

# On *Tjukurrpa*, Painting Up and Building Thought

Craig San Roque

*Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what: "Something." Like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard work: it pushes.*<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

This article contemplates the possible relationship of Central Australian “Dreaming,” or *Tjukurrpa*, to symbol and thought formation in desert Aboriginal culture. Acknowledgement is given to the diversity and complexity of descriptions of *Tjukurrpa*. The author is concerned with how thoughts are made, what they are made of, and how thinking might go wrong, that is, how disorders of thought in the intercultural matrix might arise. Thinking as a form of mental activity may be deeply related with the onto-poetic ancestry of language and locations of human movement and activity. The author suggests that through an analysis of detailed, grounded, intercultural conversations and an understanding of the structure and content of *Tjukurrpa*, non-Indigenous people working in health and law might appreciate and comprehend Aboriginal thinking and behaviour (and thus be more effective in various aspects of mutual engagement). The challenge is mutual and reciprocal.

From a psychological point of view, the author is concerned with how thought is formed over time by engagement with the dynamics of environmentally specific experience. Incremental, specific experience in an environment may make a human mind work in a specific way. Dynamics of “country” may create the mental imagery and the use of imagery which underpins language and thinking. The author seeks to understand the relationships and differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal thinking so that those called to “close the gap” in Indigenous (mental) health do not end up destroying the fabric of Indigenous thought, as a result of failing to appreciate the pattern of Indigenous thinking, how it is built up and how it is used.

## PART ONE: ELEGY FOR SEATED MEN

*Just like a god he seems to me, that man who sits across from you, so closely attentive to your sweet words.*<sup>2</sup>

### That man who sits across from you

Psychoanalysis is mostly about a strange activity that occurs between people, calmly seated, oddly speaking. When two men sat in their conception conversation in Vienna in 1907, the older said to the younger, “And tell me, what do you think of the transference?” The younger responded, “It is the alpha and the omega of the analytic method.” And the older said, “Then you have grasped the main thing.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> On *Tjukurrpa*, quoted via Stanner in P. Sutton (ed.) (1988), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Viking, New York.

<sup>2</sup> After Sappho, fragment 31, trans. J. Clay (1996).

<sup>3</sup> C.G. Jung (1966), “The Psychology of the Transference,” in *The Practice of Psychotherapy*, vol. 16 of

The capacity of a person to be a psychoanalyst rests upon his or her grasp of theory and aptitude for observational technique in the fieldwork of the psyche, as well as the capability to dwell enough in the “main thing” marked so definitively by Freud as that bittersweet activity generated between persons. The psychoanalyst must be willing to deal with the strange substances that shake one’s being when two or three are gathered together in a way that enables matter from that famous “unconscious” to emerge in bits, groans, and half-formed misunderstandings – to emerge in any shape, from anywhere along the spectrum of love to hate, beauty to terror, self-knowledge to self-delusion.

This matter can be developed further if I slow things down and ask, “Who are these two or three who sit together?” And I am thinking now, remembering occasions sitting in the company of older men – the sort of older men with whom anthropologists often have conversations. Older dark-skinned men who have custodial functions for their specific languages and a cultural obligation. Older men who smell of embedded smoke and kangaroo grease and maybe Log Cabin tobacco.

And the question might be, “What is in our minds as we sit together, you and I?” with the fire simmering, tea stewing, ants busy on the sand, and maybe the heat of coals drifting through the shade of a mulga tree. These settings are fitting for reflective conversations between men of two worlds – Indigenous Warlpiri, perhaps, and the travelling Caucasian. Such conversations take place on the edges of campsites, on the edges of settlements, on the edges of and between dreams, between times, between languages, a shimmering, dusty place where nothing much is really what it seems. And nothing spoken is exactly what it might mean and nothing heard is quite what is intended, perhaps. Ambiguous answers and ambiguous tracks of thought are exchanged between persons in exactly the settings where transference phenomena might readily be found, if Freud or Jung had time enough and the chance to sit there long enough – learning, letting go of anticipation, observing the flow of desire and projection. Seated between the eyes of two worlds. That sort of thing.

And thus another question arises about what emerges from somewhere between a different pair of men, not an Austrian Jewish doctor and a Swiss Protestant psychiatrist, both speaking German, seeking forms of feeling, edges of image, flurries of body sensation, legs, gut, heart, throat, head-ache, squinting eyes, nods, moving two minds so differently formed, hunching into conscious enough conversation, seeking to listen. No, not these two, but, let us say, a Warlpiri or Pintubi man, speaking Warlpiri, Pintubi languages and a half-formed English, and maybe a psychiatrist or anthropologist or a lawyer or police prosecutor, the two of them sitting there wondering about a mutual problem: an act of drunken assault, the suicide of a petrol-sniffing boy, the mutilated body of a woman in the creek bed, a traditional man so senseless with sweet white wine that he blurts out age-old secrets in bad company and ought to be speared for it. And if the spear is cast, the men who mete out the sanctioned, traditional punishment will be imprisoned for assault or maybe manslaughter. And they may deserve to be, if they carried out the penalty while drunk or lost their reason while doing it. Irreconcilable parallel laws, cognitive dissonance, daily bread.

Myself, I have sat in many such conversations, the ants busy, the fire dimmed by psychic pain, on a cold concrete floor, dull with ash and grease, supporting so many suchlike conversations, a hundred times, somewhere between two worlds. In the overlap of intercultural conversation, things arrive, if we take the trouble to create between us a “location for cultural experience”<sup>4</sup> and accept that what might arrive will be perplexity, compassion, humour, irony, whimsical desire, flights of ideas, confusion, resolution – or nothing much

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*Collected Works*, Routledge, London, p. 172.

<sup>4</sup> D.W. Winnicott (1971), *Playing and Reality*, Penguin, London, ch. 7.

except a sense of nowhere to go, other than a slight action here or there, a hunch of the shoulders or shift of the body.

I have thus experienced the realities of the Australian cultural trauma systems, the inter-racial transference milieu where things emerge and merge and re-form at the mercy of that famous unconscious, which pushed and pushed the Viennese doctors to discover it and reveal it. And here, in Australia, that unconscious is pushing again, maybe not within us but rather between us, black and white. It is within this unconsciousness of each other that we act, fitfully, hopelessly, being doctors, social care agents, policemen on the edge, lawyers between two laws that barely, rarely meet, barely hear, barely listen, barely see. But still we do the best of a bad enough job. Such things, such reveries are in the background, always there in these conversations between seated men. Two or three gathered together, the ants busy.

I am thinking of these conversations: the one with the boy sniffing petrol behind the garage in Fregon, or the quietly ceremonial old men's conversations at Mission Creek about two laws and the origin of the white man's rights to arrest and sentence a black man, or maybe that muttered laconic exchange in the Toyota Land Cruiser with the man from Finke River (diagnosed as suffering from schizophrenia) as to whether the snake curled in his head was going to kill him right now in the car, or maybe later. But the story I will tell you, first, so as to introduce my theme on the *Tjukurrpa*, is one about the "making of a doctor." This was a long conversation. It rolled in a vehicle from Alice Springs to Yuendumu and thus to Mt Wedge and further west. It rolled, as some conversations do, back east to Sydney and Wollongong and back and forth, again and again. And it roamed also internally, through personal dreams and experiences and clinical encounters. And still it roams, presenting a question about the archetypal basis of the healing profession – the experiential qualification that fits one for practice and the precise nature of the *Tjukurrpa* that supports one's capacity to heal effectively.

The first question put to my psychiatric colleague and myself by the Aboriginal man of whom I am thinking was simply about whether there is any similarity between the way that Aboriginal traditional healers and Western mental health doctors get their skill and recognition. The conversation starter was along the lines of the following: "Psychiatrist, hmmm. Well, you tell me. Do white doctors have to pass through anything? What gives them the right to work? Do they follow *Tjukurrpa* like the *ngankaris* [traditional healers] do? Or is it only learning from books?"

Good question. It makes one wonder about the grounded, fundamental basis of one's clinical practice, the thing that motivates one to keep on working and be successful, the position on which one stands, the *telos* of one's psychological work. Through such deftly simple questions, I find myself compelled to contemplate the meaning and significance of *Tjukurrpa* as the basis for practice, as well as the substance of another conversation, set against a longer reverie about sugars and alcohol and who or what is responsible for alcohol-related deaths, berserk assaults, family breakdown, sexual derangement, and suicide.

