THE SACRED IN HISTORY

Australia's major national foundational history, centred on the sacrifice at Gallipoli in the First World War, has been contested in recent years by historians interested in the Aboriginal wars which are arguably more foundational. With the violence characteristic of the founding of many states, these wars mark original invasion and settlement, yet they have scarcely been memorialized at all. In 1998, Governor-General Sir William Deane took up this debate in strong terms saying there were 'no official memorials to the Aboriginal Australians "slaughtered in the black wars" last century'. He was speaking on a 'sacred' day at the War Memorial in Canberra (Remembrance Day) launching Ken Inglis's book, Sacred Places: War memorials in the Australian landscape. This essay will investigate that sacred which is history's cultural 'excess', and which is not investigated (despite the title) in Inglis's thorough survey of war memorials. The sacred has, however, been taken up by others such as Gelder and Jacobs, and Taussig; it seems that the sacred and the magical have begun to reassert themselves even in the modern nation-state. A focus on the sacred in time, in history, will build on two simple questions: One: can we continue to take for granted the secularization of society? The assumption was that the major religions would continue to decline in influence, and, concurrently, the languages we use to discuss our social lives would continue to become more distant from the authority of central organizing principles (logocentrisms), distributing concepts and categories according to more democratic geographies of difference. Two: are the strange and popular beliefs we are surrounded by as trivial as they seem? There are millions, apparently, who believe that Elvis is an immortal god and worship his image at shrines. There is the re-emergence of ritual in the form of various New Age cults which sometimes attach themselves to indigenous ideas and peoples. The link with primitivity is highly important for definitions of the sacred, but I caution that primitivity is not to be simply associated with the indigenous. I define a primitive idea as one whose truth is its simple assertion ('this is the ways things are', 'nothing has ever changed', 'there can be no debate', etc.), so the Elvis example is one of a modern primitivity.
For me, the sacred is a communication between the primitive and the civilized, arching across these poles as 'sudden flares of sacral discharge'. To the extent that history works to maintain this difference, demonstrating our progress away from barbarism, the primitive must always be there in counterpoint, the potential difference giving history its power or cultural force. The frontier barbarism of colonial violence also gives way to the serenity of its representation in writing. Far from being expunged, primitivity, or at least its ghostly representation, is therefore at the heart of the modern nation-state. And in Australia, the pattern of continually aligning Aboriginality with primitivity has obscured other primitivities, making some forms of political power continue to work along racial lines.

The sacred no doubt means many other things. It is also a community effect. Georges Bataille defines the sacred as 'perhaps the most ungraspable thing that has been produced between men: the sacred is only a privileged moment of communal unity, a moment of the convulsive communication of what is ordinarily stifled'. In this convulsiveness, the sacred partakes of energy; it is an expenditure of social energy, which makes it belong to that superstructural domain we call the cultural. It is uneven in its effects, it depends on crisis and on ritual to work. While Prime Minister John Howard would like 'equality before the law' to be a 'very sacred principle' it cannot be, for the sacred is what makes religions distinct from domains such as the law; for the same reason that a government activity like taxation or census-taking cannot be sacred. The sacred, it seems, could have a lot to say about how contemporary Australia is culturally defined, which is what Gelder and Jacobs's Uncanny Australia, sets out to show. The sacred has also helped Henry Reynolds to transform Australia's cultural identity through history writing.

In a recent issue of Humanities Research, Dipesh Chakrabarty talks of what he calls 'subaltern pasts', pasts that cannot enter history as belonging to the historian's own position. The processes by which various minority histories are included in a national history are part of social democracy in general and the disciplinary renewal of history in particular, he argues. The Australian debate around Aboriginal history can be taken up from this point. The 'bringing forward' of Aboriginal histories in recent years has had such important effects in law, politics, and culture that definitions of Australian nationhood, while hotly contested, have nonetheless significantly changed. A progressivist would argue that the form and social effects of history can change further (under the influence of Aboriginal histories), and that the seed for this change lies in something that the positivist/empiricist definition of history tends to obscure: the practice of history has a sacred dimension: privileged moment[s] of communal unity as Bataille says.
Chakrabarty speaks philosophically, yet as an historian, when he gives the example of a Marxist historian, Ranajit Guha, taking a peasant revolt of the Santal people in nineteenth-century Bengal as an instance of revolutionary consciousness at work, while the peasants themselves insisted that they were acting under the inspiration of their god, Thakur. Their actions and their history have a supernatural dimension, which we moderns can nevertheless understand: 'we have a pre-theoretical, everyday understanding because the supernatural, or the divine, as principles, have not disappeared from the life of the modern'. Now while the imperative to revolt had a sacred motive ('I did as my god told me to do'), and this was normal for the pre-modern Santals of the nineteenth century, such a motive cannot enter the language of current professional history, because 'the idea of historical evidence, like evidence allowed in the court of law, cannot admit of the supernatural except as part of the non-rational (i.e.: somebody's belief-system). These are part and parcel of the anthropologizing and historicizing evening-out strategies of contemporary intellectual discourses which maintain their critical distance on their objects of study, and might resurface to rationalize wayward moments of the sacred or superstitious in everyday modern life, interruptions, in effect, to rational progress and equitable judgement. Chakrabarty argues, in conclusion, for the complexity of time to be written into historians' accounts, and for the peculiar contemporaneity of others to become part of understandings giving rise to heterogeneous histories and 'forms of democracy that we cannot yet either completely understand or envisage'.

