CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Society for Comparative Studies in Society and History

http://www.jstor.org

On Being Woken Up:
The Dreamtime in Anthropology and in Australian Settler Culture

PATRICK WOLFE

University of Melbourne

In the wake of decolonisation, an increasing number of analyses turned the ethnographic gaze onto anthropology itself. Humbler postcolonial strategies emerged, designed to democratise anthropology's intercultural staging by means of an exchange of dialogue (Crapanzano 1977, 1980; Dwyer 1977, 1982). Though sensitive to the backdrop of neocolonialism, however, these strategies largely ignored anthropology's own cultural genealogy in favour of a more particularistic focus on the scene of ethnographic interaction.

Stepping back from the front line of ethnography, James Clifford, in particular, has sought to situate anthropology in a richer intracultural setting—or "predicament"—which highlights the interplay between ethnographic trends and developments in artistic, literary, dramatic (but, interestingly, not musical) modes of expression. Nonetheless, his analyses are simultaneously intercultural (1988). Despite establishing an impressive range of connections, however, Clifford tends to depict anthropology passively, as simply congruent with, rather than dialectically productive of, other cultural practices. Accordingly, for all their thickness, his descriptions are ultimately apolitical. They neither analyse anthropology's role in sustaining and reproducing colonialism nor in delimiting indigenous responses to it.

Though Talal Asad's (1986, *cf.* 1973) critique of anthropology is overtly political, he fails to account for his own ability to frame it. Thus the inequality whereby "strong" imperial codes can subordinate third-world languages is depicted as a one-way process. There is no evaluation of the possibilities for native subjects to appropriate the code to their own ends. In particular, although Asad's selection of language as a synecdoche for the ubiquitous effects of colonial domination is effective, he does not go on to analyse what it means when the colonised subject speaks the language of nationalism. Thus he cannot analyse that language's dialectical confinement within terms imposed by the very code which it strives to resist.

To acquire a hegemonic language is to submit to a framework in which local meanings can take on unpredictable significance in relation to oppositions or associations whose determination is independent of local factors. In such a language, nationalism does not just speak. It also bespeaks an unequal history, which preempts and delimits the scope of what can be said. Thus learning a strong language is not enough to give strength to a colonised subject. Likewise, simply letting both parties speak cannot redress an all-encompassing machinery of inequality. In both cases, the consequences of speaking cannot be assumed but should be located within the overall machinery.

In what follows, I attempt to trace an item of anthropological language through a context of unequal power. In keeping with Asad, the analysis is political. It also stresses language's role in sustaining and reproducing a larger machinery of power relations, to which end it is appropriate to develop Clifford's contextual lead.

Anthropology is analysed here, in a manner adapted from Mauss, as a total cultural practice: in this case, one which both expresses and sustains the hegemonic process of colonial settlement.[1] In other words, my tribe is the anthropologists. Anthropological debates are my primary data, rather than a means to a shared end. Thus I am neither attempting to answer the questions which anthropologists have asked themselves, nor am I arbitrating their disputes, since to do so would be to analyse indigenous, as opposed to anthropological, discourse. Indigenous discourse only intrudes into the analysis when it submits to anthropological language, at which point it acquires significance in relation to oppositions and associations which have developed within the colonising culture. The object of the following analysis is, therefore, an anthropological construct called the Dreamtime, and not any presumptive Koori precedent.[2]

---

[1] "In these *total* social phenomena, as we propose to call them, all kinds of institutions find simultaneous expression: religious, legal, moral, and economic. In addition, the phenomena have their aesthetic aspect and they reveal morphological types" (Mauss 1925 [1970]:1). Apart from the obvious differences of application, I have supplemented Mauss' formula with a Marxist emphasis on sustaining (i.e., contributing to the reproduction of) social processes.

[2] The object of analysis is anthropological discourse. Accordingly, aborigines, savages, blackfellows, and so forth, are figures of discourse, reproduced here as they appear in the primary textual data, spelled and capitalised according to the usages of texts under discussion. Indigenous people in Australia no longer generally name themselves according to the single category available in settler nomenclature, so they do not have a collective name. Accordingly, when it is necessary to distinguish the generality of indigenous people in Australia from the figures of discourse, I use the name Koori, since that is the appropriate name in Melbourne, which is the place of writing. In other words, I am aware that Koori is the name of the people from the south–east, but I use it because it is a name which is sanctioned by indigenous people in Australia. Similarly, the term "settler" suffers from its suggestion of a homogeneous uniformity. "Settler culture" is shorthand for a dominant, distinctive or generalisable set of Australian popular discourses with which anthropological concepts are here held to be continuous. Nevertheless, the following discussion exemplifies both anthropological opposition to the prevailing disciplinary consensus (the Strehlows) and antagonism within settler society at large (Gillen versus Willshire). Such controversies do not, however, detract from the manifest generality of the Dreaming complex as here analysed.

In Australia, the Dreamtime and its variants signify everything that was or remains aboriginal. Its currency encompasses scholarly and popular discourse. Though introduced into the Australian settler vocabulary through the writings of white anthropologists, the Dreamtime has become the central symbol of Koori cultural revivalism. In the context of the Australian cultural field as a whole, however, the Dreamtime concept encodes and sustains the subjugation and expropriation of the Koori population. This cultural irony is the object of the following analysis.

This paper traces the origin and historical development of the Dreamtime concept and shows how its affinity with the theoretical environment of late nineteenth-century anthropology followed from an ideological legacy linking the concept to themes that were fundamental to European colonial expansion. These themes penetrate cultural reaches which would otherwise appear to be historically and geographically distinct. Thus, from situating the Dreamtime in relation to broad post-Enlightenment generalities, the paper more specifically traces the concept's genealogy through anthropological theorising to the local ideologies of a frontier culture, where it provides a rationale for the seizure of territory occupied by nomads. The local ideology is not simply a reflection of macrohistorical determinations but a culturally specific formulation which undergoes transformations as settler society develops.

The discussion therefore covers a number of historical and cultural registers, between which there is some terminological variation, but in which a reference to dreaming is constant. To express this continuity, the term Dreaming complex will be adopted. This term has the further significance that, as a focus of intersection, a complex reflects the paper's holistic approach. The Dreaming complex is, in short, a total cultural practice, the special term being necessitated by the variety of names which its referent has borne.

I

That the Dreaming complex was an invention of the anthropologists' own culture[3] can be seen from the extraordinary success which it enjoyed once it had been coined in the ethnography of Frank Gillen. Indeed, before Gillen's phrase was even introduced, it had been advertised in advance by an Englishman, Baldwin Spencer, who spoke no Koori language, as "aptly" and "appropriately" rendered from the aboriginal (Spencer 1896b:50, 111). The phrase subsequently acquired such a peerless hegemony over Australian aboriginal anthropology that the discipline's foremost practitioners mutually misrepresented the phrase's history in order to associate themselves with its discovery. The sequence of events was as follows.

Spencer, professor of biology at the University of Melbourne, met Gillen, postmaster at Alice Springs, in 1894, while Spencer was on the Horn Scientific Expedition to central Australia.[4] The ensuing partnership between the

[3] Cf. Urry 1979:15.
[4] Mulvaney and Calaby 1985: ch. 9.

biologist and the local man harnessed scientific credentials to an otherwise incompatible familiarity with savagery.

"The dream-times" was one of the first fruits of this partnership. Spencer (1896a) edited the report of the Horn Expedition. At his instigation, Gillen (1896) contributed a memoir on some manners and customs of the Arunta. This memoir was appended to the fourth volume of the report, an arrangement which enabled Gillen's phrase to have been explicitly corroborated on two occasions by Spencer, in his sections of the report, before the reader had even encountered it.

In the first volume of the report, Spencer condemned the Hermannsburg Mission, near Alice Springs, emphasising the wretched condition of the remnants of its aboriginal population and maintaining that there was no evidence that the mission had ever done them any good. He contended that the missionaries should give up the attempt to improve the moral order of the Arunta, which, though it could not compare with white morality, was unequivocally preferable to the degeneracy which followed acculturation. This undisturbed order was the Dream times:

The morality of the black is not that of the white man, but his life so long as he remains uncontaminated by contact with the latter, is governed by rules of conduct which have been recognised amongst his tribe from what they speak of as the "alcheringa", which Mr. Gillen has aptly called the "Dream times" (Spencer 1896b:111).

From the outset, therefore, the Dream times were fatally susceptible to contact. According to Spencer's Social Darwinist rationale, aborigines confronted their far-distant future in the form of the whites, a strain whose superiority exemplified the cumulative operation of selection in a whole range of ways, from cranial enlargement to the attainment of abstract thought. Thus the ensuing doom of the aborigines was a result inscribed in the natural order of things and bound to accrue once others had reached a level of progress which enabled the crossing of barriers which were at once both geographic and phylogenetic.[5]

Gillen's actual translation, which followed in the fourth part of the report, was a nondescript debut. It occurred during an exposition of Arunta explanations for the origin of fire, which ancestors were held to have acquired "in the distant past (*ülchurringa*), which really means in the dream-times" (Gillen 1896:185). Yet the anticlimax is immaterial, since what matters is not Gillen's coinage of the term but the cultural logic whereby Spencer, who gave "Alcheringa" its new spelling, should have found Gillen's rendering so apt.[6] This was the moment when a mere aside—one of many, which could otherwise only have been regarded as equally random and inconsequential[7]—was first

---

[5] He maintained this outlook until the end of his career: "The greater the difference between the cultural levels of two associated races, the more rapidly does the lower one succumb; there is no such thing as grafting the higher upon the lower" (Spencer 1921:29).