There are thousands of similar conversations going on about "who is responsible" for this and that, like background white noise. Such mutterings are heard today like any other day within the vast, vaguely circumscribed one-third of the continent that makes up the Aboriginal lands, the Aboriginal mind. Here such things as lore and sacred geography keep on mattering, and health and life matter. Yet something life-saving never quite gets to the point, as though some obstacle is there, diverting, repressing, preventing clear thoughts from becoming definitive action.

I wonder what an anthropological investigation might reveal about what goes on in "the conversation." Not so much what this "black man says," and not exactly what this "white

man says,” but what happens *between* “black and white” as they are speaking. Because then, I think, we will come to understand more accurately what *Tjukurrpa* is, how it sets us up and prescribes perfect solutions to intractable problems, and how we (black and white) have mutual difficulty in comprehending the theories on which are based our variously proposed perfect solutions. Understanding the conversation in these terms will help us recognize how we break down – how we fail repeatedly.

Yes, I think that is it. I am putting forth the case for the anthropological observation and psychoanalysis of the “intercultural conversation,” a study of the phenomena that emerge between persons – people like those two men, the Freud and the Jung, seated in Vienna and Zurich in 1907–1910, discovering the significance of what is projected and transferred between themselves, or anyone. Here in the fly-blown dusts of the Western Desert, questions will be asked about conversations between people seated halfway between times, between the beginning and the end of local civilizations. What is being projected? What is being transferred between us in exact detail? The material substances, the objects, yes; but the mental substances, the mental objects? How do we grasp the form and feeling of mental substances passing between us in a place like this?

This is the kind of place where it matters what sugar really is, and what white sugar transfers to your blood, gut and brain when you have stopped walking miles every day, hunting lizards and kangaroo, eating bush food straight from the ground, a hard-edged kind of roughage, unlike jam from the tin with white bread and fried chicken. And where two litres of port wine end the day, with maybe cannabis in the morning to straighten you out.

### **Sweet substance**

“Dreaming” – you hear them talk about it, this sweet thing. Sometimes they call it “The Dreaming,” an approximation for English language speakers. In Arrernte, they call it *Altjerre*, or in the Western Desert languages, *Tjukurrpa*, or in the Warlpiri, *Jukurrpa*. What does this really mean, this state of things that brings tears to old Paddy Japaljarri Sim’s eyes, seated cross-legged before a canvas, singing quietly, painting the “Milky Way Story”? This thing that women depict and men define in sand drawings, deft fingers moving upon canvasses stretched on the bare ground or smudged on backyard cement slab near the Todd River? *Tjukurrpa*, land claims, faraway looks, casually marking this rock and that. Reverence, breaking into song in creek beds, shrugging, walking off. *Tjukurrpa*, lightly held, with a gravity so exquisite, so solid, so omnipresent. *Tjukurrpa*, perhaps the most misunderstood, most ignored, most beautiful, most mysterious, most exploited, most obliterated phenomenon in this country. Strangely provocative, *Tjukurrpa* is seamlessly sewn into the Australian landform, sown as seeds in the mind of the country a long time ago, today. What should I attempt in defining it, this all-pervading substance that offers no salvation, no redemption?

### **Three definitions of Tjukurrpa**

First is a straightforward, heartfelt definition offered by Bob Randall, singer-songwriter, cultural facilitator from Mutijulu/Uluru. In an interview with David Roberts, in a documentary film, Randall describes *Tjukurrpa* as

the belief of the creation period and the laws that were set down from the beginning. These laws and rules were handed down through ceremonies, it was passed down from one generation to another. So I had to take care of that. It was my responsibility. You separate me from that, and already you’ve made me weak... *Tjukurrpa*, in our words, is the belief of creation: like our law, our religion. You look at the

past, it is part of the present, and will still be there in the future. It's what non-Aboriginal people refer to as "the dream time" but it's real. This is *Tjukurrpa* [patting and holding a rock embedded in a hillside]. This is not a rock, only a rock, it is my link to *Tjukurrpa*, and all the stories are in this... you realize – [this rock] it's the *Tjukurrpa*. I have to care for my country, and in caring for my country you have to know its stories and what totemic ancestral beings are associated with that. It's important. And if anything happened, that was for you to know, to pass on to your kids.<sup>5</sup>

A second definition of *Tjukurrpa*, conveyed by an informant of distinguished anthropologist W. Stanner, is quoted by Sutton: "My father said this. 'My boy, look! Your Dreaming is there; it is a big thing; you never let it go (pass it by). All Dreamings (totemic entities) come from there.' Does the whiteman now understand?" Stanner asks himself and continues, "The blackfellow, earnest, friendly, makes a last effort... 'Old man, you listen! Something is there; we do not know what: *something*.' There is a struggle to find words, and perhaps a lapse into English. 'Like engine, like power, plenty of power; it does hard work: it pushes.'"<sup>6</sup>

A third definition of *Tjukurrpa* was expressed in conversation with Andrew Spencer Japaljarri in April 1990. To set the scene, my psychiatric colleague and I are in the back-lane office of the Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (known as HALT), a petrol sniffing prevention project based in Alice Springs (at the time). We are speaking with Japaljarri Spencer, a Warlpiri member of that innovative, social activist community health team. In the background, going about their work while chatting in several languages, are Christine Spencer, Hinton Lowe, Christine Franks, William Armstrong, and passing family members. We are looking at a painting by Andrew's mother. The fine symmetrical dot painting is about a sugar ant ceremony. The sugar ant belongs in the food category of *parma*, or sweet substance. Alcohol is also categorized as *parma*, which in desert life is an essential and sought after commodity. Desert people need sugar for life sustaining activities, and in arid lands it is hard to come by. In the liquor shop and the supermarket, however, sugar is cheap and plentiful. And that is a problem. Andrew says:

This painting is about *parma*, sugar, sugar ant; different from honey ant. It's like a fly. We have the song for this, for *parma* and for strengthening *parma*. We haven't got the song to send whiteman's *parma* (sugar) away. We can't get rid of this one. We can only strengthen the good *parma*. The songs for petrol and alcohol must come from the whiteman; or we must dream new ones. The children (meaning the innocent and uninitiated) can't save the world. You, the white people, have lost your dreaming. Maybe you don't know the songs for alcohol and petrol. You have to learn (reconnect to) your songs, your whitefella *Tjukurrpa*. To turn to us, to me, [i.e. to Aboriginal people] for the [alcohol and petrol dreaming] songs is too much.

Later Andrew asks straight out: "Do *kardia* (white people) have the *Tjukurrpa* for *parma*?" I exchange glances with my psychiatric companion in this conversation. We nod to each other. I say, "Yes." Andrew replies, "Well, maybe you'd better go and get it. That's your responsibility." I nod, "All right, Japaljarri."

## The ordinary impact of Dreaming

The idea arose in this conversation that, since European or "white" culture (broadly understood) is responsible for the invention of alcohol, it might therefore hold the "creation story" (or *Tjukurrpa*) for managing intoxication. Such a creation story might be useful as a conceptual tool to help Australian Indigenous people control the problem of alcohol-related

<sup>5</sup> R. Randall in D. Roberts (dir.) (1999), *Sugarman* (the documentary film account of the project), Antipodes Productions, Sydney; and in Australian Broadcasting Corporation (2003), *Song Man: Story of an Aboriginal elder*.

<sup>6</sup> *Op. cit.*, P. Sutton (ed.), p. 15.

destruction wreaked on and within Aboriginal lives and family structures and thus, perhaps, help secure a cultural future. This is an intriguing idea. The reason for reporting this conversation here is not to give an account of the subsequent project which drew logically enough upon the mythologem of Dionysos; rather, the purpose is to note that in this conversation we have a glimpse of the potential of *Tjukurrpa* as a pragmatic and conceptual force in handling a social problem – namely, alcohol abuse. Bob Randall emphasizes *Tjukurrpa* as creation story, the underpinning of laws of behaviour, separation from which makes one weak. Stanner’s informant brings out the psychic force, the “push” in *Tjukurrpa*. And Japaljarri Spencer suggests that effective control or management of behaviour depends upon knowledge of the appropriate *Tjukurrpa*.

