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Father Worms's contribution to Australian Aboriginal anthropology

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I have previously discussed in some detail the contribution of Fathers Hermann Nekes (Society of the Catholic Apostolate, SAC, or Pallottine Society) and Ernest Worms (SAC) to Australian Aboriginal linguistics (McGregor 2005, 2007; Nekes and Worms 2006: 1–40; see also McGregor 2008b), and edited their magnum opus, *Australian Languages*, distributed in microfilm form in 1953, but not published until 2006 (by Mouton de Gruyter). In this chapter, I provide an overview of the contribution of Ernest Worms to Australian Aboriginal anthropology, which centred on Aboriginal religion, although missiology was always an applied side to his research. I will attempt to situate Worms's anthropological thought in German anthropology of the late nineteenth century and the *Kulturkreislehre* ('culture circle theory') school of anthropology. Before getting down to business, I provide a brief biography of Father Worms (see further Nekes and Worms 2006; and Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume).

Personal and intellectual background

Ernest (Ernst) Ailred Worms was born in Bochum, Germany, on 27 August 1891. Little information is available on his early life until he entered the Pallottine Society in 1912. His studies were interrupted by

World War I, when he was called up for military service; he was awarded the Kaiser's Iron Cross. After the war, Worms returned to the SAC and was ordained in 1920.

Worms's first posting was in Eastern European Pallottine jurisdictions; ultimately, he served as director of studies in Rössel in East Prussia. Worms was appointed to the Pallottine mission in the Kimberley in Australia in 1930. He arrived in Broome, Western Australia, on 17 December of that year by ship, with Father Francis Hügel and three religious brothers. There he served for eight years as Broome parish priest. Soon after his arrival, he began research on the Indigenous languages and peoples, starting with Yawuru in early 1931. After his former teacher Father Nekes (1875–1948) joined him in 1935, Worms became more active in linguistic investigations, though he always maintained a greater interest in anthropological issues.

Plate 13.1 Father Worms working in Broome, probably in the 1930s.
Source: Courtesy of the Australian Pallottine Archives.

In 1938, Worms took up the post of rector of the Pallottine College in Kew, Melbourne, where he remained for a decade. During this time, he continued his collaboration with Father Nekes, who was also in Kew for part of this period. Worms returned to the Kimberley in 1948, where

he renewed his research on Aboriginal languages and cultures. In 1957, he again returned east, to Sydney, where he took charge of the Pallottine College in Manly. While there, he played a role in establishing the New South Wales Anthropological Society, and participated in the National Conference on Aboriginal Studies, held in May 1961, where he presented a paper on Aboriginal religion, which was subsequently published in the proceedings of the conference (Worms 1963). Also in 1961, Worms was appointed a member of the linguistic panel of the interim council for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies (now the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, AIATSIS).

Father Worms died of cancer in Saint Vincent's Hospital, Sydney, on 13 August 1963, aged 72. Today, Worms appears more dynamic, more widely published and is probably better known among Australianists than his co-author, Nekes. In the mid-twentieth century, however, Elkin's evaluation was that Nekes was a trained academic (see Capell 1956: ii); Worms an amateur.

Unlike the typical missionary, Father Worms was based mostly in urban centres, from which he undertook fieldtrips to numerous locations. And, unlike the typical missionary—or missionary linguist or anthropologist— he did not work for decades with one group of people, focusing his intellectual attention on that particular group. As far as I can determine, he did not gain speaking control of any Aboriginal language. Instead, his research—both linguistic and anthropological—was largely comparative, using a broad base of languages and cultures, albeit with a particular focus on the Dampier Land region.

Worms was educated in the Limburg Seminary, where he attended lectures in linguistics and anthropology by Father Hermann Nekes, who became a lifelong friend and mentor and subsequently joined Worms in Australia in 1935. Unfortunately, I have found little information on what was taught in the seminary at the time (see, however, Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume). Nor have I been able to find much information on the theoretical framework underpinning Hermann Nekes's anthropology and linguistics, beyond the fact that he had been heavily influenced by his well-known contemporary Father Wilhelm Schmidt (1868–1954), and presumably worked within the *Kulturkrieslehre* paradigm (see, again, Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume). It is therefore reasonable to assume that Worms's linguistic and anthropological training fell within that framework.

Another potentially significant influence on Father Worms's anthropological thinking was Helmut Petri (1907–86), professor of anthropology at Cologne University. Petri led the Frobenius Expedition into the Kimberley in 1938–39, and met Father Worms at the beginning and end of this expedition, as well as on various subsequent occasions (for details, see Ganter, Chapter 14; and Redmond, Chapter 16, this volume). The extent of their personal interaction is uncertain, although Petri is referred to as Worms's 'friend and colleague in anthropology' (Worms and Petri 1998: xi). As a former student of Koppers, Petri would have been familiar with the culture circle paradigm and may have influenced Worms's diffusionist thinking. In any event, it seems that Petri may have alerted Worms to the significance of rock art to the unpicking of layers in cultural diffusion (see Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume).

