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The eternal and the ephemeral

Abstract: The first part of this paper surveys 200 years of ideas about whether the First Nations of Australia had or have a religion. The answer to this question has depended on what was meant by "religion", and by the attitudes (and obsessions) of the observer. This intertwines with the concept of "Dreamtime/the Dreaming", and it is a prolegomenon to the final section of the paper, where I put forward an innovative model which claims to explain and elucidate the Ethos of the original Australians.

Keywords: Dyirbal, First Nations of Australia, religion, Dreamtime, Dreaming

1 Ethos

The people of this world are divided between many communities, each with its own way of living. Many features recur. First, there has to be the will to live. To keep the physical body going, there must be water to drink and food to eat. Depending upon the climate, and tolerance of its extremes, there may be need for at least occasional shelter and for clothing to counter the cold.[1]

Humankind is defined by its mental make-up. Everyone has ideas, attitudes, beliefs, conventions and much more. These can, to some extent, be expressed through language, which is a means for thought, for personal interaction, and is a conduit for laws, history and planning.

Every community has its own way of viewing itself and the world, and how one should act. It is difficult to find a suitable term to describe this essence of life.

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[1] These cover physiological needs, which form the bottom level of the Hierarchy of Needs. Maslow (1943, 1954) maintains that these needs must be satisfied before there can be any attempt to rise to higher levels (one at a time): safety needs; love /belongingness; esteem; and, last of all, self-actualisation.

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I employ **Ethos**; its meaning here is shown by the way it is used below, with an explanation provided in Section 10. Basically, in this short essay my aim is to make suggestions relating to the Ethos of the original inhabitants of Australia (the "First Nations"), in particular the Dyirbal-speaking people of North Queensland.[2]

Ethos is conceived at the mental level but it also pervades every kind of activity, informing the ways in which simple tasks are undertaken – what foods should and should not be eaten, who may live in this or that part of a house, with whom one is sanctioned to mate.

Each community has its own Ethos, different from the Ethos of every other one. A group of communities may have Ethoses which are very similar, differing only in minor details. The group will have its own higher level Ethos, made up of the common features of the Ethoses of the constituent communities. And so on up. The Ethos of a village may be included within the Ethos of a County, which may, in turn, be included within the Ethos of a State. It will be seen that, as the hierarchy is ascended, each Ethos becomes less detailed than the one below.

Each of the c. 700 First Nations of Australia had its own Ethos. Types of similarity hold between various of them, allowing more inclusive higher-level Ethoses to be recognised. Finally, we can recognise the Australian Ethos, a profile which characterises the original inhabitants of the whole continent.

As one scans the world, there are a few score high-level Ethoses, each of a distinctive character. Comparing each pair of Ethoses, some points of similarity will generally be found. The outstanding exception is the Australian Ethos, which shows more differences from every other Ethos than those between any other pair of Ethoses.

In general terms, if one wishes to talk about and analyse some phenomenon, it is a distinct advantage to have been – at least at some level – a participant in the activity. For instance, the author of a book about fishing should have done some fishing themself. A linguist who undertakes to write the grammar of a language should have at least a little experience of actually using the language themself.

Suppose that a scholar sets about studying some aspect of a certain Ethos. That is, they wish to gain insight into the way people of that Ethos think and behave. The scholar wishes not only to describe but to explain why things are the way that they appear to be. To achieve this they need to – as it were – "get inside" that Ethos. There is a natural tendency for the scholar to take parameters which are relevant for their own Ethos, and to apply these in trying to interpret the beliefs, conventions, interpretations of the environment and so on, of the Ethos under study. This will achieve limited results.

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2 See Dixon (1972, 2015, 2022), Dixon and Koch (1996).

An investigator should shun a good part of the academic impedimenta of their own Ethos and try to immerse themself into another world. They must try to act as one does in this new Ethos – greeting, sitting, eating, drinking, knowing how to ask a question and where to defecate, adopting local values and perceptions, assumptions and judgements. There are some activities which require acquired skills; for instance, how to hunt and the techniques of weaving. Here one can only be a peripheral participant, but can still partake of the spirit of the activity.

When a scholar seeks to study some aspect of an Ethos other than their own, the difficulty of the task will relate to differences between the two Ethoses. If there are considerable similarities, then theoretical constructs from one Ethos may – with slight adjustment – be applicable for the other Ethos. This will apply for two Ethoses from West Africa, or two from Western Europe. But if an observer from Western Europe chooses to study the Ethos of a West African society (or vice versa), they must display a good deal of detachment, skill and insight.

We have said that the Australian Ethos is significantly different from every other Ethos. The ideal situation would be for a member of a First Nation – who has the appropriate interest and skills – to study their own Ethos, then to choose a wider area, and finally to consider that of the entire continent. What has actually happened is that attempts to understand the original Australians – for almost 200 years denigrated under the names "aborigines" or "aboriginals" – have involved scholars and others from Western Europe seeking to apply labels from their own Ethos. Some said that the Aborigines performed "magic", others that they practised a "religion". In fact, the Australians conform to neither of these activities. Then an original label was coined – "Dreamtime" or "the Dreaming" – but this was used in a manner that didn't expose the essence of the Australian Ethos.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest a new approach to an understanding of the Australian Ethos; this will be briefly set out in Section 10. In a nutshell, I am suggesting that – for Australians from right across the continent – there is, firstly, a perpetual entity which I call Cosmos. Then Cosmos projected itself to create Mundus; that is, material things and beings. Cosmos roughly corresponds to "Dreamtime/the Dreaming" and Mundus to what is called "the real world". Whereas received opinion is that "Dreamtime/the Dreaming" is an appendage to the real world, my contention is that – for Australians – the ephemeral Mundus is secondary to the eternal Cosmos.

I have worked on Australian languages since 1963, predominantly on Dyirbal but also on Yidiñ, and on half a dozen others. Languages provide a window into a culture – through all manner of texts and through the meanings of words critical to a culture. To quote just one example, the intransitive verb *ñalbañu* is central to the Dyirbal Ethos; as an outsider I cannot fully appreciate its essence. Examples of its use include: 'assume the identity of one's totem', 'be inundated by a place (e.g.,

due to too much noise or water)', and 'be lost and can't get away from a place'. These senses are doubtless facets of a single basic meaning, which eludes me.

However, this is an exception; most things I could eventually understand. Decades of linguistic fieldwork made me ruminate more and more about the nature of the Ethos which I was on the fringe of. This fermented the ideas expressed in this essay. I have also read widely in anthropology and gained much from discussion with friends of all races.[3]

For any research endeavour, what is already known and how it has been presented are of high importance. This is covered, at least in its bare bones, through the following eight sections. In Section 2 there is an account of early observers who said that the native Australians had no religion, with an explanation of what was meant by "religion" at that time. Section 3 is concerned with "totems" and magic. Then, in Section 4, there is a summary of the work of two scholars from Europe – James Frazer, who said the original Australians practised magic rather than religion, and Emile Durkheim, who said they had religion rather than magic. Sections 5, 6 and 7 introduce the ideas of Altyerrenge and Dreamtime (or the Dreaming) as the basis for an unusual type of religion. In Sections 8 and 9 there are samples of how anthropologists have characterised Dreamtime/the Dreaming, and the ways in which three First Nations people perceive it.