(*A side note.* Even though intriguing ideas are raised here, directly by an experienced and canny Aboriginal man, the conventional response in Indigenous health circles in general has been a kind of perplexed, even condescending, irritation, or a benign puzzlement about how to apply Japaljarri’s concept into the world of “evidence based” psycho-medical alcohol prevention. Perhaps it is because there are two or more differing categories of thought order here – and it is generally difficult for persons who occupy one or the other of these positions to cross over a psychic border and live/be in two minds at once. Not only is much “lost in translation” but, in fact, the differing languages and the differing conceptual orders of thought are perplexing for those untrained in deep thinking. For instance, the metaphysical, animistic, mythopoetic pragmatic of Pintubi/Warlpiri thinking may not follow the same lines as a thought in the mind of a person brought up under the demands of rational, postmodern, Western, scientific or therapeutic schooling. Folk without a poetic sensibility may have problems of comprehension. Different orders of thought, with differing ancestry, can become so at odds, so muddled, that beneficial and simple understanding seems often to be impenetrable and particularly unsustainable in a health service. Here we may be governed by anxious management or Western accountability systems which have a logic impenetrable to a Pintubi/Warlpiri perceptual logic. Some folk, many of whom are senior in the health services, have dismissed the Japaljarri suggestion out of hand as an improbable solution, or as requiring no thoughtful response. It puzzles me how one can be so sure – as though 100,000 years of psychic evolution and the incremental procedures of civilization mean nothing in the management of our social and emotional wellbeing. I have been holding to the thread of the value and psychological significance of *Tjukurrpa* for twenty years and have still found no end to it. The enigma itself leads us into the entrails of philosophy.)

I am reminded of a passage from Lévi-Strauss’s autobiographical *Triste Tropique*. Lévi-Strauss refers to a situation among a group of non-Indigenous persons in contention over Eskimo (Inuit) methods of dress and the “native” method’s suitability in handling the environmental conditions within which Eskimo dwell. For some reason the suitability was questioned by the Western visitors. As it turned out, says Lévi-Strauss, “The native solution was perfect; we could only realize this once we grasped the theory on which it was based.”<sup>7</sup> My effort to comprehend *Tjukurrpa* is synonymous with an effort to comprehend the Indigenous theory upon which Indigenous action/inaction in health, law and cultural maintenance is based. *Tjukurrpa* might in itself contain the theory on which Aboriginal solutions are based. I allow myself to appreciate how *Tjukurrpa* has such a forceful impact (“push”) and why it is so seriously held to by obviously intelligent (sober) and active Indigenous men and women, even in the midst of fraught contemporary cultural break-in/break-down conditions.

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<sup>7</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss (1977), *Tristes Tropiques*, Washington Square Press, New York, p. 239.

Travelling in uncertainty within Aboriginal territories invariably leads to something spontaneously evocative, and much could be written about the value of quietly, un-anxiously allowing experiences in order to cultivate a mode of receptivity to unknown outcomes, unprecedented ideas. What we might find in the Caucasian-Aboriginal Australian relationship is often exceptionally creative yet at times also poignantly destructive, and in an attempt to avoid too much of the destruction one might have to take preventative action. I find that an appreciation of the character and logic of *Tjukurrpa* helps in the “preventative inoculation” because *Tjukurrpa* reveals the lines along which an Indigenous mentality might run. A study of the foundation mythos of Western/Abrahamic peoples might also help Indigenous Australians comprehend the automatic actions taken by their Caucasian counterparts. This includes, of course, a study of the mythos of the messiah/saviour/dying-and-reborn god or the primitive sado-masochistic Abrahamic “sacrifice as redemption” mythos. But what may be more fruitful to us all is a study of how *generativity* is maintained, and how the benevolent nature of being and becoming has been carried through by humans in diverse circumstances, despite the repetitive devastations of our historical and environmental cycles. This too is in the *Tjukurrpa*.

### **Painting the body/shaping the mind**

I am using this article to open up the idea that *Tjukurrpa*, like play, is about symbolic realities and imaginary realities mingled with an actuality. And play, as Winnicott suggests in his book *Playing and Reality*, is also a basis for thinking and creativity. I have the idea that, possibly, ceremony is a form of serious play, in Winnicott’s subtle sense. In Indigenous ceremony symbols are painted on bodies and laid out in ceremonies in very specific formations so that *Tjukurrpa* stories become real in the mind. Understanding how *Tjukurrpa* is laid out may show something about how Aboriginal thought is put together and how things link from country exterior to country interior and even, perhaps, how things pass from one side or sector of the brain to the other. There is a neurological mystery here. It may be useful to show how Aboriginal thoughts are built and how Western thoughts have built up around specific Caucasian, Mediterranean, European or Middle Eastern mythologies and cultural matrices, or how Asian thoughts are constructed around specific Asian mythologies and ecologies as mental matrices. To appreciate how culture and history form thinking has a pragmatic and possibly therapeutic purpose for work between black and white Australians. This is based on the idea that our myths, and how we employ the myths to which we cling, actually reveal how we think and act. A study of mythologies shows how environmental forces are constructed mentally by specific cultural groups. The Egyptian mythpoetic drama of Osiris-Isis-Seth is partly an interpretation or explanatory configuration of natural elements woven with numinous human factors, told as a multi-layered story. *Tjukurrpa* is like this.

The characteristics of any cultural or racial group’s subliminal mythic collective dream states probably define who they are as a people and affect how they run a family, religion, tribe, nation state or international relations. This idea – that unconscious myth organizes political relations – is a concept derived from analytical psychology, in an emerging theory on how national thought patterns are formed by “cultural complexes.”<sup>8</sup>

What shapes thinking? The shapers are many but I am intrigued, for instance, with the way “country” forms symbolic imagery in the human mind and how accustomed geographic

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<sup>8</sup> S. Kimbles and T. Singer (eds) (2004), *The Cultural Complex: Contemporary Jungian Perspectives on Psyche and Society*, Routledge, London.

places and accustomed bodily spaces help form a language. In English there are many words and concepts formed, for example, around a common knowledge of boundaries and fences, of walls and roof, foundations and fortress, and so on, all patterned upon long association with specific and constructed human boundaries to space. In such ways certain forms encode our thinking. And further, there is some kind of evolutionary mystery to be unravelled around the continuum of being, which we, as humans, internalize. I speak of the continuum from site to flora to fauna, in a multitude of forms and activities, and the way in which this continuum of being suffuses, penetrates, fertilizes and explores the mind of the human being, and especially of those who live in long association with natural worlds and forms, be they in conversation with arid lands and the long horizons of the desert, or the long horizons of the sea or the surge of rivers, jungle, mountain, volcano... Might not desert dwellers have geographically specific images as geographically specific creators of their specific thought and language patterns? Understanding how this works might help one appreciate how *Tjukurrpa* works. The phylogenetic spectrum of being, in which humans participate, is continuously encountered in conversations when in Aboriginal country. Indigenous Australians have, as far as I can tell, a subtle notion of the continuity of being between landform, plant, animal and human but this notion is not attentive to that progressive evolution of form and consciousness to which the Darwinian eye attends. Why mention this difference? Because an understanding of geographical spaces, human relationship with the animal world, human phylogenetic history and especially how we configure this history has significance for how we configure *Tjukurrpa* and also how we might configure a local psychological therapeutic theory and practice. It has to do with the idea of where humans begin and end, where the human soul appears from and to what end, how it tells its story, what troubles the soul, and how psychic energies circulate. *Tjukurrpa* addresses and reveals these matters.

