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DAVID McKNIGHT

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A STUDY OF MYSTICAL POWER AND
SICKNESS IN AN AUSTRALIAN TRIBE*

Introduction
As my title indicates, this article is concerned with the Wik-mungkan concept nganwi. The Wik-mungkan are located at Aurukun, on the west coast of Cape York Peninsula, Northern Queensland, Australia. Nganwi is used, for example, to refer to a man’s unseen child, sickness, initiation ceremonies, and a child’s first teeth, but its basic reference is to Taipan, the Rainbow Serpent, and to Taipan’s menses. Readers familiar with Edmund Leach’s article ‘Kimil: A Category of Andamanese Thought’ (Leach 1971) may be struck by some similarities between the terms Kimil and Nganwi. Thus both terms are used in connection with illness and initiation. Leach employs a structuralist interpretation to unravel the meaning of Kimil. My own interpretation could hardly be described as structuralist. Nevertheless I hope it will be conceded that I have shed some light on the concept nganwi.

In what follows I shall describe some mystical powers and sicknesses.

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I first discuss the religious ties that people have with their country and totemic dreaming and how outsiders may become ill when visiting a strange country. I then examine how people can be made ill from a man's unseen child. I also describe the belief that people can become ill as a result of other people gossiping about them or mentioning their names. Throughout this article the themes of conception and procreation occur and I conclude that in ritual contexts Wik-mungkan men claim that they are both bearers and begetters of children.

**Countries and Totems**

Ursula McConnel (1930) and Donald Thomson (1946) have reported how the Wik-mungkan are divided into a number of exogamous localized patriclans. Each patriclans has economie and mystical ties with its country. All members have a right to hunt and gather and to use the resources of their country. These rights are extended to sister's children and affines. Thus in the case of a woman, her husband and his wives and children are allowed to hunt in her country. She in turn may hunt in her husband's country, and with him in the countries of his other wives. Sometimes neighbouring clans form a 'company', and they share hunting and foraging rights in each other's country. People are proud of the richness of their country, so despite a trespassers will be prosecuted view of clan land, when certain fish are running, or kangaroos are in abundance, or yams and water lilies are ripe, a blanket invitation is often extended for others to come and enjoy the plentiful supply of food. At these large gatherings the owners are assured of receiving a good share, for visitors are expected to give them part of their catch. Ideally the owners are in the middle of the camp, while those from the north camp are on the northern side, and those from the east on the eastern side, and so on. People say the owners should drink from the centre wells and visitors should drink from wells that lie in the direction of their country. Visitors are expected to follow the owners' hunting and cooking laws. If they do not, it is believed that the food supply may diminish. The owners of a country burn the long grass at the end of the dry season to facilitate the big drives for kangaroos. Only they have the right to do this; should others do so without permission it is likely to cause a fight. In one country there is a special patch of ground which yields large yams. As Bailer Shell, a mythical being, is believed to have made this patch, the yams must be dug up with bailer shells, and not with yam sticks as is normally done.
In every country there are story places, where in mythical times various totemic beings, such as native companion (a species of foird), bonefish, shark, water lily and dilly bag 'went down' (tu-tya). The myths recount the totemic beings' exploits and at the end of each myth they usually sink into the ground or into a swamp. These places are known as auwa, and the totemic beings are known as pulwaiya. The Wik-mungkan maintain that the pulwaiyas must have been human beings because they 'left' language. All members of a patriclan, born men and women, perform increase ceremonies for their pulwaiya at the appropriate auwa (auwa also means "plenty"). People's big names (namp pi'in) and small names (namp many) are derived from their major pulwaiya (Thomson 1946). It is said that people come from their auwa and when they die their spirit returns to their auwa.