The power of history, I would suggest, is not just in its secular making-sense. Rather, its effective magic is its ability to recast our conception of the present: 'every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irrevocably', says Walter Benjamin in his thesis on the philosophy of history. Heterogeneous histories, then, would be temporally heterogeneous. For instance, rather than relegating the Santal or the Aborigines to a primitive then, we would have to recognize the sparking of primitive-modern nexuses then and now, in 'their' rituals and in 'our' rituals.

Aboriginal history, narrated by whitefellas, has most conventionally constructed its power by trading at the liminal portal between the modern state and a pre-state otherness: encountering untranslatable subaltern pasts, which cannot enter histories themselves fully formed in this past but are there greeting the evolving narrative in its political present, greeting its outcomes with a smile at the exit, so to speak, in a rhetorical and redemptive twist giving the narrative its national and cultural justification. The conclusion to This Whispering in Our Hearts reads like this:
If true reconciliation is ever consummated in Australia and justice is not only done but seen to be done, the moment will no doubt be applauded from beyond the grave by all those men and women who hoped in their own time that such an outcome might eventually result from the European colonization of the continent. And then, after two hundred years, the whisper in the heart will be heard no more.

Henry Reynolds is usually careful to say that he is addressing European Australians because he knows he is dealing in their forms. Yet, as Greg Dening wrote recently, ‘there are few academic historians who have changed Australian history as much as Reynolds.’ Reynolds has had to do his work without the subaltern voices which might upset too much the form, content, ritual, tone, and genre of the way historians in Australia write. This Whispering in Our Hearts contains accounts of humanitarian figures like George Augustus Robinson, Mary Bennett, and John Gribble, and the authorial figure, Reynolds, becomes aligned with this humanitarian tradition as a counter-discourse to colonialism. Reynolds was recently described by Marilyn Lake as a ‘secular priest’, in a popular article whose main point was to establish Reynolds’s work as religious-like in its moral purpose.

Writing history so that the sacred effect can happen means using a discursive structure where depictions of suffering, for instance genocide stories, supply the civilizing pole, the discourse of the state, with its concrete objects; ghostly images of blacks locked in a birth-of-the-nation struggle: and dying, still haunting Europeans until they attribute to them the sacred rituals that are their due; ‘they will bring their dead with them and expect an honoured burial’, Reynolds warned his white readers in his first book so many years ago. This is the mobilization of feeling for the sake of the nation which is the whispering in the hearts, joining forces for eventual collective and orgasmic displays (‘sudden flares of sacral discharge’): a ‘sea of hands’ at Bondi beach and outside parliament (an instance of ‘cultural activism’ where coloured plastic hands, signed by individuals, were planted in the ground), and communal meetings of grass-roots organizations.

Culture thus performs its magic in ways historians can only allude to by speaking of ‘leaps of imagination’. The forces bound up and then released in the events of our lives are multi-coded and inflected. How can they be described? Their most salient feature is not the formal, textual, transformations beloved of structuralists, nor the displacement to causes of the functionalists, and nor is the search for meaning likely to be the ‘native’ participants’ main aim. Signs, forces, and bodies are all essential elements that combine in ritual processes and need to be more fully described if one is to understand how cultures work.