All of this is a prolegomenon to Section 10, which presents my innovative view of the Ethos of the first Australians. This is just an outline of the idea. It could be tested, confirmed or amended (or discarded) on the basis of detailed study in one of the remaining living cultures.

The discussion is built around quotations from the literature, each with a code:

(Q-1) to (Q-32). These are referred to by their codes in Section 10.

2 Having no religion

David Collins, a member of the first fleet in 1788, and Judge Advocate of the new colony, was a perceptive observer. His 1798 book *An account of the English colony of New South Wales* has a 31-page Appendix consisting of his observations con-

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3 In addition to grammatical and lexical documentations of five Australian languages (Dyirbal, Yidiñ, Warrgamay, Nyawaygi and Mbabaram), I have published two comparative studies of Australian languages and one popular volume (Dixon 1980, 2002, 2019) and I have supervised 24 graduate students working on languages from across the continent.

cerning the First Nation of Sydney. The section on religion commences thus (Collins 1798: 547):

(Q-1) It has been asserted by an eminent divine*, that no country has yet been discovered where some trace of religion was not to be found. From every observation and inquiry I could make among these people, from the first to the last of my acquaintance with them, I can safely pronounce them to be an exception to this opinion.
   * Blair's Sermons, vol. 1, Sermon 1

It is interesting to examine what Hugh Blair wrote when he enunciated the qualities which were at that time held to characterise a religion (Blair 1777):[4]

(Q-2) Cast your eyes over the whole earth. Explore the most remote corners of the east or the west. You may discover tribes of men, without policy, or laws, or cities, or any of the arts of life. But no where will you find them without some form of religion. In every region you behold the prostrate worshipper, the temple, the sitar, and the offering. Wherever men have existed, they have been sensible that some acknowledgement was due, on their part, to the Sovereign of the world. If in their rudest and most ignorant state, this obligation has been felt, what additional force must it acquire by the improvements of human knowledge, but especially by the great discoveries of the Christian revelation?

According to Blair, a religion should involve:
– Above all, a single Supreme Being or God, the "Sovereign of the world".
– "The temple, the sitar, and the offering" [the sitar was an Indian guitar].
– Prostate worshipping [that is, reverence to the Supreme Being].

This is what was found lacking in the autochthonous culture of Sydney.
   The "New Hollanders" had respect for, and beliefs about, the heavenly bodies. But, continuing the quote from Collins:

(Q-3) I am certain that they do not worship either sun, moon, or star; that, however necessary fire is to them, it is not an object of adoration; neither have they respect for any particular beast, bird, or fish. I never could discover

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4 Blair's remarks are meant to cover all the religions that he was aware of. The reference to Christianity was just a piece of add-on propaganda, as it were.

any object, whether substantial or imaginary, that compelled them to the commission of good actions, or deterred the perpetration of what we call crimes.

Collins' opinion was not shared by Watkin Tench, another officer with the First Fleet, who asserted his "firm belief that the Indians of New South Wales acknowledge the existence of a superintending deity" (Tench 1789: 280).

However, it was Collins' judgment which, on the whole, prevailed. As the term "religion" was then understood, it was not applicable to the New Hollanders since they lacked belief in a single Supreme Being. This was good news for the inevitable missionaries. If there had been belief in a local Supreme Being, their task would have been to replace it with the Christian version. But in the absence of such a belief, the local people should surely welcome the opportunity to embrace Jehovah.

This was easier said than done. The Lutheran Pastor C. G. Teichelmann stepped ashore at Adelaide in October 1838 and started at once on learning the local language and trying to impart a respect for his God. This didn't go down too well. The missionary's account of Jehovah's traits of love and anger were countered by: "the white men tell us, that what you speak to us of Jehovah is not true." Teichelmann (1840: 12) knew these unbelievers and assured the New Hollanders:

(Q-4) They are as bad as you, who will not believe what is true, and the same punishment awaits them as you. Whether you believe it or not, Jehovah will put you to account. Then the eldest, taking his spear and shaking it, said: I am very strong. If Jehovah punish me, I shall spear him.

The First Nations of Australia were taken by many to be an exception to Dr Blair's suggestion that every ethnic group must recognise (and worship) a "Sovereign of the world". Roderick Flanagan, an Irish-born journalist in Melbourne, wrote a series of newspaper articles on the Aborigines of Australia in 1853/4 (gathered into a book by his brother in 1888). In the spirit of the time, Flanagan considered the original inhabitants to be an inferior race, "feeble and insignificant". He supposed the New Hollanders to be of Malayan origin, noting that the Malays were a superior race. As the Aborigines wandered around Australia, they had sunk into degeneracy. It is supposed that, on arrival on the continent, the Aborigine must have believed in a Supreme Being, but (Flanagan 1888: 19):

(Q-5) though, in the course of his long and desolate wanderings, he [the Aborigine] may have lost those fixed and definite ideas of the Creator which he derived from his fathers, he has not set up a human deity in His stead.

The idea was that the invader would be able to give back to the original Australians what they were supposed to have once had and then lost – that emblem of civilisation, a single omnipotent God.

Leaving aside such fantasy, there are in essence two ways of proceeding. One is to examine First Nations Ethoses and see whether there is one Supreme Being. The other is to assume that every society has a Supreme Being and to identify him. The second alternative was adopted by a group of Lutheran priests from Germany when, in 1877, they set up a mission at Hermannsburg, 80 miles west-south-west of Alice Springs. They immersed themselves in the local language, which is called Arrernte (also spelled Aranda, Arunta), and soon selected the Arrrernte word Altjira as appropriate for "God" (Kempe 1891: 9). Pastor Carl Strehlow joined the mission in 1894 and spent the next 28 years studying local languages. In his 1907 book (in German) *Die Aranda- und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien [The Aranda and Loritja Tribes in Central Australia]*, Strehlow wrote that "God" must be "a being called Altjira who embodies the highest good (*mara*). This being is eternal (*ngambakula*) and is thought to be a tall strong man with a red skin colour and long fair hair (*gala*) which flows over his shoulders" (Strehlow 1907; Gill 1998: 98).

The amateur anthropologist A. W. Howitt followed the second alternative in his massive volume *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*. Here is a sample (Howitt 1904: 488–489):

(Q-6) According to Taplin, the Narrinyeri 'call the Supreme Being by the names Nurrunderi and Martummere . . . The Wiimbaio spoke of Nurelli with the greatest reverence . . . The Wottobalu speak of Bunjil as a great man, who was once on the earth, but is now in the sky . . .'

Moving on from enquiry about whether the First Nations recognised a unique deity (who should be feared and worshipped), some of the colonisers then turned their attention to what the First Nations people actually did have.

3 Totems and magic

The word *totem* was taken into English at the end of the 18th century as an adaptation of *doodem* in Ojibwe, an Algonquian language originally spoken from Montana across to Quebec. The British merchant and translator John Long wrote, in 1791 (p. 86):

(Q-7) One part of the religious superstition of the Savages, consists in each of them having his totam or favourite spirit which, he believes, watches over him. This totam they conceive assumes the shape of some beast or other, and therefore they never kill, hunt or eat the animal whose form they think this totam bears.

