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## The subtle ontology of power

A number of factors facilitated the grafting of missions, with their alien culture and rigid disciplines, onto Indigenous communities. The violence and danger of the frontier society pushed Indigenous people towards missions, but they were also pulled by the material advantages offered by the sheer endless supplies of the missions. Moreover, the interior logic of the missions was decipherable through a shared ontology of power.

Unlike most other settlers, missionaries openly engaged with the supernatural and promised new ways of harnessing and directing preternatural forces. Indigenous people were always interested in new ways of mastering the world they inhabited and often imported new songs, objects and ideas into their cultural registers. Christian prayer, blessings and worship, with altar boys and priests dressed for a carefully orchestrated ceremony, were easily intelligible to peoples already used to staged rituals and incantations in an attempt to influence the supra-material world. Persons who undertook to exert power over the non-material world by deciphering signs and dreams or by casting powerful words were highly respected. Missionaries with the capacity of interpreting the signs of nature, such as comets, and of invoking supernatural help through prayer were in the category of such powerful people. The paper-based information technology from which their knowledge arose was also of great interest. Catholic missionaries had a particularly impressive arsenal of rituals, ideas and objects to exert power over the natural world. They were more likely than Protestants to invoke auspicious numbers and dates, and possessed ritual objects invested with immanent powers.

The missionary convention of referring to each other by symbolic kinship terms (Father, Brother, Sister, Mother) also sits very well with the kinship-based forms of address that traditional societies generally prefer over given names. The missionaries included outsiders in their family of Christ with baptism as a form of adoption signalled by the bestowal of a name.

Local diplomats pursued their own agendas in trying to penetrate and harness this new world of meaning and influence. Baptismal classes and admission to Holy Communion rendered special access to rituals and teaching in a new order that devalued age as a marker of respect. The first baptised candidates on each mission were given a particularly grand welcome to the Christian family, and missionaries staked high hopes on 'first fruit' to work like leavening in the Indigenous society. Finally, mutual cultural incomprehension was softened through Christian men from the Pacific Rim bound into Indigenous society by marriage. Native evangelists, including those imported from the Pacific, played an enormously important role in preparing a fertile soil for missions that is generally underplayed in mission histories that tend to focus on the pioneering missionary figure labouring in isolation.

## Divine intervention and wonders

Miracles and wonders accompanied the Catholic missionaries to augur well for their plans. Among Protestants, the appeal to divine intervention is much less common, though a comment by the Moravian Adolf **Hartmann** invoking 'a higher hand' hints at the possibility.<sup>1</sup>

### *Auspicious numbers*

One of the few supernatural staples shared by Catholics and Protestants is the number 12 as an auspicious number of men to launch an institution. Twelve candidates commenced the **Gossner Mission Society** and 12 candidates commenced the **Hermannsbürger Missionsgesellschaft** (HMG), 12 men were sent to form **Zion Hill**, Bishop Gibney required

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1 In a letter to his family in 1870, Hartmann mentioned that the Franco–Prussian war was won by a higher hand for the Prussians (Protestants). Felicity Jensz, 'Everywhere at home, everywhere a stranger: The communities of the Moravian missionary Mary (Polly) Hartmann', in Regina Ganter and Pat Grimshaw (eds), *Reading the Lives of White Mission Women*, *Journal of Australian Studies* 39.1 (2015): 20–31.

a minimum of 12 staff to conduct the Kimberley mission, the first adults to be baptised at **Beagle Bay** numbered 12, and 12 at Lake **Killalpaninna**, and at New Uniya the Jesuits made room for 12 couples as colonists. Biblical numerology is also woven into an unlikely historical account by Fr Georg Walter, who claimed that the Benedictines wandered in the Western Australian wilderness for 40 days before they settled at New Norcia.<sup>2</sup>

### *Reading the signs*

Dom Salvado, in the quest for a foundation at New Norcia, saw many signs of divine providence. As the food for the working party was running low in 1846, Salvado's dog started hunting and brought back kangaroos. 'Who can fail to see a sign of Divine Providence here?'<sup>3</sup> They drove a flock of sheep through a stretch of land that contained poisonous weeds without losing a single animal, and again Salvado saw the miracle in it. But the key incident in the founding narrative of New Norcia is the story of an icon that Vincent Pallotti, the founder of the Pallottine mission society and later Saint, had given Serra and Salvado as a blessing for the good fortune of the mission. The icon played precisely that role for the Benedictines when a bushfire threatened New Norcia mission during their first harvest. All efforts to keep the fire in check were in vain, until Salvado seized the image of Mother Mary and advanced in prayer against the fire. The wind changed and the fire receded. New Norcia had arrived in the landscape of miracles. Such an incident could not have failed to impress Indigenous people who heard about the strength of conviction with which Salvado invested this ritual object with power over natural forces.

Divine providence was sometimes invoked to explain fortuitous or unfortunate circumstances. In Fr Strele's history, Fr Duncan McNab visited the **Austrian Jesuits** at Sevenhill in 1881 just as they were deliberating on a suitable site for a northern mission, 'led by divine

2 Georg Walter, *Australien: Land, Leute, Mission*, Limburg, 1928, p. 119.

3 Rosendo Salvado, *Memorie Storiche dell' Australia, Particolarmente della Missione Benedettina di Nuova Norcia*, S. Congreg. de Propaganda Fide, Rome, 1851; translated E.J. Stormon, *The Salvado Memoirs: Historical Memoirs of Australia and Particularly of the Benedictine Mission of New Norcia and of the Habits and Customs of the Australian Natives*, University of Western Australia Press, Nedlands, 1977, pp. 22, 59.

providence'.<sup>4</sup> Fr Nicholas **Emo** also felt divine forces at work in times of trouble. In the process of liquidating the Beagle Bay mission assets, against protests from the Trappists, he found a buyer in Broome for the statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, but by the time he reached Broome this 'rich Japanese lady' had died. 'Evidently there is a superior force that, come what may, prevents the liquidation [of the mission] and which, joined to the piety of our Blacks, has convinced me that God is watching over their lot.' When Bishop Gibney heard about the trouble at Beagle Bay, he announced his visit to the far north, but Emo failed to pick him up and afterwards had much explaining to do. Emo described how he waited for four days at sea to reconnoitre with the passenger ship carrying the bishop, but inexplicably, guided no doubt by an invisible hand, failed to meet the ship.<sup>5</sup> Some years later on his first voyage out of Broome on the *San Salvador* on 13 May 1906, Emo and Abbot Torres called in at Beagle Bay where the abbot went to visit the missionaries, with whom Emo had a strained relationship at that moment. Emo remained on board to spend his first night on the *San Salvador*, and that night he felt sure that 'the ship is blessed'.<sup>6</sup>

'Divine Providence' might also explain decisions that could meet with criticism. Fr **Gsell**, who became known as the 'Bishop with the 150 wives', attributed his policy of purchasing marriage rights of the mission girls not to the prior Jesuit example, but explained that 'divine providence set us on the right track'.<sup>7</sup> Divine intervention was also invoked to laud the minimisation of disaster. Soon after his arrival in Darwin, Fr Gsell had an accident in a horse-drawn carriage, which ended up with its four wheels in the air. Gsell noted that this happened on the Feast of our Lady of Miracles, 'and we were quite unhurt'.<sup>8</sup>

Reading such signs is a delicate business. The Catholic missionaries could have read many inauspicious signs telling them to abandon their plans for missions, but chose to ignore them. The 1846 shipwreck of the *Heroine*

4 Anthony Strele, 'History of the Mission to the Aborigines in the part of Australia which is called Northern Territory', translated from Latin by F.J. Dennett SJ, ca 1895, Archives of the Society of Jesus, Hawthorn.