[6] *Cf.* Mountford 1976:53, n. 12.

[7] For instance, in the same Memorandum, Gillen had referred on various occasions (1896:177, 181, 185) to "the long, long ago."

appropriated into discourse. Spencer's selection was not unmotivated. Nor did it cause the term's success. Rather, it was but the first in a cognate series of such selections whose aggregation consolidated the Dreaming complex.

Once coined, Gillen's phrase took off immediately. By 1900, it had found its way into the writings of European theorists who had not been to the ethnographic field but who had encountered it in a number of articles published jointly by Spencer and Gillen after 1896:

I dislike offering a theory about what occurred in the "Dream-time" (*Alcheringa*) behind our historical knowledge of mankind (Lang 1900:9).

Though the Alcheringa featured prominently in Spencer and Gillen's classic 1899 book on the Arunta, the term dream-times did not appear in it. But, in her book *The Euahlayi Tribe,* which went to press around the time that Spencer and Gillen's 1904 book (in which the phrase did appear) was published, Langloh Parker (1905:2) was already referring to "the Arunta myth of the Dream Time, the age of pristine evolution" without further explanation. The phrase would seem to have travelled by way of Oxford, since Andrew Lang, who wrote the introduction to Langloh Parker's book, had corresponded with her over its preliminary drafts. In any event, the Euahlayi were not from central Australia but from the east coast, so the equivalence asserted between their ideology and that of Spencer and Gillen's Arunta constituted an enormous geographical diffusion of the dream-times—one which was soon to extend to all aborigines.[8]

Yet one needs to go no further than the initial move from the Arunta to the Euahlayi for clear evidence that the extension of the term Dream Time was not ethnographically motivated. Not only was there no suggestion that the Euahlayi equivalent had anything to do with dreaming, but the doctrine to which the term was reapplied differed fundamentally from its original Arunta referent. For, although, as will be seen, Spencer and Gillen went to considerable lengths to refute Strehlow's claim that the Aranda (as he called them) had a monotheistic All-Father, insisting instead that the Alcheringa referred to an age of mythical but non-theistic ancestors, Langloh Parker's Euahlayi had a monotheistic supreme being in Byamee. Yet it was this Byamee who "in the first place, is to the Euahlayi what the 'Alcheringa' or 'Dream Time' is to the Arunta" (Langloh Parker 1905:6) Thus no claim about Koori discourse is necessary to invalidate the extension of the Dreaming complex from the Arunta to the Euahlayi.

The diffusion of the Dreaming complex through anthropological writing will be considered in greater detail below. For the moment, the point is that this diffusion was not prompted by ethnographic observation. The Dream Time was appropriate to the Euahlayi because they were aborigines, rather than because of any particular beliefs which they may have espoused. The

___

8 Exceptions such as "The Law," "History" or "Stories," though used locally by Kooris, have not affected the Dreaming complex's monopoly in settler discourse.

meaning of the term resided not in the doctrinal content of Alcheringa but in a thematic affinity between the two signs "dream" and "aborigine," which affinity obtained within the anthropologists' culture rather than within that— or those—of their subjects. Thus the success of Gillen's translation did not simply result from Spencer's having approved it in advance. Rather, that approval was itself culturally prefigured.

To set the subsequent demonstration of the Dreaming complex's prefigura-tion into context, it should first be noted that the concept's very opportuneness encouraged a mystification of its origins. This was because its success gave it high value in anthropological discourse: the Dreaming complex was some-thing to be associated with. Thus two of the three most eminent figures in Australian aboriginal anthropology misrepresented its origins in order to ap-propriate it to their own respective names, whilst the third (Radcliffe-Brown) left the field to the first two by ignoring the concept altogether.[9] It is, there-fore, little wonder that its true origins should have become obscured. This explains the otherwise puzzling fact that, even though the occurrence of the Horn Expedition was well-known—and an afternoon in a reasonable public library would have been more than enough to trace the origin of the Dreaming complex—none of the major figures in Australian aboriginal anthropology could correctly locate the concept's introduction.[10]

The obscurity surrounding the origins of the Dreaming complex enhanced its ethnographic credibility by virtue of its marginalising the role of an-thropologists. Indeed, it was appropriate that the aboriginal category *par excellence* should have no beginning, since aborigines were a people without a history. Even if its original authorship had been recognised, therefore, the concept's universal distribution within aboriginal culture would mean that Gillen's happening to be the first to place it on record could hardly be ac-counted a discovery, much less an invention. Thus a circle is closed: The very cultural appeal which first commended the concept to anthropologists subse-quently effaces itself, in the process reinforcing the hold of the concept.

The two who muddied the water were Spencer himself and, later, Elkin. Although Gillen's memoir was published in 1896, the Horn Expedition had actually taken place in 1894. Writing in 1926, however, Spencer was to trace the term back to fieldwork among the Arunta which he and Gillen had under-taken together two years after the Horn Expedition and which had formed the basis for their first major work, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia,* which had appeared in 1899:

---

[9] Radcliffe-Brown (1913:169) referred early to "the times long ago," a formula consistent with Gillen's initial (1896:177) "the long long ago." Later, when the Dreaming complex was firmly established, Radcliffe-Brown claimed (1952 [1945]:166) for his term "World Dawn" the preposterous ethnographic warrant that it "corresponds to certain ideas that I have found amongst the aborigines of some tribes."

[10] See Appendix (a).

It was during our work amongst the Arunta in 1896, when we were able to watch and study in its entirety the long and great Engwura ceremony that we first became acquainted with the terms *Alchera* and *Alcheringa*. . . . As indicating a past period of a very vague and, it seemed to us, "Dreamy" nature, we adopted, to express as nearly as possible the meaning of the word *alcheringa* (*alchera*, a dream, and *ringa*, a suffix meaning "of" or "belonging to") the term "dream times" (Spencer and Gillen 1927: 592).

Though this account leaves no room for doubt as to the year 1896, Elkin was later to use it to claim that Spencer had not discerned the dreaming connotation of Alcheringa until 1926. This then enabled Elkin to suggest that *he* had discovered the term at around the same time as Spencer but over a much wider ethnographic range:

The concept "Dream-time" arose out of Spencer and Gillen's use of the Aranda word Alcheringa (*Altjiranga*) in their classic *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899) to denote the mythic times of the ancestors of the totemic groups. However, when revising that book in Alice Springs in 1926, Professor Spencer found that "past mythic time" was only part of the meaning of Altjira; it also meant dream and, moreover, those Aborigines who were becoming familiar with English referred to the ancestral heroes, their past times and to everything associated with them as their Dreaming. And, in my own field-work from 1927 onwards in southern, central, north-western and northern regions of Australia, whatever the term, it was the "dreaming". *Altjira* in the Aranda tribe, *Djugur* in the vast western region of South Australia and neighbouring areas of Western and Central Australia, *Bugari* around La Grange and Broome, *Ungud* on the north of the King Leopold Range, Northern Kimberley, *Wongar* in North-Eastern Arnhem Land, and so on (Elkin 1964:210).

Three points anticipated in this version of events will figure prominently below. First, the fact of a single English word being interchangeable for all these different words derived from separate cultural regions has the effect of smothering multiplicity under a single undifferentiated category—"aboriginal"—defined in contradistinction to settler society. Second, Elkin represents Aborigines as proffering the English word dreaming as if they had been the authors of its translation. The third point is the terminological shift from dream-times to Dreaming, especially in so far as a reference (or lack of it) to time is concerned.

Before developing these points, however, the cultural background to the Dreaming complex needs to be sketched in. Since I do not intend to account for Eurohistorical watersheds, socially contexted analysis will be restricted to the local level, where it is possible to show the cultural selection and specification of a general post-Enlightenment theme.

II

Dreaming has long signified the subordinate aspect of a lop-sided ambivalence between scientific empiricism and various forms of subjective or romantic idealism in European discourse. Needless to say, this ambivalence

also extends to dichotomous representations of nature and of the female, as well as to the enduring alternation of base and noble savagery. This double-edgedness endows the romantic aspect with a contrary subtext, so that when, say, Andrew Lang (1898:xviii) places aborigines amongst the "most distinguished" of the world's dreamers, the distinction is bestowed to satirical ends. This ambivalence continues to the present day in the common settler quip equating the Dreamtime with alcoholic stupor. As will be shown, this ambivalence, which is an aspect of the cultural irony to which this paper is addressed, has substantial implications for settler ideologies concerning rights to land.