This word – re-spelled as *totem* – was soon used of further North American people, and then of others further afield.

In 1841, George Grey provided an extensive account of nations in Western Australia, including the following about Nyungar, the language of Perth and its surrounds (Vol II, pp. 228–229):

(Q-8) Each family adopts some animal or vegetable as their crest or sign, or *Kobong*, as they call it: . . . A certain mysterious connection exists between a family and its *kobong*, so that a member of the family will never kill an animal of the species to which his *kobong* belongs, should he find it asleep; indeed he always kills it reluctantly, and never without allowing it a chance to escape . . . Similarly, a native who has a vegetable as his *kobong*, may not gather it under certain circumstances, and at a particular period of the year.

Grey related this *kobong* to Long's *totam*. It was the term "totem" (not *kobong*) which was used in future accounts of the original Australians. Nowadays, "totem" is a term in general usage, and has been borrowed into many major languages.

"Totem" has a wide range of meanings. Most dictionaries characterise it as "a particular plant, animal, or natural object which a person or a clan regard as their special symbol". There is held to be a special relation between a totem and the person or group with whom it is associated. This relationship can take several forms. That described in quote (Q-7) from Long is the most common. Dyirbal is a little different; before going into battle or before undertaking any significant activity, a person will assume and call out the identity of the totem they "belong to" (verb wurraliñu). Totems included *gayambula* 'white cockatoo', *jambun* 'witchetty grub', the oak tree *miyabur* (*Helicia australasica*), and *gañarra* 'alligator'. The man who became an oak tree harnessed its strength. The person who called out that he had become an alligator believed this would ensure that (real) alligators would not bite him. (There was a different kind of belief for each totem.)

Totems were recognised in significant studies of Australian nations by the turn of the century. For example, Spencer and Gillen (1899: 112), in their wide-ranging study *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, stated that:

(Q-9) every individual . . . is born into some totem – that is, he or she belongs to a
      group of people, each one of whom bears the name of, and is especially as-
      sociated with some natural object. The latter is usually an animal or a plant,
      but in addition to those of living things, there are also such totem names as
      wind, sun, water, or cloud – in fact there is scarcely an object, animate or
      inanimate, to be found in this county occupied by the natives, which does
      not give its name to some totemic group of individuals.

The most common situation is for a family group or clan to share one or several to-
tems. Sometimes each person will also have their own individual totem. For instance,
a kinship section may have the eel as their totem with its members having individual
totems relating to this, such as the jawbone of an eel, the gill of an eel, and so on.

   The notion of "totem" persists in present-day studies of traditional Australian
societies. Details vary as to whether a totem is linked to a group or to an individ-
ual, a person's obligations towards their totem (and vice versa). Totems are recog-
nised, apparently, independently of whether other aspects of traditional culture
are categorised as "magic" or as "religion".

   From the start, the invaders had taken note of the local people's curious be-
liefs, rites and ceremonies, which were aspects of their Ethos. These came to be
labelled as a kind of "magic" (the term undoubtedly had a wider range of mean-
ing in 1900 than that which it has today). It was acknowledged that a "medicine
man" could cure a sickness by rubbing and sucking on the affected portion of
skin, extracting a small stone. Or that the same practitioner could kill someone in
a roundabout and not perceivable way. First of all he would replace some vital
organ in the victim's body (maybe the liver or kidney or heart) with a poisoned
rag. This was achieved by employing a supernatural sleight-of-hand. The victim
would know that in three days time they must die. And so they did.

   This sort of thing appeared to be somewhat similar to what is called "magic"
back home and so that seemed a suitable label (once more, unfamiliar things
being described from a European perspective). There was a fair amount of inter-
est overseas concerning the people who had come to be called "Australian Aborig-
ines" and their customs. Note, however, that this was within the general opinion
of the time – started by Dampier (1697) – that the Australians were "the misera-
blest people in the world". (See Dixon 2019: 32–46 for the story of how this mis-
judgement came about.)

4 Divergent opinions from far away

Once in a while, an exceptional scholar comes along, who – through a lengthy period of application and dedication – produces a wide-ranging and significant body of work. James Frazer was such a scholar. He made a comparative study of the beliefs and institutions of mankind across the world, published in *The golden bough: A study in comparative religion.* The first edition, in 1890, consisted of two volumes. For the second edition, of three volumes, published in 1900, the sub-title was changed to *A study in magic and religion.* There was a third edition, of 12 volumes, published between 1906 and 1916, and then a one-volume abridged edition in 1922.

Frazer supposed that mankind progressed in stages from "magic", through "religious belief", to "scientific thought". It is important to clearly state how these terms are being used. We read (p. 65):

(Q-10) By religion, then I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life.

That is, religion is a belief in powers higher than man and man's attempt to be friendly to these powers and to please them. This contrasts with magic, "where the magician has an arrogant demeanour towards higher powers, and his unabashed claim to 'a sway like theirs'".

Frazer did all his work from a desk in Britain. He had never seen an original Australian and lacked the experience of observing them within their milieu. This is a bit like a geologist working entirely from photos and never looking at a rock in situ. Frazer relied on printed accounts, which were, at that time, of decidedly mixed quality. On the basis of his characterisations of religion and magic, Frazer concluded (p. 72) that:

(Q-11) Among the aborigines of Australia, the rudest savages as to whom we possess accurate information, magic is universally practised, whereas religion seems to be nearly unknown. Roughly speaking all men in Australia are magicians but not one is a priest.

Confirming the received idea that the Australians' way of life involved magic rather than religion, Frazer's work had a considerable influence. For instance, Spencer and Gillen (1899: x) say: "It need hardly be pointed out how much we are indebted to [Mr Frazer]". However, things were soon to be turned on their heads.

The aim of the French sociologist Emile Durkheim was to analyse the nature of religion. He considered that the best place to start would be "the simplest and most primitive religion", which he identified as that of the Australians, "whose organisation is the most primitive and the simplest known" (p. 93). In 1912 he published a lengthy monograph *Formes élementaires de la vie religieuse,* translated into English as *The elementary forms of religious life.*

Like Frazer, Durkheim worked only with written sources, which were of varied quality (although quite a few more detailed and more reliable accounts had appeared since 1890).

Also like Frazer, Durkheim was concerned to distinguish between religion and magic. A dozen pages are devoted to the criteria for recognising religion, but Durkheim then admits (pp. 39–40) that this characterisation

(Q-12)   fits equally well two orders of things that must be distinguished even though they are akin: magic and religion. Magic, too, is made up of beliefs and rites. Like religion, it has its own myths and dogma but these are less well-developed, probably because, given in pursuit of technical and utilitarian life, magic does not waste time in pure speculation. Magic also has its ceremonies, sacrifices, purifications, prayers, songs and dances.

"How then", Durkheim asks, "can a line of demarcation be drawn between these two domains?" His response is (pp. 41–42):

(Q-13)   Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith . . . [becoming] . . . what is called a Church.