5 Emo to Sept Fons, 25 Nov 1900 (36 pages) continued in January 1901, in Brigida Nailon, *Emo and San Salvador*, 2 vols, Brigidine Sisters, Echuca, 2005, Vol. 1, pp. 148–81.

6 Emo to Sept Fons, 25 November 1900, in Nailon, *Emo*.

7 F.X. Gsell (n.d., ca 1925) Report about Bathurst Island Mission, 16 pages, in Bathurst Island Mission Reports 1910–1915, A431, 1951/1294, barcode 66600, National Archives of Australia (NAA).

8 F.X. Gsell, *The Bishop with 150 Wives: Fifty Years as a Missionary*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1956, p. 19.

with Fr Angelo Confalonieri's party in Torres Strait could have been enough warning against a northern outreach. Similarly, during Bishop Gibney's first exploratory journey around Dampier Peninsula in 1890, the party became bogged in the swamp several times, Fr Ambrose had debilitating attacks of fever and diarrhoea and, just as they were fixing on the mission site at Beagle Bay, Ambrose had a close encounter with a snake and the bishop was retching. Ambrose had serious misgivings about the venture, but Gibney was reading different signs.

The natural environment unleashed its own wonders, which could be loaded with meaning. When the Passionists assembled in Sydney in 1843, planning to head for Moreton Bay, a great and striking comet pointed them to 'the precise location' of their future mission at **Stradbroke Island**, as Fr Vaccari observed. And on the **Daly River** missions, just before Christmas 1895, 'a comet was seen yesterday in the west'.<sup>9</sup> Previous Christmas tidings had been less auspicious. On Saint Nicholas Day of 1895, the Daly River mission community witnessed the frightening phenomenon of a fireball, a rare kind of lighting strike, and two days before Christmas of 1891, 'one of the goats gave birth to a monster with only one eye, and that in the middle of the forehead!'<sup>10</sup> One might wonder what the Indigenous mission residents made of the monster birth.

### *Propitious dates*

Catholics were careful to choose an auspicious date for a beginning. The name day of Salvado appears twice in the selection of a site for New Norcia: on 1 March 1846, at a site called Badji Badji near the Bolgart farmhouse; and on 1 March 1847, when the foundation stone for the first hut was ceremoniously laid on top of a St Benedict medal at the current site. The Jesuits occupied their first site on the Daly River on 1 October 1886, the Feast of the Holy Rosary, and named it the Queen of the Holy Rosary Station. This proved unexpectedly auspicious shortly afterwards when a Tyrolean benefactor in the United States donated \$1,000 on the condition that a church should be dedicated to the Holy Rosary.<sup>11</sup> Sacred Heart mission at Serpentine Lagoon was supposed to

<sup>9</sup> Daly River Mission Diary (DRM), 22 December 1895, Archives of the Society of Jesus, Hawthorn.

<sup>10</sup> DRM, 22 December 1891.

<sup>11</sup> Anton Strele, *Annual Letters from the Jesuit Mission in North Australia 1886–1889*, translated by F.J. Dennett SJ, Archives of the Society of Jesus, Hawthorn, 1887.

be formed on the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1889, but the superior Fr Strele arrived back from Europe too late. In 1891, the Jesuits abandoned Sacred Heart station in favour of St Joseph's mission at New Uniya 'by a just judgement, according to the word of the Lord, on the feast day of St. Francis Xavier' (one of the founders of the Jesuit order).<sup>12</sup>

Since the Catholic calendar is frequently double-booked with feast days, it was not too difficult to find a meaningful date. Bishop Gibney re-erected the **Disaster Bay** mission abandoned by Duncan McNab on 16 July 1890, the day of Our Lady of Mt Carmel, as if the local place name Caromel (as heard by Gibney)<sup>13</sup> had already anticipated it. On the Feast of St Bernard, 20 August 1890, Gibney erected the Beagle Bay mission and dedicated it to St Bernard, principal patron of the Trappists. On the Feast of Assumption of Our Lady, 15 August 1896, the Trappists baptised their first 12 converts and, on the Feast of Assumption, 15 August 1918, the Pallottines dedicated their new church at Beagle Bay. On the Feast of the Sacred Heart in 1911, the first prefabricated cottage at Bathurst Island was ready to be occupied by Gsell. On the feast of Christ the King in 1932, Raible blessed the new church at Lombadina.

Fr Emo was not at liberty to choose an auspicious date on which to take on **Lombadina** mission, previously run as a secular mission – it occurred on 1 January 1911 – but he died in the early hours of 8 March 1915, the Feast of St John of God, an adventurous Spanish martyr, perhaps very similar to himself. The story of his death, too, is surrounded with hints of divine inspiration as it is claimed that Fr Droste at Beagle Bay 'felt an uncanny impulse to go to Lombadina' just as Emo lay dying,<sup>14</sup> although the mission diary reveals that the Indigenous couple temporarily placed in charge of Lombadina sent word to Droste at Beagle Bay.<sup>15</sup>

12 The feast day of St Francis Xavier is on 3 December, whereas Strele's 1891 letter describes the duration of the Sacred Heart mission as October 1882 to November 1891. The mission diary has removals beginning in late September. Strele, *Annual Letters 1891*.

13 Caromel as written by Gibney possibly designates a ritual site, similar to a word Gibney recorded for Beagle Bay, Kirmel, and possibly also related to the Karamala festival observed on the Daly River in the 1890s, also spelled Caramal.

14 John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*, Albatross Books, Sutherland, NSW, 1990, p. 445.

15 **Droste diary**, 1–12 March 1915, in Droste, Wilhelm (Pater), P1 Nr 17, Zentralarchiv der Pallottinerprovinz (ZAPP).

## Potent rituals

The primary interior purpose of mission was to dispense divine life, or grace. For this task, the rituals of liturgy, prayer, blessings, transubstantiation and the sacraments including the Eucharist (holy communion or the Lord's Supper) were fundamentally important, and missionaries strained to share the inner secrets of these rituals. The outward signs of the rituals were easy enough to decipher. They required appropriate spaces and were held at meaningful times dictated by the hour of the day (evening prayer), the day of the week (Sunday prayer), the week of the year (with events like Pentecost as a fixed point) or the year of emergence of an institution (jubilees). In such rituals, people occupied roles according to their level of initiation, garbed in meaningful attire loaded with symbolism, obeying protocols for progression, behaviour and spatial arrangements with women on one side, men on the other, priests at the front. The requisite ritual objects were themselves invested with immanent signification and were to be treated with respect – the crucifix, the rosary, the Bible, the holy host (prosporon), the Eucharistic wine, the monstrance and the tabernacle. Besides the Eucharist and baptism, also celebrated by Protestants, the Catholic Church offers the holy sacraments of penance, confirmation, ordination, extreme unction and matrimony. (Although missionaries required a licence from the state to perform legal marriages.) The Catholic cosmology is a conglomerate of mystical and social ideas containing heaven, hell and purgatory, angels, saints and the holy trinity, Mother Mary and the Pope, bishops and cardinals, sins and cardinal sins, blaspheming and blessing, Ten Commandments and house rules. If one tried to systematise this ontology with oral history methods, by interviewing the oldest members of a community, as Pastor Georg **Reuther** did at Killalpaninna, one might face an intellectual quagmire in which the anecdotes are intelligible enough but the overarching ontological structure is elusive.