Being both subjective and impervious to logic, dreaming was bound to invite scientific antipathy (which was indeed expressed at least as early as Descartes' first *Meditation*[11]). In particular, dreaming's notorious disregard for sequential regularity ran counter to the whole discourse of time, discipline and order which Foucault (1967, 1977) has famously analysed. A century after Descartes, Buffon, one of the greatest of the Enlightenment systematisers, made the capacity to distinguish between dreams and reality a threshold which separated humans from animals. For Buffon, the reason that animals were incapable of distinguishing between dreams and reality was that they lacked a sense of time:

We remember dreams for the same reason that we remember former sensations: the only difference between us and the brutes is, that we can distinguish dreams from ideas or real sensations; and this capacity of distinguishing is a result of comparison, an operation of memory, which includes the idea of time. But the brutes, who are deprived of memory and of the faculty of comparing past and present time, cannot distinguish their dreams from their actual sensations (Buffon 1812 [1749]: 530–1).

By the second half of the nineteenth century, within the emergent discipline of anthropology, aspirations to scientific status ruled out any romantic reverence for dreaming's creative freedom. Rather, the abasement and promiscuity which characterised dreaming in the private realm were transferred to a scientifically constructed realm of savagery. From within the heartland of romanticism, for instance, the German anthropologist Adolf Bastian, whose international standing was yet to be rivalled by that of the Englishman Tylor, could hardly have expressed the construction more clearly:

Tribes in the state of nature surrender passively to the all too overwhelming impressions of the external world. For them, hallucinations and illusions maintain a half-conscious oscillation between dreaming and waking as a normal condition. Their entire mental condition enables them to create supernatural agencies or to believe in these unconditionally, with an intensity and to an extent, to the direct understanding of which luckily our logical thinking has long ago destroyed the bridge, or at least should have done so (Bastian 1868:118).[12]

[11] Descartes 1954 [1642]:61–3.
[12] F. Goodman, translator.

The difference between this statement and Buffon's is that, whereas Buffon had distinguished between people and animals, Bastian, through citing essentially the same criteria, was distinguishing between types of people. The theoretical watershed separating the two approaches was Darwinism, which both relativised Buffon's hiatus and enabled the opening up of comparable divisions within *genus homo*. Indeed, a quarter of a century before the emergence of the dream-times, Darwin himself, who had been to Australia, had compared the consciousness of Australian aborigines, who had "hardly any abstract words" and could not count above four, to the twitching of a sleeping dog reliving the chase in its dreams (Darwin 1871:i, 62).

Aborigines' unquestioned proximity to the animal state entailed in advance that they, like animals, should be held to confuse dreaming with everyday experience. An anthropological preoccupation with ritual encouraged such a conclusion, since ritual added to the input of the irrational. In this regard, scientific rationalism sustained discursive continuities which encompassed centuries. Thus, by way of Spencer and Gillen's account of totemic announcements among the Arunta, Frazer attributed precisely the same role to aboriginal ritual as, over a hundred and fifty years earlier, Buffon had attributed to animals' lack of a sense of time:

These announcements perhaps sometimes originate in dreams, for what a savage sees in a dream is just as real to him as what he sees in his waking hours. The thoughts of the natives are at times so much taken up with the performance of sacred ceremonies that it is quite natural that they should dream of them and take the visionary images of sleep for revelations of those spirits with whom their own spirit has been communing during the lethargy of the body (Frazer 1910:i, 212).

To turn more specifically to anthropology, Frazer's estimate of dreaming's importance in savage life did not simply reflect European rationalism in general. Within that overall tradition,[13] his estimate was specifically predicated upon Tylor's theory of Animism, whose key premise was dreaming, and which dominated late nineteenth-century anthropological thought. According to this theory, whose paradigm enunciation was Tylor's landmark (1871) *Primitive Culture,* the first abstract conception was the notion of a soul, or of a spiritual double detachable from the body, which occurred to savages as an explanation for the sensation of moving about in their dreams. Animism had both cognitive and religious significance since, once spirit doubles had been conceptualised, they could be attributed to a whole range of objects—hence fetishism, totemism and other forms of idolatry.

In keeping with the conventional evolutionary conflation of individual and species development, Tylor (1871:i,431) deemed animism a childish doctrine,

[13] For a classical precedent opposing dreams and science in a manner closely anticipating Tylor's theory of Animism, see Lucretius (1886:iv, 29–39). Voltaire (1967 [1770]:425) anticipated the theory by a century, whilst Hobbes (1909 [1651]:17, 83) had anticipated it a century before Voltaire.

"the infant philosophy of mankind," which was no different to the nursery belief that sticks or toys were alive. It was not that the conclusions which savages drew from their experiences were invalid. Rather, an incapacity to distinguish between dreams and veridical sense data[14] rendered their reliance upon experience a mockery of the sensory foundations of scientific empiricism:

Everyone who has seen visions while light-headed in fever, everyone who has ever dreamt a dream, has seen the phantoms of objects as well as of persons. How then can we charge the savage with far-fetched absurdity for taking into his philosophy and religion an opinion which rests on the very evidence of his senses (Tylor 1871:i,431)?

In sum, then, savages' impartial crediting of all sensation made them the hapless dupes of somatic caprice. It is in this connection that the singular value of dreaming for evolutionary anthropology can be most clearly seen, for, emanating from within the private constitution of the sleeper, dreams afforded a nexus which linked the physical and the mental. Thus they provided a bridge between the animal and the human, the concrete and the abstract, craniology and culture. Aborigines thought with their bodies: Their brute senses were geared to tracking game; they counted on their fingers; and so on. Thus their sign language testified to their lingering failure to abandon direct tactile reference in favour of the relative abstraction of vocal representation (hence they needed to stay within the light of their campfires in order to converse at night[15]). This combination of the somatic and the semiotic had made aborigines into dreamers long before the Dreamtime.

The contention that the Dreaming complex constituted the culmination of a historical discourse which subordinated dreaming savages to the level of animal nature shares some ground with Ortner's (1974) claim that the female category is universally subordinated in an analogous manner. Thus it is no accident that the dream-times should have emerged at the same time as psychoanalysis, which brought together a similar assemblage of themes—women, savagery, childhood, irrationality, instinct, ritual, and so forth—within a scientific discourse on dreaming.[16]

A further consequence of the theory of animism was theological, for the idea of a world populated by a multitude of vitalised objects did not entail their being worshipped. The issue was of some moment, as religious senti-

[14] This was a common theme. Herbert Spencer (1871:150), for instance, claimed that savage languages were incapable of distinguishing between "I saw" and "I dreamed that I saw." Thus it was conventional that Howitt (1884:187, 1904:411) should attribute aboriginal beliefs to a failure to distinguish between dreaming and reality. Spencer and Gillen's (1904:451) version repeated Tylor and Herbert Spencer word for word.

[15] For a model statement of the whole formula from a follower of Tylor, see Clodd (1885:223–4; cf. H. Spencer 1871:142–97).

[16] The first, German edition of Freud's The Interpretation of Dreams was published in 1899, though its title page was postdated to 1900 (Freud 1976:34).

ment had also been proposed as a feature distinguishing people from ani-
mals.[17] In contrast, Tylor's theory eliminated moral and theological criteria
from a scientific definition of humanity. Though not jeopardising the human
status of its practitioners, however, the lowest, dream-related form of ani-
mism was categorically pretheistic in Tylor's scheme, merely furnishing the
ground upon which gods would later develop (Tylor 1871:i, 1)

   This clear distinction between animism and theism illuminates one of the
transformations of the Dreaming complex. Although the Dreaming was later
to be adduced by Stanner (1965:213–21) as evidence of aboriginal religiosity,
Spencer and Gillen not only avoided the term religion in relation to the dream-
times but actually resisted its use. Following Turgot and Comte, Frazer had
ranked religion as an evolutionary advance from magic, with science subse-
quently developing out of religion. On this basis, Spencer (1904:404) ex-
plicitly proscribed the use of the word religious in relation to the Arunta, for
whom the term magical was appropriate.

   This exclusion of the dream-times from religion underlay the long-running
dispute between Spencer and the Lutheran missionary Carl Strehlow, whose
Hermannsburg Mission had been the subject of Spencer's disparaging re-
marks. Though they were in total opposition over the question of aboriginal
religiosity, neither doubted that the dream-times and religion were incompati-
ble. Thus the dispute was over whether or not blacks had a dream-time, rather
than over what it would have meant if they had.

   Strehlow repudiated Gillen's translation, contending that "a 'dream-time'
is unknown to the blacks."[18] Whilst Strehlow's rare proficiency in Aranda
might seem to have made him a more credible authority than Spencer and
Gillen, the concept of the dream-times brought the protagonists' professional
interests into direct conflict. Spencer's interest in the primitiveness of his
ethnographic discovery encouraged a denial of the very faculty—a religious
sentiment—which was prerequisite to the success of Strehlow's evangelical
enterprise. Thus Strehlow alleged that the word Altjira (the alchera in Al-
cheringa) referred to an Aranda good god, to which Spencer responded with
the claim that, in translating the Lutheran canon into Arunta, the Hermanns-
burg missionaries had rendered Gott as Altjira and had inculcated the usage in
daily prayers, which accounted for Strehlow now finding that the word had a
monotheistic import.[19]

   Beyond the particular issue of theology, however, a more general transfor-
mation took place between Spencer's and Stanner's approaches. Though Stan-
ner is not to blame for the New Age caricature which enveloped aborigines in

---

[17] In Australia, and with reference to aborigines, by J. Dunmore Lang 1861:374. Cf. Schmidt,
1931:58.