(Q-14)   Magic is an entirely different matter. Granted, magic beliefs are never without a certain currency. They are often widespread among broad strata of the population, and there are even peoples where they count no fewer active followers than religion proper. But they do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them into the same group living the same life. *There is no Church of magic* [his italics] . . . A Church is not simply a priestly brotherhood; it is a moral community made up of all the faithful, both laity and priests. Magic ordinarily has no community of this sort.

Operating in terms of these principles, Durkheim takes issue with Frazer (p. 21):

(Q-15) In order to identify the simplest and most primitive religion that observation can make known to us, we must first define what is properly understood as a religion. If we do not, we run the risk of either calling a system of ideas and practices religion that are in no way religious, or of passing by religious phenomena without detecting their true nature . . . Having failed to take that precaution, M. Frazer, a scholar to whom the comparative science of religions is nevertheless greatly indebted, failed to recognise the profoundly religious character of the beliefs and rites that will be studied below – beliefs and rites in which, I submit, the original seed of religious life in humanity is visible.

That is, whereas Frazer considered that, in Australia, "magic is universally practised whereas religion seems to be nearly unknown", Durkheim opined that so-called magical matters have a profoundly religious character, and that religion is pervasive. He also considered totems to be fully religious. Applying his own criterion, Durkheim – 9,000 miles (16,000 km) away, and never having met a single one of the original Australians, let alone a group of them – must have decided that each First Nation could be considered to be a church (or maybe several churches).

   Note that Frazer did provide as much discussion of definitions as Durkheim. And that Durkheim speaks of something having a "religious character", seemingly leaving this totally subjective characterisation to his own intuitive feelings.

   Presumably, all the phenomena which Frazer (and others) regarded as aspects of magic would be considered by Durkheim to be of a religious nature – the technique for passing one's sickness onto another person, the habit of pointing a bone at someone as a way of injuring them, of making a charm as a way of enticing a woman to be your wife, ceremonies for multiplying a totem, ceremonies for detaining the sun in the sky, or for hastening its descent. After all, supernatural manifestations can be just as much at home in religion as in magic. The reader can decide for themself whether or not to accept Durkheim's definitions and judgments. Not everyone did. The first edition of *The Illustrated Australian Encyclopædia* (1925) had an entry of 20 (large) pages on "Aborigines" (by "W. R. S."). This includes "totems" and "magic", with no mention of "religion". However, it was – as we shall see – Durkheim's views which prevailed.

   We can now stand back and assess the situation. I am familiar with European ideas of "magic" and of "religion". I also know a good deal about the native Australian Ethos (at least from one area). Although there are points of similarity, I

cannot accept that the Australians practised a form either of magic or of religion. They had something entirely apart.

We can recall that Frazer and Durkheim (and many others) regarded Australians as "the rudest savages" and "the most primitive and the simplest known". They looked down on them, judging them by European principles. No thought was given to the notion that this was an entirely different type of society, rather than an early stage of the calibrated development of the human race.

Getting back to the main storyline, around 1900 there came an important new parameter to help in understanding the Ethos of the First Nations. A couple of books by Spencer and Gillen have been mentioned above. Now it is time to introduce the men themselves and their contribution.

5 Altyerre, Altyerrenge (Alcheringa)

In 1894, mining magnate William A. Horn fitted out a Scientific Expedition to Central Australia, which took 14 weeks and 2,000 camel miles. It included a bevy of scientists, including Baldwin Spencer, the Professor of Biology from Melbourne University. One participant from outside academia was F. J. Gillen, post and telegraph manager at Alice Springs. During the quarter-century that Gillen had lived in the Centre, he associated with the Arrernte nation, gaining some familiarity with their customs and worldview, and a smattering of the language. Volume 4 of the Expedition's Report (edited by Baldwin Spencer, dated 1896) included an essay by Gillen entitled "Notes on some manners and customs of the Aborigines of the McDonnell Ranges belonging to the Arunta (sic) tribe". The section titled "Tradition of the Origin of Fire" includes the following paragraph (p. 178, my bolding):

(Q-16)   The natives explain that their ancestors in the **distant past (*ŭlchŭrringa*),** which really means in **the dream times** for this is the manner in which the natives always speak of the long ago, acquired the art of '*ŭrpomalla*' (fire-making) from a gigantic arrange (*Micropus robustus*) [common Wallaroo] . . .'

There is great variation in the spelling of Arrernte words (linguists debate how many vowels there are). In fact, Altjira ('God' for Strehlow) is the same word as *ŭlchŭrringa* ('distant past' for Gillen), save that the latter includes the suffix *-nge*

'in, from'.[5] Thus, *altyerre* (to use modern spelling) is a plain noun, but *altyerrenge* is an inflected form, with the suffix *-nge* which was translated into English as 'in'. There were all sorts of other difficulties. In 2012, linguist Jennifer Green published "The Altyerre story – suffering badly by translation", documenting how the word *altyerre* has been mistranslated and misunderstood.

Gillen and Spencer joined forces and together published four books on Arrernte and other languages of Central Australia. Spencer knew no Arrernte and Gillen just a little, so that "pidgin English provided the chief medium of cultural exchange" (Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: 174). They did think it important to include native terminology, but this was done in a muddled way. For instance, there was much mention of Alcheringa (i.e., *altyerre nge*), but treated as a simple noun, saying as in "in the Alcheringa", which is, literally 'in in/from (the) Alchere'.

They made some observations concerning Arrernte's northerly neighbour "Kaitish" (now written "Kaytetye"), referring to a mark on a drawing as representing "a waterhole where a man . . . came into existence in the Alcheringa" (Spencer and Gillen 1912: 325). Katyetye does have a noun *altyerre*, just like Arrernte, but it does not have any suffix *-nge*, so that *Alcheringa* is a word in Arrernte but not in Kaytetye.

6 Dreamtime, the Dreaming

Alterrenge is a word in Arrernte, not at all suitable for describing the culture of other nations (although this was sometimes done, as for Kaytetye). But in (Q-16), the extract quoted above from his 1896 paper, Gillen had provided an alternative: "the distant past (*ŭlchŭrringa*), which really means in the dream times for this is the manner in which the natives always speak of the long ago". "Dreamtime" (note the difference between this and Gillen's "dream times") is an English word, and thus available for application elsewhere.

The 20th century saw the growth of anthropology in Australian universities, and brought a new attitude towards the First Nations. Their material culture might be regarded as minimal (although highly functional) but their languages, kin systems and social culture in general were seen to be as sophisticated as could be. Professional anthropologists undertook immersion fieldwork in those communities where the traditional way of life was still maintained.

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5 Recommended materials on Aranda include Breen (2000), Green (2005), and Henderson and Dobson (1994).

In other Central Australian languages there was a concept similar to *Alterre(nge)* in Arrernte which it was thought could also be translated by "Dreamtime". The term in Warlpiri, next door neighbours of the Arrernte to the north-west, is *jukurrpa*. In *Desert People*, his ethnographic monograph on the Warlpiri, Meggitt (1962: 60) wrote:

(Q-17)   All these events occurred in the long-past dreamtime, an epoch (which is also a category of existence) that not only preceded the historical past and present, but also continues in parallel with them. Although the heroic beings either departed from Warlpiri territory or vanished onto the earth within it during the dreamtime, they still exist and their powers and actions directly affect the contemporary society. The people believe that, by performing the appropriate rituals and songs, living man can actually 'become' these beings for a short time and so participate briefly in the dreamtime.

