On Aboriginal Religion: An Appreciation

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Though W.E.H. Stanner’s essays ‘On Aboriginal Religion’ are a continuing—one may say without exaggeration, inexhaustible—source of insight to students of Australian Aboriginal society (cf. Keen 1986:26), they are not as widely known as their ethnographic and interpretive richness would seem to warrant, and regrettably, have not found a regular place in the cross-cultural study of religions. There are several reasons for this, some simple and some complex. This appreciation attempts to account for this relative neglect through a broad interpretation of Stanner’s aims and methods, and greater and lesser successes, in this work.

One reason that the work is not as well known as its appreciative readers might expect has been its limited availability as a monograph, something this edition is intended to rectify. The essays which comprise ‘On Aboriginal Religion’ were originally published as a series of articles (spanning the years 1959–1963) in the journal Oceania (based at Sydney University). In 1963 they were reprinted, with the addition of a brief introduction by Stanner but otherwise unmodified, as Number 11 in the Oceania Monographs series, in a limited edition. A second impression appeared in 1966. This too was soon exhausted, and editorial files reveal continuing inquiries about the monograph’s availability and possible reprinting. But Stanner himself, when contacted about this, was reluctant to allow its re-issue. The reason was, as his letters reveal, that he planned revisions of the work, though their intended nature and extent is not revealed in the correspondence. Some time after the possibility of a revised edition disappeared with Stanner’s death in 1981, Oceania sought Mrs. Stanner’s permission to re-issue the monograph
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in order to gain for it the wider distribution it deserves, permission for which we here express our sincere gratitude.

Almost certainly, Stanner’s reluctance in the matter was linked to the fact that ‘On Aboriginal Religion’ was written as a series of articles, not conceived and written as a book. Thus while many of the ideas contained in the later articles are prefigured in the earlier ones, showing that from the first one Stanner had a conception of the linkages he wanted to make, nevertheless in refusing to allow re-issue it is likely that he had in mind a re-casting which would give a stronger unity to the whole. The work is ethnographically of a piece, in that all the material Stanner discusses comes from a single region, indeed in the main from one tribal grouping, the Murinbata, of the northwestern Northern Territory (see Barwick, Beckett and Reay 1985:4–8 [BBR] for background to Stanner’s fieldwork of the 1930s in this Daly River region). It is noticeable, however, that some of his main theoretical themes, such as his objections to interpretations of Aboriginal religion as reflecting the social order, recur throughout the essays, resulting in a degree of repetitiveness that his intended revisions might have eliminated. In the final essay, which contains some of Stanner’s broadest and most powerful constructions of an Aboriginal ontology, he observes (page 325) that it should perhaps have been first rather than last, and that the first article, with its interpretation of an Aboriginal rite under the guise of sacrifice, might more appropriately have come last, so that (one infers) the aptness of the analogy could be felt to follow naturally from the preceding generalisations concerning the religion (see Maddock 1985 for examination of the adequacy of the analogy, also comments on this by Keen 1986:42). To some extent, then, Stanner himself imposed limitations on the availability of the monograph because he still regarded it as a work-in-progress.

There are other, more complex reasons to explain why this work is not yet as well known as it should be. One, in my opinion, is an uncertainty or ambivalence in direction which developed over the course of writing of the essays. Thus certain themes broached in the earlier essays remain suggestive but unelaborated. Especially the first
three essays moot revisions in significant anthropological concepts, specifically, the development of a notion of a system or structure of operations over then-current notions of social structure (see below, also BBR 1985:33–34, Keen 1986 for further commentary). The reader presumes that Stanner will use the rich Murinbata ethnographic material to illustrate the utility and force of the proposed revisions. The later articles, however, evince no significant development of them through the material. Instead, alongside and partly through the comparative examination of Murinbata myth and rite, conducted by methods which do not significantly rely on, and in fact seem to by-pass, the intended development of a notion of operations, Stanner develops a rich and suggestive view of Aboriginal religion as an ontological system which, indeed, he had prefigured in the earlier articles as his main object of study (page 98, page 113). Thus, the development of the articles eventually reveals some lack of continuity between his earlier-stated initiatives concerning anthropological theory, and the methods he actually applies in elaborating his portrayal of the ontology. Though there is a disjunction in the essays between the two emphases, they have an underlying point of contact in Stanner’s rejection of reductionist, impoverishing views of Aboriginal religion, varieties of which he claims are inherent in approaches to Aboriginal society through contemporary social structural analysis, and which he clearly intends his portrait of the ontology to redress.