Consider the ritual central to Australian nation-forming history. A piece of music is played on a brass instrument by a lone man at dawn. It is a trace of rhythmic
energy emerging from a body and entering every sympathetic, permeable body in the listening host, and in its life-movement alternates inside and outside, self and other, sound and the whisper of breath. The sound swells, other forces come together and intensify into something highly ritual. Its performance is designed to increase or maintain culture by uniting subjective feeling and national myth. So as the final tone of 'The Last Post' fades on the breeze, there is hardly a dry eye at the Shrine of Remembrance. This 1920s shrine is described by Greg Dening as 'harsh and heavy, like some pillbox standing in Flanders fields, it is all contradiction in architectural design, a ziggurat on top of a columned temple ... through the ziggurat is carved a shaft. At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month every year, the light of the sun beams through this shaft directly on the Unknown Soldier's tomb'. Dening adds, wistfully, as he describes yet another kind of magic: 'Or it used to, before daylight saving. It is all done with mirrors now'. Even if the older magic was more à la Stonehenge, cultural events were always 'done with mirrors'; the necessary seductive illusion which is part of their force.

The crowd gathered there re-creates the nation every time with this myth of origin. The force of this myth lies not just in its meaning construction, rather it derives from the power of death as a vital force, this derivation as complex as the seeming necessity for music on this occasion and others like it, and it is also the transformation of the bodies of those present at this ritual. Michael Taussig talks of the 'magical harnessing of the dead for stately purpose' the state's 'attraction and repulsion, tied to the Nation, to more than a whiff of a certain sexuality reminiscent of the Law of the Father and, lest we forget, to the specter of death, human death in that soul-stirring insufficiency of Being'. There is a vitalism that can be read into the analysis of foundation myths and rituals as the condensation of positive forces in the transformation of bodies in space. Death is a positive force, to the extent that it makes gifts to the living, and in return the living must make sacrifice, which of course literally means 'make sacred'. There is no greater sacrifice, we are told, than the gift of one's life for the Nation: the 'unknown soldier' stands for the universal and arbitrary grandeur of this gift. The state, relentlessly secular in its definition, maintains nonetheless the highest form of the sacred-in-death ('the horror of the mute-absurd of the violence upon which all states are founded'). Blood has been spilt. The political stakes for the sacredness of the state are high. The political question, then, in a multi-racial and multi-cultural nation, is whose dead will count on the roles of honour? Normal political calculations of numbers and representation would suggest the Aboriginal people, now 2% of the population, should be a minor part of national life, but this fails to calculate the cultural forces of the sacred in history.
In an earlier version of this essay I gave an example from Strehlow's 1947 *Aranda Traditions* which narrated a ritual where Aranda people had sat in a circle and opened their veins to enable them to travel in a subterranean river of blood under dangerous territory. I was criticized by anthropologists for using material that might be 'too sensitive', meaning sacred, even though it had been published before. As Gelder and Jacobs suggest, an important part of the sacred is non-disclosure, that is, the secret. Traditionally anthropologists have conjoined secret-sacred, but I think we are now in a position to see the secret not as something to be revealed, but as the 'business' of different social categories (women, men, etc.). So, unlike the sacred which exceeds representation (a symbol is sacred to the extent that it 'means more' to people than just a sign), the secret may simply be a gloss for business relatively transparent in its meanings to those allowed to participate.

My use of the text was a way to pluralize my account and to carry 'the montage principle over into history', as Walter Benjamin said, not to anthropologize, nor historicize (we think this, they believe that; we used to think this, etc.) but to mobilize the rhetorical force of its otherness and the poetic truth (the leap of imagination) and 'sacral discharge' in a 'ritual for country'. Desacralizing the Aboriginal primitive by treating it as 'matter of fact' needs to go hand in hand with sacralizing the everyday modern and rediscovering the primitive there. The political principle here is that sacredness needs to be more equitably distributed, because keeping traditional Aborigines as emblematic of the Australian sacred perpetuates the possibility for racist divisions.

Could it be that the promise that was Aboriginal history has failed theoretically but succeeded practically? Australian history has changed, but understandings of history have not. Was it such a gift to Aboriginal peoples that their history was brought into being as a pre-history to European settlement? That in the early eighties 'twenty thousand years' became a mantra of truth? Nevertheless 'Captain Cook' histories of exploration and discovery have been displaced, and with that triumphalism deflated, history, anthropology and the law combined in a powerful way to create the conditions whereby the 'Mabo' judgement could become a reality and *terra nullius* denied.