[18] Strehlow in Thomas 1905:430. For a fuller context, see Appendix (b).

[19] See Appendix (b).

the wake of the 1960s, his celebrated 1956 article, "The Dreaming," which remains the definitive expression of the concept, represents a distinct shift towards the romantic pole:

The truth of it [The Dreaming] seems to be that man, society, and nature and past, present, and future are at one together within a unitary system of such a kind that its ontology cannot illumine minds too much under the influence of humanism, rationalism, and science (Stanner 1956:54).

Though cautioning against a European tendency to view all aboriginal thought as ruled by mysticism, Stanner depicts his blackfellow as a stock transcendental other in contrast to the order and efficiency of settlement:

What defeats the blackfellow in the modern world, fundamentally, is his transcendentalism (Stanner 1956:61).

Defeat, here, has serious implications, since it is equated—in a manner at first sight reminiscent of Spencer's Social Darwinism—with "extinction" (Stanner 1956:61). Yet Stanner's rhetoric is very different to Spencer's evolutionist resignation. When Spencer asserted (1896b:111) that "in contact with the white man the aborigine is doomed to disappear," he meant that the people would die out. For Stanner, on the other hand, extinction has the quality of a literary event:

A good analogy is with the process in Chinese poetry by which, according to Arthur Waley, its talent for classical allusion became a vice which finally destroyed it altogether (Stanner 1956:61).

The apparent offensiveness of Stanner's own allusion is inexplicable until one decodes what he means by extinction. In the overall context, this judgement does not refer to the lives of the erstwhile inhabitants of the Dreaming (by 1956, their physical extinction was no longer a feasible prospect) but to their transcendental mentality.

The difference between Spencer and Stanner is symptomatic of a much more general process. On the ideational level, this process can be characterised as the extension of the scientific realm. On the local level, it has a material correlate in the extension of colonial settlement. The two are cognate. Moreover, in addition to thematic continuity through the shared imperatives of order, regularity and control, they have a common developmental structure.

To deal with this common structure first: when Tylor coined his theory of animism, he was, as observed, engaged in establishing anthropology's credentials as a science.[20] In the process, he not only had to carve out a space between established sciences (archaeology, philology and so forth), but he also took it upon himself to discredit the dissenting "pseudo-sciences" of spiritualism, astrology, divination and the like, which he stigmatised as anom-

---

[20] Burrow 1968:234–41. Cf. (regarding Tylor) Marett 1941:308; Stocking 1987:267.

alous modern survivals of the savage germ of animism.[21] Animism's associa-
tion with dreaming was part of the stigma. There was nothing unusual about
Tylor's attitude, which Frazer and Spencer shared. It simply represented a
continuation of the long-standing scientific opprobrium which attached to
dreaming as a signifier for subjectivity and disorder. As Freud observed (1976
[1900]:212), "The phrase 'Dreams are froth' seems intended to support the
scientific estimate of dreams." This estimate is the contemporary context in
which Spencer's selection of Gillen's phrase should be understood. By con-
trast, when Stanner was writing, over half a century later, anthropology was
well established and no longer had grounds for anxiety over its possible lack
of disciplinary status.[22] Stanner had no need to prove that he was on the side
of science.

This academic consolidation echoed the consolidation of settlement in Aus-
tralia. In the 1890s, when Spencer was amongst the Arunta, the frontier
remained a reality to the north and to the west.[23] Hostile natives were still
being "dispersed," as the official euphemism put it, to make way for settle-
ment.[24] By the time of Stanner's article, however, settlement had been effec-
tively completed. On both academic and political counts, therefore, savages
and their dreaming had become detoxified by the 1950s.

Besides the common developmental structure, there are certain thematic
continuities. So far, we have only considered ideas and theories in isolation
from the social forces which bore them. We have also remained within the
realm of learned discourse. When we move from the level of metropolitan
theories to consider their appropriation into local culture, however, it becomes
possible to suggest the diversity of the discourses which the Dreaming com-
plex combined. In the section that follows, ideologies which are distinctive of
a particular frontier culture will be shown to be adaptations of the general
post-Enlightenment themes outlined above, which are further modified as the
local situation develops. Thus, though the imperative of order is an obvious
common denominator between science and colonisation, it takes on idiosyn-
cratic forms in the Australian context.

The addition of a local dimension allows the concept of total cultural
practice to be clarified. As will be seen, the Dreaming complex tied different
levels of discourse (epistemic, local, political, poetic, and so forth) into a
culturally distinctive knot. Similarly, though expressed in language, it was
language which operated synecdochically, both encapsulating and contribut-
ing to the historical development of settler society. Thus the cultural appropri-

21 Tylor 1867:91.
22 See Markus 1990:144–5.
23 In practice, there was, obviously, no simple demarcation between two monolithic societies
but a spectrum of articulation running from first encounter to incorporation. Thus the term
frontier is used here to signify a settler construct for the continuing existence of unincorporated
aboriginal social units. It is, therefore, equivalent to the term bush black.
24 Mulvaney 1989:100.

ation of the Dreaming complex was not a passive process. Rather, the concept was taken into use as an active representation within Australian settler culture, where it took on new contextual meanings which shifted its original significance.

As opposed to the situation in, say, most Asian or African colonies for example the people who invaded Australia did not seek simply to dominate indigenous society in order to extract a surplus from it. They sought to replace indigenous society. Pastoral settlement was seen as a zero-sum conflict: as the folk aphorism had it, "niggers and cattle don't mix."[25] For this culture of settlement, dreaming had a particular ideological salience on account of its conformity with the idea that colonial intrusion was a form of awakenment. Though the idea of awakenment was a commonplace of the doctrine of progress, legitimating conquest right across the colonised world, the settlement of land belonging to nomads gave it a special twist. For what was to be aroused there was not the people but the land itself, which, having never felt the improving iron of cultivation, had yet to become property.[26] In reducing the land to order, then, settlement was rescuing it from nature as reason rescues consciousness from the chaos of dreaming. Whereas the colonisation of surplus-generating civilisations which had had golden ages was depicted as renaissance, dreaming aborigines had merely occupied the land, so settlement was not occupation. Like the mist, therefore (or like Freud's "froth"), the dream-times evaporated with the dawning of settlement, leaving behind only land as the other party to the colonial encounter. In other words, the Dreaming complex constituted an ideological elaboration of the doctrine of *terra nullius*,[27] emptying the land so that settler and landscape formed a dual interaction with the characteristic proportions of mind over matter. This ideological bracketing-off—whereby aborigines were either effaced from the land or assimilated to it, leaving "a blank page on which the white man could write his will and his hopes"[28]—is of such cultural depth that journalists, popularisers, schoolbooks and children's stories have repeated it tirelessly:

The unique aspect of the Australian colonial experience was that there were two great protagonists, the settlers and the very land itself (Harris 1967:1–2).

The theme of precolonial somnambulance, a blend of dreaming and the aimless Walkabout, suffuses Australian liberal culture, as evidenced by its

---

[25] Reynolds 1982:129.

[26] The reference is to Vattel's doctrine of natural law, whereby rights to land accrued from tillage or pasturage. It was expressed in a passage from Herbert Spencer's *Social Statics* republished as a pamphlet in Melbourne in 1870 by the Land Reform League: "Cultivation is commonly considered to give a legitimate title. He who has reclaimed a tract of ground from its primitive wildness, is supposed to have thereby made it his own" (H. Spencer 1870:7). See also Bridges 1970; Reynolds 1989: ch. 3.

[27] Spencer himself entitled the third book of his popular *Wanderings in Wild Australia* (Spencer 1928) "Australia's Great Lone Land."

[28] The quotation comes from the jacket notes to Fisher 1968, a widely used school text book. Examples of this point could be multiplied indefinitely.

coffee-table literature (*Time Before Morning, The Dawn of Time,* and so on). Walkabout could only be aimless, as there was nowhere to go in a signless void unorganised by pioneering purpose. For settlers, the wilderness was void because its contents had no use—a random assemblage of protean forms, they were to be replaced rather than domesticated or employed. Thus land was but a spatial condition, rather than one of the forces, of production. Hence aborigines' assimilation to the landscape amounted to the same thing as their efface-ment from it. According to this ideology, they were part of its useless original contents rather than acknowledged sources of labour, as witnessed by their legendary unsuitability for work.[29] In what might be called its hard version, this formula implied that aborigines needed clearing along with everything else on the land. Whilst it is relatively rare to find modern examples of this version, it was predicated upon a narrative structure which remains abun-dantly alive in the softer trappings of liberal romanticism:

What a fascinating place Australia is! When one thinks of the centuries of civilisation that have passed over China, India, and Europe and here you have a situation—still— in 1982 that most Australians are entirely ignorant of some parts of the continent, be it structure, wildlife, or the heart and soul of this beautiful old bronze raft that severed itself from the rest of the world, and slumbered in a "dream time" with its bizarre marsupials and its gentle Aboriginal people who believed that the landscape itself was the creation of their known world . . . (Olsen *et al.* 1984:12).

This theme is not dependent upon Gillen's particular verbal formula, having been recognisably, albeit unromantically, expressed before the appearance of the dream-times:

the weird savages, birds without wings, mysterious animals of land and water in this weird and "Strange Land of Dawning" (Purcell 1894:289).