The term "dreamtime" soon came into everyday currency across Australia. Note how Meggitt did not capitalise it in the extract just quoted. There are thought to have originally been about 700 First Nations. All but a few score have had their original culture – at the least – greatly depleted. Sure, similar "dreamtimes" have been documented for a number of nations in Central and West Australia. But we know little about the erstwhile cultures of the southeast; there are just a few snippets of information from settlers or local policemen.

In a study of the Pintupi (speakers of a variety of the Western Desert language, lying due west of Arrernte), Myers provides an excellent account of how the "dreamtime" (here called *Jukurrpa*) intertwines with many aspects of living. Myers (1966: 47) then makes a very broad statement:

(Q-18)   Throughout Australia, the Aboriginal outlook on human life and the universe is shaped by a distinctive and subtle conception that they refer to in English as The Dreaming.

This is erroneous in several ways. First, the term "Dreamtime" (or "the Dreaming") is not used "throughout Australia". Not where the original community has been destroyed. And it is certainly not in regular use in north-east Queensland, for example (see Section 10 below). And it is not the case that where the term is known to members of the First Nations, they will use it a lot. T. G. H. Strehlow (1971: 614), son of Carl Strehlow, grew up at Hermannsburg among the Arrernte and spoke the language fluently. He wrote:

(Q-19)   The English 'dream time' is therefore a vague and inaccurate phrase, and
         though it has gained wide currency among white Australians through its sen-
         timentality and its suggestion of mysticism, it has never had any real mean-
         ing for the natives who rarely, if ever, use it when speaking in English.

The word "dreamtime" has one fault: its use as an adjective is limited. An alterna-
tive term came into use in the 1930s – "dreaming", which can denote a time, a
state of being, or a place. For example, one may hear "The baby was conceived in
an important Rain Dreaming place", whereas it would scarcely be felicitous to say
". . . in an important Rain Dreamtime place". One also hears "This posssum is my
Dreaming (totem)" and "This boomerang is my Dreaming (totem); it originated in
the Dreamtime".
     The label "the Dreaming" gradually grew in popularity. There are two edi-
tions of Tonkinson's study of the Mardu nation of Western Australia (speaking
another variety of the Western Desert language). "The Dreamtime" (again called
Jukurrpa) in the 1978 edition is replaced, 24 years later, by "the Dreaming, or
Dreamtime":

(Q-20)   (1978: 13) The profoundly religious view of life that characterises the abo-
         rigines rests on their concept of the Dreamtime, which is typically de-
         scribed as the period of creation.

(Q-21)   (2002: 20) The profoundly spiritual world view of the Aborigines rests on a
         complex set of beliefs and behaviours commonly referred to as the Dream-
         ing, or Dreamtime, which is typically described as the period of creation.

7 The resurrection of religion

By the 1920s, there were three analytical frameworks available.
–   Totems and totemism. Well established (but there is much discussion about
    details).
–   Dreamtime/Dreaming, emanating from Spencer and Gillen (1899).
–   Religion (a.k.a. Magic), emanating from Durkheim (1912).

This was surely too much! There must be (at least) a fair degree of overlap here.
What's the difference between a Totem and a Dreaming? Shouldn't Dreamtime/
the Dreaming be a part of (or the whole of) Religion?

Anthropologists have ingenious ways of combining these theoretical arte-facts. In Tonkinson (2002: 22) we read that "the multiple totemic associations that characterize all humans and link them to the Dreaming powers are enduring and indissoluble". And Berndt and Berndt (1999: 294) maintain that "the kinds of phenomena that are often called 'totemic' are to be understood only through what Aborigines conceived of as the dimension of the Dreaming".

What is of particular interest is the way in which the word "religion" has been used. At first it was employed in a mild extension of its normal sense. When, in 1798, Collins made his "no religion" judgement he was using Blair's criteria, which we can repeat from Section 2. For Blair, a religion should involve:
– Above all, a single Supreme Being or God, the "Sovereign of the world".
– "The temple, the sitar, and the offering".
– Prostate worshipping [reverence to the Supreme Being].

Note that Blair's purview was far wider than Christianity; rather, it embraced all the types of religion known to him at that time.

Frazer and Durkheim were sound scholars and realised the need to be explicit. Each contrasted definitions of "magic" and of "religion". The latter word was being accorded an extended sense, but this was carefully explained.

Then came the anthropologists, who accepted Durkheim's view that there was a special "Australian religion" and took this as the basis for their investigations. (Frazer's work, preferring the label "magic", was regarded as "out-of-date".) There is also the fact that – academic argumentation being pushed to one side – it sounds much more respectable to say that you are studying "First Nations religion" rather than "First Nations magic".

But Durkheim had stressed that, to validate anything, "we must first define what is properly understood as a religion". Unfortunately, the anthropologists dismissed this requirement. In the vanguard came A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, who was the first Professor of Anthropology in Australia (at the University of Sydney, 1926–1931). Radcliffe-Brown (1945: 33, 38) approved of Durkheim and discussed what he called "the totemic religion of the Australian Aborigines". But he didn't follow Durkheim's precept that in a scientific enquiry critical items must be defined. Instead he stated: "Anthropologists and others have discussed at length the question of the proper definition of religion. I do not intend to deal with that controversial subject on this occasion". As far as I can tell, he didn't discuss its definition on any other occasion either.

Following on from Radcliffe-Brown, W. E. H. Stanner undertook extensive fieldwork among the Murrinhpatha, on the Daly River, from the 1930s. There were others after the war – M. J. Meggitt on Warlpiri, Fred R. Myers on Pintupi,

and Robert Tonkinson on Mardu, to name just three. As far as I can tell, there was no attempt by any of them to define "religion".

A fair number of worthwhile papers and books were published, together with two important edited volumes:

– 1984. *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*, ed. Charlesworth et al. 19 chapters.
– 2005/2017. *Aboriginal Religions in Australia*, ed. Charlesworth et al. 18 chapters.

In the introduction to the 2005 volume, Max Charlesworth writes (2005: 1): "W. E. H. Stanner has emerged as the central figure in the study of Aboriginal religions".[6] This makes it sensible to examine Stanner's attitude and methodology.

In his article "Stanner on Aboriginal Religion" in the 2005 anthology, Ian Keen (2005: 75) refers to Stanner's "overworked and sometimes obscure style". It could (generously put) be considered idiosyncratic. This idiosyncrasy was also manifested in other ways. For instance, Stanner contributed one of the 13 academic chapters in the Festschrift for A. P. Elkin (Berndt and Berndt 1965). A normal referencing convention was followed in 12 chapters, the same as that used in the chapter you are now reading; for example, "Meggitt (1962: 60)" in the text and full details of the source in the list of references at the end of the chapter. However, Stanner has no references whatsoever in his chapter. This could indicate either laziness or arrogance – "I am above having to conform to the usual conventions".