Any food near a story place or auwa belongs particularly to the owners of die country. Strangers may not eat this food, unless an owner collects it and shares it with them. For example, in the country of the bonefish clan there is a swamp where water lilies grow in abundance. Bonefish is said to have made this place in mythical times. Strangers must not pick water lilies near the auwa, but they may pick water lilies further away if the owners grant permission. All countries have other ngaintja (taboo) places known as a:k penji (a:k = place). These places are mystically dangerous. Only old men, who are also owners of the country, may safely gather food at an a:k penji. And even they should wrap their feet in bark to avoid direct contact with the ground. They must be careful that branches do not touch their skin, otherwise they will become terribly swollen. Informants have recounted cases of people, often strangers, who broke these taboos and consequently suffered withered limbs, sores, loss of pigmentation and wasting diseases. I do not know of any places where it is safe for women alone, either young or old, to gather food. Some countries have dangerous places which even the owners tend to avoid. They invariably have some unusual topographical feature, such as a large rock or stony ground, which is at variance with the surrounding countryside. In many, if not in all, countries there are small areas known as mai unt (unt = testicles). Any food in these areas is special to the owners of the country. When they decide it is ready for picking they may invite others. On the first day, only the owners and their families may gather the food and eat it. On the second day, others may help themselves, but they are expected to share with the owners.

The owners of a country should put their sweat or smell (porntjil -
Thomson 1936: 383) on a stranger. This causes the pulwaiya to believe that the stranger belongs to the country (McConnel 1930: 187). If it is not done, the pulwaiya can smell the stranger and make turn or her ill. Children have the same pulwaiya as their father. Consequently there is no need for a man to put his smell on his children, because his pulwaiya knows their smell. Nevertheless, if a man's children have been away from his country for a long time, or if they are visiting the country for the first time, then he may well put his smell on them as a safety precaution. A woman, or one of the older members of her clan, should put her smell on her children when they visit her country because her pulwaiya is different from theirs. A woman also puts her smell on her husband, and he in turn puts his smell on her when she visits his country.

I recorded an interesting account from a woman who became ill while visiting a strange country. She was a bonefish woman, and in this instance she was visiting shark country to collect yams and honey.

We went to the beach to camp for a while. We were all thirsty, and I gave my billy can to one of the others to draw water for me. Although it was good drinking-water, the water in my billy can was milky. The place where the water came from was made by two sharks — they were husband and wife. The milky stuff in my can must have come from the sharks. When I tasted the water it was salty, so I told the others I was going to get some clean water. They forgot to put their smell on me to protect me. Strangers should get the smell of the owners of the country, so the shark won't know they are strangers.

We camped that night and I started to feel very sick in my stomach, just below the ribs where a Shark can get a good bite. I was awake all night and cried in pain. By morning I was very weak and worn out. One old lady noticed how ill I was. She felt me just below the ribs, she could feel two lumps, one on either side. She knew from this that the shark was eating me, for the lumps were two fins. The old lady told the owners of the country. They too felt the lumps. They realized I was very ill and that they had forgotten to put their smell on me. So they danced around me and imitated the shark's two fins with their arms. They had spears and they imitated the shark swimming. The lumps started to go down and down and there was no pain. They put their smell on me, and blew 'lightly on the crown of my head, so the shark would not know that I was a stranger, and would think I belonged to the country.

It is dangerous even for the owners of a country to go to a well or a spring after eating meat or a particular kind of honey known as mai kuyin. Water holes are said to be the home of the Rainbow Serpent
(Taipan) and also to be its eyes. If the taboo is broken, then the Rainbow Serpent may enter one's stomach and eat one's bowels. Someone who has not eaten meat or mai kuyin should return from the well with water for others so they can wash their hands and rinse their mouths. This makes it safe for them to go to the well. It is considered to be very dangerous for a pregnant woman to draw water from a well, for the Rainbow Serpent might enter her stomach and seize her unborn child. This sickness can be cured by certain men, nhuyins, who have special healing powers which are derived from the Rainbow Serpent.