### Baptism

Baptism was the key performance indicator in the quality framework of all mission societies. It was the ritual admittance to the family of Christ, a public declaration of conversion, and therefore the fulfilment of the aim of heathen mission. The standards for admission varied greatly between mission societies, and the Reformed missions became increasingly selective

in the nineteenth century, with elaborate instructions to prepare children for baptism and exacting standards for recognition as Christian converts for adults. A monogamous lifestyle became an absolute prerequisite and therefore a great obstacle for Indigenous people. Other provisos might include building a house, avoiding heathen rituals or regularly attending Sunday service and instructional gatherings. Baptism has some intrinsically ecumenical characteristics, easily understood across cultures. It is a public ritual, witnessed by appointed guardians, that revolves around the bestowal of a name to signify belonging. Such a story occurs in one of the contact narratives preserved by the Milingimbi Language Centre in Arnhem Land, the story of 'The Last Visit of the Macassans'. The narrator Djawa tells how in his youth he and his uncle encountered a Macassan captain who was on his last journey to Elcho Island (the 1906/07 season). The captain gave Djawa the Macassan name of Mangalai (a name that occurs in that captain's family), signifying a relationship, and asked him to make his new name public to everyone.<sup>16</sup> One might suspect that this story is not so much about the Macassans visiting for the last time, but about a deep connectedness between Yolngu and Macassans. Precisely such stories were 'turned in' (became hidden) with the arrival of Christian missionaries soon after the Macassan contact period.

There are many early missionary accounts of the individual baptism of Indigenous people (for example, the deathbed baptism of young 'Nanny' at Wellington Valley in July 1839). Such baptisms need not signal conversion to a different faith. The bestowal of a name to signify relationship fitted in very well with Indigenous expectations of the assimilation of strangers, and Indigenous people may have sought to create a fabric of family connections through the acceptance of such names. In Sydney in the 1830s, Bishop Polding observed:

Oftentimes we have the happiness of seeing fathers bring to us, at Sydney, their children that they may receive a name – it is thus they signify baptism. We grant, without difficulty, this favour whenever a priest resides in the territory which the tribe inhabits, and we give a certificate which is to be presented to the missionary in order that he may watch over the regenerated infant.<sup>17</sup>

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16 Regina Ganter with Julia Martinez and Gary Lee, *Mixed Relations: Asian–Aboriginal Contact in North Australia*, University of Western Australian Publishing, Crawley, 2006, p. 30.

17 Polding in Sydney to Central Council of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons, 10 January 1840, in Osmund Thorpe, *First Catholic Mission to the Australian Aborigines*, Pellegrini & Co., Sydney, 1950, pp. 187–88.

The Fathers on their part also gave a profound meaning to this bestowal of names, so the ritual of baptism created a classical common ground on which the successful meeting of strangers could take place, and involved, as American historian Richard White has suggested, a process of mutual invention.<sup>18</sup>

The first voluntary baptism was the point when a mission became successful. It usually opened the gates to a community and the churches considered it the essential threshold. At Moreton Bay, the early attempts at Zion Hill, Stradbroke Island and **Bethesda** were all considered failures because they did not result in a single baptism. Indeed, the opinion that it was actually impossible to convert Australian Aborigines became widespread even among Lutheran pastors, until the Moravians in Victoria proved otherwise.

In August 1860, on the occasion of the consecration of the mission chapel, the Moravians at **Ebenezer**, a mission formed only in 1859, baptised Nathanael Pepper in the presence of more than 150 people. In 1865, Phillip and Nathanael Pepper, both baptised and married to brides selected by the missionaries, became paid missionary assistants. Ebenezer's early success, unparalleled elsewhere, was much praised and at the same time evoked criticism of those other Australian missions that had less to boast. Pastor Spieseke at Ebenezer tried to deflect: 'the Lord has given us favour in the sight of men, so that I think they sometimes make too much of us and our poor endeavours'.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the outstanding success of Ebenezer had probably less to do with the capability of its missionaries and more with lucky circumstances, and raises the question of Pepper's motivation, to which Chapter 5 returns.

A degree of denominational competition spawned the break through the baptismal sound barrier. That breakthrough came during the rush to the interior described in Chapter 2. John Green at Corranderk claimed William Barak as the first Victorian Aboriginal convert for the Church of England in 1865, and followed up with two more in 1866. Hard on his heels was the Moravian Friedrich **Hagenauer** with his first fruit James Mathew Fitchet at **Ramahyuck** before a 200-strong gathering in

18 Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991.

19 Spieseke, November 1863, Mission Station, Wimmera – Extracts from *Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren*, compiled by C.W. Schooling, ca 1975, MS 9896, State Library of Victoria.

March 1866, on the occasion of the consecration of the church, greatly lauded in the mission newsletters and the local press. In the same year, the Austrian Jesuits at Sevenhill, who planned to enter into heathen mission further north, baptised several Aborigines to assist them in their desire.<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, Hagenauer at Ramahyuck was able to record another success, with the first two Christian weddings in July 1867, again before a large crowd including 200 white visitors. The publicity surrounding these events was a win-win strategy: for Indigenous persons, being at the centre of a public spectacle was surely some incentive to make a commitment. By 1879, 60 per cent of the mixed-descent residents at the **Lake Condah** Church Mission Society (CMS) mission under the charge of Moravian missionary Stähle were already baptised.<sup>21</sup>

The Lutherans remained more cautious in admitting candidates to baptism. At Cooper's Creek (Killalpaninna), the missionaries said that they hesitated with baptisms because in the course of their work on the Dieri language they found it difficult to adequately translate key religious concepts, like grace and sin. They took care to strike an accommodation between Indigenous and European naming conventions, with a preference for Christian personal names that worked in English and German. Their first 12 candidates were baptised in 1879, including Benjamin Dalkilina and Luise, Benjamin's brother Johannes Pingilina and Clara, Elias Palkilina and Beate, Joseph Diltjilina, Henry Tipilina, Gottfried Yildimirina and Sarah, the disabled Derelina and the young bachelor Diwana, who did not receive a name ending in *lina* because he was not yet *materi* (full-bearded). Later, Pastor Johann Flierl constructed names like Nathanael Nimpilina for a man who had fled from frontier violence in Queensland, or Timotheus Maltilina, a person of mixed descent, with *multi-* expressing gentleness.<sup>22</sup>

Lutheran missionaries were instructed to report the names of the newly baptised and to describe the ceremony in detail,<sup>23</sup> with a view to reporting in the mission newsletters, because then, as now, grassroots fundraising

20 G.J. O'Kelly, 'The Jesuit Mission Stations in the Northern Territory 1882–1899', Honours thesis, Monash University, 1967, p. 2.