Psychoanalysis is concerned with psychic travelling, circulating, with therapeutic purpose along the spectrum of being from the earliest forms of becoming to present becoming. It is concerned with following a person from their most simple forms of primal thought/feeling to their most complex and abstract forms of thought/feeling/action. As I think about this while in arid country, I think about these specific landforms, bush foods, fruits, lizards, snakes, mammals and the birds which appear in the mind and appear simultaneously in actuality in the country. As I listen to Aboriginal conversations I find myself in a reverie wishing I could report such loosely noticed moments and flickering tails of insight to a Jung, in archetypal fishing mood, or to Bion, in his “thoughts looking for a thinker” mood, or to Klein, given her intense study of the earliest forms of interior life and the earliest forms of destructiveness, as apprehended by her unique mind, when in proximity to children’s minds.<sup>9</sup> I am making the point that different things occur in one’s mind depending upon *with whom* one is sitting. *And where*. Different ideas form in the mind of psychoanalysts depending upon where they consistently sit. That is to say, in whose proximity they sit, and in whose country. Sit attuned in the company of Indigenous Australians and note the senses, images and experiences which arrive in your mind. They might be different to those which arrive in the mind when you sit with people in rooms in Melbourne, Zurich or London. This may seem a truism, perhaps, but in Bion’s way, I would say that in Central Australia there are specific “thoughts looking for a thinker.” In Japaljarri’s language, *Tjukurrpa* talks to you. *Tjukurrpa* gets “lonely for people.”

I sit as others do, sometimes in good company, in trucks, by fires, amid dust and

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<sup>9</sup> For example, M. Klein (1950), “The Importance of Symbol Formation in the Development of the Ego,” in *Contributions to Psycho-analysis, 1921-1945*. Hogarth Press, London; and M. Klein, P. Heimann, S. Isaacs, J. Riviere (eds) (1973), *Developments in Psycho-analysis*, Hogarth Press, London.

plastic bags and dogs, with old men and women, with petrol sniffers and vigorous painters, and in such sittings there foregather certain clusters of thought/feeling. As an agent of agencies employed to solve Indigenous health problems, I admit that I have not formed the mental container system which allows localized thoughts to be accurately felt, accurately ordered and consistently followed through into accurate action. This is difficult to do. Learning how *Tjukurrpa* works *in situ*, in its unique structure, in its specific function and specific symbology may be a very pragmatic step toward taking accurate social therapeutic action.

### **Summation so far**

I introduce an approach to *Tjukurrpa* as a mental or conceptual system. I suggest that a Bion/Jung/Winnicott nexus offers a potential schema by which psychological thinkers who value poetic sensibility might come to appreciate the intricate beauty of the structure of the Aboriginal mental world and the significance of *Tjukurrpa* as matrix for holding and revealing the continual becoming and continual rebirth of human life. There is value in passing on to “the kids” and to uninitiated Westerners the practice of listening to *Tjukurrpa*. Forgetting it, ignoring the psychological significance of “Dreaming,” may be, as Bob Randall suggests, a form of dissociation which mentally weakens us all.

## **PART TWO: REVERIE ON A LONG ROAD**

### ***Kulini***

Somewhere between a Stuart Highway roadhouse and the turnoff toward the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands I am thinking about the simplicity of listening. A Pitjantjatjara word cluster, *kulini/kulira/kulilkatinyi* means “to listen” and also “to think.”<sup>10</sup> Linguist Ely White has noted that according to her understanding, “the real business of Aboriginal men is to think; that is to say, to listen – *kulini*” (pers. comm.). *Kulini* leads us to the business of “attentive listening” and thus to “thinking.” It leads me to consider that just as Aboriginal men whom I know have sacred objects to which they listen and speak, we, the Caucasians, also have physically numinous mental objects with which we think. I wonder also what objects we carry around in our mental bodies which persistently manifest in Aboriginal country and destroy our capacity for intelligent forethought and action.

### **The wreck of the *Batavia***

There is a novel, *The Accomplice*, by Kathryn Heyman, a narrative of a Dutch protestant woman caught up in the human disasters following the wreck, off the West Australian coast in 1692, of the East India Company sailing ship, the *Batavia*.<sup>11</sup> The numinous objects in this story might be “ship,” “Holy Book,” “money” and “guns,” as part of the repertoire of seventeenth-century religious and commercial exploitation of the Dutch East Indies; but the combination of “Holy Book” and “ship” founders on the Australian coast and the stranded

<sup>10</sup> C. Goddard (1987), *Basic Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara–English Dictionary*, Institute for Aboriginal Development, Alice Springs.

<sup>11</sup> K. Heyman (2003), *The Accomplice*, Headline, London.

crew and passengers murder and cannibalise each other. On an Australian shore, foundering, a project which began in Holland with quiet faith and noble hope, became indeed a conversion. The end of an idealization. The loss of civilization by the aspirant civilizers. In 1692 this occurred. Heyman begins her account with a quote from Primo Levi. “The harsher the oppression, the more widespread among the oppressed is the willingness to collaborate with the power.” Her story details the effect of collaboration with the prevailing powers among the crew (after the wreck). Survival requires that “good” Christian people lose their voice, their presence of mind. The ship’s commander is gone. Acts degenerate. The disaster, the “wreck of civilization,” is displayed through the incremental loss, in each person, of an intelligent and humane mind. My concern is that an insidious catastrophe which prevails in central Australia echoes the *Batavia* scenario in a perverse almost indecipherable way and the wreck is made possible because significant numbers of people lose the command of intelligent mind and collaborate, paradoxically with a pervasion of powerlessness. A (psychic?) cannibalism of a kind is condoned and played out in wrecked Aboriginal settlements. It is not that there is a harsh oppression of native peoples, as such, any more, but perhaps it has something to do with the way certain integrating *Tjukurrpa* – of both white and black cultures – are gobbled up for profit or power while the inherent, integrating, culturally specific ethic coding is ignored, gutted and dropped in the rubbish. We all lose a specific presence of integration in our minds. Heyman details, in fiction, the human wreck of the *Batavia*. The present disaster one might feel in Central Australia (and maybe Oceania) should be open, not only to political fiction and journalistic fictions, but to precise psycho-anthropological analysis; an ethnography of failure, to follow on from the example of HALT’s work,<sup>12</sup> including that of Alex Minutjukur and Andrew Japaljarri Spencer and their families, who have consistently attempted a social analysis of Australian conditions in their paintings. So too have significant painters, Tim Leura Japaljarri<sup>13</sup> and the unique hybrid portraiture of Rod Moss. Their imagery depicts, from inside experience, the wreck of culture, offering parables with a power, a push, a force and an irony that are forms of contemporary *Tjukurrpa* in metamorphosis.

It might be that a (silent) majority of Australians simply do not know how to appreciate the longstanding work of a small but intensive minority company of collaborative projects, such as those I mention here, which thoughtfully create intimate communications between the people, black and white, people who now also dwell together in this ancient sea bed of desert Australia. Much could be learned and integrated into policy from those experiences, but we will more likely fail to notice; thus, perhaps, 300 years after the *Batavia*, the name of the wreck in which we sail is *Kulini Wia*. That is, *Nobody Listens*.

### Reverie on a long road again

These things I am thinking, tonight, somewhere in a haze in a yellow truck crossing over the border-zones of South Australia, leaving behind another futile-feeling conversation with a petrol sniffer and old men who shrug and walk away. Just here, in this brief interstitial one hundred kilometre stretch, I think about a place I have pegged in my own mind as the White Noise Café where we, the white folk, talk in circles, endlessly; and why it is that nothing seems to grittily emerge out of the law matrix of the *Tjukurrpa* to save *Anangu* (Aboriginal people) from themselves, and all ourselves from ourselves. This is a recurrent reverie I know

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<sup>12</sup> HALT: Healthy Aboriginal Life Team (1991), *Anangu Way*, Nganampa Health Council, Alice Springs.

<sup>13</sup> G. Bardon and R. Bardon (2004), *Papunya Tula: A place made after the story: The beginnings of the Western Desert painting movement*, Miegunyah Press, Melbourne.

so well. It is like a musical Canon, a repeating theme in the ethnography of “hopelessness and helplessness.” Lévi-Strauss in his melancholia recognized that prevailing wind of hopelessness among the Indigenous Amazonians, just as Strehlow did at the end of his *Songs of Central Australia*.<sup>14</sup> Iconic anthropologists making half-whispered, existential, diagnostic statements, offered in *tristesse*, offered in response to the mood of country entering depression. How strangely we fail. Again and again, in country after country.