Unseen Child

It is believed that a young person could become ill by glancing at a man while he is making something, especially a spear. Making a spear is dangerous because a spear kills. Hence one should be attentive and look fixedly at what a man is doing, particularly if he is a wutmantaiyin, i.e. an old powerful man, an elder who has participated in many initiations. If a man notices a small child staring at him he can prevent the sickness by putting his smell on him. He places his hands under his own armpits and rubs his hands over the child. The sickness, which is known as nganwi, is said to be caused by a man's nganwi, i.e., his "unseen child". Men who have yangantaiyin, i.e. strong, coarse, fuzzy hair, are believed to have greater power than other men to cause nganwi sickness. Nganwi is a word which is used in a variety of contexts. Although it may refer to a taboo place, a new-born child, a child's first teeth, an absent relative, one's totemic dreaming, honey, any large bird or animal, and so on, yet basically, according to the Wik-mungkan, the underlying reference is to Taipan, i.e. the Rainbow Serpent, and to Taipan having a sore inside, i.e. Taipan's menses. Some people say that Taipan created the first auwa and that he was the first pulwaiya. Taipan, one of the most powerful, if not the most powerful pulwaiya, foorth creates and destroys. He controls life and death. The blood of life, heart blood, and menstrual blood were left by him when he 'went down'.in his auwa (McConnel 1957).

A man acquires his unseen child by participating in the initiation ceremonies, not once, but many times. During the initiation (also known as nganwi) male initiates are said to be put in the snake's belly, tuk impanang (tuk = 'snake; impanang = belly or pregnant). In the initiation ceremonies men seem to usurp the reproductive powers of women, and claim that they, and not women, give birth (McKnight 1975). It is only by first "killing" the youths in the initiation that the
elder men can give birth to them. The *pulwaiyas* form a part of the initiation. Each patriclan exhibits its carvings and dances, which portray an event that happened to their *pulwaiyas* when they were human beings.

A child could become ill if he walks unnoticed behind a *wutmantaiyin* or if he upsets him. Furthermore, children and young people may become ill by being in the presence of an older man, or from handling his personal possessions, or by tossing a proffered article in his direction. The correct, and safe, way to give him something, is to look at him while placing the article in his hand. If this is not feasible, when, for example, the recipient is in the wife-giving category, which disallows a direct face-to-face relationship, then one should put the article on the ground beside one and make sure that he realizes it is there so he will immediately pick it up.

I witnessed a dramatic enactment of *nganwi* sickness in a dance performed at a mortuary feast. The main dancer, a *wutmantaiyin*, made a representation of the Rainbow Serpent with the help of other initiated men and myself. He referred to the figure as *nganwi*. The tips of the throat, arms and ribs were white, while the rest, particularly the body, was mostly red (only red ochre and white clay, I believe, may be used to decorate a representation of the Rainbow Serpent). It did not have a head (see Figure 1), for in mythical times the Rainbow Serpent’s head was bitten off by *Wala*, the blue-tongue hazard (McConnel 1957: 111 sq.). Sometimes the Rainbow Serpent is represented in a completely different manner, with only a head and no body; the head may have hair to show that he was once a human being. In the mortuary dance a man pretended to be ill with *nganwi*
sickness. A bow-shaped stick painted with red and white stripes was stuck in the ground beside him. It too represented the Rainbow Serpent, particularly his ribs and stomach. (Similar bow-shaped sticks are used in the initiation dances. The initiates dance while holding the bows in front of them. At the end of the initiation the bows are stuck in the ground and the initiates crawl through them. The bows are known as nganwi.) While the "sick" man was writhing and moaning, others tried unsuccessfully to heal him by putting their smell on him. Finally the wutmantaiyin hit a stick three times, rubbed his body against him, put his smell on him, and he was healed.