21 C.A. Meyer at Tanunda, Report to Pastor Herlitz, 8 July 1878, Biographical Collection, Meyer, C.A., Lutheran Archives Australia (LAA).

22 Susanne Froehlich (ed.), *Als Pioniermissionar in das ferne Neu Guinea: Johann Flierls Lebenserinnerungen*, 2 vols, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2015, passim.

23 Pastor Rechner to Flierl II, 8 December 1886, Immanuel Synod, Mission Committee, Correspondence book of Pastor GJ Rechner, 1886–1892, LAA.

greatly relied on the reporting of success. The first seven baptisms at **Hermannsburg** took place in 1887 and, by 1893, Hermannsburg registered 25 baptised Christians, mostly from the mission school. They were allowed to choose from a range of suitable baptismal names, so that they could understand their meaning, such as archangel Michael or the 'good Lutheran name' Martin.<sup>24</sup>

The Austrian Jesuits on the Daly, on the other hand, started off by giving local people names like Walpurga, Burgina, Hildegard, Joachim, Dagobert, Waldemar or Kunigunda.<sup>25</sup> Such Germanic names could hardly have been decipherable or even pronounceable to the Indigenous people. Still, they were perhaps an improvement on some of the names deriving from contact with settlers, such as Killingmi or Fanny Taitmiab. That the settlers were 'killing me' or 'tied me up' is entirely credible in the post-Coppermine ethnic violence of the Daly River, and perhaps these women tried to tell a story rather than their name. After a few years, the Jesuits took more care to preserve Indigenous names and integrated them into double names like Anthony Taruak, Margarita Dandam, Teresa Nimbali, Paul Tyedburo or Helena Bayi. They also began to refer to Barramundi as Ngologorog, and to Dummy as Nabba (still a reference to being deaf-mute). Others continued to be called in good European tradition (presumably also arising from settler contact) according to their region of origin, like Pine Creek, Daly and Finiss, or by their function, like Captain. Between 1886 and 1899, the Jesuits on the Daly baptised 197 infants and 78 adults and also performed 78 deathbed baptisms.<sup>26</sup> It would be interesting to examine their baptismal records to recover and document the shifts in their naming policy. I suspect that the early Germanic names were not baptismal names because they derived from the pre-Christian and Nibelungen fables rather than from the Bible.

The 'first fruit' for Queensland Lutherans was claimed by Pastor Ernst Richard Hansche from Neuendettelsau at **Mari Yamba** mission, who baptised an adult man and a child within months of his arrival in

24 Everard Leske, *For Faith and Freedom: The Story of Lutherans and Lutheranism in Australia 1838–1996*, Open Book publishers, Adelaide, 1996; Report from O. Liebler in *Kirchen und Missions Zeitung* 47.22 (May 1911): 173; 'Our Australian Mission', in Biographical Collection, Moses Uraiakuraia, LAA.

25 This German name has a striking similarity to 'that mob kuniguni', a place of old women, mentioned in passing by Britta Duélke, *'Same but Different': Vom Umgang mit Vergangenheit Tradition und Geschichte im Alltag einer nordaustralischen Aborigines-Kommune*, Studien zur Kulturkunde 108, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag, Köln, 1998, p. 103.

26 David Strong, *The Australian Dictionary of Jesuit Biography 1848–1998*, Archives of the Society of Jesus, Halstead Press, Rushcutters Bay, NSW, 1999, p. 228.

late 1894. He was severely criticised by his HMG-leaning mission committee because it was ‘too soon’ and without another pastor present.<sup>27</sup> The committee organised what it considered a proper baptism shortly afterwards, at the Toowoomba mission festival in May 1895, where it presented 13-year-old Magdalena and 15-year-old Maria in the presence of the press to seven pastors and a large crowd including ‘numerous English people’. In December 1896, the mission performed three more baptisms, this time in the presence of two Mackay pastors. By the time the Mari Yamba mission closed in 1902, about half the population was baptised.<sup>28</sup> Clearly the response of Indigenous people was not the cause of the eventual failure of this mission.

The 1895/96 success of Mari Yamba reflected poorly on the other missions in Queensland. At **Cape Bedford** (Hopevale) mission only a deathbed baptism in 1892 had so far been performed. Under probing from Neuendettelsau, more girls were baptised in 1896 and 1897, and the first adult baptisms at Cape Bedford took place in 1899. The fate of **Bloomfield** mission was now hanging in the scales, but once the Immanuel Synod received advice in mid-1899 that the first converts would shortly be baptised, the committee decided to continue the mission.<sup>29</sup>

On the other side of Cape York, the Moravian/Presbyterian **Mapoon** mission also recorded success in 1896 with the baptism of Jimmy and Sarah and their child together with two missionary children on the occasion of the consecration of the new church, again a public event. Rev. Nicholas Hey had trouble deciding what to do with Indigenous names. In the case of his first fruit, Hey reflected that Deinditschy was ‘Jimmy’s real name’, also carried by his father, brother and sisters. It also happened to be the name of a bird – although Hey thought that this was possibly incidental and not at all important. Hey decided in favour of Jimmy, a ‘nicer sounding’ name (to Hey’s ears), and as a result of this decision it is very difficult to decipher the life trajectories of the various Jimmys on the Moravian/Presbyterian missions on the western Cape York Peninsula. Chapter 7 will return to the lack of anthropological training of missionaries.

27 United German and Scandinavian Lutheran Synod of Queensland, Mission Committee Minute Book, 1887–1903, May 1895, LAA.

28 Leske, *For Faith and Freedom*.

29 Immanuel Synod, Mission Committee Minutes, 1895–1901 (translated), 29 June 1899, LAA.

In the same year as the Moravians at Mapoon and the Lutherans at Cape Bedford recorded their first baptisms, the French Trappists invited the media in August 1896 to witness the baptism of their first 12 young men at Beagle Bay. To the Indigenous or accepted names of the candidates they added their own personal names (Sebastian, Narcisse, Joachim, Joseph, Jacques, etc.). This must have set a strong signal of relatedness between the baptised community and their namesake Fathers and Brothers. In 1897, another 23 gathered for mass baptism, and altogether the Trappists claimed to have baptised over 200 people.<sup>30</sup> This means that the following three years must have seen a veritable rush into this new ceremony with an average of over 50 each year.

By this time, the Moravians at Ramahyuck declared that their mission statement had already been achieved: preaching the gospel, conversion and salvation.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the 1886 Aborigines Act, which Friedrich Hagenauer had helped to introduce, banished mixed descendants from the Victorian missions and therefore depleted them of residents. Further north it was precisely the mixed descendants, particularly children, who became the focus of missions under the impact of state legislation.

