, it is the senior men and women who predominate and collectively transform dream fragments into the coherent wholes of ritual performance.

Shulman and Stroumsa (1999) offered wise counsel in drawing attention to the images of authority implicated in the act of narration or interpretation and the need to discern how an observer can relate dreams to the wider cultural forms of a given society. The contribution of the part to the functioning of the whole was a basic tenet of British structural-functionalism, so as a student of a student of Raymond Firth, I concur. However, it is important to note that Shulman and Stroumsa drew

their generalizations from many societies, ancient and modern, but *not* from hunter-gatherer peoples. In fact, in their introduction they lament the absence of papers dealing with African societies. However, some of the above generalizations do resonate with the Mardu case, particularly with regard to both status and context, and specifically in relation to the inelastic boundary between "secret-sacred" and "open" or "public" throughout Western Desert traditional societies.

The polyphasic Mardu and their cultural congeners across the Western Desert exemplify belief and immersion in altered states of consciousness as "really real." The fact that the term "the Dreaming" is used in many regions for one of Aboriginal culture's two institutional pillars speaks volumes for the salience of altered states of consciousness in their societies. Mardu discourse tends not to bracket or frame dreams to distinguish them from events in everyday life: to travel in dream-spirit form is as real and tangible as walking on the earth. Similarly, when men visit increase centers to summon forth spirits of fauna and flora, they outline their needs for, and expectations of, reciprocity as if in conversation with their fellow humans, since the spirit world is conceived of as being on the same level of reality as they are. Again, conception is couched exclusively in spiritual rather than physiological terms, as I have discussed at length elsewhere (Tonkinson, 1978). People conceptualize their cosmic order as a unified whole in which humans and nature, the creative beings, spirits, and other conceived entities are all "kin," which suggests that some form of social intercourse is possible among them.

Totemic associations thus provide every individual with unique, direct, and indivisible links back into the Dreaming epoch itself, and no two individuals, even twins, would share exactly the same set of identities. The altered states of consciousness that allow for the entry of new knowledge enliven Western Desert religious life without producing status distinctions between those older people who are the principal vehicles for the entry of new knowledge and others who are not. Knowledge and power accrete with age as long as people retain their intellect, but individuals cannot take credit for whatever creative skills they possess. Also, despite their exchange-value in the wider Western Desert society, these rituals do not lead to accretions of power in particular areas, because the advantageous role of "host" group changes for each big meeting, just as every ritual has its own set of "bosses."

As my esteemed mentor Kenelm Burridge (1973) noted, the many cross-cutting classificatory schemes that exist in Aboriginal societies also operate to separate out and individualize people, which must contribute significantly to their strong sense of self and identity. At the same time, however, this uniqueness of the person is embedded with a broader cultural framework that, in the Western Desert at least, stresses cooperation and unity. Despite the interpersonal constraint entailed in a range of kin relationships, a collective attunement to things and forces spiritual encourages cooperation. Among the desert people, this would include co-dreaming and innovation of the kind that builds on existing elements and patterns in ways that accord with Stanner's (1979) insightful "forms of permanence."

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- 57 months, among the Mardu Aborigines, and, since 1966, among Southeast Ambrymese people in Vanuatu (Melanesia). He taught at the University of Oregon for eight years in the period 1968-1980, Australian National University (1980-84), and has written two ethnographies, *The Jigalong Mob* (1974), and *The Mardu Aborigines* (1978/2003), a monograph on his Melanesian research, several edited volumes, and numerous articles on Melanesian and Australian Aboriginal cultures. His topic interests include social organization, religion, Western impacts (and change and development), gender relations, migration, identity, values, social justice, and the politics of tradition.

### **About the Author**

*Bob Tonkinson, PhD*, is Emeritus Professor and Senior Honorary Research Fellow at The University of Western Australia, and a Life Fellow of the Australian Anthropological Society, Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania, and the West Australian Anthropology and Sociology Association. He is also a long-time elected member of the Council of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. Born and raised in Perth, he obtained BA (Hons) and MA degrees at The University of Western Australia, and his PhD at the University of British Columbia (1972). After teaching high school (1958-1963), he became a graduate student in anthropology at UWA. From 1963 he has made 29 fieldwork trips into Western Australia's East Pilbara and Western Desert regions, totalling