This dance, which is the ritual equivalent of the bonefish woman's illness mentioned above, illustrates the main method of curing nganwi. The sick person has violent headaches and stomach pains. His stomach swells as if he were pregnant. He is urged to try to recall whom he was with, so that they can put their smell on him. But, so it is said, and so it was enacted in the dance, it is always the last person, the one who is most doubtful that he had anything to do with the sickness, whose unseen child was the cause. He feels tight inside and is reluctant to approach the sick person. He only feels like going to the sick man after everybody else has tried. He mildly protests: "I don't think it was me. I'm sure it wasn't me. But I'll try if you want." He is prevailed upon to try. He takes his spear-thower and puts his sweat on it. He places it lengthways on the sick man's stomach and chest, then he lies on top and rubs his body against him. Gradually the man underneath feels his stomach deflating and the pain lessen. The healer then takes the spear-thrower in his left hand and a stick in his right hand. He hits the stick three times, once below the neck, once on the chest and once on the stomach. The sick man is helped into a sitting position and the healer smears his sweat over his body. Later, if he is not completely well, he blows on top of the man's head and this finally heals him.

I recorded a few case histories of this type of sickness. Two may suffice to give the reader a fuller understanding. The first case concerns a young man who became sick, apparently because he was not attentive while a wutmantaiyin was making a spear. It happened near a story place. These locations, as I have pointed out, are particularly dangerous for strangers.

I remember a wutmantaiyin and two younger men. The old man was making a spear while the other two were with him. It was at the bat story place. The older of the younger men got nganwi. He vomited
blood and his stomach was very swollen. He could hardly turn over and was almost dead from suffering. The old man kept saying that it was not his *mai kuyin*, although the *mai kuyin* story place belonged to him. Others said, "It's your *mai kuyin* story place, you must come". But he hung back, saying, "It's not me". But finally he gave in and said he would try, since everybody else had tried and failed. The old man rolled him over while he was crying with pain. He put his smell on his spear-thrower and on the man. He placed his spear-thrower on the young man's chest and stomach, and lay on top of him. All of a sudden the pain stopped and his stomach went down. He was able to get up the next day, but he was still very weak. So the old man had to put his smell on him again, and blow on the crown of his head.

In the second case, a middle-aged woman recalls a time in her childhood when she was stricken with *nganwi*. Note that here, too, the *mai kuyin* dreaming plays a part. Of the five different kinds of honey recognized by the Wik-mungkan, it is the most potent and masculine (McKnight 1973: 201).

It happened when I was only a little girl. I used to comb an old man's hair and make a lot of fuss about him as we were very fond of one another. Late in the day I felt sick in my stomach and I started groaning. Someone asked what was wrong, and I told her about the pain in my stomach. Right away *nganwi* was suspected. I was urged to think back about what I had been doing during the day and whom I was with. I told them about combing the old man's hair. They thought that he was responsible because he had *mai kuyin*, a very dangerous *pulwaiya*. He refused to believe it was him, for we were often together. He kept saying it wasn't him. But they kept after him about it, so he put his smell on me, rubbed my stomach, and immediately the pain went away.

Note that in both these cases the old men's unseen child appears to be equated with their *pulwaiya*.

Sometimes people believe that *nganwi* sickness may have been caused by someone who is no longer at a camp. In this case they cool some water and call out his *namp pi'in* (big name). His close patrilineal kin, such as brother or son, put their smell on the sick person. They take anything that the absent man left behind, such as his spear, gum (a binding substance made out of ironwood root), dilly bag, string, or spear-thrower, and rub them on the patient. A dilly bag and spear-thrower are supposed to be particularly effective: a dilly bag because it contains a man's private possessions and magical paraphernalia; a spear-thrower because it is a very personal object. A spear-thrower is not normally borrowed, for a man spends much time and care in
making one to suit himself perfectly. Even old men, who are past hunting, stroll about with their spear-thrower, if not also with their spear. It can be used quite effectively in a fight to break an opponent's spears. A spear-thrower is said to be like a man's son, because it feeds him. When I pointed out to my informants that this did not seem an appropriate simile, since a father should not eat his son's food, they replied: It is only when a son is young and uninitiated that it is taboo for a father to eat his food, but when a man is old his son is allowed, and indeed is expected, to feed his father, just as his father fed him when he was young. Following up this simile it would seem that as a man's unseen child can make one ill, so his child, i.e. spear-thrower, can heal one.