One may object to focussing attention on Stanner’s discussion of such theoretical issues for, it may be argued, that turns out not to be the major emphasis or strength of the work. But that Stanner himself placed importance on his initiatives in this regard is shown by the fact that he devotes to them about half of the several pages he wrote in 1963 as a brief Introduction to the monograph, when all the articles had been completed.

The following sections examine main themes in the work, leading up to Stanner’s conceptualisation of the Dreaming in the final article, the centrepiece of his exploration of Aboriginal ontology.
Defects of Social Structural Analysis

Stanner’s studies at Sydney University, which out of necessity he combined with work as a reporter, took a decisive turn in 1929 when he enrolled for Anthropology I with A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, foundation professor at Sydney from 1926–1931 (see BBR 1985 for a detailed biography of Stanner, and a full bibliography of his work). Drawn by Radcliffe-Brown’s authoritative and winning style as teacher and mentor, Stanner graduated in 1931 with first class honours in anthropology, and soon undertook a seven month period of fieldwork in the Daly River region from 1932, one aim of which was to supplement Radcliffe-Brown’s survey of ‘The social organisation of Australian tribes’ (1930–1).

While at the Daly, Stanner became aware of the impact of European intrusion on the Mulluk Mulluk, Madngella, Marithiel and Nangiomeri people with whom he worked, then mostly employed on peanut farms established in the Depression era here and elsewhere in the upper Northern Territory. This first-hand experience of the effects of colonisation, missionisation and usurpation kindled in him a continuing concern for the contemporary conditions of Aboriginal people, and prompted his increasing involvement over the years in policy and administrative developments, not only in Aboriginal affairs, but also in Africa and the Pacific, where he subsequently gained extensive field and administrative experience. There are, however, indications that in his fieldwork in the Daly he was most strongly drawn, intellectually and temperamentally, by insights into traditional religion and social life; and some of his later Aboriginalist writings (e.g. Stanner 1958) show a related tendency to explore even radical social transformation under the rubric ‘culture contact’ or ‘culture change’, with the attendant break between culture as a continuity of transmitted ‘values’ (cf. BBR 1985:31), and the actualities of social life, that such labels often entail.

Following completion in 1934 of his master’s thesis, ‘Culture Contact on the Daly River’, Stanner carried out another long stint of fieldwork in the Northern Territory, some of which formed the basis for his Doctoral thesis, ‘Economic Change in North Australian Tribes’, submitted at the
University of London in 1938. Early in his stay in England, Stanner briefly renewed his contact with Radcliffe-Brown, then at Oxford, and accepted his advice to write his thesis under Bronislaw Malinowski at the London School of Economics. Stanner found the intellectual environment there both taxing and stimulating (BBR 1985:9), and it certainly put him in touch with influences other than Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism, which he always acknowledged as formative (BBR 1985:4), but against which he registered a strong reaction in ‘On Aboriginal Religion’.

Radcliffe-Brown’s structural-functionalism had of course partly been developed in relation to Australianist materials, but Stanner was obviously dissatisfied with it in general, and with its specific applications to Australian Aboriginal society. His own form of analysis of the Murinbata material owes little to it, and turns out to bear greater resemblance to Lévi-Strauss’ structural approach than to any form of sociological analysis (though Stanner notes that he was unaware of Lévi-Strauss’ work on myth until 1960, see page 325).

What defects, in Stanner’s view, inhere in the usual notions of social structure, and why are such notions inappropriate in relation to the Aboriginal material?

In a number of places Stanner makes it clear that, for him, the worst failing of social structural analysis is its aridity, its proceeding by reification and abstraction of social relations that have another nature (p. 16), resulting in models not of or after them, but about them. (We might now see this in light of Bourdieu’s 1977 theme of the limits of objectivism). Accordingly, modern anthropology is anxious that it is not yielding ‘clear pictures of human persons at the business of life’ (p. 16).