Overview of Father Worms's anthropological research

As already mentioned, Worms's anthropological interests centred on religion, while his linguistic interests were primarily in the domain of anthropological linguistics—in particular, he was interested in the domain of language and thought, where he upheld a fairly extreme Whorfian stance (see further below). One encounters very little in his writings on social concerns, either sociolinguistic or social anthropology.
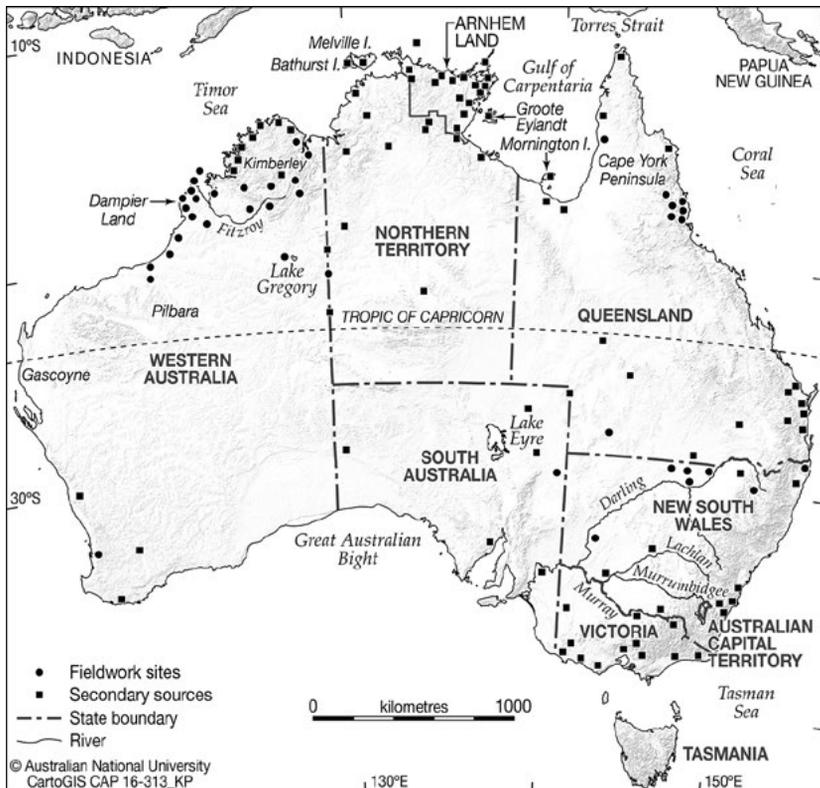
Fieldwork

Father Worms undertook linguistic and anthropological fieldwork in a variety of locations throughout the country, including:

- the Dampier Land region, mainly Broome and Beagle Bay
- west and east Kimberley locations, in annual field trips from 1933 to 1938
- western New South Wales and southern Queensland, during the same years
- Palm Island, in 1946, where he worked on a number of rainforest languages and peoples of northern Queensland, and also carried out anthropometric measurements
- Balgo, in 1948 and 1950, where he discovered rock engravings

- the Pilbara region and Port Hedland hinterland, in 1952, where he also investigated rock art

- Central Australia and the Northern Territory in 1960, when he undertook a nine-month-long fieldtrip investigating cave paintings funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundation.

Map 13.1 shows the traditional locations of the languages and groups on which Father Worms did fieldwork (cf. Nekes and Worms 1953: 15); the fieldwork was not always in the traditional regions indicated (e.g. the northern Queensland fieldwork was probably all conducted on Palm Island). Information on locations visited during the 1960 fieldtrip is incomplete. It should be noted that Worms did both anthropological and linguistic research in each fieldwork location. Nekes's fieldwork was focused exclusively on the Dampier Land region.

Map 13.1 Map showing the location of Worms's fieldwork languages and cultures.
Source: CartoGIS, The Australian National University.

Worms does not discuss his fieldwork methodology in detail anywhere in his published writings. I provide a brief description of what is known of his linguistic fieldwork methodology in Nekes and Worms (2006: 14–15). Even less is known of Worms's anthropological fieldwork methodology. One of the few descriptions of a fieldtrip comes from his colleague Father Francis Hügel:

> He learned also about the neighbouring tribes and was one day told about the hero GALALANG; the outstanding figure among the Njol-) Njol [sic], the residing tribe in Beagle Bay. So one day he came up to Beagle Bay, where I was appointed to and invited me to come with him to trace the last tracks of this hero. On mule back it took us almost a whole week to cross the Dampier peninsula, 65 km East to the King Sound, but what we found was rather disappointing: a clearing in the bush where [there] was gravel over the ground, on that ground a clearing in the shape of a human being: this was the place where Galalang rested and had gone back into the ground. For our guides, Abos and all the local tribe of the Nimanbur [sic] a sacred place. Fr. Worms travelled always with a good camera, a Leika, and so he took also a photo of Galalang. (Huegel 1981: 2–3)

Worms describes the figure as follows (Worms and Petri 1998: 116):

> In the country of the Bard, hidden in the mangrove thicket of King Sound, we found a large ground-figure of Galalang in sunk-relief which had been scratched into the gravelly ground.

Unfortunately, Worms and Petri (1998) contains no photographs; presumably, his photo of Galalang is somewhere in the uncatalogued collections in Kew, Rossmoyne or Limburg (see Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume). In fact, only a handful of photographs appear in publications, mainly in those concerning Aboriginal art (see below).

Worms gathered a range of texts in the languages he investigated, including mythological narratives and songs, some explanatory texts and a few narratives of personal experience. Most were taken down laboriously, verbatim, from native speakers, as they were produced. It appears that some form of shorthand may have been used in the online transcriptions, though no examples of these representations or information on this form of shorthand are provided (Worms 1953b: 967; Nekes and Worms 2006: 14−15). Just a few texts were recorded on wax cylinders, and these were

all songs.[1] Fieldworkers at the time had to be very circumspect in their use of cylinders, which were quite bulky and inconvenient to use, and tended to record only music and song (see also McGregor 2008a).

