

## You Can't Escape Your Origins: Exegeting the *Jukurrpa* in Warlpiri Christianity and the Struggle Over Indigeneity

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The question of origins retains – dare we say it – its primal force in Australian life. Origins still matter in a neo-colonial settler nation where so-called culture wars pit narrative against narrative in an attempt to define the politics of the present. In this teleological contest the stories, symbols and hopes of the First Nations peoples of this land are periodically used to reinforce political division, yet something more than a line in the sand of public policy is being drawn here. Indeed, when an increasingly secular society finds itself confronted by this alternate Australian story – the ‘Indigenous’ story – it comes face to face with that which was thought to be forgotten or no longer relevant to a modern nation: the presence of the sacred (Gelder and Jacobs 1998, especially Chapter 1). Yet to put matters in this way is to surely make a backhanded claim about Indigeneity: that to be Indigenous is to be connected with sacred things, places, ideas, and histories. Obviously, this will not do in any simple or straightforward way, for people can patently be Indigenous and yet embrace a ‘post-sacred’ worldview. In such a context, and as an intellectual catchall, Indigeneity must account for both continuity amidst innovation and allow for extrapolations as well as re-imaginings that might appear novel to those who seek to locate the Indigenous within traditional schemas of the old anthropologists, venerable though their works may be.

How the notion of ‘Indigenous Religion’ overlaps with, or departs from, current notions of Indigeneity is a related conceptual conundrum. In what follows, the works of senior Warlpiri figures from Central Australia, including the award-winning artist Dorothy Napangardi, the pastor, educator and community leader Rex Daniel Granites Japanangka, and the Lajamanu-based Christian leader, Jerry Jangala, are briefly explored to offer insight into the way in which the particularity of Warlpiri culture and places such as the Tanami Desert and Lake Mackay are dynamically brought into conversation with non-local versions of Aboriginality, town living, modernity, and, surprisingly, Christian faith. Their attempts to ‘exegete’ Warlpiri culture in paint, ceremony, and Biblical interpretation are viewed from within the overarching perspective of the history of Aboriginal ontology that Tony Swain developed (Swain 1993), and are

investigated as an examples of what James L. Cox posits as the cultural hybridity evident within some forms of contemporary indigenous religion (Cox 2014), and of the reflexive and intentional religious synthesis that Carl F. Starkloff theorised as the 'Syncretic Process' (Starkloff 2002). The attempts of Warlpiri leaders to articulate the past in the present, to re-imagine and re-vision tradition in order to explicate the meaning of the *Jukurrpa* in current Warlpiri culture offer a vibrant expression of Indigeneity in contemporary Australian life. In taking this path, these Indigenous leaders offer their own interpretation of life in a post-modern global age. These interpretations are to be taken seriously, and the reading of their work that follows in this chapter builds on the work of Minoru Hokari, who argued for the modernity of these ontologies, hybrid though they may be (Hokari 2011). That Christianity has to some extent played an ongoing role in this 'two-ways' process and, arguably despite the intention of some missionaries, has not in the end hindered it, but has instead aided a polyphony of voices to emerge. These voices express the essence of a Warlpiri ontology in the midst of a (post)modern secular state. This highlights the resilience of Aboriginal culture, the malleability of Christianity in non-Western contexts, and the complexity of the relationship of Warlpiri 'Indigeneity' to a dominant non-Indigenous culture.

Taken together, the interplay of these themes and concerns calls for the positing of a theoretical position that insists on the gathering of ongoing case study material that is able to inform discernment of historical transformations in Indigenous religions, and capture the richness of these evolving life-worlds at the local level. This detailed and analytical work must be carried out in dialogue with, and allow itself to be critiqued by, perspectives that are informed by scholarly standpoints that privilege Indigeneity and the production of Indigenous knowledge, thereby guarding against the temptation of Western critical analysis to abstract themes and concepts too far from the self-consciously structured relationships that drive and limit any process of potential transformation in Indigenous communities, whether in the city or, as in this excerpted case study, the remoteness of the Central Australian deserts. The late Dorothy Napangardi (c.1948–2013) was a Warlpiri woman who resided in Alice Springs and had a connection by birth to the Lake Mackay area in Western Australia (<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/obituaries/not-even-fame-is-better-than-family-20130628-2p2np.html>) access date 26/9/2013. Napangardi created a celebrated body of artwork that embodies a dazzling aesthetic vision. In many of her works such as the award winning *Salt on Mina Mina*, Napangardi visualises the Lake Mackay area from above, her fine dot work mimicking water on the desert sandhills and salt pans, while at the same time providing a visual sense of the narrative movement of the Mina Mina Dreaming where the ancestral