TJUKURPA PALYA—THE GOOD WORD:
PITJANTJATJARA RESPONSES TO CHRISTIANITY

BILL EDWARDS

There has been a tendency by some historians, anthropologists and Indigenous writers to downplay the response of Aboriginal people in Australia to Christianity. This chapter examines the establishment of Ernabella mission in the north west of South Australia, and the response of the Pitjantjatjara to the introduction of Christianity.¹ It challenges anthropologist Aram Yengoyan’s claim that “the religion of the economically and politically dispossessed society [the Pitjantjatjara] does not have a ‘prior text’ that facilitates religious conversion—that is, one that relates to prior texts in Western thought which do embrace Christianity.”²

The Pitjantjatjara

The Pitjantjatjara occupied a large region in the far north-west of the state of South Australia and adjacent parts of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. This area included the Musgrave, Mann and Tomkinson Ranges, and extensive sandhill plains. The Pitjantjatjara were hunter-gatherers whose movements were governed largely by the availability of scattered water supplies. They attribute the beginnings of their existence and their way of life to the creative activities of the Tjukurpa, glossed in English as the Dreaming.³ They believe that spirit beings who had lain dormant under the unformed substance of

¹ I acknowledge my own interest and firsthand involvement with the Pitjantjatjara over 22 years. I have continued to have a close association with the Pitjanjatjara since leaving the Pitjantjatjara Lands 24 years ago.
the land, became animated and emerged on the surface of the earth. Most have both human and other species identities. As these ancestral beings moved across the surface of the land, their activities formed the hills, watercourses, sandhills, trees, caves and other features of the environment, as they metamorphosed into these objects, or in other ways left their imprint. Pitjantjatjara associated with particular areas of country, believe they are descended from these ancestor spirit beings and are responsible for preserving and passing on the stories and rituals related to their totemic being. The rituals include male initiations and increase ceremonies which ensure the continued supply of resources. The activities of the Dreaming ancestors provide the model for daily living and social cohesion. Through ritual the performers participate in the original acts of creation linking past and present. The emphasis is on social rather than on individual identity where everyday behaviors are determined by intricate kin networks.

The arid environment and distance from coastal areas protected the Pitjantjatjara from the impact of early colonial settlement in Australia. They remained isolated from outside influences until the mid-twentieth century.

Evaluations of Aboriginal Christianity

Richard Broome reflects the views of many historians when he states,

Until the 1960s there were very few Aboriginal Christians converts. Also there were no significant amalgamations between Aboriginal religious ideas and Christianity to form a new religion along the lines of many indigenous-Christian churches in Africa today.

Broome ignores the creation of Aboriginal congregations in a variety of missions throughout Australia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the role of earlier Aboriginal pastors and evangelists such as Nathanael Pepper, Blind Moses Tjalkabota, James and David Unaipon, Mamoos and James Noble.

---

7 See John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity. A Story*