Motivations

Worms's anthropological and linguistic research was motivated to a considerable extent by missionary concerns to develop more effective missionary practices, thus facilitating conversion. As Worms (1970: 374–5) himself put it:

> I believe the following to be important qualities for a missionary working among Aborigines.

> 1. He must have a good knowledge of classical and several modern languages, as well as history. The former will give him at least a linguistic feeling and adroitness for native languages; the latter, having made him conscious of the complexity and recentness of his own cultural background and of the problems which arose from the meeting of different cultures in the history of his own home country, will supply him with a sympathetic attitude for similar difficulties faced by his primitive natives, who find themselves in a similar, but far more intense, collision …

> 3. A fundamental anthropological knowledge is necessary, otherwise he would feel lost in strange surroundings and be blind to the exuberance of human life around him. This science will enable him to avoid a false impression that all he observes is unique and extraordinary, but will support him in his difficult task by adding to his experiences, that of other anthropologists and educated missionaries …

> 5. The missionary, too, must be a man of restraint and of untiring perseverance. Being an anthropologist and psychologist by his education and vocation, he clearly sees the impossibility of changing the style of living of a nomad within one generation—even the educational work of three generations will not bridge the immense distance between their culture stratum and that of the modern industrial age.

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1   Their recorder—probably an Excelsior phonograph—was provided by the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and brought to Australia by Father Nekes in 1935. Father Worms cut a dozen wax cylinders in Beagle Bay in 1936 and duly forwarded them to the museum. The phonograph seems never to have been used again, probably because all of the cylinders were recorded in 1936. An offer of more cylinders was made by the director of the Phonogramm-Archiv, Dr Marius Schneider, in mid-1937; no action appears to have been taken on this, perhaps initially because of Father Worms's imminent move to Melbourne and, later, due to the war.

Father Worms's Kimberley fieldtrips of the late 1930s were also partly motivated by concerns to set up a new mission in the east Kimberley for the desert peoples, to replace Rockhole near Halls Creek, which had been encountering many difficulties. Thus, his favourable report on the area of Lake Gregory led ultimately to the establishment of the Balgo Mission.

However, Worms was also concerned about the loss of traditional languages and knowledge, and about their preservation:

> The compilation of this list of Aboriginal geographical names used by nine tribes of the Australian Kimberleys, together with etymological and mythological annotations, has a three fold purpose: first to prevent an irretrievable loss of verbal documents at a time when place names have already started to fade out of the memory of the younger natives, especially those living in the coastal regions … Over a hundred names, hitherto unknown, are now rescued from falling into oblivion. (Worms 1944: 284)

Output and major themes

Table 13.1, which slightly revises Table 2 of Nekes and Worms (2006: 36), categorises the published and unpublished writings of Fathers Nekes and Worms according to their main topic. For the sake of completeness, both linguistic and anthropological writings are included. However, this division is somewhat misleading: Worms's anthropology was closely linked to his linguistics and (as we will see) most of his writings combined both fields. Note also that, in some instances, works are listed under more than one topic heading.

Table 13.1 Published and unpublished works by Fathers Hermann Nekes and Ernest Worms

Topic	Published	Unpublished
Grammar	Nekes (1938)	
Lexis and semantics	Worms (1938b, 1938c, 1942b, 1944, 1946, 1957b, 1960c)	Worms (1958b)
Texts (including translations)	Worms (1940, 1949, 1950a, 1950b, 1957c, 1959d)	
Historical	Worms (1941)	
General linguistics (grammar, lexis, texts)	Nekes and Worms (1953); Worms (1953b)	Nekes (1931–47)
Other linguistics	Worms (1958a, 1958c)	

Topic	Published	Unpublished
Religion and intellectual culture	Worms (1938a, 1942a, 1947, 1950a, 1952, 1953a, 1960a, 1963); Worms and Petri (1968); translations: Worms (1972, 1986); Worms and Petri (1998)	
Missiology	Worms (1959a, 1970)	
Art	Worms (1953c, 1954, 1955b, 1957a, 1957d, 1959b, 1959c)	
Material culture	Worms (1950b)	Worms (n.d.)
Mythology	Worms (1957b); see also under 'Texts'	
General anthropology	Worms (1955a, 1960b, 1961)	Worms (1974)

The remainder of this section provides brief discussion of the major themes in Worms's linguistic and anthropological thinking.

Lexis and semantics represented two of Worms's major concerns in linguistics and are dealt with in no fewer than seven published papers. In addition, they play a very prominent role in Nekes and Worms (1953); over half of this work is made up of an alphabetical listing of lexical items in a range of languages of the continent. As will become clear in the discussion below, Worms saw lexicon and semantics as windows into Aboriginal thought. He also believed they provided crucial evidence of diffusion of cultural traits and notions, as also discussed below. Aside from this, the lists of lexical items and the remarks on their meanings provide fascinating information on culturally relevant phenomena that are not dealt with in detail elsewhere in his works—for example, artefacts, such as *laŋgai* ('slowly burning tree, used as fire reservoir') (Nekes and Worms 1953: 644) and *nomolor* ('stern of boat, back of cart, big end of axe-head') (pp. 760, 765), and practices and/or beliefs, such as *djibeṛ* ('presentiment, foreboding of coming event on account of nervous jerks or palpitation of a vein') (p. 473; see further McGregor 2005: 12–13; 2007: 108–9).