Spear-throwers have ritual significance in the initiation ceremonies. At one stage the youths’ arms are looped over their spear-throwers like a yoke and they are forced to look down. Each initiate's sister's husband, or one of the older men, makes certain that he cannot look up by holding his head down as they run. At the end of the initiation a number of rituals may be performed. Any man who decides to promise his daughter to one of the initiates taps him on the head with his spear-thrower. Anyone whose father has recently died may choose one of the men to adopt him. Usually this is a father's brother or a classificatory father belonging to the youth's own father's pulwaiya and country, but need not be. In this ceremony, the youdi places his spear-thrower on the right shoulder of the adopted parent. My informants made a special point of emphasizing that the right shoulder is tapped, for the right shoulder, and the right hand, are stronger than the left and more able to support children. I may add that the right-hand side is the male side, the auspicious side and the side of kinship and friendship. In many rituals men are on the right-hand side, eldest to the right and youngest to the left, and women are on the left-hand side. Kin are on the right and affines are on the left. I was told diat one never allows an enemy to sit on one's right side, because he may grab or injure one's right arm and thus render one practically defenseless.

I mentioned that a child's first teeth should be referred to as nganwi. If a child frets when cutting his first teeth one should say it is nganwi bothering him. Some people believe that a child's first teeth should not be touched in case they may recede. Perhaps there is an identification with the Rainbow Serpent's teeth. In the myth referred to above he tried to bite off blue-tongue lizard's head, but he broke his own teeth instead. Now in Wik-mungkan territory there is a real snake known
as taipan (*Oxyurenus scuellaptus*). To avoid confusion I shall refer to it as the taipan-snake. The Wik-mungkan are frightened of taipan-snakes, for with good reason they believe that they are very venomous. They claim that when taipan-snakes bite, their front fangs break off. Judging from one which I examined, they have a double set of fangs. When the front ones break off the back ones probably push forward gradually to take their place.\(^3\)

Absent relatives should be referred to as *nganwi*. Any gossip about them or mention of their name may cause them harm, even though there is no malicious intent. In one dispute, which I witnessed, some remarks were made about some young men who were away working for a mining company. Immediately the speaker was rebuked on the grounds that the young men were doing dangerous work, and bringing their names into the fight could cause them to have bad luck. Similarly one should not talk about a person who is out hunting. Hunting is hazardous, there is always a very real chance of being 'bitten by a snake, crocodile or shark. At the very least the hunter might not catch anything. For this reason a woman, for example, refers to her son who is away hunting as: *tuwa ngatharram nganwi* (my child *nganwi*).

The Wik-mungkan know that a man cannot always be lucky, 'but if he is consistently unsuccessful, or if anything peculiar happens, then he may suspect that others are gossiping about him, perhaps his family are fighting, possibly his wife is unfaithful, or maybe the spirits of the dead are affecting the game. People believe that a dying person's spirit, or the spirit of the recently dead, may cause ill luck; for this reason close relatives of a very sick person are reluctant to go hunting, nor will they hunt before the proper mortuary rituals are completed. When hunting in a recently deceased person's country, one should placate his spirit by telling him one never meant him harm; and inform him why one is in his country; and ask him not to drive the game away, but to give plenty of good luck.