At **Bathurst Island**, Fr Gsell had to content himself with deathbed and infant baptisms for the first 10 years (1911 to the 1920s), ‘just spade-work’, as he called it, but the 113 baptised children in the mission school ‘became the core of the Christian community’.<sup>32</sup> Fr Gsell began to drill down to the system of marriage promise to liberate the girls and their yet unborn babies from future promised husbands, rather than tackle adult polygamy.

## Marriage

Polygamy was a major impediment to adult baptism. Missionaries evinced a strong moral disdain for polygamy, and the idea arose early that Indigenous marriage arrangements meant that women were in virtual sexual slavery – Strelet at Rapid Creek, Gsell at Bathurst Island and Hey at Mapoon all made comments to this effect. At Beagle Bay, Fr Alphonse

30 Nailon, *Emo and San Salvador*, Vol. 2, p. 143, gives the figure as 255, and Sept Fons indicated 200 baptisms. Fr Marie Bernard, Sept Fons to Limburg, 10 December 1900, *Australien 1900–1907* B7 d.l. (3), ZAPP.

31 ‘Mission Work among the Aborigines at Ramahyuck, Victoria, Report for 1894’, McCarron Bird & Co. Printers, Melbourne, 1895.

32 Gsell, ‘*The Bishop with 150 Wives*’, p. 73; F. Flynn, ‘40 ans chez les Aborigènes Australiens – l’évêque aux 150 épouses’, *Annales de Notre-Dame du Sacré-Coeur*, December 1960, pp. 266–69.

Tachon asked the advice of Fr Duncan McNab before admitting the first adults, who were all in polygamous relationships, to baptism. In 1896, the Elder Felix Gnodonbor perhaps helped things along by interpreting monogamy as a temporary condition: 'In two months I will turn away again all my wives and will keep only one of them, you will baptize me, for I say it to you, I want to be a Christian'.<sup>33</sup>

But the missionaries were not content with 'turning away again all my other wives', they required a lifelong unbroken commitment to one spouse, and therefore they deeply disturbed Indigenous social relationships. The Jesuits decided in June 1888 that schoolgirls could no longer be given in marriage by the parents without the consent of the missionaries, and the Daly River mission diary is full of troubles caused by wrong marriages. Helena Bayi was the first girl whose marriage rights were purchased from her father in 1892, and while it freed her from a tribal obligation it left her vulnerable to claims from other men (see **Daly River Stories**).

The missionary marriage rules also created their own confusions, as in the case of Johannes **Pingilina**, who tried to live up to expectations but was not considered worthy of a legal divorce when his second wife ran away (see Chapter 5) or in the case of Sebastian at Beagle Bay:

Sebastiamus was married to a young girl by the Trappists. The young woman, however, refused to live as wife with Sebastiamus and ran away after a short while. When Bishop Gibney visited Disaster Bay mission [1900] he married Sebastiamus to another woman although the first woman was still alive. This second wife died and Pater Nikolaus [Emo] married Sebastiamus to a third woman at Lombadina. When this woman also died Fr. Droste married Sebastiamus a fourth time. This woman also ran away, but was killed last year in a fight at Beagle Bay. The first wife is still alive in Derby. She visited Lombadina last January. Sebastiamus now lives together with a heathen woman who would like to become Christian. The Blacks think that he can't marry her because his first wife is still alive. Neither a written document about the first marriage nor an annulment are extant.

Quaeritur:

Can the missionary Augustius [Spangenberg] baptise the heathen woman and then marry her to Sebastiamus on the assumption that his predecessors also knew about the first marriage?<sup>34</sup>

33 Brigida Nailon, *Nothing is Wasted in the Household of God: Vincent Pallotti's Vision in Australia 1901–2001*, Spectrum, Richmond, 2001, p. 154.

34 Note to Raible in Broome, 17 November 1929, in Droste, Wilhelm (Pater), P1 Nr 17, ZAPP.

Indigenous communities sometimes objected to wrong marriages by using the missionary rules, as in the case above and at Bathurst Island.

Like baptism, marriage was a public ceremony that placed the aspirants at the centre of ritual attention, usually with special robing and occasionally covered by a press release, particularly in cases of 'firsts'. It also garnered access to material improvements, such as a place in the inner circle of the mission colony. This status elevation, too, sat well with Indigenous markers of prestige, where more wives flagged greater social stature and being unmarried was an image disadvantage. Like baptism, the sacrament of marriage usually required some preparation. At Ebenezer and the Daly River, the young men were supposed to demonstrate their capacity to support a family by building a cottage or similar structure, and it was meant to last longer than the four months that one such structure held up on the Daly River before it came crashing down.<sup>35</sup> As Deborah Rose observes, it was usually Father Kristen who built, or finished, the cabins to accommodate the Daly River 'colonists' on their garden plots. The endurance, perseverance, discipline and courage required for such an ordeal also resonated with the preparations for initiation. The missionary rules were different, but certainly not undecipherable.<sup>36</sup>

### *Deathbed baptisms*

The threshold standards for adults for admission to the sacraments were demanding, but in the face of death the missionaries were usually ready to put these aside. Any baptism was a soul potentially saved, a small victory for Christ – an increase ceremony.

The Austrian Jesuits on the Daly River missions did not consider deathbed baptism as 'mere spade-work'; for them, any baptism was core business. They were not above dashing off in the middle of night for a deathbed baptism and much regretted if they arrived too late to give the necessary instructions and obtain the proper answers to perform the rite. If they could not baptise someone before death they felt that they had 'let them down'.<sup>37</sup>

35 DRM, 4 January 1890.

36 Deborah Bird Rose, 'Signs of life on a barbarous frontier: Intercultural encounters in north Australia', *Humanities Research* 2 (1998): 17–36.

37 DRM, 17 May 1890.

Indigenous people were in general quite willing to take out this free next-world insurance at the last moment. Actually, the black frocks on the Daly became recognised experts in death and dying and were usually notified when somebody was dying. Several people survived their deathbed baptism and, indeed, Fr **Conrath** felt that Catholic baptism could not only save the soul for the next life, but also prolong this life. The mission diary contains entries like ‘was near death, and after baptism (if not through baptism) was cured of her sickness in an almost miraculous way’<sup>38</sup> or ‘was baptised near death and is now recovering’.<sup>39</sup> The promise of life, and of after-life, was a marvellous gift offered by the missionaries.