About the same number of publications present texts in languages from various parts of the continent—again, with particular focus on the Dampier Land region. Mostly these texts are presented in the original language,[2] which is always identified (although not always correctly). In many instances, the narrator of the text is identified. The Aboriginal language transcriptions are accompanied by interlinear glosses

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2   In a few instances (e.g. Worms and Petri 1998), just the English/German free translations—or summary translations—are provided.

(often somewhat lacking by modern standards) and free translations into English or German (usually separate from the original and interlinear representations); in many cases, they are replete with footnotes providing grammatical and lexical information that repeats information provided elsewhere in their work, as well as a limited amount of elaborating material. As already remarked, the majority of these texts were dictated—hence, their shortness and similarity to written texts and general lack of features characteristic of oral delivery—although, fortunately, a few characteristics of oral delivery are apparent in some texts.

It was the content of the texts (including songs) that most interested Worms, not their linguistic features.[3] Thus, in particular, Worms mined mythological texts for the insights they provide on religious beliefs; at times, he also used their content as evidence in support of his interpretation of Aboriginal prehistory. And sometimes he linked the myths to associated rituals and artefacts (e.g. *tjuringa*). This attention to texts is doubtless an inheritance from late nineteenth-century German ethnography, which held that the essence of a cultural group is inscribed in its mythology, folktales and songs.

Material culture figures but minimally in Worms's writings, although, as mentioned above, it does appear indirectly in wordlists and mythology (see also below on religion). Worms (1950b) presents a number of fire myths in Australian languages and provides discussion of fire-making tools and how they are used. As usual, he enters into fairly extensive discussion of terms for these artefacts. Worms (n.d.) is a 10-minute black-and-white 8 mm film illustrating pressure flaking of quartz spear tips.

Worms's research on rock art did not begin until some 20 years after his arrival in Australia, and may well have been stimulated by contact with Helmut Petri (see above). In 1953−54 and 1960, he undertook field trips to investigate rock art in the Pilbara, northern Kimberley and Northern Territory, funded by two grants from the Wenner-Gren Foundation. The findings of the first of these trips appeared in three articles published in *Anthropos* (Worms 1953c, 1954, 1955b). The second and third of these papers provide fairly detailed descriptions of the art and are illustrated by a number of photographs and drawings of a selection of artworks (see Plate 13.2 for an example). No publication resulted from the second Wenner-Gren grant, though the discussion of Aboriginal art in the first

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3   That is, except their lexical choices, which he deployed in ways discussed above.

chapter of Worms and Petri (1968) draws on his findings. Evidently, Worms spoke to local Aborigines about the art and their interpretations of it (see e.g. Worms 1955b: 547). In the late 1950s, Worms also published two very brief, popularising pieces in magazines (Worms 1957a, 1957d) and two reviews of books on Australian Aboriginal art (Worms 1959b, 1959c).
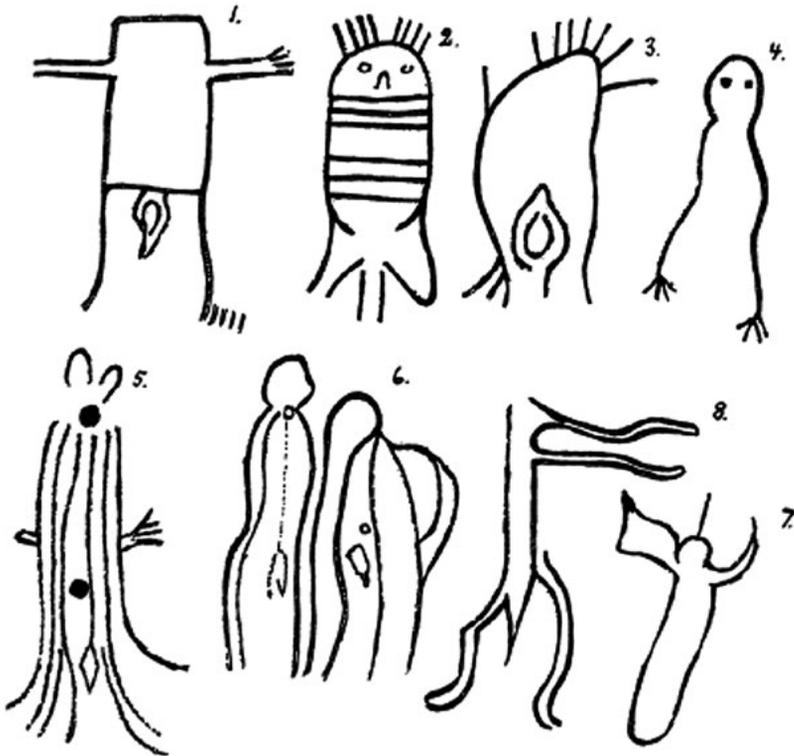

Plate 13.2 Figure D from Worms (1954: 1085).
The caption reads: 'Petroglyphs of Human Beings, Port Hedland, W. A.—2: 61 cm. long. — 3: 41 cm. × 17.5 cm. — 6: 56 cm. × 25.5 cm. — 8: 31 cm. × 24 cm.'
Source: Courtesy of *Anthropos*.