To mention any animal one is preparing to hunt is unlucky, so the term *nganwi* is substituted for the animal’s name. Normally this is done only for food animals, particularly for big game, e.g. emu, kangaroo, and native companion, but it is also done for honey, especially *mai kuyin*. If necessary one can be more explicit about what one intends to hunt by using sigh language, for the Wik-mungkan have a very extensive sign language. Furthermore it is unlucky to point where one is going. The direction should be indicated by a movement of one’s lips and/or chin. (Incidentally, it is taboo to point with a straight
finger at a Rainbow or the figure of Emu in the Milky Way; one should crook one's finger so that one is pointing with a knuckle, otherwise one's finger will be permanently bent.) When women intend to gather plants and berries they do not have to use the substitute word *nganwi*, but they should use it if they intend to hunt swamp turtles, which are also hunted by men. The word *nganwi* appears to be substituted for flesh foods (*niin*), but not for plant foods (*mai*), with one exception, i.e. honey, which is collected by both men and women. It seems that hunting activities involving men are singled out as potent, for men mainly hunt flesh foods, while women habitually gather plant foods. Sometimes men gather yams and water lilies, but these plant foods then become taboo to women and children, and they are classified in a special category as *mai umpinam*. If women and children were to eat them they would break out, in sores and lumps. There is not a corresponding taboo for men when women catch small game. I do not know if the word *nganwi* should be used when men collect plant foods; any way it is unlikely, as men do not normally go into the bush with the intention of gathering plant foods. But men and women do go into the bush specifically to gather honey.

Women do not have an unseen child, i.e. *nganwi*, in the sense that a man has, and a woman cannot cause *nganwi* sickness if one is inattentive while she is making something. My informants, both men and women, were quite explicit about this. One cannot get *nganwi* sickness merely from being in the presence of a woman. Nevertheless, the fact that women are not completely powerless was revealed by an incident involving myself. One day while I was sitting with a man, whom I called father, a woman dropped a bundle of firewood beside us. He urged me to follow his example, i.e. to put my sweat on some earth (sand or charcoal would have done just as well) and to throw it on top of the wood in order to "blind" the *nganwi*. If we did not the woman might become ill. In following up this matter I was told that, had she been an old woman, she could have become ill and so could we. Now one may ask, as I did, where does the power come from if a woman does not have a *nganwi* like a man? It comes from her grey hair, because she is older, i.e. more *mantaiyin*, than the receiver, because she has had children (*puk manya*), and above all because her husband is a *wutmantaiyin*. Her husband's power becomes part of her. Even a widow is potent because her husband's spirit, *marnya*, is close to her. Formerly, when a man died, his widows and his sweethearts were supposed to be present when his body was mumified. They had
to lie on top of the corpse. People claim that a man's wives have his spirit, and that widows are dangerous until they are purified, though even then the power of his spirit may linger. I was told that a woman does not put her smell on sand (or earth) when she tosses it on an object in order to prevent nganwi sickness.

The place where a woman gives birth is known as a:k nganwi (Thomson 1946: 160, translates this term as "taboo place"). It is taboo for any man to go near this place. As Thomson (1936: 381) has reported, a new-born child is known as puk nganwi (puk = child) until it is presented to its father. The father is known as nganwi ngarrpan (ngarrpan = begetter). When a woman presents her new-born baby to her husband and his patri-kin, she puts her smell on him, and he in turn puts his smell on the baby. Thomson (1936: 383) reports: "The object of this rite was to avert the bad luck in hunting that might otherwise ensue".

In Wik-mungkan mythology Taipan is a man. In some accounts Taipan, the father, was a great healer, and in other accounts it is Taipan, the son, who was a great healer; in any case he is male. But as we have seen, the basic reference of nganwi is to Taipan having a sore inside, i.e. Taipan's menses. There appears to be some ambiguity or contradiction about Taipan's sex. When people see red in a rainbow they say that Taipan is sore inside. Further investigation reveals that the red is the menstrual blood of Taipan's sisters (or daughters). As Taipan 'went down' in his auwa, he left menstrual blood for his sisters (or daughters). Women from the country where Taipan 'went down' are named "Tipmeninga or Ngointyameninga which means a 'sore inside' " (McConnel 1957: 116, see also 1936: 85). I should mention that Thomson (1936) has shown that the Wik-mungkan are aware that menstrual blood is connected with procreation. Thus, inter alia, "they regard the cessation of menses as one of the earliest signs of pregnancy. Admittedly the following interpretation is somewhat intuitive, but I think that the ambiguity of Taipan's sex and the fact that menstrual blood is clearly associated with Taipan stems from the men's denial, in the initiation rituals, of women's function in reproduction, and the ritual assertion that men have unseen children inside them. Elsewhere (McKnight 1975) I have discussed Wik-mungkan views about menstrual blood. I need only mention here that men are very frightened of menstrual blood. They believe that if a man were to come into contact with it he would become HI and a poor hunter. Traditionally a menstruating woman was isolated from the main camp, just as a woman
in labour was isolated. Perhaps in Wik-mungkan thought the power of a man’s unseen child is the counterpart of the power of a woman’s menstrual blood.