Even on a strictly local level, the general theme was clearly present to the minds of settlers who were responsible for dealing with the Arunta. Thus Gillen's superior, a mounted policeman named W. H. Willshire who was local Protector of Aborigines, wrote a number of books recounting his homicidal exploits in the outback, one of which—published in the same year as the report of the Horn Expedition—was entitled *The Land of the Dawning* (Willshire 1896).

Despite its thematic compatibility, however, *The Land of the Dawning* does not mention the dream-times.[30] For the purposes of cultural selection, the verbal difference is crucial. As the earlier outline of the significance of dream-ing in European thought should suggest, it was simply not open to the Dawn-

[29] Aboriginal resistance to the discipline of labour imposed by the settlers is encapsulated in another English-language signifier for aborigines: Walkabout. By 1925, the dyarchy of the two signifiers had become such that Strehlow's anthropologist friend Basedow (1925:279) asserted, in relation to the Aranda, that "Altjerringa is the 'walk-about' of the spirit ancestors."

[30] Nor does Willshire's (1888) vocabulary of the Alice Springs natives, published eight years earlier. The first ever exhibition of aboriginal art (as "art"), held in the late 1880's in Adelaide, was entitled "Dawn of Art" (Jones 1988:165).

ing, or to other local analogues, to acquire the same purchase upon anthropological theory. The different levels of discourse conjoined by the Dreaming complex gave it a wide range of possible meanings, so that no synonym could substitute for it through all its uses. A further consequence of this versatility, to which discussion now turns, is that it enabled the Dreaming complex to become transformed in use.

Ignored thus far has been the fact that the phrase dream-times seems to consist in a paradox, the sense of time being conventionally excluded from dreams.[31] Indeed, controversy over whether or not the concept had a time reference accompanied the formulation of alternative nomenclatures such as the Dreaming, the eternal dream-time, and so forth. In its infancy, however, as Spencer and Gillen's 1904 Glossary illustrates, the dream times unequivocally referred to the past:

Alcheringa. Name applied by the Arunta, Kaitish and Unmatjera tribes to the far past, or dream times, in which their mythic ancestors lived. The word "alcheri" means dream (Spencer and Gillen 1904:745).

Yet this temporality contrasts with later characterisations of the Dreaming complex:

We realise that Spencer and Gillen's translation of Alcheringa and similar words as Dreamtime and Radcliffe-Brown's reference to World-Dawn, both meaning a past time, are not wrong, but are inadequate. The Aboriginal word includes the idea of "belonging to the dream" and my early translation of *djugur* as "eternal dreamtime", with which Roheim agreed, at least suggests that the Dreaming is an ever-present condition of existence (Elkin 1961:203).

The reason why Elkin deemed it not wrong, but merely inadequate, to represent the concept as applying to a past time is that it did refer to such a time. It was inadequate, however, so to limit it, since the concept also expressed a continuing or eternal reality, persisting, as Stanner (1956:52) put it, "everywhen." The discursive structure is, therefore, twofold, juxtaposing past origin and continuing present. For the argument to come, the fact that the two are juxtaposed (and thus coexistent), rather than amalgamated or collapsed, is central. Though ultimately encompassed, the two aspects are categorically distinct. A beginning did actually take place, whilst the ever-present evades placement in time—or, as Berndt (1974:8) expressed it:

Generally, the concept of the Dreaming refers to a mythological period which had a beginning but has no foreseeable end . . . these beings are believed to be just as much *alive* today as they ever were and as they will continue to be. They are eternal.

The juxtaposition of origin and presence is echoed in Australian nationalist ideology, in which the two are divided by a notional moment of settlement.

---

[31] Hence Sydney Hartland objected (1909:238) that alcheringa was "not very happily rendered by 'Dream-time,' seeing that the Aranda believe the events to have actually occurred in an indefinite but far past period."

Here the retrospective aspect, which is the counterpart of origin—"back in the Dreamtime"—refers to the inscrutable (but occasionally glimpsed) era before Captain Cook, the First Fleet, or whatever might serve to summarise the establishment of the nation.[32] Lacking a history, precontact Australia was unimaginable and, accordingly, unreal. Though it may seem to be labouring the obvious to state that the Dreamtime maps on to nationalist constructions of Australian prehistory, it is in its second aspect, that of the timeless ever-present, that the ideological consequence of the juxtaposition can best be appreciated. For the corollary of this unreal past became an unreal present which was the outcome of anthropological representations in which aborigines figured as ritually constituted entities.

The pervasiveness of ritual in anthropological representations of aborigines has already been noted with reference to Frazer, who saw habituation to ritual as encouraging savages' credulity in regard to their dreams. There are further reasons for the attractiveness of ritual, quite apart from a certain prurience discernible in the literature. Ritual presented condensed expressions of aspects of social structure, especially details of kinship systems, which might otherwise have escaped notice. In the case of small nomadic groups traversing large expanses of territory, even the people themselves, let alone the details of their social organisation, were liable to escape notice—a problem alleviated by the relative conspicuousness of large-scale ritual gatherings (which, given appropriate inducement, could usually be arranged).[33] Furthermore, ritual, with its exotica, together with the alien collectivism of classificatory kinship systems, constituted well-defined social–anthropological subject matter at a time when the discipline was in its institutional infancy.

In addition to these considerations, however, there was an overwhelming economic reason for the preponderance of ritual and kinship in anthropological discourse, which was that the great majority of anthropological data was collected from people who were dependent upon the settler economy. This does not mean that they were necessarily residents of missions, stations, prisons or other settler institutions, although most were. Pastoralism had such far-reaching ecological effects upon water, vegetation and game that people could lose control over the reproduction of their traditional mode of production even though they might be at a considerable distance from settlement, hence the cumulative pattern of nomadic groups coming in off their land.[34] Thus anthropological photographs which depicted functioning precontact social systems were usually misleading—as, of course, were representations of kinship as a conceptual diagram which systematised reproduction as if

---

[32] Scholarly examples include Flood's (1983) *Archaeology of the Dreamtime* and Fitzgerald's (1982) *From the Dreaming to 1915—A History of Queensland*.

[33] See T. G. H. Strehlow 1947:190, 1969:48–9, 1978:7. *Cf.* Howitt 1904:517–8, 624; Stirling 1896:28.

[34] See Reynolds 1982: ch. 6; Rowley 1972:206–11.

it required no terrestrial support. Similarly, although ritual practices could be adapted to meet changed conditions, anthropological analyses which present-ed ritual data as if they were embedded within viably functioning traditional societies had the effect of obscuring the expropriation of those societies.

In its second, ever-present aspect, the Dreaming complex was quintessen-tially a ritual concept. Thus it is significant that Spencer's misrepresentation of the history of the first, originary version of the concept should have derived it from the *Engwura* ceremony. In immortalising this three-month-long series of rituals as a kind of precontact swansong, Spencer and Gillen's 1899 book reenacted evolutionary taxonomy through its freezing of the Arunta in a present poised at the parting of the ways, when their empirical substrates passed on to acculturation or beyond. Moreover, the ritual aborigine which transpired conduced to the ideological bracketing-off whereby aborigines were excluded from the dual encounter between settlers and the land. To make this last observation clear, it is necessary to develop the twofold structure of the Dreaming complex more fully.

III

The twin aspects, origin and presence, have in common the feature of being discontinuous with the economic realities of settlement. Thus the Dreamtime as precontact idyll is lost, whilst, in the potentially more controversial realm of the present, dreaming aborigines hover in a mystically supported ritual space which does not conflict with the practical exigencies of settlement. The two coexist without meeting. Thus the timelessness of the ever-present Dreaming is actually a spacelessness.[35]

The primary ideological significance of the Dreaming complex was that it established ideal versions of settlers and aborigines which excluded shared features. Since the feature most crucially shared between the two was an economic interest in the same land,[36] it is consistent that the aspects of aboriginal life most stressed by the Dreaming complex should be precisely those with the least connection to economic existence. In other words, the scheme was the simplest of binary oppositions, substituting an ideal horizon-tal relationship—"encounter"—for the vertical reality of incorporation. Hence ambiguity was rendered repugnant. This feature received its most public expression where "miscegenation" was concerned, to the extent that "mongrel" remains one of the most potent insults in the settler repertoire. In a

---

[35] Swain (1988:454) makes a similar point, only in relation to Warlpiri, rather than settler, ideology: "What links the Dreaming 'past' and the present is, therefore, not time but place." Also perhaps relatedly—though with more romantic ("postrational"?) intentions—the German anthropologist Hans Peter Duerr has intoned (1985:121) that "The 'dream place' is everywhere and nowhere, just like the 'dream-time' is always and never. You might say that the term 'dream place' does not refer to any particular place and the way to get to it is to get *nowhere*."