Religion, as already mentioned, was Worms's primary interest; the majority of his publications touch on religion in one way or another and it is the main topic of at least nine of them. Two are general works on religion in Aboriginal Australia. The first was an overview article (Worms 1963). The second was a much more substantial work—Worms's anthropological magnum opus, 'Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen',

which was published in 1968 as volume 5.2 of the series *Die Religionen der Südsee und Australiens* (Worms and Petri 1968). A French translation of the volume was published in 1972; however, it was not until 1986 that an English translation of Worms's contribution appeared (Worms 1986). This was followed a decade later by a revised translation (Worms and Petri 1998). Worms died before he could complete work on 'Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen', and Helmut Petri completed the revision and editing of the manuscript.[4] He added a considerable amount of material to the text, which he distinguished by smaller font. In fact, his contribution was significant enough that the 1998 translation includes Petri as a joint author, at the request of Gisela Petri-Odermann, his widow. Having myself edited *Australian Languages* (Nekes and Worms 1953), I have no doubt that Petri had to do a considerable amount of editorial work to produce a publishable text.

'Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen' covers a range of themes concerning religion and religious thought, all of which are dealt with in previous publications, including mythology; sacred beings ('heroes') and their relation to the concept of god; sacred objects—the material culture of religion (the significance and use of these objects); music, song and dance (including musical instruments and song texts); art; symbolic representation (in sacred objects, art, etc.); the concept of the soul and beliefs about death; and initiation and other rituals (e.g. funerary rituals). Worms's treatment is, overall, quite descriptive and synchronic in orientation, and integrates evidence from his own fieldwork and from the contemporary literature, with which he appears to have been conversant. Nonetheless, the temporal dimension looms large, so that he continually returns to the topic of diffusion, which he attempts to substantiate through his interpretation of Australian Aboriginal linguistics, prehistory and physical anthropology.

'Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen' ranges over the entire continent, including Tasmania, which is dealt with in a separate chapter. Although mindful of the inadequacies of treatments of the religion of Tasmanian Aborigines, Worms felt there was sufficient evidence to conclude that the religious ideas of Tasmanians resembled those of mainlanders in key points, and that the similarities were indicative of an ancient cultural stratum.

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4   It would be interesting to know how much interaction they engaged in during the preparation of the text before Worms's death, and the extent to which this shaped Worms's draft.

Worms's ideas on mission practice are overviewed in some detail in his last publication, also posthumous, Worms (1970), although his ideas on this theme are articulated elsewhere as well (e.g. Worms 1959a).

Some characteristics of Worms's anthropology

Virtually all of Father Worms's anthropological work was tied in one way or another with religion. It is impossible in the scope of this short chapter to provide a comprehensive account and evaluation of Worms's contribution to knowledge about Australian Aboriginal religion. Instead, I will identify and briefly discuss two recurrent themes and issues in Worms's contribution: 1) the role and place of language, which I will cover briefly, since it has already been discussed elsewhere; and 2) diffusion and *Kulturkreislehre*, on which I will provide more details, as this has been discussed less comprehensively in the literature.

The role and place of language

Language played a crucial role in the German anthropological tradition of the late nineteenth century (Kenny 2013: 5). There are two main aspects of this notion: first, from Herder came the idea that cognition is dependent on language; and second, it was considered that mythology, folktales and song constitute the essence of a cultural group. Both of these features, as was seen above, are characteristic of Worms's ethnography, just as they played a central role in the German-inspired Boasian tradition in the United States. Thus, Worms presumed a strong Whorfian stance, as I have observed elsewhere in discussing his linguistics (Nekes and Worms 2006: 18). Indeed, he imbued words with an almost mystical significance:

> Indeed, by an appropriate naming of places the Aboriginal depicts mentally a plastic map of his country and its geographical forms, shows parts of his economy by pointing to the prevalent kinds and regions of vegetation and animal life, reveals the practical mastery of his language and a faithful memory of an archaic vocabulary, and discloses involuntarily his carefully hidden mythology and actual religion by inter weaving natural features of the landscape with totems, heroes, and supernatural beings. (Worms 1944: 284)

Moreover, as already discussed, he recorded the mythology and songs of many of the groups with whom he worked—in many cases, in their traditional language. A number of articles reproduce them in the original language together with interlinear glosses and free translations, and with some explanation and/or discussion.

There is a third aspect of the significance of language to Worms's ethnography, which I have elsewhere referred to as *lexical syndromes* (Nekes and Worms 2006: 20), which I here refer to as *lemes*: a blend of *lexeme* and *meme*, since that is effectively what they are—the lexical correlate of memes. Whether or not this represents an original idea of Worms's or is something he borrowed from others remains to be seen.[5] I have discussed these in some detail in Nekes and Worms (2006: 20–24); however, since they play such a crucial role in Worms's anthropology, some general remarks are in order here.

Lemes are form-meaning correspondences that are recurrent across languages and that are indicative of underlying root forms that reveal, according to Father Worms, insights into the workings of the Aboriginal mind and, ultimately, Aboriginal beliefs and culture. For instance, Worms (1957b; see also Worms and Petri 1998: 8–10) identifies the leme *bag- ~ bug- ~ big-* ('the dead, ghost'), which is manifested, he avers, in a wide range of lexemes across the languages of the continent that concern the domain of ghostly activity (Worms's spellings; sources omitted):

- *baka* 'dead' Darling River, South Australia, New South Wales; *kuka-buk* 'dead' Streaky Bay, South Australia; and *buka-da* Kurnu (New South Wales)
- *biga* 'shade' Yawuru; *pega* Murray River 'ghost'
- *bag-wan* 'to hide' Brabralung (Victoria)
- *puka* 'ghost' Streaky Bay, South Australia
- *baga-djimbiri* 'two heroes' Karajarri
- *bagin* 'bad spirit' Wiradjuri
- *bagu-ṇan* 'ghost of the dead' Bardi, Jabirrjabirr, Nimanburru, Nyulnyul
- *bugan-di* 'walking without tracks' Mangala, Nyikina, Yawuru

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5   Nowhere, as far as I am aware, does Worms actually discuss the concept or attribute it to any source. Schmidt (1919) does not employ any comparable notion, and Brandewie (1990) nowhere alludes to anything like the leme in Schmidt's thinking. Of course, the possibility that he employed it somewhere in his vast corpus of writings cannot be ruled out.