**Conclusions**

One way of deciphering the meaning of a word is to break it down into its constituent morphemes. Unfortunately I do not know of any other Wik-mungkan word which is similar to *nganwi* (or *nganwuy*) and I am unable to analyse the term morphologically. It may well be monomorphemic, with no internal constituents. So for the time being I must use a different approach.

Thomson (1946: 163) has translated *nganwi* as "taboo" and "any taboo place". But as we have seen, it is not used for just any taboo place, and it may refer to other things besides place. To be fair to Thomson, he briefly mentioned *nganwi* in two contexts only, viz. when discussing birth and in a passing reference to the second stage of initiation (1936: 379, 381, 384 and 386). It is a pity that he did not discuss the reasons for his rendering, for judging from his reports and my own fieldwork he had a flair for languages.

Let us tabulate the different uses of *nganwi* and see what sort of pattern emerges. (See page 103.)

When we examine these different uses of *nganwi*, it becomes clear that a good case could be made for following Leach’s analysis of the Andamanese term *Kimil*. Thus one could argue that *nganwi* is used for dangerous, abnormal, ambiguous or ritually tabooed situations, e.g. birth, initiation, hunting in the foush, visiting a strange country, etc. And I dare say that given more information one would discover a parallel between seasonal and human uses of *nganwi*. I think, however, that one can go beyond this type of observation and find another message in our data.

It is well known that two different words may sound the same, hence the same sound does not necessarily convey the same meaning; context must be taken into account. This holds true not only for aural symbols, but also for visual symbols, and any kind of symbol. In one context mudshells may be vaginas, but in another they are simply mudshells. Therefore if we were to encounter the word *nganwi* only two or three times, there is no reason to jump to the conclusion that the same meaning is being conveyed. But if we encounter it many times, in the same or similar contexts, it is not unreasonable to suppose that we are dealing with the same message. I cannot prove that a connection exists,
but I think one would be on much weaker ground in maintaining that there is no connection in the various uses of the word *nganwi* and that it is fortuitous that the symbolism of copulation, pregnancy and birth occurs so frequently in rituals concerning *nganwi*.

**Table 1**

VARIOUS USES OF THE TERM NGANWI

I. *Nganwi* is a name, and most likely the ritual name, for Taipan, the Rainbow Serpent.

II. *Nganwi* is used for a certain type of sickness (and generally the agent causing the sickness), the main symptoms being a swollen abdomen and/or abdominal pains.

**NGANWI SICKNESS**

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<thead>
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<th>Afflicting agent (i.e. caused by)</th>
<th>Afflicted (i.e. victim)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Taipan (at water-holes)</td>
<td>(1) Anyone who breaks taboo of drawing water from a water-hole while they have blood, grease or honey on their hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(2) Pregnant women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Man's unseen child</td>
<td>Ritually weak - children, young people and women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Pulwaiya</em> - especially at auwa</td>
<td>Strangers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation of Taipan and other <em>pulwaiya</em></td>
<td>Uninitiated</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. *Nganwi* may be substituted for the name of an absent relative, a newly born child (and a child's first teeth), and any animal (especially big game) and honey (especially *maikuyin*) that one is hunting. It is worth pointing out that a newly born child is "unseen" by most people until mother and child are ritually incorporated into the community.

