The epistemological foundations of contemporary Aboriginal religion: some remarks on the Ngarrindjeri

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I begin with two glosses that were provided by Ngarrindjeri women of the Lower Murray River area, South Australia, concerning the claim of restricted women’s religious knowledge during the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Affair. One was made by Doreen Kartinyeri, and has been often cited: ‘This isn’t a Dreaming, it’s reality’. The other was made by way of the original submission by the proponent women to Cheryl Saunders, where the nature of the claim was described as ‘not mythological but spiritual’. Little attention has been paid to how these utterances might represent an enormous transformation in the Ngarrindjeri understanding of ‘the sacred’ in comparison with the religious world of the Ngarrindjeri sketched by the Berndts’ elderly informants in the 1940s. Indeed, since Stanner’s pioneering efforts, in recent treatises on contemporary ritual observance among the Yolngu (e.g. Keen 1994; Morphy 1991) the question of the contrasting epistemological foundations of Western Christianity and Aboriginal religion is hardly acknowledged. I will briefly suggest what the nature of that transformation might be here.

The European Reformation as we all know heralded the advent of religious pluralism in Western society and — as a corollary to that — it secured the commitment to the separation of secular and religious power. It marked the beginning of the demise of the Eastern religious mystery upon which the original doctrine of divine intervention was first established, and introduced the modern notion that the presence of God and His effects on the human and natural worlds are mediated through the symbols we manipulate to betoken His presence and influence.

I wish to draw attention to several dimensions of this, here. An important shift in this process involved the position of Man in the divine scheme: Man moved from being a component within a total Creation of God to the entire point of the Creation (the idea of John Scotus Erigena, who propounded the first view of the transubstantiation as met-

1. See Lucas 1996.
aphor, also proposed the notion of Man as *copula mundi*, that is, the 'universal catalyst', the Being who, created in God's image, thus reflects all things).

Another important effect of the Reformation, as seen clearly for example in the theories of John Wycliffe, among others, was to remove God as an immanent presence on earth and in Man and his community, and to relegate Him to His ethereal throne in Heaven, where He would subsequently act through the media of symbols and Church authority. The nature of man's religious experience would henceforth be of the nature of an interior 'indwelling' of the spirit of God or Christ, rather than any substantial external effect of an immanent power (see Wagner 1986).

I propose to take a similar view of the transformation in Aboriginal religion, at least among those populations who have undergone a more or less thorough 'missionisation' effort during this century. Of course, the western epochal transformation from Man as effect of Creation to Man as in charge of it, took hundreds of years, and in this sense we can perhaps see the more rapid transformation of Aboriginal religion, insofar as its pre-contact form had much more in common with our medieval, pre-modern form of Western religion, as an ontogenetic recapitulation of a cultural-historical phylogenetic event that is deeply inscribed in the Western perception.

The first observation I should like to make about this 'Great Transformation' in the Aboriginal context is the severance of the so-called religious system from the productive system of subsistence activity envisaged as a purposeful movement over, transformation of, and appropriation of the land and its resources. Knowledge of the land was part and parcel of subsistence *tut court*. Knowledge of songs was linked to the territory through knowledge of the Aboriginal names of places. When this productive-motile nexus was broken, as for example by forced relocation to mission stations, a key juncture supporting the religious system was lost. When knowledge of places is lost, an important buttress of the landscape of spiritual life goes with it. Thus in the Hindmarsh Island case, Doreen Kartinyeri stated that she had retained the knowledge of the restriction and its cosmological dimensions, but had not known the actual place to which it was attached.

The second point I want to make is that here Ngarrindjeri beliefs did evince features that set them apart from other well-documented Aboriginal religious systems. It is true that the geographical dimension of subsistence was important, and the Ngarrindjeri apparently had a myth-landscape nexus similar to the rest of Australia; however, their religious life was somewhat differently centered: they had a central and well-developed notion of personal power and the importance of personal attributes in its quest. Reading the Berndts' account (1993), one is reminded of the Yaqui Indian efforts to become a man of power (see Castaneda 1974). The Berndts draw attention to the notion of *miwi*, the physical seat of awareness and emotion, but also the source of physical strength and vitality. The *miwi* was an innate characteristic of the person, but it could be trained, enhanced and nurtured through proper techniques. Closely related to this was the role of the healers, the *putari*, who allegedly were the individuals in whom

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2. Draper maintains that the Ngarrindjeri were unique in that they occupied an especially fertile and well-stocked environment whose reproductive vitality needed far less human intervention than did other areas of the continent.
originally reposed the restricted knowledge at issue in Hindmarsh Island. But the role of the putari, among other things, involved the power to control the ngatji, the totem species, and to harness it in relation to the person’s mivui. It appears then as if the putari in one respect mediated between the totemic/species world and an interior one of personal power. This intensification of the personal dimension of religious experience would already have positioned the traditional Ngarrindjeri closer to what Luckmann describes as the condition of contemporary religion (1996: 73).