How about a definition of "religion", something which Durkheim would have considered necessary? After all, "religion" is a word in general use which has an accepted range of meaning. Stanner and his coterie are using it in a quite new sense which surely should be explained. However, what we get is (Stanner 2014: lvii):

(Q-22) It seems to me that most anthropologists know well enough, for working purposes, what they and their professional associates mean by 'religion'. Slips apart, I have tried to use the word indicatively, for the content of a devotional life. Beyond that, if pressed by the definition-minded to say what I 'really mean' by 'religion', I would be inclined to point to the facts of Murinbata culture and say: 'That kind of belief and conduct.' It seems to me that definitions of religion – that is, of all religions in all places and at all times – are doubtfully a matter for anthropology at all.

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6 Not every anthropologist working with First Nations people accepted this use of "religion". A notable exception is Nancy Munn; see, for example, Munn (1970).

What Stanner is saying here is:

– Anthropologists (sorry, *most* anthropologists) know this new and specialised meaning of "religion" and that's all that matters.
– If pressed for a definition, he would "point to the facts of Murinpata [now written Murrinhpatha] culture and say: 'That kind of belief and conduct'." (Does this imply that "culture" is equated with "religion"? On this principle, if asked for the meaning of "sonnet", one could recite Shakespeare's 66th sonnet and say: "This, and things like it". Or, if asked for the meaning of "apple", one could hold up an example of the referent of this word and say "This and things like it". This could be taken to mean "fruit" or "fruit which does not need to be cooked" or "granny smith apple" (if the item being held up is of this type) or "round object".
– How can definitions of religion not be a matter for anthropologists? A lexicographer must work with material provided by anthropologists, which they will cast into dictionary form.

The leading dictionaries of the world add new senses of words to their entries as they come into being. Although searching widely, I have found no dictionary which includes this new meaning of *religion* as used in Australian anthropology. This is not at all surprising, given the lead provided by Stanner.

In her introduction to a volume of Stanner's papers *On Aboriginal Religion*, Francesca Merlan (2014: xi) regrets that Stanner's works

(Q-23)   are not as widely known as their ethnographic and interpretive richness would seem to warrant, and regrettably, have not found a regular place in the cross-cultural study of religions.

The moral is: if you want to be integrated into this world scene, you should produce work which is accessible. If new terms are used, or old ones in a new sense, they should be explicitly explained.

The question "what is First Nations religion?" is tangential to an understanding of the Ethos of the original Australians (although it did muddy the waters somewhat). Whether the six rites and four associated myths documented by Stanner for Murrinhpatha (Hiatt 2014) are regarded as "religion", or "magic", or whatever, is a matter for discussion between anthropologists, and basically a question of naming.

"Dreamtime" or "the Dreaming" is a concept created by anthropologists. It is in many cases not considered useful by members of the First Nations.

We have now completed a brief historical survey of attempts to describe and explain the Ethos of the original Australians, which is leading up to a sketch, in Section 10, of an innovative characterisation of this Ethos. Much valuable work re-

lating to this has been published and it will be useful, in Section 8, to quote relevant extracts from some of these, adding to that by Meggitt in (Q-17). To complete the picture, Section 9 features insightful observations by members of the First Nations.

8 Ideas about Dreamtime/the Dreaming

In his ethnographic study of the Mardu nation, Robert Tonkinson (2002: 20–22) provided the following explanation:

(Q-26) The heroes of the Dreaming simply were, and they performed many adventurous acts . . . The Dreaming beings were human-like but could assume animal form at will. Much larger than life and gifted with superhuman magical powers, they hunted, gathered, and behaved a lot of the time in ways similar to the people living today. In so doing, they were creating most of the land's distinctive forms – here a winding creek bed created by the movement of an ancestral snake; there, a gap between hills opened by a blow from the stone ax of a fighting lizard-man . . .

Describing the Pintupi nation, Fred R. Myers (1966: 47, 50) says:

(Q-25) Because it touches so many dimensions of Pintupi life, The Dreaming (tjukurrpa) possesses no single or finite significance. It represents, instead, a projection into symbolic space of various social processes . . .
    Nothing is created by human beings; it was all there 'from the start'. Pintupi believe that the Dreaming left behind at various places the creative potency – or spiritual essence – of all the natural species and of human beings. They speak of conception and birth as the emergence of an individual from the plane of the Dreaming into the physical phenomenal plane of existence.

In his insightful study of the Lardil, David McKnight (1999: 228–229; my bolding) wrote:

(Q-26) The concept of Dreamtime differs from one region to another, but there appears to be a common nucleus, which centers on the belief that Dreamtime is everlasting. The Lardil believe that Dreamtime is a time that came into being (or perhaps more accurately has always existed) before the appearance of humans, and it is a time that will continue after humans cease to

exist. In some unexplained way, a split occurred in Dreamtime, and as a result the time of this world that we live in came into existence. The two times, Dreamtime and the time of this world, exist parallel to one another so that there are two streams of time. For the Lardil, the **everyday secular world in which they live is only a pale imitation of Dreamtime. It is not true reality. True reality is Dreamtime, [which] is timeless and unchanging**. Throughout Aboriginal Australia, dances frequently reenact the activities of Dreamtime beings, and while they are being performed the performers partake in the essence of Dreamtime beings and are part of Dreamtime. This is particularly so in initiation rituals. Dances are like dreams. They have Dreamtime qualities because the fantastic is enacted.

In the case of the Lardil, dances are indeed the enactment of dreams. Sometimes people are able to slip into the stream of Dreamtime in their sleep. In dreams wonderful events occur. And one of these is that the Dreamtime beings sing and show themselves as they truly are. A man who dreams a dance, and it is mostly men who do dream them, is believed to be able to see the Dreamtime beings. Men sing in their sleep. The Lardil believe that it is not really the man who is singing but the Dreamtime beings through him.

A. P. Elkin, the doyen of Australian anthropologists, held the chair in Sydney (following Radcliffe-Brown) for 23 and a half years. His comments (1969: 89) on the Dreaming, based upon wide first-hand experience, are particularly useful:

(Q-27)   The Dreaming is not just a concept of time, or of duration of the Eternal Now. It includes also that which occurs and the beings which exist. These particulars, however, exist in, and because of the Dreaming. The latter is both the conditioning and the conditioned . . .

The Aborigine would say that the ultimate ground of the existence of everything that is, lies in the Dreaming.

It is also useful to note the impressions of someone from outside academia. J. W. Bleakley was for 28 years Protector of Aborigines in Queensland. In retirement he wrote *The Aborigines of Australia*, which included (1961: 33):

(Q-28)   The aboriginal lives in a secret world of his own, an existence apart from that of his daily life and its obligations. In this 'dreamtime' his spirit is in communion with nature and the ancestor spirits upon whose miracles and precepts – jealously treasured and guarded by their totemic cult – the laws and codes of the tribe are founded.

It is useful to reiterate, with Charlesworth (1984: 11)

(Q-29)   It needs to be emphasized how necessary it is for us to purge our minds of Western European preconceptions if we are to understand the Aboriginal religious world.

9 The inside story

It is really valuable to hear from members of First Nations. There follow three statements. The first two are from Warlpiri people; we can recall, from Section 6, that *Jukurra* in Warlpiri corresponds to *Alterre(nge)* in Arrernte.The third is from an Arrernte elder.