## PART THREE: THE UNDOING OF ONESELF

### Corrupted by desire

Bion advocates that a therapist should come to an analytic engagement with an open mind, uncontaminated with “memory and desire.”<sup>15</sup> It could also be advocated that an anthropologist or a therapist ought to be able to come to an inter-cultural engagement with a mind thus uncontaminated. I doubt very much that this is possible. Or rather such an openness of mind might be achievable, but how in fact and in detail *does* one achieve inter-cultural creativity? The evidence is, however, more likely to show that almost no one has succeeded in cracking the code of a “successful outcome” in health or law, social justice or social reconstruction or even in colonial administration. Most of us professionals of ethnic engagement might confess to failure, and might, in the twilight hours, confess to having contributed to the destruction of those cultures and those specific people whom one desired to assist. Or be assisted by. In the process, as perhaps Lévi-Strauss, Strehlow and Bardon exemplify, one finds oneself finally “undone.” This phenomenon, in itself, is worth a delicate feelingful ethnography – an analysis.

I came to my meeting with Japaljarri Spencer with prejudice, expectation, innocence, memory and desires; and I came with questions (always there are questions). I came with a pursuit in mind, a desire to get a grip on how the exponents of European and Aboriginal therapeutic traditions and cultures might beneficially find a way of talking to each other about the practice of their crafts. This desire both directed and contaminated the way I listened to what Japaljarri (and family) conveyed in the fractal fragment of conversation about *parma* and alcohol *Tjukurrpa* which I reported to you above.

When Japaljarri raised this matter of concern he naturally enough couched it in terms that made sense to him. Whether I understood his issues and communications or not is open to question, but it would appear that my mind had been prepared in a certain way to make a particular sense of what he was saying. Because my mind had been prepared in a certain way, I took action in a certain way, and gathered action about me. Analysing the actual detail of these transactions is what I mean by an “ethnography of failure.” That is to say, we need precise, professional description and analysis of our inter-cultural interaction and how that interaction constructs systems and where these systems fail, if we are to diagnose our joint condition. And maybe solve it. So far as I can see the construct systems turn around this matter of memories and desires and also around the persistent forces coming from our mythic (unconscious) foundations of thought and perception. That is to say, the *Tjukurrpa*. It might help to appreciate the place *Tjukurrpa* occupies within Indigenous mind, and how the force or push of the *Tjukurrpa* influences day-to-day perceptions by each Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal person involved interactively in health, law, economics, social action and cultural

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<sup>14</sup> T.G.H. Strehlow (1971), *Songs of Central Australia*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney.

<sup>15</sup> W. Bion (1984), *Learning From Experience*, Karnac, London, pp. 31-35.

activities. It seems to be a matter of what is felt as real and what is felt simply as passing illusion. I am at a loss about this. I am trying to describe it.

## Unquiet minds

It is a part of the psychoanalytic discipline to conduct an ongoing analysis of one's counter-transference reactions to the other person, the so-called patient. Such a discipline of reflective self-observation seems as useful in the practice of intercultural communication as it is in therapeutic communication. Training as a psychotherapist prepares one to attend to interpersonal communications in a particularly useful way. The emphasis I place is upon the mode of human attention cultivated within the discipline of psychotherapy and not upon the theoretical constructs of the psychotherapeutic profession; the emphasis is upon the mode of human attention cultivated within the discipline of psychotherapy, the theories we can take or leave. What we have to work with is the acquired discipline of lucid self-perception, a form of apperception whereby one attempts to observe what is going on between oneself and another, most especially when both are cast into difficult situations and into unquiet states of mind.

## Some implications

Throughout Central Australia and perhaps much of the rest of the country, certainly the north and western sectors, there is a particular creation power (*Tjukurrpa*) associated with water, water sources, watercourses and water holes and serpents. There is a temptation to emphasize here the association between waters, serpents, sexuality, healing activities and initiation into specific states of being on the edge or overlap of dying and creating. These somewhat esoteric/mystical meanings tend to capture (Jungian) attention but, less noticed by psychologists is the *significance of specific sites* for the way sites in themselves are the activity of psychologically significant events. By which I mean, the site is a psychologically significant event for the Aboriginal person connected with it. Things happen at a site. These things do not merely happen in the mind or in some metaphysical archetypal platonic reality absent from actual geographical location. Site is significant. When Japaljarri Spencer spoke of a *Tjukurrpa* for alcohol, I took this to imply that such a story, like all *Tjukurrpa*, would need to be rooted in the actuality of site, in geography with traceable travels of creation beings connecting wine and intoxication to specific sites in the regions of origin. The Dionysos myth does just that. As does the Jesus story, which is exquisitely site-specific with archetypal value. (A devoted pilgrim who visits a Jewish, Christian or Islamic site in a numinous Jerusalem or Mecca may comprehend and appreciate the impact of the conjunction between human and site.)

The implication here is that there are elements and patterns in both the desert Aboriginal and (broadly) Western mythic repertoire which do have kinship. Strehlow thought so. He tried to demonstrate this in the oral and written cultural forms, the songs of Central Australia and sagas of Old Europe, for instance. Elkin suspected there might be congruence between the practices of Indigenous healers (*ngangkari*) and Western psychiatric practitioners.<sup>16</sup> Why has it taken so long for such work to be realized and incorporated into psychological practice? What is the secret warfare that goes on between us in Australia that makes such an obvious effort at congruence so difficult to imagine, let alone put into experiential practice?

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<sup>16</sup> A.P. Elkin (1977), *Aboriginal Men of High Degree*, 2nd edition, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

When I heard a simple outline from Japaljarri Spencer of a specific *Tjukurrpa* as a reference trek for the formation of a *ngangkari* in his own region, with its subject's passage through waterholes, snakes, displacement, rejection, attack, virtual dismemberment, entry, after perilous journeys into caves and water, I felt that I was on familiar symbolic territory. Rather than dismissing his iconography for whatever reason, I and my psychiatric colleague committed ourselves to years of gradual engagement with this one story. Much that I have since found in the iconic sequences of the Dionysian matrix and also the nine-generational saga of Oedipus represents a repertoire of incidents which are congruent with incidents, symbolic shapes and patterns in like Indigenous Australian traditional stories with which I have become personally and physically involved, as I explain below. The emphasis here is direct physical and personal engagement with these stories; and if there were ever to be a useful study of the impact and usefulness of the Australian Dreaming, then I would suggest that such a study would have to go a lot further than a catalogue and recording of Dreaming stories as objective narratives. It would have to take into account the effects upon persons who have internalized specific *Tjukurrpa* and specific sites

## Summation

It appears that basic patterns of both Aboriginal and Caucasian/European/Middle Eastern foundation/creation stories do reveal a remarkable commonality. Some of the common elements of Caucasian mythic episodes and *Tjukurrpa* stories include significant (heroic) beings travelling to specific sites and the action of those travels and those sites on the visitor. They are marked by the presence of reptilian beings and other numinous proto-human/animal activity; acts of being swallowed and regurgitated by such creatures, or being made small and infantile; beings to whom traumatic events occur; instances of sexual anarchy, incest, trickery, deceit by such creatures. There are disappearances into the earth, into landforms, into the sky; appearances out of the sky, out of the earth; travels over ground, underground, in the sky and among the stars; acts of creation from bodily fluids or functions; losses (and sometimes recovery) of body parts; various tales of male and female supernatural beings in endless gender politics; erotic adventures, comic, tragic and epic, repeating ad infinitum into endless fights. And always somewhere, there is the presence of good humoured, wily, compassionate beings, sometimes women, sometimes men, sometimes of elder status, sometimes "innocents," who advocate cunning, intelligent consciousness, apperception and the value of wisdom and care gained from experience.

One might note processes within these tales that reflect significant procedures of human inner and outer life. It would take an extensive locally based study to satisfactorily set out the parallel process between Indigenous Australian and Indigenous Mediterranean/Caucasian/European mythologies that are central to our contemporary and prevailing cultural matrices. It is probably worth doing if for no other reason than to appreciate each other's idiosyncratic ways of thinking, our cultural anxieties and our several capacities for self-delusion, in order to provide informed and sophisticated psychological care for Indigenous people in distress, especially for those who live in the tensions of parallel or borderline realities/fantasies of the black and the white Australia. I want to move on to the intriguing and mysterious matter of how thoughts are made, or what thoughts are made of.