### *Relics and incantations*

The Jesuits on the Daly had precious little to defend themselves against the onslaughts of nature and disease, but drew on a wholesome arsenal of instruments of supernatural powers. For healing, the missionaries used smallpox vaccine, snake oil, blessed water from Lourdes and, of course, incantations. They also brought holy oils and relics of saints, obeyed food taboos and appealed to the spirit world to achieve desired outcomes. Once, when the Fathers had feared about the future of the mission and good news finally arrived, Fr Conrath recorded that these positive outcomes ‘are rightly attributed to the intercession of St. Joseph, the Patron of this Station’.<sup>40</sup> Special incantations were deployed to combat epidemics. In February 1897, the Jesuits began ‘a novena to avert disease from our animals’ and nine days later observed with disappointment ‘Today is a black day for us – it saw a bull and a cow dead of the same disease, though it is the last day of the novena’.<sup>41</sup> In times of flood, they added a prayer to St John and the *A domo tua* against storms to the Litanies, and to halt the rising waters they exposed the relics of St Nepomuk, protector from floods and drowning, gifted to them by the Archbishop of Prague.<sup>42</sup> Among the icons inscribed with spiritual powers were a black Madonna, a life-size statue of St Ignatius and relics of St Aloysius and St Nepomuk. The relics, together with holy water and incantations of exorcism, were also used when one of the mission girls had a fit:

38 DRM, 10 February 1897.

39 DRM, 17 June 1898.

40 DRM, 30 April 1898.

41 DRM, 12 February 1897, 20 February 1897.

42 DRM, 16 May 1891.

In the evening Helen the Christian girl, became deaf-mute ('nabba'). She seemed not to know what she was doing, made various gesticulations and rushed about the room ... she collapsed on the ground ... she gave no answer, but simply stayed there with a look of astonishment, her eyes fixed in a strange stare. We used the prayers for private exorcism, the touching with relics, the sprinkling with holy water and giving it to her to drink – and finally she came to herself again and got back the use of speech and hearing. When she was then asked what was the cause of all this, she said it was a devil!<sup>43</sup>

Helena Bayi's condition was ascribed to 'obsession or diabolical influx', although seizures called 'nabba' were quite common on the Daly, and her own father carried that name.<sup>44</sup> Their prayers and baptisms promised health and life, but the Jesuit connection with the supernatural was not only capable of healing. The missionaries also demonstrated that disobedience to God's rules could invoke His mortal blow. The death of 'old Bede' was recorded with the comment:

Nine weeks ago Fr. Conrath told this man [old Bede] not to go to the Karamala which is a pagan festival, threatening him with the punishment of Almighty God if he did go. 'I shall go', said the native, 'let God punish me'.<sup>45</sup>

And so it came to pass: Old Bede died nine weeks later. Indigenous people had their own explanations for such phenomena. They, too, practised distance killing, normally to revenge an unnatural death – 'killing for superstitious reasons', according to the missionaries.<sup>46</sup> Had Fr Conrath really put a death spell on Old Bede?

At St Joseph's (New Uniya 1891–99), a large cross towered over the mission under which the missionaries held speeches and gatherings. Individuals were 'called to the cross' for admonition and interrogation. Aboriginal people were well aware of the image of Jesus nailed to the cross, and feared this massive cross may be used to crucify them as punishment.<sup>47</sup> This fear of the cross is mirrored in many other missionary accounts. Bishop Polding generalised in 1840 about Aborigines (whether at Sydney or Moreton Bay) that 'when I could speak to them on religion I found it

43 DRM, 13 November 1891.

44 DRM, 14 November 1891.

45 DRM, 31 June 1898.

46 DRM, 14–17 September 1895.

47 Adolf Kristen SJ, 'Aboriginal Language', 1899, p. 197, MS 1239, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (AIATSIS).

very easy to make them comprehend the principal truths of the Catholic faith. The cross, particularly, is for them a subject of serious reflection'.<sup>48</sup> At Bethesda in 1866, one of the leading men demanded an explanation of the image of the crucified Jesus shown in a small illustrated booklet that Pastor Hausmann distributed. Presumably, the message that 'Jesus loves you' was not easily reconciled with such horrific images and a potentially vengeful God.

### *Double binds*

The people at Uniya were also afraid of the cemetery, so close to the main station.<sup>49</sup> Even after accepting baptism, many balked at having their bodies consecrated according to Christian burial. Sometimes the missionaries were misled as to the whereabouts of the dead or dying so that they would not snatch the corpse and a traditional burial could be performed instead:

The boy died today at 10am ... His father, against our express wish, took the body to the camp of the pagans across the river, and so deprived him of Christian burial.<sup>50</sup>

News came of the death of Fanny Taitmiab ... Fr. Marschner, on Wednesday of last week, judging her to be in danger of death, went with the Holy Oils to the hut where she lived ... and said, that he would come back next day and bring her the sacraments ... Next day, when about to go there, he heard that she had been taken to another place ... He promised tobacco both to the women and to the one who took her there if she were brought back again in the canoe ... she was not brought back ... and ... he heard that she had died last Saturday. Such was her life, and such her death. R.I.P.<sup>51</sup>

One of the Jesuit Fathers, soon after his arrival, interfered with the remains from a tree burial. He opened the bundle, and finding human remains, but not a fully intact corpse as one would expect in a Christian burial, he feared 'malefice'. Instead of giving it a funeral as intended, he quickly and unceremoniously interred the remains.<sup>52</sup> Across a cultural

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48 Polding in Sydney to Central Council of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons, 10 January 1840, in Thorpe, *First Catholic Mission*, pp. 187–88.

49 DRM, 17 April 1895.

50 DRM, 13 January 1893.

51 DRM, 22 February 1897.

52 DRM, 10 May 1900.

divide, it was easy to offend each others' sensibilities, and to get spooked. Their Aboriginal informants often supplied subterfuge stories for fear of punishment, so that misinformation and guesswork often clouded the missionaries' accounts of traditional actions and reactions. Since the missionaries treated abortion as a crime, infanticides and abortions were disguised as stillbirths or mysterious illnesses. (For more on such misinformation, see **Daly River** missions.)

Mission residents were in a cultural double bind. Punishment could easily follow from meeting traditional obligations, while not meeting such expectations could equally incur punishment from the Elders. The case of Mathilda, as narrated in the Daly River mission diary, illustrates this dilemma. When Mathilda came 'of marriageable age' at the mission, the priests forced the issue about her marriage. She refused to give up her promised husband and was therefore 'refused baptism' and 'sent away' together with her father and promised husband.<sup>53</sup> The following year, she was married to Aloysius who was loyal to the Christian missionaries<sup>54</sup> but the promised husband tried to claim Mathilda back:

Yesterday evening a pagan native tried to take Aloysius' wife Mathilda for himself. He threw a spear at Aloysius and came within an ace of killing him. The man was punished and summarily ejected by Fr. Kristen. The wife [Mathilda], who did not show herself sufficiently on her husband's side, was beaten by him [Aloysius], to her great benefit.<sup>55</sup>

Mathilda subsequently allowed herself to be baptised,<sup>56</sup> but when her baby died she was torn between death threats from the Indigenous society insisting on a proper tree burial and threats of expulsion from the mission if the baby did not get a Christian burial. The Jesuits dismissed her fears as superstitions:

The funeral was held of a girl who died the day before yesterday – at least the body was given ritual burial. The parents of this child had been filled with superstitious fear, thinking that the body of this infant at the breast must be put up in a tree – if it were buried in the ground, the death of the mother [Mathilda] would follow. The father, Aloysius, rejected this superstition, being warned that otherwise he would lose his garden.<sup>57</sup>

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53 DRM, 13 April 1891.

54 DRM, 14 January 1892.

55 DRM, 8 September 1892.

56 DRM, 7 May 1893.

57 DRM, 20 November 1895.

Submitting to the Christian rites was a condition of living on the mission and to be expelled from the garden in November, with the onset of the wet and hungry season, would have been a great hardship. The question of her baby's burial confronted young Mathilda with a choice between two sets of intransigent rules.