[36] My reason for asserting that this was more crucial than the men's sexual interest in the same women is that the initial motivation for settlement was land rather than women.

more general sense, however, mediation of the pure opposition was not adaptation but aberration. The cultural hybrid, even though "full-blooded," could be ridiculous, grotesque or nefarious. Thus the incorporation of blacks into white society split into two the ambivalent post-Enlightenment image of savagery, attaching its negative side to the acculturated, leaving the good savage (or "bush black") as a completely good residue but always somewhere else. The ideal was a formula for imposing liability upon its empirical counterparts. Thus the romantic ideal and the repugnant hybrid represent opposite sides of the single message that bad savages do not deserve the land and good savages do not use it.

The two modes of the Dreaming complex emerged at separate stages in the history of Australian settlement. The originary, dream-times version was a frontier concept: to cross the frontier was to go back into the deep time preceding history. The emergence of the ever-present Dreaming, on the other hand, did not commence until over a quarter of a century later, in the late 1920s. Thus it coincided both with the statistical turning-point at which aboriginal numbers began to rise from their lowest level, recorded in 1921 (Lancaster Jones 1970:3–6) and with the effective disappearance of a frontier. These two developments coincided in placing aborigines within settler society. It is, therefore, consistent that Bates, who devoted a whole book (Bates 1938) to the contention that aborigines were "passing," should have referred in it to the Dreamtime, whilst Elkin, who opposed the claim that aborigines were dying out (Elkin 1952:244), should have been closely associated with the ever-present mode of the Dreaming complex.

With the emergence of the ever-present Dreaming, then, aborigines came in from behind the frontier and were finally assimilated into the nation state, only on terms of their economic invisibility. So far as this second mode is concerned, therefore, Elkin's "eternal dream-times" might perhaps be entitled to the priority which he claimed for it (Elkin 1932:128–9, 1933:11–12). As already observed, however, the classic statement of the ever-present version was to be Stanner's (1956) article, "The Dreaming," which exemplifies many of the preceding observations.

For present purposes, however, the significant feature of Stanner's article is the way in which he refers to blackfellows as a unity, rather than to distinct groups. Thus the diffusion of the Dreaming complex has become complete.[37] Stanner's article is suggestive in this regard, since, after crediting Spencer and Gillen with immortalising the term, he goes on to make the striking observation that it is not, after all, a translation of corresponding blackfellow words:

In their own dialects they use terms like *Alcheringa, mipuramibirina, boaradja*—often almost untranslatable, or meaning literally something like "men of old" (Stanner 1956:51).

[37] Though not as complete as in Micha's (1970:291) turnabout: "Thanks to Carl Strehlow, we have numerous examples of migrations of 'dream-time' groups in Central Australia."

A little lower, however, we find Stanner wondering:

Why the blackfellow thinks of "Dreaming" as the nearest equivalent in English is a puzzle (Stanner 1956:52).

Expressed thus, Stanner's puzzlement may seem curiously naive. It becomes understandable once it is set against the paradox of a precontact anthropology. For, just as the Dreaming complex had no place for the economics of incorporation, so, by the same token, did it preclude the consequences of a colonial *lingua franca*. Operating within the working assumptions of his discipline, Stanner did not have access to a range of possible reasons why blackfellows should so mistranslate.

<div align="center">IV</div>

Reports of aborigines referring to their Dreaming raise a question not thus far considered. The cultural affinities commending the term to a predominantly European imagination could hardly have appealed to such Kooris as had come to appreciate them.

Kooris' submission to anthropological language was the result of invasion rather than of cultural selection. With the spread of settlement, settler and Koori discourses merged. It follows that the isolation of anthropology for discrete analysis can only be a heuristic device. For, as part of the discourse of colonial power, anthropology becomes an object of contestation for the colonised, who seek to appropriate it to their own advantage by turning it back upon their expropriators. In the process, however, the colonised acquiesce in the terms encoded within that discourse, whereby their collective self-assertion finds expression as a species of nationalism, which, in turn, encodes the progress-based rationale for colonisation. Thus the collective unity underlying Koori (or "pan-Aboriginal") identity is itself the product of colonial conquest, which installed the prerequisite of a generalised other. More specifically, however, in adopting the twofold discursive structure of the Dreaming complex, Koori ideology recapitulates the familiar mythology of the nation state, which has an origin but is eternal. The irony of Kooris' adoption of the Dreaming complex is, accordingly, a symptom of the containment, or relative powerlessness, of their discourse.

Tracing the diffusion of the Dreaming complex does not, therefore, explain why Kooris came to submit to anthropological language. It merely accounts for the particular form which that language took. In this regard, as the earlier example of Byamee suggests, the term's dissemination was a text-effect of anthropology.

After their initial fieldwork, Spencer and Gillen mounted an expedition from Arunta country up to the shores of the Gulf of Carpentaria. This resulted in their second (1904) major book, which contained the above-mentioned Glossary. Though the actual term dream-times only appeared once in the text

of that book, they liberally allocated synonyms for Alcheringa, which thus entailed that the words concerned meant dream-times. Hence they opened their account of Urabunna cosmology with the brief statement that:

the Urabunna belief is as follows:-in the Alcheringa (the Urabunna term for this is Ularaka) . . . (Spencer and Gillen 1904:145)

and then dispensed with Ularaka. Thus transmitted within the Alcheringa, the dream-times can be followed across huge tracts of country within the space of a sentence:

Thus the Arunta term for the far past, during which their ancestors lived, is *alcheringa,* so also is that of the Kaitish and Unmatjera. In the Warramunga, Walpari, and Wulmara it is *wingara;* in the Tjingilli it is *mungai;* and in the Umbaia and Gnanji it is *poaradju* (Spencer and Gillen 1904:12).

It would seem, therefore, that the well-known overture "What is your Dreaming?" (Elkin 1933:11–12) was not, after all, a Koori invention but an English lesson. Thus established, the concept could travel full circle, even back to the Arunta themselves. Hence Spencer achieved a poker-faced reversal, whereby the dream times became prior to the Alcheringa:

According to the Arunta ideas, their ancestors who lived in the dream times, or, as they call it, the Alcheringa . . . . (Spencer 1904:392)

   The fact that Alcheringa was synonymous with the dream times enabled a syllogistic contagion whereby any number of other aboriginal words could become dream times by virtue of their being equated with Alcheringa within the mystifying confines of aboriginal language. The singular is significant here, since linguistic diversity—along with aboriginal heterogeneity in general—was minimised, notably by the use of the term dialect rather than language. Thus Alcheringa became a linguistic double-agent: a conduit whereby an equivalence established within anthropological discourse could be projected back on to aboriginal cosmologies.[38]
   Anthropologists' reluctance to concede the extent of their reliance upon the pidgin *lingua franca* produced a linguistic levelling. On the one hand, the differences between Koori languages are minimised, whilst, on the other, the general use of English is largely ignored. Yet a measure of the consequences of the settler elaborated code can be gauged from the conspicuous decline of aboriginal sign language in the literature after the generation of Howitt, Roth, and Spencer. Once translated into the overarching idiom of English, terms

[38] Thus Howitt (1904:482, 658) equated the Dieri *mura muras* with the Alcheringa (*cf.* Langloh Parker 1905:6). By 1908, "Alcheringa" had secured a heading to itself in Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1908). Under this heading, which was translated as "Dream Times," Urabunna and Warramunga beliefs were classified together despite their being acknowledged to be "widely different" (Thomas 1908). In Oxford, then, Alcheringa and Dream Times had become interchangeable terms for aboriginal beliefs, without reference to doctrinal content. Across the Channel, van Gennep (1906:XLVII) reversed Spencer and Gillen's procedure, assimilating Alcheringa to Ularaka.

could be exchanged outside the contexts of their customary use without local differences becoming apparent.[39] Referential heterogeneity is reinforced in the case of secret-sacred knowledge, with access to a range of different meanings varying according to ritual status. Since an externally imposed universal code was necessarily the least esoteric medium, interlocutors using it to exchange terms such as Dreaming (or totem, clan, family, and the like) could successfully conduct parallel conversations without the code occasioning their mutual interruption.[40]

The hegemony of an English-language formulation for an aboriginal construction of the sacred is multiply ironic. Although ethnographers were generally loth to confess their reliance upon pidgin, they regularly furnished evidence in other contexts of a thoroughgoing exclusion from sacred affairs of anything associated with settlers.[41] Thus the claim that the Dreaming expressed the sacred was a contradiction in terms: Rather than a way of talking about the sacred, the Dreaming provided a way of *not* talking about it.[42]

Whether or not a particular term which a speaker intended to render by the word Dreaming had any coincidental connection with ordinary dreaming in that speaker's local language is, therefore, quite irrelevant, since Dreaming was a word in English, whose semantic root system was a historical product of that fact.[43] As a single alien word, introduced through conquest, it bore no such roots. Thus there is no puzzle attaching to Kooris' use of the word Dreaming. They were simply speaking English.

APPENDIX

PRINCIPAL ACCOUNTS OF THE TEXTUAL ORIGINS OF THE DREAMTIME AND THE ALCHERINGA

(a) The Dreamtime/The Dreaming

For Spencer's and Elkin's versions, see above. Stanner (1956:51) stated merely that Spencer and Gillen "immortalized" the concept, without further refer-

---

[39] *Cf.* Urry 1980:71.

[40] Thus for example, Howitt's (1904:513) report of the last intertribal *Kuringal* initiation ceremony: "It was, in fact, the great intermarrying group which met at this ceremony, and the component parts of it differed so much in language, that the most distant could not understand each other without making use of the broken English which passes current all over Australia in those native tribes which have been brought under the white man's influence."