My argument would have to concede that Aboriginal peoples, prior to invasion, had no history in the Hegelian sense; history as a set of texts setting out a linear chronology of events. There certainly was a sense of time, a sense of past events, and ways of connecting past events to ones taking place in the here and now. This historical attitude was not just produced as a set of texts, oral or written, it was produced rather more ritually or ceremonially. More thorough examinations of Aboriginal experiences of time, through textual analyses and
discussions with Aboriginal intellectuals, will perhaps provide material for the reinvention and renewal of Australian history:

Every culture is first and foremost a particular experience of time, and no new culture is possible without an alteration of this experience. The original task of a genuine revolution, therefore, is never merely to 'change the world', but also—and above all—to 'change time'.

So it may be true that time changed in the early eighties in Australia. For some people this experience was ephemeral, for others it was deeply felt, but in any case the germ of a new Australian culture was born. Many remember the discovery of ancient human cremation at Lake Mungo, and at about the same time Henry Reynolds forged his reputation as a pioneering historian with the publication of *The Other Side of the Frontier* in 1981. 'Twenty thousand years' as an activist slogan had the effect of stretching national time back into the distant past, crossing an intellectual frontier (just as the 'real bush' frontier was disappearing), indigenizing history, and creating new beginnings for the national story. This process has not gone all the way to completion; further steps could be taken, steps which would broaden the process, and in some ways make it less the business of historians, and more the business of philosophers.

The production of cross-cultural historical knowledge is not just an epistemological problem, concerning the foundations for knowledge, but also an evolving one which occurs and is repeated in rituals like 'writing an historical paper'. It is therefore crucial for Aboriginal history to continually contrast accounts of ways in which indigenous Australian peoples come to know things with ways in which Europeans institutions organize knowledge rituals. There is another example in Strehlow where he reports an account of a promising pupil of Aranda knowledge, about fifty years ago:

The old men took me apart from the other young men of my own age at an early date. They showed me many gurra ceremonies which they withheld from the other members of my bandicoot clan because they were still too young. I remember their teachings well. I often had my veins opened to supply blood for the ceremonies. I dutifully paid large meat-offerings for the instruction that I had received. Some of the ceremonies were too secret to be shown even to ordinary men of the bandicoot clan ... My elders kept repeating these ceremonies time and again in my presence: they were afraid that I might forget them ...

Now while university students don't come to seminars with 'large meat-offerings' or open their veins (the state bleeds them with tuition fees), it is more significant that the exhortation here is to remember the sacred text exactly, through excessive mimeticism, constant repetition. In university seminars the students are instead urged to put the text in their own words, to contribute, eventually, to the endless proliferation of commentary which is the European way of sacralizing texts, to renovate the classic text by
making it 'mean something' in the contemporary context, coordinating the responses of other commentators, finding a new relevance for a theory by attaching it to a new object, in other words: displacement. So what is interesting for me in both cases is not core knowledge as such, but ways of practising knowledge, keeping it alive. If I were to risk a generalization I would say Aboriginal philosophies, as ways of life, are all about keeping things alive in their place.

We could therefore ask a similar question of ways of knowing a thing like Australian history as a way of life for practising scholars. Which is more important, the existence of Manning Clark's history, or the way in which (parts of it) get activated as social memory through rituals like annual final-year school examinations as rites of passage? Or, indeed, does the Gallipoli episode get reinforced as an Australian foundation myth more through the annual ritual of the ANZAC Day dawn services and the veterans' march, or through the books and films?

Ritual as the repetition of the sacred and as 'privileged moments of communal unity' is so unlike the hermeneutic tradition of displacement, taking meanings elsewhere, observation from a distance. A ritual, like initiation, has to be taken on its own terms so that it is not understood, but performed: it means what it does via immediate relations between objects, things, feelings, words, music ... so multiple in its heterogeneous codes and forces that this immediacy is not any shutting down into primitivity.

In this context José Gil advocates taking seriously traditional people's own words to describe things (a well-accepted anthropological practice), but formulates a new approach in terms of forces:

to stop giving prime attention to the meaning of signs, to their representational contents, in order to focus instead on their practical effects. To give up trying to decode the significance hidden behind symbols, but to ask what forces they draw on or shore up, and through which mechanisms they are likely to trigger certain effects ... In other words, and we must stress this notion, it is not a question of studying forces (magical, religious, prestigious or whatever) according to their representational contents, but to grasp them in the way they function in their own right, that is, in the way they may differ from the signs and symbols that are attached to them.