The third point I wish to make is that we are in the midst of a post-modern blurring of religious and secular authority which is the opposite of the medieval subordination of the human to the divine. Because what we identify as the ‘religious’ in Aboriginal tradition cannot be separated from the epistemological, the political and the productive, any legislation that purports to protect Aboriginal tradition must therefore be prepared to pass judgement on the nature of Aboriginal religion. This represents an intrusion of the polity into religious affairs. Religion becomes an affair of state not because the polity has once more become divine, but precisely because of the opposite condition: that religion has become a subordinate adjunct of ethnic, national and racial identity, protected by those legislative Acts that buttress pluralist freedom. Because culture has become aestheticised, the role of religion within it has also, something that is perhaps inevitable under the conditions of pluralism in today’s democracies. We are less interested in it as a manifestation of a very different conception of the human and more as a component of identity assertion within such pluralist polities. We may wish to accept that in contemporary cases of indigenous cultural revival in Australia and elsewhere around the world, ‘traditional religious practices’ may be more important as items on a preservationist agenda for identity management and promotion, than they are as cosmological supports for a different world. The boundary between these acts and anti-racial vilification legislation becomes very ambiguous, something which can be said to have been acknowledged by Aboriginal people themselves for example, the Ngarrindjeri proponent women, and Marcia Langton.

My last point concerns the contemporary practices of recognising and defining culture and cultural difference. While pre-colonial Aboriginal communities were well aware of cultural differences between themselves and others, the conclusions that indigenous people drew from the perception of such linguistic, ceremonial and productive differences did not concern ‘culture’ as such, but more particularistic foci of differentiation, such as myth and place as sources of human distinctness.

The coming of the Europeans created a new and external perspective upon this regime of social differentiation for Aboriginal people. The terms of human interest and intention shifted from the representation of the signs of one’s specific local and ceremonial identity to the meta-representation of the contemporary contexts that served as their conditions of visibility. The phenomenon we call the ‘Invention of Tradition’ takes places within this meta-representational register, what we can gloss broadly in Sahlins’ terms (1981) as the culture of the conjuncture, a relational moment that has particular historical and temporal as well as semiotic properties. The Euro-Australian culture of legal

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3. 'The new, basically de-institutionalized, privatized social form of religion seemed to be relying primarily on an open market of diffuse, syncretistic packages of meaning, typically connected to low levels of transcendence and produced in a partly or fully commercialized cultic milieu'.
and bureaucratic classification that forms the dominant element within this conjunctural nexus stipulates that for a legitimate pre-Western, pre-modern Aboriginal community, 'tradition' must be seen to remain uncontaminated by external and foreign elements. And yet under the Western legal framework in which they are forced to confront the terms of their own cultural distinctness, indigenous Australians find this impossible.

Those indigenous people are now working within a blatantly 'entified' regime, where culture and society are now items of human conscious fabrication. Like us, they have incorporated a new domain of unarticulated ground against which human action can be made to appear. They have now been recast as social beings in possession of 'a tradition and heritage', rather than men and women of power for whom the conventions of culture and social life were previously taken for granted. No longer do Aboriginal communities in settled Australia such as the Ngarrindjeri seek to objectify the ancestors through inspection of the present day traces of their primordial presence; they now have to objectify the tradition of ancestral authority itself for the benefit of anthropologists and lawyers who must characterise and make a case for a more westernised version of such tradition in the courts.

We need to not only recognise the quality and social placement of objectification involved in such a situation. We need to understand the moment of historical transformation that such new forms of objectification point to, and anticipate the future effects of such conjunctural forces on the development of contemporary forms of Aboriginal religion. Upon these characterisations rests whatever incommensurability we may still wish to recognise between Aboriginal and Western religious life.

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References