## PART FOUR: WHERE THOUGHTS ARE THINGS AND THINGS ARE THOUGHTS

*This rock isn't a rock ... only a rock ... it is Tjukurrpa.*

## This rock...

Bion, in *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, describes the terms he will use throughout his project on thinking, thought formation and transformation and the use of mental “objects” in psychotherapeutic activity.<sup>17</sup> He develops the theme throughout five books. For our purposes here I deal only with the simplest use of Bion and three of the elements of his system. These are *beta* elements, *alpha* elements and the *alpha* function.

*Beta* elements refer to “the earliest matrix from which thoughts can be supposed to arise.” In this origin state of thought the proto-elements of the thought domain have the quality of inanimate objects and psychic objects without any distinction being experienced between the two states. In this most primal state of mind “thoughts are things, things are thoughts and they have personality.” “*Beta* elements are not amenable to use in dream thoughts but are suited for use in projective identification. They are influential in producing ‘acting out.’ They are objects that can be evacuated or used for a kind of thinking that depends on manipulation of what are felt to be things in themselves as if to substitute such manipulation for words or ideas.”<sup>18</sup> Could we, I wonder, think of *Tjukurrpa* as the “earliest matrix from which thought can be supposed to arise,” using Bion’s way of thinking about the matter of mental life? Perhaps one might suggest that in the *Tjukurrpa* state of mind, one might be feeling and seeing inanimate objects and psychic objects as one and the same.

In the *Tjukurrpa* state of mind, it would seem that thoughts are things and things are thoughts. Mountains are snakes, snakes are mountains, rocks are bits of people, bits of people are rocks and they have personality. These “things” project themselves into the minds and lives of people and they act out stories in the topography of the country, rather than in the topography of the interior mind, where mind is considered conventionally as an internal domain. I have been with Aboriginal people whose minds dwell in and roam among “snakes as mountains, mountains as snakes” – the rocks are people, people are rocks, living, breathing, doing things in the world, not in the mind as such. The mind is in the country, or the country is acting in the mind. The question, what is going on in the mind, can be rephrased as, what is going on in the country?

At some point in time, or in human mental evolution, people let their minds play, and *alpha* function, as Bion formulates it, begins to operate on *beta* elements, i.e., those concrete, primal, pre-mental things. When this happens, some kind of psychic work is done and mental transformations take place. This process reflects a fundamental capacity for sustaining human life. The primal *beta* elements become *alpha* elements. That is to say, bits of primal experience acquire a psychic reality, and bits of experience somehow begin to enter into human experience as “dream thoughts.” As Bion explains:

*Beta* elements ... differ from *alpha* elements in that they are not so much memories as undigested facts, whereas the *alpha* elements have been digested by *alpha* function and thus made available for thought. It is important to distinguish between memories and undigested facts ... If the patient cannot transform his emotional experience into *alpha* elements, he cannot dream. *Alpha* function transforms sense impressions into *alpha* elements, which resemble, and may be identical with, the visual images with which we are familiar in dreams, namely, the elements that Freud regards as yielding their latent content when the analyst has interpreted them ... Failure of *alpha* function means that the patient cannot dream and therefore cannot sleep.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> W. Bion (1963), *Elements of Psycho-analysis*, Karnac, London, pp. 22-27.

<sup>18</sup> *Op. cit.*, W. Bion (1984), p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

## The place in the brain where thoughts assemble

So many times, sitting on bare sand, watching the relaxed yet concentrated seriousness of the way men or women painted up their bodies and prepared for a *Tjukurrpa* enactment, I found myself wondering if ceremony might be the communal milieu, the communal container, wherein these subtle psychological transformations take place, the place where thoughts are assembled, somehow inside and outside the human mind at the same time. Perhaps ceremony can be understood as a humanly constructed domain where evolutions of consciousness take place and thinking as a mental condition begins, simply by the manipulation of internal/external objects, painted and changed into a kind of numinosity and then carried out in a mental physical place, a psychosomatic or “psychoid” event (to use Jung’s term), which, by virtue of being shown on “sacred ground,” is somehow also located inside the mental world. There is no Cartesian split within such people, as far as I can tell. Inside matters happen outside. Mental events happen in the body moving. The body moving is an idea. I guess that is not so strange really, it is just that I am used to seeing ideas moving as words on a page, rather than as bodies on a ceremony ground. Ideas on a page as abstract mental constructions are too far along the Bion continuum, too far from the body, too far from the *Tjukurrpa* state of mind, where rocks are thoughts and thoughts are rocks.

In the *Tjukurrpa* state of mind, if you want to move ideas you have to paint bodies and move objects as actual things and as psychically charged re-presentations of things/places/beings/rocks. A ceremonial enactment in song and dance is where, collectively, individual and group *beta* elements are worked on and transformed into *alpha* elements, into dream elements and meanings. The ceremonial enactments present simple things as simple moving thoughts. They move, through the container of the ceremony, from a location in country into a place in someone’s mind and thus into everyone’s mind. As a result, landforms and mind are fused consciously. (The ceremonial management of such intensely psychic procedures is normally entrusted to the owners of the ceremony, the *Kirda* in Warlpiri language, denoting a group who are bound in reciprocal relationship with the *Kurdungulu*, who together help manage and contain the conduct and interpretation of such events.)

I suggest then that psychic work (*alpha* function) is being done through the singing of a *Tjukurrpa* storyline. For example, the “mountains as snakes” are intensely felt or seen to become “snakes as dream” – either as sleep/dream or as awake/lucid dream, perhaps hallucinated or as a form of active imagination; but by whatever means, the “snakes” assume meanings for men and women. As meaning collects perhaps thoughts arise or are formed as internally felt “presences of mind.” (In a way this is an intensely erotic process – bodies are transformed in a numinously charged manner and so emotionally charged thinking goes through a process of transformation, perhaps all the way along the most primitive brain structures to the most advanced cortical moment. It is a generative activity.) Strings of thoughts and strings of songs cohere to make sections of ceremonial action which are dreams in action; thus as psychic work is done, new members (those still out of their mind), the young, or uninitiated in the family, are brought into conscious containment by the communal thought systems. Participation in ceremony is participation in the container of shared and developing thinking. Ceremony is, I think, in Bion’s terms, *alpha* function in collective action, psychic work in collective operation.

With this possible procedure in mind, perhaps one can understand the significance of what Japaljarri Spencer and others are saying about the need for something to cover or fill the absence of a necessary *Tjukurrpa* in order to hold the space for thinking about something as perplexing in its effect as alcohol is seen to be. When Japaljarri searched the earliest matrix of Aboriginal experience (from which thoughts can be supposed to arise), he could not find any

elements there (psychically significant objects) imbued with the spirit of alcohol intoxication. Ancestral lizards might commit incest but none were drunks. He can find intoxication generated by other means but not the drunkenness familiar to the white people. He could not find, or could not recognize, an element/object which could be used to do psychic work to convert bizarre, unintegrated, lawless, drunk behaviour into appropriate dream imagery and then potent thoughts/action. Japaljarri suggested that he needed dream thoughts or *Tjukurrpa* actions located in the Indigenous *Tjukurrpa* itself before he could authoritatively form mental conceptions to speak in Warlpiri/Pintubi terms about the behaviours of intoxication and its management. Even if there were to be a container made for a ceremony, Japaljarri and his companions did not know exactly what ceremonial thought-objects had to be brought out from the “earliest matrix” and then placed into collective view for conscious attention by gathered potential thinkers. The Warlpiri man did not know (I conjecture) the shapes of the animals or plants, nor the painted designs for the body, nor the physical or mimetic actions, nor the words or rhythms of the songs which could be authoritatively sung to manage the thoughts about drunkenness. This is partly a shamanic issue and partly a conceptual issue. Things have to be sung to shape them to mental concepts and into law as consciously held prescriptions for action in response to intoxicated behaviours. My friend, literally, concretely, did not know what to think. No *Tjukurrpa* matrix, no thought matrix. Something like that...