So many Aboriginal stories culminate in metamorphoses of this kind, beings turn into trees, stars, or tracks. But these are not everyday stories, they are magical stories underpinned by strong beliefs and rituals that function to intensify the (bodily) energies of the participants in the ceremony. A ritual performance is an event where codes (music, dance, myth, organization of space), which are normally quite separate in everyday life are brought together and condensed so that actual transformations can be brought about on the bodies of the participants, or a single participant: an initiate to be made into a man and imbued with knowledge, a sick
person to be cured, etc. These bodies 'turn into' the body of the ancestor-snake, or the pain in the body is transformed into a shard of quartz, etc.

For palaeontologists one of the first signs of human societies is the ritual treatment of the dead: charred remains of bones. Funerary rites attribute power to the dead, cast a magical protective veil between the community of the living and the dead, accept the gift of their moral legends, and generate ancestral prestige in the form of honour. This primal ritual is the one being contested between the dead of the post-imperial wars and the Aboriginal wars.

In this essay I have tried to show that the secular state finds in its foundation myths and rituals the same magico-religious forces observable in the rituals, the poiesis, of non-state societies. Accounting for the force of the cultural means accounting for the persistence of ritual in state societies, not to mention the persistence of others' rituals in these societies in their radical plurality:

The history of the State in the West has been a long process of disengagement of political power from its religious roots, while at the same time seeking out a new sacred foundation for its authority. This would be an interminable task. Where is the transcendence of the secular State to be sited, if it is away from religious or divine sources? It seems that no modern State has satisfactorily resolved this question. But history is revealing: in the absence of being able to give itself a religious foundation, the State will transfer aspects of its sovereignty and authority towards the 'nation'; and the latter will be founded on the power of the dead.33

The resurgence, in recent years, of the power of Aboriginal cultural formations in the context of Australia as nation emerges not just as a consequence of calculations about politics and justice, but also because of the resurgence of the power of Aboriginal rituals and Aboriginality in rituals. This would be most significant in revisions of history and nationhood seeking to pay homage to the Aboriginal dead. Making the unknown soldier in a shrine of remembrance a body from the original local wars would be the radical gesture to honour all dead and those particular dead. It would change the site of our foundation myths to this country (rather than overseas wars) and create the possibility of seeing in Australia's Aboriginal wars the horror and violent legitimacy of sacrifice and gift.

In the domain of the cultural, 'primitive' and 'modern' spark in their connectedness and their contradictions. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people have different feelings about events and the ways in which their histories are understood, lived and performed. But if social processes that matter are not understood as purely secular, and history is a practice that changes things like national identity, then histories like Henry Reynolds's partake of the sacred. Unreflective about current debates or his own historiographical practice, Reynolds is a 'just do it'
A simplicity which announces 'these are all incontrovertible facts from the past' has a paradoxically greater claim on moral and political transformations of the present. This is just one of the strange potencies of historical rituals. Another is a prose composed of the subtle and poetic interweavings of narrative and argument, as well as public performance as both storytelling and ritual. It is thus connected to cycles of renewal, cycles that can be sited in, for instance, a country where sacredness need no longer be a past religiosity we have transcended, but particular instances of the present where communal feelings are intensified.  

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NOTES

1 Henry Reynolds, The Law of the Land (Ringwood: Penguin, 1992), pp. 1–2, notes that while the possible twenty thousand Aborigines killed in the course of settlement were not 'in a legal sense, foreign enemies ... a few were shot down during periods of martial law' that 'most were murdered—nothing more nor less'. See Howard Pedersen and Banjo Woorunmura, Jandamarra and the Bunaba Resistance (Broome: Magabala Books, 1993) and my discussion in 'Experimental history? The "Space" of History in recent Histories of Kimberley Colonialism', The UTS Review, 2.1 (1996), pp. 1–11, in relation to 'guerilla' resistance.


8 Taussig, The Magic of the State, p. 150.


12 Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories ...', p. 27.

13 Chakrabarty, 'Minority Histories ...', p. 23.


Henry Reynolds, 'Beyond the Frontier' (interview with Heather Felton), *Island*, 49, (Summer 1991), 30–37, p. 33, quoted 'in writing about the past we have to be able to make imaginative leaps ... History, by definition, has to be able to make that leap across barriers of time and culture'. Mark Gibson, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 1.1 (January 1998), p. 147, quoted 'Henry Reynolds and Aboriginal History: Postcolonialism and the claiming of the past'.

Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1996), a book on returned soldiers, wrote partly out of this feeling: 'I have no experience of war, nor any real knowledge of military history, but few things move me more deeply than remembrance ceremonies, and few pieces of music wrench the heart more than 'The last Post' (p. 8).


Gil, *Metamorphoses of the Body*, p. 52–3

Dening, 'Past Imperfect', p. 4.