- *buga-di* 'hair dress' Kukatja; *puka-ti* Pitjantjatjara, *poko-ti* Ngalia
- *baka-li* 'power (in vocation) names' Yirrkala
- *buga-mani* 'spirits of deceased, burial ceremony with grave posts' Tiwi. Literally perhaps 'carvings of spirits'—cf. *mani* 'engraving, picture' Kukatja
- *mirrabooka* (*mira-buga*) 'group of stars, Southern Cross; The Primeval Old Man' (Perth)
- *lari-buga* 'initiation ceremony' Karajarri, Yawuru; *lari-big* Bardi, *lari-b* Nyulnyul
- *dil-bag* 'ritual snapping of fingers' Bardi, Jabirrjabirr, Nimanburru, Nyulnyul
- *gan-bag* 'music stick' Jabirrjabirr, Nyulnyul
- *bukwa nepi* 'spirit babies' Cape York
- *būgar-ri* 'dream, myth' Karajarri, Mangala, Nyikina; *būgar* Nimanburru, Nyulnyul; *būgir* Jabirrjabirr, *būar* Bardi, *bura* Jawi
- *ma-būgarin* 'to dream' Jabirrjabirr, Nyikina, Nimanburru, Nyulnyul, Yawuru; *būgari mana* Karajarri
- *ga-buguri* 'dreaming' Kukatja
- *bugaru* 'mythical time' Malyangapa (New South Wales), *pekere* 'dreamtime' Tangana [possibly Tanganekald, South Australia]
- *baguri-ji* 'I dream' Gumbaynggir; *baguri-nj* 'initiation ceremony' Gumbaynggir
- *būgari-gura* 'native law' Yawuru, Karajarri
- *bugerum* 'big bullroarer' Yakara (New South Wales).

There are many problems with Worms's implementation of the notion of the leme, which we need not go into in detail about here (for more detailed discussion, see Nekes and Worms 2006: 21–3). Suffice it to observe the following: Worms's implementation of the notion of leme is almost completely lacking in constraint, the only apparent constraint being that the lexemes must apparently come from Australian languages— otherwise, there would be no reason not to include, for instance, *bogey* (man) ('devil, ghost'; English, nineteenth century) and *bogle* ('phantom, goblin'; Scots English, sixteenth century) as instances of the leme. The fact that the lemes are—like *bag- ~ bug- ~ big-* ('the dead, ghost')—very short forms, often consonant–vowel–consonant, ensures that there is a high probability of false identifications. Furthermore, Worms frequently

fails to systematically distinguish between segments that are phonemic in particular languages—which is especially the case for the apical tap/ trill and apical glide rhotics, which are phonemic in most Aboriginal languages—adding to the probability of false identifications.

Worms employed lemes in his anthropology in a range of ways, including to argue (never very convincingly) for:

- directionality of borrowing/diffusion of words
- directionality of borrowing/diffusion of cultural items, material and cognitive
- directionality of movement of peoples
- fundamental cultural beliefs
- the significance of places and myths (including their 'heroes', etc.)
- the idea that there are just a few *demas* ('supreme beings') across the continent.

In fact, it is often unclear what the leme is imagined to motivate and/ or precisely how it motivates a particular claim. Consider, for instance: 'But the etymology of Maŋulagura, the mythological name of Wamerana, gives us a satisfactory insight into the significance of the sacred place' (Worms 1954: 1079). The 'etymology' provided on the following page indicates that Maŋulagura means 'The Woman's' or 'The Place of the Woman', but no information is provided about the relation of the site to women, so the putative etymology falls far short of providing an insight into the significance of the place.

Diffusion and *Kulturkreislehre*

The second major influence on Worms's thought comes from the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century German–Austrian anthropological theory of *Kulturkreis* ('culture circles'). As we have already seen, his teachers and mentors were evidently strongly versed in and influenced by this theory, especially through Schmidt and Koppers. Culture circle theory and diffusion permeate Worms's linguistic and anthropological thinking, even though, as far as I am aware, Worms does not specifically mention the theory by name anywhere in his academic

writings; nor, I think, does he ever use the word diffusion.[6] Other components of Father Schmidt's thinking about religion and culture circles are also evident in Father Worms's writings; again, these ideas are not always attributed to Schmidt.

Culture circle theory was developed by Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), and subsequently refined by Fritz Graebner (1877–1934) and Father Wilhelm Schmidt. The basic tenet is that cultural traits spread out from a centre of origin via diffusion of ideas and/or of cultural groups upholding those ideas. Schmidt developed the theory further, adding the notion of culture complex, an entity comprising various features embracing all cultural domains (material culture, economy, social life, religion, etc.) that form functionally interrelated sets of cultural traits. Culture complexes develop from a centre of origin and may diffuse over large areas of the world.

The former component, diffusion, is perhaps the more immediately obvious in Worms's writings, both linguistic and anthropological. However, culture complexes are more implicit, though discernible to some degree—in particular, Worms evidently presumes that sets of interconnected phenomena are what primarily spread as packages.