[41] Hence a reported alleviation of the rigors of initiation, since white food was not a scheduled proscribed category (Howitt 1904:637). Similarly, "medicine men" were reported to lose their power after drinking white man's tea (Spencer and Gillen 1904:481), a consequence extending to alcohol and to hot liquids generally (Langloh Parker 1898:14).

[42] Elkin himself acknowledged (1951:170) the occurrence of code-switching between indigenous and settler spheres.

[43] With the exception of the Berndts (and, of course, of the Strehlows and of Spencer), the question of the term's relationship to ordinary dreaming was scarcely ever addressed directly (Berndt and Berndt 1946:68; *cf.* Elkin 1933:11, 1937:51–2). More recently, Sutton (1988:15) has distinguished the Dreaming from ordinary dreaming: "The use of the English word *Dreaming* is more a matter of analogy than of translation."

ence. Ronald Berndt (1974:7) found that the moment of its introduction was "not clear from the literature", but later (Berndt 1987:480) settled on the probability of a Glossary of Native Terms appended to Spencer and Gillen's (1904:745) *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia,* the source cited previously by Ralph Piddington (1932:374) and Carl Strehlow (1907:2). The dream-times had actually been mentioned in the text of the 1904 book, only in a passing reference to the Walpari rather than to the three groups (Arunta, Kaitish, Unmatjera) mentioned in the Glossary (Spencer and Gillen 1904:576). More recently, Mulvaney (1989:116, *cf.* Mulvaney and Calaby 1985:124) alluded to Spencer's earliest reference to the term (Spencer 1896b:50) as "the first published general application of the concept of the 'Dreamtime', although precedence in its use belongs to a German missionary at Hermannsburg." It is not clear either what Mulvaney meant by "general" or which German missionary he had in mind. In any event, there had been no preceding reference to the Dreamtime; only to *altjira* and the like (in Krichauff 1890 [1887]:77, "altgiva").

(b) The Alcheringa/Altjiranga

In a published letter to the Oxford anthropologist N. W. Thomas, as in his (Strehlow 1907:2) *magnum opus,* Carl Strehlow referred to Spencer and Gillen's 1904 Glossary, maintaining that its claim that "*alcheri* means dream, and Alcheringa the dream-times" was a mistake: "Dream is *altjirerinja,* a dreamer, *altjirerana.*" Strehlow also contended that the word *altjira* (that is, the "alchera" in Alcheringa) "has in itself no meaning; but a verb derived from it, *altjirerama,* means primarily to become God; it is used in the sense of to dream; for the blacks think that in dreams are revealed the will of Altjira. . ." (Strehlow in Thomas 1905:430). Altjira was described (Strehlow 1907:1) as a God residing in Heaven (*cf.* von Leonhardi 1907:286–7). In a letter to Frazer, which Frazer published in his *Totemism and Exogamy* (1910:i,186, n. 2), Spencer charged that the Hermannsburg missionaries had translated *Gott* as altjira for Lutheran prayers, contending that "Flour and tobacco, etc., are only given to natives who attend church and school." Later, Spencer quoted Strehlow's fellow Hermannsburg missionary Kempe as writing to him that Altjira did not mean God in the sense of a person but in the sense of something existent (Spencer and Gillen 1927:596). This, however, was in the course of an incomplete and significantly incorrect history of accounts of the terms altjira and altjiranga as published by Strehlow's missionary predecessors at Hermannsburg, which Spencer produced in 1927 as a continuation of his dispute with Carl Strehlow, who had by then died (Spencer and Gillen 1927:590–6). In the course of this history, Spencer cited Schulze (1891:239) as the first occasion on which the word Altjira was used (Spencer and Gillen 1927:591). In fact, Schulze's first use of the word had occurred one page earlier than this. In any event, twelve years before Schulze, Kempe (1883:53) had reported the central Australian Blacks as saying that Altjira

(whom he glossed as God) gives children ("Die Kinder, sagen sie, schenkt Altjira (Gott)"). Spencer's history would seem to have been the source used by Dixon *et al.* (1990:150) and by Swain (1985:53; *cf.* 1989:346, n. 8) who repeats the erroneous attribution of the word's origin to Schulze's (1891) paper, adding the further error that the word to which Schulze referred was alcheringa, rather than the less controversial altjira. Carl Strehlow's son later returned to the dispute between his father and Spencer, conceding that Altjira did not mean God, but still maintaining that Alcheringa had been "mistranslated" as "dream time" on the basis of a confusion between altjiranga (alcheringa) and altjira rama (the altjirerama above) (T. G. H. Strehlow 1971:614–5; *cf.* Durkheim 1912:84, n. 2).

REFERENCES

Allen, L. 1975. *Time Before Morning. Art and Myth of the Australian Aborigines.* New York: Crowell.

Asad, T. 1973. "Introduction," in *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter*, T. Asad, ed., 9–19. London: Ithaca Press.

———. 1986. "The Concept of Cultural Translation in British Social Anthropology," in J. Clifford and G. E. Marcus, *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, 141–165. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986.

Basedow, H. 1925. *The Australian Aboriginal.* Adelaide: F. W. Preece and Sons.

Bastian, A. 1868. *Beiträge zur Vergleichenden Psychologie: Die Seele und ihre Erscheinungsweisen in der Ethnographie.* Berlin: Dümmler.

Bates, D. 1938. *The Passing of the Aborigines.* London: John Murray.

Berndt, R. M. 1974. *Australian Aboriginal Religion.* Leiden: Brill.

———. 1987. "The Dreaming," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, M. Eliade, ed., iv, 479–81. New York: Macmillan.

Berndt, R. M.; and C. H. Berndt. 1946. "Review" of Roheim, G., *Eternal Ones of the Dream. Oceania*, no. 17, 67–8.

Bridges, B. 1970. "The Aborigines and the Land Question: New South Wales in the Period of Imperial Responsibility." *Journal of the Royal Australian Historical Society*, 56:2, 92–110.

Buffon, Comte de. 1812 [1749]. *Natural History, General and Particular*, vol. 3, W. Smellie, trans. London: Cadell and Davies.

Burrow, J. W. 1968. *Evolution and Society. A Study in Victorian Social Theory.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clifford, J. 1988. *The Predicament of Culture. Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art.* Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Clodd, E. 1885. *Myths and Dreams.* London: Chatto and Windus.

Crapanzano, V. 1977. "The Writing of Ethnography." *Dialectical Anthropology*, 2:1, 69–73.

———. 1980. *Tuhami: Portrait of a Moroccan.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Darwin, C. 1871. *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*, 2 vols. London: John Murray.

Descartes, R. 1954 [1642]. *Philosophical Writings*, E. Anscombe and P. T. Geach, ed. and trans. London: Nelson.

Dixon, R. M. W.; W. S. Ramson; and M. Thomas. 1990. *Australian Aboriginal Words in English. Their Origin and Meaning.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duerr, H. P. 1985. *Dreamtime. Concerning the Boundary Between Wilderness and Civilization,* F. Goodman, trans. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Durkheim, E. 1912. *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie.* Paris: Alcan.

Dwyer, K. 1977. "On the Dialogic of Fieldwork." *Dialectical Anthropology,* 2:2, 143–51.

———. 1982. *Moroccan Dialogues.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Elkin, A. P. 1932. "The Secret Life of the Australian Aborigines." *Oceania,* no. 3, 119–38.

———. 1933. *Studies in Australian Totemism (Oceania* monograph no. 2). Sydney: Oceania.

———. 1937. "Notes on the Psychic Life of the Australian Aborigines." *Mankind,* 2:3, 49–56.

———. 1951. "Reaction and Interaction: A Food Gathering People and European Settlement in Australia." *American Anthropologist,* no. 53, 164–86.

———. 1952. "Review" of Simpson, C., *Adam in Ochre. Oceania,* no. 23, 243–4.

———. 1961. "The Yabuduruwa." *Oceania,* no. 31, 166–209.

———. 1964. *The Australian Aborigines. How to Understand Them,* 4th ed. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Fisher, J. 1968. *The Australians. From 1788 to Modern Times.* Adelaide: Rigby.

Fitzgerald, R. 1982. *From the Dreaming to 1915—A History of Queensland.* St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Flood, J. 1983. *Archaeology of the Dreamtime.* Sydney: Collins.

Foucault, M. 1967. *Madness and Civilization,* R. Howard, trans. London: Tavistock.

———. 1977. *Discipline and Punish,* A. Sheridan, trans. Hammondsworth, Middlesex, United Kingdom: Penguin.

Frazer, J. G. 1910. *Totemism and Exogamy. A Treatise on Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society.* London: Macmillan.

Freud, S. 1976 [1900]. *The Interpretation of Dreams,* vol. 4 of the Pelican Freud Library. New York: Penguin.

Gennep, A. van. 1906. *Mythes et Légendes d'Australie. Etudes d'Ethnographie et de Sociologie.* Paris: Guilmoto.

Gillen, F. J. 1896. "Notes on Some Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the McDonnell Ranges Belonging to the Arunta Tribe," iv, 159–96, in W. B. Spencer, ed. *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia,* 4 vols. London: Dulan and Company.