Indigenous people on missions had much to fear: the wrath of God curses of the missionaries that could result in death, punishment for fulfilling traditional obligations, desecration of burial sites, the cemeteries full of after-life close to the settlement, the use of bones of Saints to achieve intended outcomes, hints of crucifixion, blood-drinking during the Eucharist, and so much talk about death. It is not altogether surprising that bizarre contact cults emerged in an attempt to rebalance the power relationships between people, with the spiritual world and with the material world that the missions were destroying and establishing.

## Contact cults

Most missionaries were suspicious of Indigenous ritual gatherings. At Cooper's Creek, Pastor J. Flierl II burned all the boomerangs in 1886 in an effort to eradicate Indigenous culture. (Flierl II was a namesake cousin of the Johann Flierl already mentioned and was later dismissed in disgrace from the Immanuel Synod.) Carl Strehlow at Hermannsburg wrote that 'I have often brought dance singsongs to an end with a stick'.<sup>58</sup> Abstinence from ritual gatherings was a condition for baptism, and at Easter of 1898 Fr Conrath on the Daly even broke up a 250-strong Caramal corroboree (also written as Karamalla) that was usually held in March/April at the Coppermine Landing (aka Paramalmal), which practically the whole mission population was attending.<sup>59</sup> Especially disturbing was the 'diabolical Tyaboi' to which Fr Conrath referred in 1890 and 1893, finding that it involved objectionable rites from which sexually transmitted diseases could be contracted.<sup>60</sup>

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58 Immanuel Synod, Mission Committee, FRM Box 5, Correspondence Wettengel (transcriptions and translations), LAA.

59 DRM, 10 April 1898.

60 DRM, 20 April 1891.

Tyaboi begins, and the fight of the devil with Christ for the blacks. Benbenyaga (blacks), Chinese garden, Chinese, Coppermines, all mixed up in it – so we have heard from a Christian boy sufficiently grown up to know, and various circumstances prove the evil that is going on.<sup>61</sup>

Anthropologist Deborah Rose adds that the Tyaboi most likely also referred to the Jesuits themselves. She explains that the Tyaboi functioned as a contact cult to incorporate the new, unknown and unpredictable in Indigenous cosmology, and so to tame it. There had been questions raised at the mission about whether Jesus was a Malak-Malak – in other words, whose side he was on. Fr McKillop ventured that the Tyaboi involved human sacrifice.<sup>62</sup> Rose discounts this possibility but suspects that the ‘evil spirit’ (or Jin-man) to whom sacrifice might be made was God himself, ‘the Father who killed his own son’, meaning that the concept of human sacrifice was actually introduced by the missionaries themselves. She also points out how closely ‘Jin-man’ approximates ‘Chinaman’. Indigenous lexica elsewhere also paid little heed to the racial differences so highly doted on among settlers, so that in Yolngu languages ‘balanda’ was used for Asians as well as Europeans.

Tyaboi had disappeared from the Daly by the 1930s, but by this time another contact cult, ‘the immoral Gorangara’, was observed in the Kimberley. Bishop Raible and Fr Ernst Worms first encountered this near Balgo in 1938, and Worms described it as an immoral, dangerous cult of black magic involving death curses, which was spreading across the Kimberley striking fear into people. His informants refused to translate the curse songs, saying that they had come from elsewhere and were undecipherable. (For more on this contact cult, see Ernst **Worms**.) Worms adjusted his orthography to approximate it to the phenomenon of Kurangara already described by Ronald Berndt in Arnhem Land. Here, too, the cult has been interpreted a revolt against white colonisation.<sup>63</sup> Neither the Pallottines nor the Jesuits entertained the idea that they themselves and their teachings were cast as the devil figure in these ceremonies, or that for non-Christians a ritual curse may not appear all that different from invoking the wrath of God.

61 DRM, 17 October 1893.

62 D. Mackillop, ‘Anthropological notes on the Aboriginal tribes of the Daly River’, *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Australia* 17 (1892–93): 262.

63 Tony Redmond, ‘Tracks, texts and shadows: Some intercultural effects of the 1938 Frobenius Expedition to the north-west Kimberley’, paper presented at The German Anthropological Tradition in Australia, Nicolas Peterson and Anna Kenny, ANU, 18–19 June 2015.

## The power of the word

Just like the curses of contact cults, the missionaries had powerful words spoken in prayers, sermons and admonitions. Fr Conrath on the Daly River predicted the death of Old Bede. Fr Finnegan at Tardun recorded a success of 5 inches of rainfall to his prayers in 1961. The spoken word of missionaries was powerful. The mission superiors pronounced who was able to stay on the mission and who had to leave. But even more powerful was the written word of God. It was contained in the holy book, the supreme ritual object in which knowledge and power was immanent. The Bible seemed vested with all-knowing powers. Anecdotes abound about Indigenous respect for written words, books and papers, and the whole technology of information communication that they represented. Bishop Polding observed:

Any writing which we entrust to these savages has, in their eyes, something mysterious and sacred, and if they happen to know that the letter or ticket concerns themselves or their children they preserve it with a truly religious care.<sup>64</sup>

The sanctity accorded to the baptismal certificates that Polding refers to is reminiscent of the way in which tjuringas and message sticks were treated – also material objects on which information is encoded. The meaning embedded in these objects was clearly powerful and could evoke a strong response from those who decoded it. In the case of a baptismal certificate, the decoder would accept the nominee as ‘one of us’, a fellow Catholic. The missionaries were vaguely aware of the similarity of these media. When Pastor Richter wanted to tell the people assembled near Aurukun in 1910 that they had arrived too early for Christmas, and should come back in a week, they asked for a proper message stick. Richter sent them a piece of cardboard showing the mission address, and instructed the courier to show them seven fingers for seven more sleeps, with the result that 270 people arrived on time for Christmas. Such part-written, part-enacted communication created a middle ground between instrumental attitudes to missions as sources of material benefit, and as grails of knowledge/power with new forms of communication. Senior men (see **Piltawodli**) and young men who felt sidelined by Indigenous hierarchies (see **Aurukun**) were vying for access to this new technology of power.

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<sup>64</sup> Polding in Sydney to Central Council of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith in Lyons, 10 January 1840, in Thorpe, *First Catholic Mission*, pp. 187–88.