I   Christine Judith Nicholls (2014) reported that in 2002, Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi, formerly a Warlpiri teacher at the Lajamanu School in the Tanami Desert of the Northern Territory, where I worked for many years first as a linguist and then as school principal, explained the central Warlpiri concept of the Jukurrpa in the following terms:

(Q-30)   To get an insight into us – [the Warlpiri people of the Tanami Desert] – it is necessary to understand something about our major religious belief, the Jukurrpa. The Jukurrpa is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment . . .
         The philosophy behind it is holistic – the Jukurrpa provides for a total, integrated way of life. It is important to understand that, for Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people living in remote Aboriginal settlements, the Dreaming isn't something that has been consigned to the past but is a lived daily reality. We, the Warlpiri people, believe in the Jukurrpa to this day.

Nicholls adds: "In this succinct statement Nungarrayi touched on the subtlety, complexity and all-encompassing, non-finite nature of the Jukurrpa. The concept is mostly known in grossly inadequate English translation as 'The Dreamtime' or 'The Dreaming'. The Jukurrpa can be mapped onto micro-environments in specific tracts of land that Aboriginal people call 'country'".

As a religion grounded in the land itself, it incorporates creation and other land-based narratives, social processes including kinship regulations, morality and ethics. This complex concept informs people's economic, cognitive, affective and spiritual lives.

II In a booklet on Warlpiri art, Joe Brown (2008) wrote:

(Q-31) The Jukurrpa is sometimes translated as the 'Dreaming' or 'Dreamtime' and exists in desert law as the creation period . . .

　　　During the Jukurrpa, ancestral beings in both human and animal form moved across the desert singing, marrying and fighting – or tricking and helping one another. As they travelled, they created the features of the land, its waters, plants and animals, and people, languages and ceremonies.

　　　They also established the moral, practical and spiritual laws that still govern Aboriginal societies. At journey's end, the ancestral beings returned to the earth, transforming themselves into important waters, hills and rocks. Others took their places among the stars . . .

　　　These Jukurrpa narratives form an intricate network of 'Dreaming tracks' or 'songlines' that crisscross the desert country. The knowledge embedded in these stories is held collectively by senior initiated people . . .

　　　Some aspects of this knowledge are broadly known to desert peoples; others, including parts of men's and women's law, are restricted to people of certain age, status and gender.

III. Many aspects of traditional life, and how it is blended into the modern world, are described in *Iwenhe Tyerrtye = What it means to be an Aboriginal person*, a 221-page book by Arrernte elder Margaret Kemarre Turner (2010). This is the transcription of a spoken text. As is typical of that generation of First Nations people, Turner alternates between Arrernte and English. Each Arrernte segment is immediately followed by its translation into English. One of many insightful passages is (Turner 2010: 36):

(Q-32) People have always gone back home to pass away. Then that soil makes maybe two or more people the same as the one that died. *Apmerele Aherne irrare-werne akngirtneme apmerele utnenge athenetyeke*. The Land takes the spirit back to its own cemetery to lay it down to rest, so that the spirit can look after the place and the people who come from there. Because our Land holds the roots and veins which tie us in. That's how we Aboriginal people all know and understand together. *Anwernekenhe alkngenge-ularre*. That's how it is through our eyes.

10 An innovative approach

Having – in Sections 2 to 9 – essayed a brief chronological summary of ideas relating to the Ethos of the original Australians, it is now time to outline an alternative model which may better explain this Ethos. All that is provided here is a framework, on which future studies could be based. Material given in the 32 quotations is cross-referenced as it relates to a point being made.

I have worked for several decades as a linguist, predominantly on Dyirbal, within the ambit of their Ethos. In the beginning I couldn't work out the "how" and "why" of what I perceived; things seemed not to cohere into an integrated whole. But it was the foreign spectrum through which I was gazing that impeded me. Once I recognised the Cosmos/Mundus model – described below – things fell into place.

The model involves two critical notions:

Cosmos, which relates, rather roughly, to the Dreaming

Mundus, which relates, even more roughly, to the Real World

A feature of both Cosmos and Mundus is what have been called "heroic beings", "heroes", "ancestor beings" and "ancestral spirits" (see quotations Q-17, Meggitt; Q-24, Tonkinson; Q-28, Bleakley; Q-31, Brown). These are here called **Heroes**.

Whereas it has been accepted – by supposed similarity with societies outside Australia, such as those in Europe – that the real world is "basic", with such things as the Dreaming being "appendages" to it, the approach here is quite different – that is, it is Cosmos which is basic, with Mundus being secondary to it.

The Cosmos/Mundus model

A. First, there is what can be called **Cosmos.**
—Cosmos has no material form.
—It is independent of time and location.
—It incorporates entities which are visible (at some time of day) but are non-substantial – rainbow, moon, sun, stars and other celestial phenomena,
—It is the repository of all knowledge (Q-27, Elkin)
—Cosmos is eternal (Q-26, McKnight; Q-27, Elkin)

B. Cosmos has the ability to project itself and to create material things and beings. Using this power it created a material phenomenon, **Mundus,** which consisted of:
—A bare Earth.
—People, animals and plants to populate it. Care was taken that there should be plenty of variety.

C. Cosmos also put on the earth (from within itself) **Heroes.**

—Each Hero had several manifestations:

- Something which is insubstantial, e.g., a rainbow, the moon, a particulate star (Q-3, Collins).
- One or more forms which are similar to the people and/or animals which Cosmos had placed on Mundus. For instance, one Hero could be both a shooting star and a spider, while another Hero combines being a rainbow, a scrub python and something looking like a man (examples from Dyirbal).

D. The people and animals which Cosmos had placed on Mundus could also be fluid as to form, being either man or kangaroo, woman or wombat, and so on (Q-31, Brown). It may be that plants could also be included in the possibilities. I have no information concerning whether a human (or a Hero) could alternate sex.

The Heroes made themselves look like people (although often with exaggerated features). They undertook daily tasks, and in addition completed the detailed creating of the physical world – putting in mountains and rivers, waterfalls and caves, swamps and forests (Q-24, Tonkinson; Q-25, Myers; Q-31, Brown). The Heroes taught songs (and sometimes also associated dances (Q-26, McKnight).

During this activity, there was no idea of "time", nor perhaps of "place".

E. Then everything changed; the reason for this can only be guessed at. Perhaps Mundus was getting too chaotic, so that it was not easy for Cosmos to maintain control of things (see items H-J below).

Life for people became greatly restricted. There was no longer any variation of form; one could be a human woman or a female wallaby, but not both. To make up for this, totems were adopted; someone who had been both man and eel now became just a man, but with an eel as his totem (Q-8, Grey; Q-9, Spencer and Gillen).

A chronological scale of time was introduced and, with it, mortality. With time being measured, people must – in their turn – die, and would need to be replaced (more on this under H below).

Mundus had become **ephemeral**. It could be destroyed or it could destroy itself.