Taking it further, if Japaljarri, as a traditional healer, wanted to isolate and send the “spirit” of alcohol away, that is, become dispossessed of intoxication, he could find no psychic objects in the “earliest matrix of thought” which he could manipulate physically wielding his psychic *ngangkari* authority over them. If he wanted to become a healer of alcohol-induced sickness from within Indigenous culture he could find no dream/thoughts and no sustaining psychic or physical objects in the earliest matrix of local *Tjukurrpa* which could form the basis of procedures, ceremonies, songs or psychic manipulations and which would have effect in the mental domain of his own family (many of whom were “drunks”). No one listened because there was nothing to sing (*yinkangu*) in the sense of ceremony or healing songs or sorcery, backed up by law. Nothing to sing, except country and western, Alcoholics Anonymous songs or *wama wanti* “give up the grog” pop songs. Japaljarri pointed to the missing link: for this problem there is no deep-structure *Tjukurrpa* music upon which to call. (Whether any drunk would listen or not, even if there were such songs, would be a problem of a different order.)

To restate: in the absence of a deep-structured, culturally acknowledged, ordering song, as evidence of experience-based human thought transformed into law, alcohol and intoxication remain (in Bion’s terms) as undigested psychic facts, for which no one has responsibility. The only thing you can do with undigested psychic facts is to attempt to “excrete” them. That is to say, to shit them out, turn undigested fact into piss, and keep drinking. Intoxicated behaviours persist in the form of de-humanized human objects in chaos in the landscape of the dreaming, but the psychic facts of intoxication are unrelated to or dissociated from the dreaming, with a life of their own, recognised but not internalized, remembered but barely owned as real memories, maybe hardly even dream fragments of psychotic nature, where a real killing act is forgotten instantly. Intoxication becomes something one cannot wake up from and the body on the ground is an illusion. The immensity of such a psychological failure of comprehension is almost more than a normal mind is built to take in. In this sense, drunkenness, (as experienced by the persons whom Japaljarri is thinking of) becomes something one “cannot wake up from” and “cannot go to sleep from” – something that exists outside the reach of thought, yet is ever present as psychotic fact. As Bion says, “The patient who cannot dream cannot go to sleep and cannot wake up, hence the

peculiar condition when the psychotic patient behaves as if he were precisely in this state.”<sup>20</sup> In my current understanding, Japaljarri as a community cultural *ngangkari* could not (at that time) find or see the psychic objects to extract from the spirit/dreaming body of his community/patients nor could he find or see the psychic-empowerment objects (*maban*) that he could use to insert into the disbanding communal bodies of his kin and bring about the restoration of their sanity. This is why Indigenous *ngankari* (healers) say they have trouble dealing with alcohol sickness.

### **Restatement: No Tjukurrpa – No Theory**

Let me restate this complex, subtle and probably abstruse theme: when faced with a request to fix a drunk, the Indigenous healer, surveying his or her repertoire to handle spiritual, bodily sickness, could find none of the necessary “thoughts as things, things as thoughts” to manipulate shamanically. There are no empowered storylines to hold or direct the travelling reverie of the healer’s mind or hands. No “snakes as mountains, mountains as snakes” that could be used to orient a patient’s thought lines or recovery lines. No “rocks as people, people as rocks” to insert into the mind-country. No “objects as power or powers as objects” to insert into the alcohol-dismembered joints. No “words of power or powers as words” to whisper into confused ears. No theory. No *Tjukurrpa*.

In short, the potential healer could find no *ngangkari* sequence of psychically effective operations. None of the usual natural objects, geographical locations or activities at sites could be brought to bear to transform the minds of drunks who are literally out of their Indigenous mind and thus in limbo, lost in a country of intoxication. There is no reference point in the topographical dimensions of Aboriginal being or psyche. No place (in mind). No story (in mind). No way of empowering action. *Alpha* function proves impotent. The consequence of this void is that a collective psychosis as a cultural plague occupies the void. In Bion’s way of thinking, no one is dreaming these things and no one is waking up and no one is sleeping the sleep of healthy restoration, so the intoxication events remain as undigested dissociated *beta* elements. When dreaming, waking, and sleep become disturbed and their realities confused with one another, then a person begins to inhabit a psychotic state. In a psychotic state personal relationships disintegrate. Obligations and reciprocity of kinship disintegrate. Attention to country disperses and dissociates. Depression results.

### **Catastrophe, breakdown and story**

Meltzer, in his series of lectures on Bion, describes Bion’s formulations on “catastrophic change” as including the search for a “container” to relieve the stress of fragmentation and the hopelessness of ever attaining an integration.<sup>21</sup> The catastrophic nature of the Aboriginal breakdown is almost “unthinkable.” It is too emotionally disturbing for most people to comprehend and that unthinkability is the therapeutic problem to be investigated and solved. The instinctive attempt at self-organized healing, which Andrew Japaljarri Spencer and company generated through HALT’s work with petrol sniffers and intoxication, also presented itself as a request for an “object” of therapeutic power. It was not a request for a tranquillizer. The request was for a narrative with substance with which to make sense of a

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> D. Meltzer (1978), *The Kleinian Development, Part 3: The clinical significance of the work of Bion*. Clunie Press, Perthshire, UK, p. 62.

senseless and unimaginably psychotic existential condition.

In Sophocles' *Oedipus*, the issue was the plague and the undisclosed family crime – the killing of an old man, the incest between son and mother and the consequences of trans-generational traumas. In Australia the issue is existential catastrophe, undisclosed family crimes and an invasion of mind that this particular cultural *ngangkari* has articulated on behalf of his family, culture and country. Japaljarri Spencer and his kin have articulated their concerns clearly, through succinct compacted and complex paintings and through the discourse unfolded from those images in the (now almost forgotten) HALT work. In the course of his many conversations, Japaljarri has plainly said that if the “white doctors” want to help, there are two necessary steps. Firstly, the white doctors must be cured of their own illnesses (of perception). Secondly, the white doctors must be incorporated into the Indigenous family system and have explained to them their family obligations and responsibilities to specific country/*Tjukurrpa*. That is to say, the solution must involve inclusion into a relational system which can be used wisely and pragmatically. This is a form of productive reciprocal empathy. The notion of inclusion (into a client's or patient's family) contradicts an accustomed Western medical notion of successful solution by distance, scientific objectivity, non-involvement and rationalized detachment. (The relational/kinship issues in black/white relations deserve attention; for this, too, is an area open to “ethnography of failure.”)

A mode of operation familiar to psychoanalysts is the long discursive rambling circumambulation of a matter in hand which does not yield to concise penetrative interpretation. Sometimes for months this circuitous reverie may play like a base theme, just out of consciousness, until upon the day, the matter clarifies into solution. Sometimes, deep within the concentration of an analytic session the therapist realizes that a moment has arrived where the patient's most hidden self-recognition has become tangible. A moment arrives of painful self-revelation which requires a response from the therapist, a response of complete presence where the therapist brings to bear all of his or her available experience, understanding and eloquence. These moments are rare but totally demanding. At such times of intense relational connection, it is as though all of one's life and the patient's life passes before us. Such a moment may not last long but much is packed into it. Something like this has been going on in the long session between myself and Japaljarri. We are both patient and doctor to each other. Practice supervisors also. The conduct of the Sugarman events (as explained below), meetings about law and the treatment of sniffers, the revelation of *Tjukurrpa* ceremonies, the performances and conflicts – while all these are maybe something in themselves, perhaps they are also really nothing more than useful illusions, enactments, hypotheses, experiments in mirroring, conversation bits, attempts at a communication about the realities of our differing lives, cultures, dream-thoughts... “Is it like this? Might this be how you too see these things? Do you understand me? Are we listening properly? Do I understand you? Is it like this?”