Several Indigenous languages refer to writing with synonymous words for the idea and an associated object. In Yolngu languages, which have the longest demonstrated history of contact with writing in Australia, *wukirriwuy*, for example, means both writing and pen, while *darabu* refers both to writing in general and to a particular triangle pattern representing the ensign flags of Dutch-licensed Macassan trepang boats, which have become, with slight variations, patterns representing different dialect groups.<sup>65</sup> Anna Kenny points out a similar instance in the Aranda language and develops from this an interesting reading of the power of paper. She observes that the nickname the Aranda at Hermannsburg used for their missionary Father, *Pepa*, also means paper. His book of law and fundamental truth was also a *pepa*, and local elders were interested in this technology of power and knowledge. According to Kenny, they imparted their secrets for him to write down on paper, in order to produce the Aranda's book of law and fundamental truth, the Aranda's *Pepa*.<sup>66</sup>

At Killalpaninna, too, Pastor Georg Reuther ended up translating Dieri religious texts into German, instead of the other way round. His informant Palkalina narrated in detail the process through which he became a *kunki* to occupy the highest position of honour in his group. Attempting to systematise the knowledge to which he was introduced, Reuther recorded the 17 steps of the three-day procedure and the 13 rules of the *kunki*. Reuther was exposed to an enormous amount of secret knowledge. He was taught how to interpret dreams and how to cast a magic spell on 15 types of objects, including waterholes, yellow ochre, brown ochre, the sun and the rain. Reuther's whole manuscript, some 2,600 pages in dense German handwriting, bound into 13 thesis-sized volumes, reads like he was being recruited, or trained, into Dieri ways of knowing. Reuther struggled with his sanity and finally felt he had to flee from the mission to avoid the lunatic asylum (for more on his struggle with sanity, see Georg Reuther).

The knowledge recorded in Reuther's manuscript seems to arise out of a dynamic between Reuther and his informants. Anna Kenny's explanation seems very plausible, that the Elders invested in a new technology to preserve their laws. Just as the missionaries struggled for the right words

65 Made by Mambur (or Mick Marambur), Elcho Island 1961, Nr 931 Berndt Collection, Berndt Museum, University of Western Australia.

66 Kenny, Anna, *The Aranda's Pepa: An Introduction to Carl Strehlow's Masterpiece Die Aranda-und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien (1907–1920)*, ANU Press, Canberra, 2013.

to explain the inner truth of their faith, so the Indigenous informants must also have found it difficult to find the right words to communicate their secrets. It seems like Reuther was instructed in terms that made sense to him. He gained the understanding that there is an all-powerful creator (Mura), to whom believers appeal through the intercession of spirit ancestors (*mura-mura*), who really did once live on earth and have biographies, just like Saints. Chanting sacred texts will help a person in need or great fear. Upon death, the soul rises into the heavens, and there is a beautiful heaven above in the skies. The bad and evil is the realm of the devil. Witchdoctors can save souls and act as intermediaries. Here, Reuther felt compelled to insert one of his rare commentaries. He noted that witchdoctors differ from Western priests in that they are associated not with the benevolent creator, but with the devil. Whether that was the message intended by his informants is doubtful, since the contact cults certainly did not subscribe to that cosmological alignment. Again, we see signs of a mutual invention.

The power of paper in carrying detailed knowledge across vast distances was an amazing technology, also commented by Tony Ballantyne who explores how this technology was taken up by literate indigenous people.<sup>67</sup> A light-hearted anecdote by a Zion Hill missionary relates such an epiphany about the power of books. An axe had gone missing and, while the theft was being discussed, one of the Brethren, who was immersed in a book, stated the name of the thief without looking up. It looked like he was reading the answer from his book. Wunkermany straightaway declared that his pipe was also missing, and could the Brother please check the book about who took it? Pastor Eipper felt that 'a superstition had formed amongst them' 'that out of a book we could know what had happened at a distance, or who had stolen any article'.<sup>68</sup> Wunkermany, who was himself an influential man and communicated with spirits, often knelt down with the missionaries in their prayers, keen to learn more. Presumably for Wunkermany the anecdote was not lighthearted, but a quick-witted attempt to fathom the power of the book.

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67 Tony Ballantyne has several publications on this theme, for example, 'Paper, pen, and print: The transformation of the Kai Tahu knowledge order', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 53.2 (2011): 232–60.

68 Christopher Eipper, 'Observations made on a journey to the natives at Toorbal, August 2nd 1841 by the Rev. Christopher Eipper, of the Moreton Bay German Mission – **Journal of the Reverend Christopher Eipper**, Missionary to the Aborigines at Moreton Bay 1841', published in the *Colonial Observer*.

A similar paper miracle forms part of the foundation narrative of the Moravian Ebenezer mission in Victoria in 1859. An epiphany arose dynamically out of a situation where missionary Hagenauer related the published story of Willie Wimmera, a Wimmera boy who was orphaned in a settler attack, was sent to Britain and converted to Christianity.<sup>69</sup> In discussion, this Willie Wimmera of the story was rightly or wrongly identified as the very same boy whom a local settler, who was present at this storytelling, had taken into custody after an attack. These two stories became one and the same, so the written story from England became connected with the lived experiences of some of the young men listening, and also with the mission site in the Wimmera. The words from the book came alive and took physical shape. The dynamic here is again reminiscent of the dynamics of the contact zone described by Richard White in *The Middle Ground*, not a fabrication but a negotiated process of mutual invention.

The Willie Wimmera epiphany led to a hunger for learning to read and write among the young men at Ebenezer. Missionary Hagenauer was shown exactly where this boy's mother had been shot, just metres from where the mission church now stood. The Indigenous diplomats had their own vested interest in seeking an accommodation with the missionaries. Perhaps now the missionaries would understand why it was a meaningful place and corroborees had to be held there, against Hagenauer's instructions.

## Conclusions

The project of harnessing the supernatural provided a common ground for missionaries and Indigenous knowledge bearers. The symbolic bestowal of names in ritual baptism, incantations of prayers and the Bible as a ritual object that had to be treated with particular respect were recognisable means of establishing relationships between people and with the material and supernatural worlds. This common ground was, however, loaded with distrust and dismissal of opposing and alternative explanations of cause and effect and of energy-aligning rituals. Armed with sacred objects, incantations and the support of saintly spirits, the Catholic missionaries

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69 The Willie Wimmera incident has been explored by Jane Lydon, Felicity Jensz, Robert Kenny and the late Bill Edwards.

strained against the ‘childish superstitions of the blacks’ while Indigenous people often felt that the gospel narratives were untruthful, useless and not for or about them. Translation difficulties compounded the mutual incomprehension. The bizarre contact cults that emerged reshuffled new and old elements of exerting power.

Beginning with mutual incomprehension, but with a shared commitment to metaphysics, it took until after World War II for missionaries and Elders to harness each others’ ontologies in the project of inculturation (see Chapter 5) – the forging of a shared understanding that led to the emergence of Indigenous churches, for which the seeds were sown with the first baptisms in each region.

The fastest converters were indisputably the Moravians, who took one year at Ebenezer, four years at Ramahyuck and five years at Mapoon to register the first baptisms. The slowest were no doubt the Lutherans, who took 13 years at Killalpaninna, 16 years at Hermannsburg, a precipitate seven years at Mari Yamba, 10 years at Hopevale and 13 years at Bloomfield to claim ‘first fruit’. Catholics claimed instant success on the Daly (Jesuits), early success at Yule Island (Missionaries of the Sacred Heart [MSC]), six years at Beagle Bay (Trappists) and confined themselves to children under Gsell’s policy (MSC). While Catholic missionaries were most active in the north and relied greatly on Filipino and other Asian and Pacific intermediaries, the Lutherans had the greatest success with outstanding Indigenous evangelists, as the following chapter explores.

This text is taken from *The Contest for Aboriginal Souls: European missionary agendas in Australia*, by Regina Ganter, published 2018 by ANU Press, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.