IV. *Nganwi* is also used to refer to places of birth and initiation and for initiation ceremonies. Both birth and initiation occur outside the camp in the bush.

Wik-mungkan believe that initiated men have an unseen child inside them. A man's unseen child is dangerous or potent. It can get inside of others (or impregnate others) and make them ill. When a man's unseen child penetrates another person — man or woman — it makes that person's stomach swell, as if he, or she; were pregnant. That person suffers just as a woman suffers, and significantly women are said to
suffer in childbirth because of Taipan's curse as he 'went down' into his *auwa*. One is particularly apt to suffer *nganwi* sickness if one is inattentive while an older initiated man is making a spear. In another article (McKnight 1973: 202) I have discussed the sexual symbolism of spear and its maleness. As if to drive home the point that it is a man's child which makes others ill, a spear-thrower is placed on a sick person's stomach and the healer lies on top of him as in the sexual act. There is little or no worry that women *qua* women may cause *nganwi* sickness. Or to put it another way, there is no worry about women being impregnators. We have also seen that *mai kuyin*, the male type of honey *par excellence*, is ritually dangerous. In contrast the most female kind of honey, *mai at*, is not dangerous, and of all the different kinds of honey is the most freely given and received (McKnight 1973: 201). I know of no case of a pregnant woman's child causing sickness or misfortune; indeed, I was told that the husband of a pregnant woman may have good luck. A man's unseen child and a woman's new-born child are both referred to as *nganwi*. The place where a woman gives birth and where initiations are held are both known as *a:k nganwi*. There is an obvious parallel between sexual intercourse and pregnancy, and initiation and obtaining an unseen child. Thus one copulation is not enough to impregnate a woman (Thomson 1936: 375), and once through the initiation is not enough to obtain an unseen child. It seems to me that Wik-mungkan men are trying to have it both ways, i.e. in ritual contexts they claim they are bearers and begetters of children. Or to put it another way, they are both genetrix and genitor.

**NOTES**

1 At the end of the initiation, when women are present, the initiates and older initiated men dance while facing one another. The older initiated men exhort the youths to stare hard at them and they also exhort the women to stare at the initiated youths. Thus one should always pay close attention to what one's ritual superior is doing.

2 It is unlucky to dream about people whose *pulwaiya* is Taipan. To prevent ill luck or sickness one should warm one's hands and feet over a fire and poke one's gums to make them bleed. If one dreams about other people one may be lucky in hunting their *pulwaiya*. Some informants claimed that if one dreams about a white person, it means that one will find a stingray, shark or *mai at* (the female type of honey). The whiteness of Europeans is explicitly associated with the white liver of shark and stingray and the clearness or whiteness of *mai at*.

3 In the hope of gaining a better understanding of the Rainbow Serpent I collected information about taipan-snakes. The eye of a taipan-snake is said
to be dangerous because, unlike other snakes, once a taipan-snake fixes its eye on its victim nothing deters it from striking. Informants said that the taipan-snake is more brightly coloured than other snakes. They emphasized its redness and claimed that it has some white on its neck and body. It is for this reason, I was told, that red ochre is ritually more important than white clay. It is believed that if children were to eat the heart of a taipan-snake they would grow up to be wild and quick tempered. And if a child looks at a taipan-snake's eye, then the child's eye may become very bright and he will be able to see things far away.

4 I am reminded that some Canadian women refer to their menstrual period by a man’s name, Charlie. In some way it seems significant that Taipan is associated with menstruation and that some Canadian women use a man’s name to refer to a female physiological phenomenon.

6 It is dangerous for initiates and uninitiated people to handle *pulwaiya* carvings. I once handled some carvings which had recently been used in an initiation. In order to protect me from *nganwi* sickness some of the older initiated men put their smell on me.

6 Taipan is associated with storms, lightning and thunder (McConnel 1936: 85 and 101). Wik-mungkan are terrified of lightning.

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