### **On Dionysos, and derangement**

During a phase of our relationship, while Japaljarri used snake stories and various *Tjukurrpa* bits to speak with, I began to use the mythic Dionysos/Zagreus, in particular, Dionysos's character and his kin's dramatic activities for intercultural communication. I was happy with the way this character represents a complex, fragmented interlacing of provocatively irrational, amoral and contradictory adventures. It easily matched the doings of *Tjukurrpa* snakes and eagles and lizards of Warlpiri and Pintubi country. The god's name changes, his

face changes, he carries out acts of apparently mindless violence, disordering the settled world, provoking rage and eroticism. He travels, he appears, he disappears, mysteriously. He journeys across countries to sites of significance, he marries a rejected woman and, paradoxically, holds together a stable marriage. He institutes mysteries of death and renewal, he institutes ceremonial dramas and acts as guardian of theatrical endeavour. He is a spirit of natural fertility, indestructible life, of fluent vegetation, the power of fermentation and essence of alcohol. He is attributed with being the essence of human soul, the avatar of intoxication. A creation being who spits grapes and death. A narrated container therefore, wherein it is possible to see *beta* elements and *alpha* elements tangling together. Dionysos presents us with the domain where thoughts are in flux, where bodily emotional processes are fluid and where the reality of derangement is the fact of life. If thoughts are people and people are thoughts, then in Dionysos's ceremony/symbolic drama, most concisely presented in Euripides's *Bacchae*, we see and feel mad people and mad thoughts manifest as gods.

In the sleepless dream states of the actions of Dionysos/Zagreus, mad things travel, dream passions arise ungoverned, mythic acts take precedence over individual wishes, delusions abound, thought disorder reigns, and yet there is a peculiarly liberating logic at work. Despite the chaotic derangement of isolated acts, the whole network of the Dionysos legend hangs together in a loose-knit container of fragmentation and integration which somehow holds sanity, pleasure, looseness and vitality. As far as I can tell, ceremonial theatre is not about art, it is all about family obligations and maintaining cultural bloodlines and somehow or other it is about thinking as a communal activity. In my experience it is within well-organized and well-performed ceremony that the moments of clarity arrive. The rehearsals and preparations are like the long circumambulating reverie of analytic work. Japaljarri insisted that a *Tjukurrpa* from the European repertoire, to become effective, had also to be performed as Aboriginal *Tjukurrpa* is performed. Hence our several experimental enactments at Intjartnama Outstation in community spectacle, objects swirling through smoke and fire, beneath the canopy of wind and stars, with the character of Kronos/Crow, cheerfully spearing his father, gleefully swallowing children, resolutely accompanying Captain Cook, dragging a boat up onto the beach, unloading laws, split brains, broken families, fences, holes in the mind, bottles of rum, bladders of piss. These are images of the "greedy *beta* elements" of Western civilization arriving on the fatal shore "full of a sense of catastrophe, searching wildly for a saturating realization in the absence of the container (breast)."<sup>22</sup>

The invasion of the domain of the *Tjukurrpa* by Crow/Kronos (white people) and Kronos's desperately increasingly prolific cohort (us), is in fact, "hair raisingly psychotic" (Bion's term), when you come to think about it. The fact is, we, the immigrant Europeans, are indeed the bringers of a frenzy. The substances which we bring generate physical and mental breakdown. Yet we present the package as salvation, opportunity and benevolence. Searching for a response to this "unthinkable catastrophe," in which I too participate, Japaljarri had tentatively, modestly enquired if there might be held somewhere a mental map (a story) which could help him to hold in mind an explanation for the pattern of madness he was witnessing as he and his family came under the spell of alcoholic intoxication – and the unknown people from the east. Probably there is no story which offers the adequately healing breast to a mind in shock. But when, in our performance, Crow/Kronos steps onto the ceremony ground, displaying the beginnings of whiteman's madness as the swallowing of children, and Captain Cook puts on the mask of Dionysos, promising joy but dealing out mayhem, and when socially upright King Pentheus of Thebes paints up his face to quell the manic entourage of

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<sup>22</sup> Op. cit., W. Bion; op. cit., D. Meltzer.

Dionysos and ends up dead himself, perhaps then, those who sit and watch find some of the contradictory images they need with which to think about the contradictory things we bring to Japaljarri's territory. Even the white people's *Tjukurrpa* equivalent shows that mayhem is part of the truth. There is no silver bullet. We Europeans have known for a long time that theatrical images can become objects with which to aid clarity of thought. Indigenous people have known the same thing for twice as long. The issue here is finding the mutually recognizable objects which speak the truth of our joint condition. These may be ideas in the conjoint mind which support the absorption of knowledge and love.

### **A conclusion of sorts**

Talking about intoxication, Bob Randall says, "We see the problem, we really do, but you know, no one knows what to do about it, whose responsibility [it is] ... it's a mystery thing." What is the "mystery thing?" Is it that nothing ever quite works, or holds long enough to be allowed to work? Aboriginal health gets worse and the many "cowboys in the health industry walk away." There is no grand heroic narrative of Central Australia to write; rather there is an ethnography of failure. And if such an ethnography of failure were astutely written with a deeply concentrated and applied psychologically analytic eye, then perhaps those of us who work in these border zones might comprehend where we have all gone wrong or how it is that the destructive and creative elements of human beings turn so precisely and voraciously upon each other in the midst of our own country. I suspect I am putting to you that part of the failure in black-white relationships is the failure to appreciate the psychological significance of the *Tjukurrpa*.

You will have noted the mood that pervades much of my reflection, and the reflections of others who spend time psychically attentive to the existential realities of life and death in these borderline zones of Australia and southwestern Oceania. It is the mood of a *Tristes Tropiques*, the melancholy of the *Songs of Central Australia*, Strehlow's "last post." It is reflected in Geoffrey Bardon's eulogy for the Pintubi painters in his accounts of the Western Desert Art Movement and in Tim Leura Japaljarri's bushfire skeleton painting made for Bardon, and in Alex Minutjukur and Andrew Spencer's paintings as cultural reflection works made under HALT's banner. You too may have felt the pervading moods of final, elegiac resignation among the men and women who come and go. This pervasion of feeling is a significant mood to catch, to psychoanalyse in the truest sense. These works and these moods are truly a part of Central Australia's "country" music.

### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Dr Jadran Mimica (University of Sydney) and Vivian Berghahn for permission to reproduce this paper. The original version of the paper appeared in 2006 in *The Journal of Social Analysis* 50(2), and was re-published in Jadran Mimica (ed.) (2007), *Explorations in Psychoanalytic Ethnography*, Berghahn, New York. Some text is revised in the interests of clarity, and in mindfulness of current local issues. (For a recent and masterful "ethnography of failure" the reader is referred to Peter Sutton's *The Politics of Suffering*, Melbourne University Press, 2009.) The original endnotes, full acknowledgments and full bibliography appear in the volume edited by Mimica. I include here only those references directly cited in text. Quotations from Andrew Spencer Japaljarri and family are from personal communications during the Dionysos/Zagreus/Sugarman alcohol project (1995–1999), as reported in my doctoral thesis, "Intoxication," University of Western Sydney, 1999.

### **Note on *Tjukurrpa*.**

There are varied and rich definitions of Central Australian Dreaming or *Tjukurrpa* by English speaking writers with a high degree of experience of Aboriginal life and a grasp of how Aboriginal language and metaphysics can be translated into Western concepts. There is much about *Tjukurrpa* which is of a secret or sacred nature and cannot ethically be made available to a reading public. It is not my purpose (or hubris), here, to attempt to comprehensively define *Tjukurrpa*, although some grasp of it is necessary in order to make sense of the arguments and flow of thoughts, especially in the later section of this essay. For reliable and available evocations and descriptions extracted through direct immersion, the reader might be referred to publications of Geoffrey Bardon, the Berndts, Liam Campbell/Jampijimpa Ross, Richard Kimber, Marcia Langton, Peter Latz, Bill Neidjie and countless Indigenous painters, Peter Sutton, Tony Swain, the various film, art and curatorial contributions of the Perkins family, e.g. *The First Australians* documentary series, Randall/Hogans's film *Kulini*, linguists such as Jenny Green/Wenten Rubuntja, and the Hansens. Deborah Bird Rose in *Dingo Makes Us Human* and *Nourishing Terrains* delicately honours the "independent voice" of country/*Tjukurrpa*. Finally, there is always access through the foundation works of formative Australian anthropologists, a representative selection of which includes Diane Bell, Hiatt, Mountford, Meggitt, Munn, Myers, Morton, Olive Pink, Stanner, Strehlow and their students. Much of this material can be accessed through the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Canberra (website: [www.aiatsis.gov.au](http://www.aiatsis.gov.au)).