Crucial to the culture circle theory is the notion that ethnology is history: 'Ethnology is history or it is nothing', according to Schmidt (cited in Brandewie 1990: 99). This idea is strong in Worms's anthropology; the historical dimension is ever present in the synchronic facts, which are consistently interpreted diachronically. As usual, this is mirrored in his linguistics; as I have remarked elsewhere (Nekes and Worms 2006: 19), Nekes and Worms consistently confused synchronic and diachronic dimensions in their linguistics—and perhaps believed it artificial to separate them. And, although in many places in their writings they used temporal terms, apparently they did not always imbue them with temporal significance.

Diffusion is the primary historical mechanism that Worms alluded to, though it is often unclear whether he is talking about diffusion of ideas or movement of people; these are also often confused in his works. Where he apparently talks as though ideas have diffused, it is not always clear that this is not a consequence of movement of the people holding the

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6   The only publication of Worms's that I am aware of (thanks to Ganter, Chapter 14, this volume) that mentions 'culture circles' explicitly is a newspaper report (Worms 1947).

ideas, and in places migration is explicitly mentioned as the vector for diffusion of ideas. Indeed, one gets little sense of internal developments within a culture (complex) or language (or language family). Thus, at times, he speaks of strata of Aboriginal languages or peoples as though some of the contemporary languages or societies have remained virtually unchanged—in both geography and their systems. This reading prevails in various places even though one finds a number of explicit statements to the contrary.

One such original stratum was the 'pygmoid' Tasmanian Negroid population, which, according to Worms, previously inhabited the entire continent. Contemporary remnants of this group are the Cairns rainforest people in Queensland (Worms and Petri 1998: 95). Mythological references to earlier 'races' of small stature in the western Kimberley, northern Central Australia and western Arnhem Land are taken as evidence supporting the original spread of these people. A later mainland Australoid population subsequently migrated into Australia, Worms maintained, taking over most geographical regions. The influence of Schmidt's notion that pygmies represent the ethnographically oldest people of the world (Brandewie 1990: 69), and were indeed the oldest group in Australia (p. 117), is obvious.

Another obvious influence from Schmidt concerns the earliest religion, which Schmidt argued in his 12-volume work on religions of the world was monotheistic—'primitive monotheism'—and that south-east Australians had a notion of a highest being. In Worms's writings of the 1940s (e.g. 1947) and 1950s (e.g. 1950a: 642), we find expression of this notion. By the time of 'Australische Eingeborenen-Religionen', however, Worms had moderated his views—or perhaps Petri moderated them for him. Thus, according to Worms and Petri (1998: 126), there is insufficient evidence for belief in a single highest god among mainland Aboriginal cultures. At best, there is evidence for belief in *demas*, or sublime beings. Belief in a single highest god may, Worms admits, have been present in Tasmania, but the evidence is insufficient to be certain.

If diffusion is so important, its direction immediately emerges as a concern—and Worms invariably identifies directionality. How does he motivate it? Sometimes it is simply stated and left unargued. In some instances, directionality follows from presumed prehistoric population movements—for instance, the migration of a 'powerful' group, the Aranda, who (it is claimed) moved down from Papua New Guinea to Central Australia and presumably represented a cultural complex.

In some instances, claims by Aboriginal people are used to motivate directionality. Evidently, Worms sometimes asked his consultants where particular phenomena came from—for example, fire-making artefacts (Worms 1950b). In some instances, mythological evidence was employed; this could be in the form of information contained in a myth or evidence of the spread of myths based on contemporary knowledge. Recent history in a few cases provided evidence, as in the case of diffusion of sections and section terms into Dampier Land, where both historical records and local knowledge of Aboriginal people indicate that these social categories and the terms for them are recent, and replace a former generation moiety system. Succession of styles in overlays in some rock art is interpreted as evidence for directionality of movement of styles and/or people, where some of the overlaying styles are limited in geographical distribution.

In some cases, Worms adduces linguistic evidence in support of directionality of diffusion. In no instance does this evidence make a convincing argument. Consistent with the idea that sets of cultural and linguistic phenomena diffuse together as a bundle, Worms presumes that the direction of borrowing of lexical items is consistently unidirectional, that lexical items are always borrowed in one direction and that this direction is also consistent with the direction of borrowing of corresponding cultural notions, artefacts, and so forth. Worms frequently uses these ideas in making his arguments, and in refuting counterclaims. Thus, he critiques Davidson (1947) on the directionality of diffusion of some fire-making artefacts on the grounds that this direction goes counter to the direction of borrowing of the terms for the artefacts.

Certainly, etymologies can be used to support diffusion of cultural phenomena, assuming that it can be shown that a term for a cultural notion or artefact was borrowed in a particular direction. But Worms never produces such evidence. His etymologies do not support directionality or, if they do, they are of items not directly relevant to the diffused phenomena, or the alleged 'etymologies' are in reality lemes, not etymologies.

As already mentioned, Worms showed little interest in social anthropology. The closest he comes to this theme is in his treatment of social divisions (moieties, sections and subsections) and, to a lesser extent, kinship. His treatment of these themes, however, largely concerns diffusion, and concerns of social organisation and interpersonal interaction are barely touched on. As mentioned above, Worms realised that sections were a relatively new introduction to the Dampier Land region and that they

had begun to make inroads into the peninsula only in the early decades of the twentieth century, when they began replacing an earlier generation moiety system. The ongoing diffusion of the section system could hardly have escaped him and was obvious from statements from Aboriginal people themselves. In typical fashion, Worms put the centre of diffusion in Central Australia—in particular, the Arrernte people—and proposed that it emanated from there outwards to the southern Kimberley region and ultimately Dampier Land (Worms 1950b: 156–7).