F. Location would also have lost its fluidity and become fixed. The people were grouped into small nations, each with its own "country" – according to the availability of water and food – language (or dialect) and social matrix. There was in every instance a classificatory kinship system, rules for marriage and various rites and rituals. Each nation had its own character but there were typically similarities of various types with neighbouring nations; these generally diminish as physical distance between nations increases. A particularly significant ritual, song or physical technique (e.g., a new mode of weaving) may be borrowed from nation to nation over a

considerable region (see Mulvaney and Kamminga 1999: 232). It is as if the various First Nations had been cut from the same cloth, but in varied sizes, shapes and hues.

G. In contrast, Cosmos, and its Heroes, are ethereal and **eternal,** distinguishing them even more from the people of Mundus. The humans thrived on stories from the timeless era. Of how the Heroes had created this island or that cave. Of how a mouse-Hero snatched the only water from the blue-tongue-lizard-Hero. And how the satin-bird-Hero grabbed the only fire from the snake-rainbow-Hero (Dyirbal).

Each nation within Mundus had its own bevy of Heroes, including those who had carved out that nation's country during the timeless era. There was much overlapping – one portion of Cosmos (such as the sun or the seven sisters; Q-3, Collins) could be the basis for Heroes in several nations; each would have its own name in the language of the nation to which it was attached. Arising from the conjunction of sunlight and water vapour, the rainbow has a quite different character from the Heroes relating to stars, and is a Hero prevalent across Australia.

Thus, the Heroes – who were acknowledged as creators of the landscape – were still in attendance, ensuring that the people behaved sensibly (Q-17, Meggitt; Q-31, Brown).

H. There was a very strong bond between each nation and its country. Outside Australia, a person (or people) can be considered to "own" a tract of land. Things were entirely different for the original Australians. The country of a nation, which had been created by the Heroes, was in effect a part of Cosmos. Members of the nation did not "own" their country. Rather, there was a symbiotic relationship between people and land. The people had a responsibility to care for their country and, in response, the land provided them with food, water and other needs.

I. Mundus (which is ephemeral) could not be considered a part of Cosmos (which is eternal). Cosmos is primary, with Mundus being secondary to it (the reverse could never be considered). Cosmos created Mundus and in several ways continues to control it. This can be illustrated for births, dreams and songs.

J. Speakers of Dyirbal told me about *bala yubanday*, a person's "conception site", which their "spirit" comes from at conception and returns to after death. It is recognised that childbirth requires swiving (having sexual intercourse). However, this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition – not every instance of swiving leads to pregnancy. What is needed, in addition, is approval from Cosmos. The conception site – which is shared by all members of a kinship group – is like a valve connecting Mundus with Cosmos. It was Cosmos which, in the timeless era, placed people on Mundus. And it is Cosmos which continues to monitor the addition of new people to replace those who have died.

A person's conception site is a sacred place. Life's fortunes may carry them away but, as death creeps up, they make every effort to return to the site (I have recorded several stories about such journeys). The "spirit" which they enjoyed for a lifetime is returned – via the conception site "valve" – to Cosmos, from whence it came (Q-25, Myers). It is then likely to be returned as the "spirit" of another human (Q-32, Turner).

K. The people on Mundus have control over much of living, but not of sleeping. Dreams are a bridge through which Cosmos communicates with people. This is not to suggest that Cosmos pays attention to all dreams. It is just that dreams are a channel through which Cosmos may link with people (Q-26, McKnight).

George Watson (born about 1899) told how, when he was a boy, the main songster in the Mamu dialect of Jirrbal was "Old Paddy", who had a large repertoire. However, Paddy had never composed a single song himself. Nor had anyone else. In the creation era, the Heroes had taught songs and dances to the people of Mundus. In later days it was all done through dreams. Paddy would be taught a song in his sleep. On waking he would remember everything – words, metrical pattern and tune, and sometimes also a dance (Q-26, McKnight).

It is instructive to see how the original lifestyle was modified by the inundation of white people. One change was that people began to compose songs themselves (all in traditional style) and admit to doing so. One group of Dyirbal speakers remained living in the dense rainforest (around the Upper Tully river) until the early 1940s. When they emerged, most of them established a community around Murray Upper, in their traditional lands. But one man, Tom Murray, moved away, working on cattle stations in western Queensland for the next 40 years. He retired back to his home country in about 1980. Tom knew many songs, but they were all from his youth and had been learned through his or someone else's dreams. Tom was scornful of people who were, by then, composing songs about contemporary happenings. "Those are not real songs", he declaimed.

L. There were many more aspects to the Ethos of the original Australians than have been mentioned here. Their kinship systems were unmatched for their intricacy; they determined the obligations which devolved on each particular member of the community. Every nation had its own set of legends (many going back to the timeless era), also rites, ceremonies and the like. Some of these may emanate from Cosmos.

We began by wondering about the Ethos of Australian nations. The basis of **the Ethos is** surely **the link between Mundus and Cosmos.**

M. Most of the accounts of Dreamtime/the Dreaming present it as secondary to the "real world". But McKnight's shrewd analysis (Q-26) presents a different view, simi-

lar to that which is espoused here: "For the Lardil, the everyday secular world in which they live is only a pale imitation of Dreamtime. It is not true reality. True reality is Dreamtime, [which] is timeless and unchanging".

First Nations people feel an emotional bond with the Cosmos around them. In quotation Q-30, Jeannie Herbert Nungarrayi talks about the Jukurrpa in Warlpiri, which is roughly equivalent to Altyerrenge in Arrernte: "The Jukurrpa is an all-embracing concept that provides rules for living, a moral code, as well as rules for interacting with the natural environment".

It will be evident that neither of those competing bulwarks of European thought – magic and religion – are at all appropriate in connection with the Australian Ethos. How would magic deal with a person being taught a song in a dream from a non-material entity? And there are a dozen other hurdles. A religion must include worship, and someone or something at which the worship is directed. It may be a designated God. (The first of the ten commandments of the Christian Bible says "You shall have no other Gods before me". This implies that there are other gods, but people shouldn't mess with them.) The Cosmos is treated with respect, often with reverence, but it is not worshipped. And there is only one Cosmos/Dreaming, not a set of rivals which one has to choose between. The Australian Ethos may be unique in the world and must be treated in its own terms, rather than as a funny variant of something familiar.

When I was working with the languages of north-east Queensland, from 1963 until 2001, I never heard any First Nations people use the term "Dreamtime" or "the Dreaming". Dick Moses, my superlative teacher of Yidiñ, referred to the era of creation as "storytime".

Speakers of the Girramay dialect of Dyirbal used the word *Ganbaymu*. When asked its meaning, they said "creation time, and all the people and places relating to it"' (other dialects of Dyirbal use the term *Jujaba*). Ganbaymu Heroes were creators, and are still around, teaching songs through dreams, besides hindering and helping the people in various ways.

Bessie Jerry, a Girramay elder, had retained more traditional ideas and habits than anyone else I met in that region. On 4th December 1991 she recorded for me a traditional story about a dragonfly. One sentence included the word *ganbaymu*, referring to a Hero in "creation time". I went through the story word by word, obtaining meanings for words that were new to me. Although I knew its meaning (or thought I did: "creation time, and its people and places"), I asked Bessie what *ganbaymu* meant. She replied "Mother Nature". What an appropriate way of describing Cosmos!

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