Harris, M. 1967. "Introduction," in M. Harris and A. Forbes, *The Land That Waited,* 1–2. Melbourne: Lansdowne.

Hartland, E. S. 1909. *Primitive Paternity,* vol. 1. London: Folk Lore Society.

Hastings, J., ed. 1908. *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics,* vol. 1. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.

Hobbes, T. 1909 [1651]. *Leviathan.* Clarendon: Oxford.

Howitt, A. W. 1884. "On Some Australian Beliefs." *Journal of the Anthropological Institute,* no. xiii, 185–98.

———. 1904. *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia.* London: Macmillan.

Jones, P. 1988. "Perceptions of Aboriginal Art: A History," in P. Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia,* 143–79. London: Viking, 1988.

Kempe, H. 1883. "Zur Sittenkunde der Centralaustralischen Schwarzen," 52–56, in *Mittheilungen des Vereins für Erdkunde zu Halle.*

Krichauff, F. E. H. 1890 [1887]. *"Further Notes on the 'Aldolinga' or 'Mbenderinga' Tribe of Aborigines,"* vol. 2 (1886–88), 77–80, in *Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, South Australian Branch.*

Lancaster Jones, F. 1970. *The Structure and Growth of Australia's Aboriginal Population*. Canberra: ANU Press.

Lang, A. 1898. "Introduction," in K. Langloh Parker, *More Australian Legendary Tales*, xvii–xxiii. London: David Nutt, 1898.

———. 1900. "Australian Gods: A Reply." *Folk-Lore*, no. 10, 1–46.

Lang, J. D. 1861. *Queensland, Australia*. London: Edward Stanford.

Langloh Parker, K. 1898. *More Australian Legendary Tales*. London: David Nutt.

———. 1905. *The Euahlayi Tribe. A Study of Aboriginal Life in Australia*. London: Archibald Constable and Company.

Leonhardi, von M. F. 1907. "Über einige religiöse und totemistische Vorstellungen der Aranda und Loritja in Zentralaustralien." *Globus*, band 41, 285–90.

Lucretius. 1886. *De Rerum Natura. Libri Sex*, H. A. J. Munro, trans., 4th ed. Cambridge: Deighton, Bell and Company.

Marett, R. R. 1941. *A Jerseyman at Oxford*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Markus, A. 1990. *Governing Savages*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Mauss, M. 1925 [1970]. *The Gift*, I. Cunnison, trans. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Micha, F. J. 1970. "Trade and Change in Aboriginal Australian Cultures; Australian Aboriginal Trade as an Expression of Close Culture Contact and as a Mediator of Culture Change," in A. R. Pilling and R. A. Waterman, eds., *Diprotrodon to Detribalization. Studies of Change Among Australian Aborigines*, 285–313. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

Mountford, C. P. 1976. *Nomads of the Australian Desert*. Adelaide: Rigby.

Mulvaney, D. J. 1989. *Encounters in Place: Outsiders and Aboriginal Australians*. St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press.

Mulvaney, D. J.; and J. H. Calaby. 1985. *"So Much That Is New." Baldwin Spencer, 1860–1929. A Biography*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

Olsen, J.; and M. Durack, G. Dutton, V. Serventy, and A. Bortignon. 1984. *The Land Beyond Time. A Modern Exploration of Australia's North-West Frontier*. South Melbourne: Macmillan Australia.

Ortner, S. B. 1974. "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?," in M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds. *Woman, Culture and Society*, 67–87. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Piddington, R. 1932. "Totemic System of the Karadjeri Tribe." *Oceania*, no. 2, 373–400.

Purcell, B. H. 1894. "Rites and Customs of Australian Aborigines," in *Verhandlungen der Berliner Gessellschaft für Anthropologie, Ethnologie und Urgeschichte*, 286–9. Berlin: Verlag von A. Asher.

Radcliffe-Brown, A. R. (A. R. Brown). 1913. "Three Tribes of Western Australia." *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute*, 43, 143–95.

———. 1952. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Reynolds, H. 1982. *The Other Side of the Frontier. Aboriginal Resistance to the European Invasion of Australia*. Melbourne: Penguin.

Reynolds, H., compiler. 1989. *Dispossession. Black Australians and White Invaders* (The Australian Experience Series). Sydney: Allen and Unwin.

Roberts, A.; and C. P. Mountford. 1969. *The Dawn of Time. Australian Aboriginal Myths in Paintings*. Adelaide: Rigby.

Rowley, C. D. 1972. *The Destruction of Aboriginal Society*. Melbourne: Penguin.

Schmidt, W. 1931. *The Origin and Growth of Religion. Facts and Theories*, H. J. Rose, trans. London: Methuen.

Schulze, L. 1891. "The Aborigines of the Upper and Middle Finke River: Their Habits and Customs with Introductory Notes on the Physical and Natural-History Features of the Country," J. G. O. Tepper, trans. *Transactions and Proceedings and Reports of the Royal Society of South Australia*, vol. 14, pt. 2, 210–46.

Spencer, H. 1870. "The Right to the Use of the Earth" (Land Reform League Tract no. 1). Melbourne: Robert Bell.

———. 1871. *The Principles of Sociology*, vol. 1 (vol. 6 of *A System of Synthetic Philosophy*). London: Williams and Norgate.

Spencer, W. B. (Baldwin), ed. 1896a. *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*, 4 vols. London: Dulan and Company.

———. 1896b. *Through Larapinta Land: A Narrative of the Horn Expedition to Central Australia*, vol. 1, 1–136 in *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*. London: Dulan and Company.

———. 1904. "Totemism in Australia" (Presidential Address to Ethnology and Anthropology section). *Report of the Tenth Meeting of the Australasian Association for the Advancement of Science*. Dunedin: A.A.A.S.

———. 1921. "Presidential Address" to the Fifteenth Meeting of the Australia New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science. Melbourne: Mullett (Government Printer).

———. 1928. *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, 2 vols. London: Macmillan.

Spencer, W. B. and F. J. Gillen, 1899. *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*. London: Macmillan.

———. 1904. *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia*. London: Macmillan.

———. 1927. *The Arunta*, 2 vols. London: Macmillan.

Stanner, W. E. H. 1956. "The Dreaming", in T. A. G. Hungerford, ed. *Australian Signpost. An Anthology*, 51–65. Melbourne: Cheshire.

———. 1965. "Religion, Totemism and Symbolism," in *Aboriginal Man in Australia: Essays in Honour of Emeritus Professor A. P. Elkin*, R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt, eds., 207–237. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

Stirling, E. C. 1896. "Anthropology," in W. B. Spencer, ed., *Report on the Work of the Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia*, iv, 1–158. London: Dulan and Company.

Stocking, G. W., Jr. 1987. *Victorian Anthropology*. New York: Macmillan Free Press.

Strehlow, C. 1907. *Mythen, Sagen und Märchen Des Aranda-Stämmes in Zentral Australien*, teil 1 of *Die Aranda-und-Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien*. Frankfurt: Joseph Baer.

Strehlow, T. G. H. 1947. *Aranda Traditions*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press.

———. 1969. *Journey to Horseshoe Bend*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

———. 1971. *Songs of Central Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.

———. 1978. *Central Australian Religion. Personal Monototemism in a Polytotemic Community* (Special Studies in Religions no. 2). Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions.

Sutton, P. 1988. "Dreamings," in P. Sutton, ed., *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, 13–32. London: Viking, 1988.

Swain, T. 1985. *Interpreting Aboriginal Religion. An Historical Account* (Special Studies in Relgions, no. 5). Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions.

———. 1988. *The Ghost of Space. Reflections on Warlpiri Christian Iconography and Ritual*, in T. Swain and D. B. Rose, eds., *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions. Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, 452–69. Adelaide: Australian Association Stud. Relig., 1988.

————. 1989. "Dreaming, Whites and the Australian Landscape: Some Popular Misconceptions." *The Journal of Religious History,* 15:3, 345–50.

Thomas, N. W. 1905. "The Religious Ideas of the Arunta." *Folk-Lore,* no. 16, 428–33.

————. 1908. "Alcheringa", in J. Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics,* vol. 1, 298. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.

Tylor, E. B. 1867. "On Traces of the Early Mental Condition of Man." *Notices of The Proceedings at The Meetings of the Members of the Royal Institution of Great Britain,* no. 5, 83–93.

————. 1871. *Primitive Culture,* 2 vols. London: John Murray.

Urry, J. 1979. "Beyond the Frontier: European Influences, Aborigines and the Concept of 'Traditional' Culture." *Journal of Australian Studies,* 5, 1–16.

————. 1980. "Aborigines, History and Semantics—A Reply." *Journal Australian Studies,* 6, 68–72.

Voltaire, F. M. A. de. 1967 [1770]. *Dictionnaire Philosophique.* Paris: Garniere Frères.

Willshire, W. H., 1896. *The Land of the Dawning. Being Facts Gleaned from Cannibals in the Australian Stone Age.* Adelaide: W. K. Thomas.

————. 1888. *The Aborigines of Central Australia, with a Vocabulary of the Dialect of the Alice Springs Natives.* Port Augusta: Drysdale.