Worms also discussed the diffusion of subsections and used lemes to support his story of their diffusion (Worms and Petri 1998: 180–1). In particular, he claimed that the 16 terms for the eight subsections (two terms, one male, one female, for each subsection) in Kukatja represented 12 words for 'human being'. Where the figure of 12 comes from is not explained and is inconsistent with the data he presents; nor does Worms say what the 12 words for 'human being' actually are or comment on their provenance. He correctly observed that terms for the males of subsections begin with the palatal stop while those for females begin with a nasal, and divided each of the 16 terms into two components, the first of which is a term meaning either 'man' or 'woman' (not 'human being'!). One infers that Worms sees the subsection terms as composites of pairs of lexical items meaning 'human being' and 'man'/'woman', and that these exemplify the leme 'human being'. Worms's excursus into this domain is a clear illustration of how badly one can be misled by lemes. There may be formal similarities between the components Worms identifies and terms for 'human being'. However, his proposed leme is not very convincing and has little explanatory adequacy; nor does Worms's discussion provide any insights into the diffusion of subsections or terms for them. More obvious and plausible correspondences are between initial syllables of the subsection terms in Kukatja (and a number of nearby languages) and gender prefixes in some languages of the Victoria River district, and the remainders with section terms from two different sets, as shown by Patrick McConvell (1985a, 1985b).

I wind up this discussion with an example of one of Worms's better arguments for directionality, albeit one that still falls short of being convincing. Worms (1950b: 152) uses the words of a Yawuru fire-making song to support the argument that the fire saw was borrowed from the south, and ultimately came from Central Australia and Papua New Guinea. Given the song words are from Aranda, the song may reasonably be presumed to originate there also, though whether or not

it was contemporary with the development of the fire saw is impossible to say. If not, and the song developed much later than the implement itself—as would seem likely—it would be irrelevant to the direction of diffusion of the fire saw. And, surprisingly, Worms does not discuss the word for 'fire saw'; it seems more plausible to associate the direction of borrowing of the lexeme with that of the item than with the direction of borrowing of an associated song.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have given an overview of Father Worms's contribution to Australian Aboriginal anthropology. There are many gaps in the story presented and further research is needed on a number of issues. I single out two of these as particularly important. First, what was the nature of the intellectual background of and influences on Father Worms? In particular, we need to know more details on what was taught at the Limburg Seminary, both by Father Nekes and by Worms's other teachers. Father Nekes still appears to me as a rather shadowy figure in the background (Nekes and Worms 2006: 11–12), and it would be useful to gain a clearer idea of his linguistic and anthropological thought and the influences on these from Schmidt, Koppers and others. Ganter (Chapter 14, this volume) provides some relevant information in this direction, though many details need to be filled in. In addition, we need to know more about Worms's interaction with Helmut Petri and his influence on Worms's thinking.

Second, what was the relationship of Worms's anthropology to mainstream Australian anthropology of the time, and Worms's relations with other Australianist anthropologists? Worms evidently read widely in the Australian anthropological literature and was familiar with relevant work, particularly in religion; however, the impact of his ideas on Australianist anthropology and of Australianist anthropology on his thinking remains somewhat uncertain. We know that personal relations with Professor A. P. Elkin were not always good and that Worms blamed Elkin—not entirely without justification, though in fact Elkin was right that the manuscript was really unpublishable—for problems in publishing *Australian Languages*. On the other hand, a number of his contemporaries were more favourably disposed to Worms. Norman B. Tindale (1974) dedicated his major work to Father Worms: 'To the memory of Father Ernest A. Worms whose active encouragement, beginning in the year 1952, led to the

preparation of this work in its present form.' And W. E. H. Stanner had this to say in his 1967 address at the Australian Student Christian Movement conference in Canberra:

> [The Aboriginal religious mentality] is still only variably appreciated by Christian missionaries to the Aborigines—by some, not at all; by others, very sensitively understood. I can think of no one whose insight and empathy could compare with, let alone exceed, that of the late Fr. Worms. (Worms and Petri 1998: xi)

Regardless of Worms's difficult personal relations with Elkin, I think it is fair to say that the latter was not nearly as dismissive of Worms's anthropological work as R. M. W. Dixon was of his linguistic work, especially on Dyirbal (see Dixon 1972: 365–6; 1977: 510).

I conclude with my own evaluation of Worms's contribution to Australianist anthropology. To begin with, many of his diffusionist notions are interesting, though they lack clarity (e.g. movement of what exactly?) and have little evidential basis. Specifically, the linguistic evidence he cites to substantiate his proposals is completely unconvincing. The lemes he employs are almost completely lacking in constraint. Although some/many/all may have some viability, there is no compelling reason to believe they do, and there is no evidence that they show anything significant or unique about Aboriginal modes of thought. The person leme in subsection terms is a case in point.

The main value of Worms's anthropological research is probably descriptive and documentary. Some of the mythological materials he gathered, especially in Dampier Land and nearby areas, may be important, especially given the current state of the languages and (presumably) current knowledge of traditional mythology and culture. But, in many cases, the usefulness of this material is reduced by the lack of association with particular places. As remarked above, unlike the typical missionary, Worms's contact with Aboriginal groups was usually quite brief; thus, his descriptions and documentations of both religion and languages lack depth compared with those of missionaries such as Carl Strehlow. My own feeling is that Worms's and Nekes's contribution to Aboriginal linguistics is more significant than Worms's contribution to Aboriginal anthropology.

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