Stanner repeats the image of social structural relations as enduring connections between points of force in a network (page 99, page 112, page 325, page 163), and he quotes Geddes’ definition to the effect

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1 See also Keen (1986:33–34) for indications of the positive influences of Firth on Stanner’s concepts of transaction and operation, discussed below, and some other aspects of Radcliffe-Brown’s influence.
that it is ‘categories of people and the regular forms of relationship between them that anthropologists mean when they speak of social structure’ (page 113). In a passage which clearly alludes to (but does not mention) Radcliffe-Brown, Stanner says that social structural principles—the equivalence of alternate generations and the like—are inappropriately separated analytically from conduct as in some sense prior to it or causal of it. Rather, such so-called principles are ‘necessary and enabling conditions’ of social conduct (page 89), and insofar as they can be made concrete, are only known by their content, i.e. in conduct. Such principles do not yield a picture of sociality (page 113). What anthropology has become, Stanner complains, is a ‘dialogue over abstract nouns’, and ought to be converted into a ‘conjugation of verbs’ (page 63).

Were Radcliffe-Brown to have been confronted with these complaints, he probably would have regarded them as quite beside the point of constructing a ‘natural science of society’ (Radcliffe-Brown 1957, based on his University of Chicago lectures of 1937). The disagreement about what it is important and plausible to study would seem to be fundamental. Using an old figure to compare the views, we may say Radcliffe-Brown had in mind a comparative science of anatomy (despite his later moves towards a different formulation, see Radcliffe-Brown 1952:4), while Stanner here argues that the prime object of study should be physiologies, the emphasis shifted more definitively from structure and function to process; and that the anatomical image is not even apt—structures may only be said to exist as functions (in a slightly different sense) of social acts, or operations, which are the only plausible object of ethnographic observation.²

² Singer (1984) has argued that Radcliffe-Brown’s work shows a movement from early functionalist, empiricist and naturalist tendencies to moments of ‘genuine structural analysis’ later on (cf. Radcliffe-Brown 1952, 1957), possibly influenced by conceptions of structure, and the philosophy of events and relations among them, of Russell and Whitehead. However this may be, it is clear that Stanner’s own view of Radcliffe-Brown’s principal contributions was that these lay in his efforts
Stanner says that operations are acts of sociality (page 113), and may be studied as having a distinguishable structure. Earlier (page 89), he had broached a notion of transaction to capture the sidedness of human dealings, and had distinguished transitive and intransitive types of conduct (i.e. as to whether they have or are intended to have perceptible effect), in an effort to deal with the old question of whether it is appropriate to regard many types of religious acts as evidence of an ‘illusion of technical competence’ (page 91), i.e. some sense of direct efficacy, on the part of those who participate in them.

How does Stanner envision the notion of operations or structure of operations contributing to an improved Australian Aboriginal anthropology? Its potential application is not made fully explicit, yet there are clear instances of his insight into the possibilities. Consider totemism, that hoary subject, which in Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms*, as well as works of lesser imaginative force, had been seen as the key to the description of Aboriginal society, as a segmental organisation of totemic clans. Besides deploring the reduction of Aboriginal religion to totemism (page 301, Stanner further contends that an image of segmental clans is a fundamentally inadequate view of Aboriginal sociality/society. It falsely tends to suggest that society can be seen as a unified whole (page 112), or rather, its organisation as unidimensional. He excoriates those (page 112)—no doubt he has W.L. Warner in mind, among others—who have thought to find in kinship a unifying principle which underlies interaction. There is not a social system which exhibits a structure. Totemism is an operational relation, which may indeed be seen as providing the fundamental mode of linkage between cosmology/ontology and the social order. It provides the basis for men’s (sic) acting through totemic signs towards the putative ground of dependency (the ‘totemic endowment’), and in those actions reproducing types of
to define types and forms of structure as that which is discoverable, coherent and consistent in social systems (albeit always acknowledged by Radcliffe-Brown to be virtual in what he distinguished as social organisation), and to develop a comparative social science based on the abstraction of such general features (see Stanner 1968).
groupings and identifications ‘of a totemic determination’ (page 110). Thus, totemism constitutes an important ground of action, including the terms by which people act as a group, but only in relation to certain objects of activity, not all. Sociality, the ‘common life of interaction’ (page 111), is composed of many different types of relation and activity—marriage, trade, hunting, etc., which rest on diverse (‘conjugate’ page 111) principles of association. No single one can be seen to organise all activities, nor do the various principles of organisation have a ‘ground of unity’ (page 111). Relations of association are ‘visible’ (page 111) as ‘conjoint acts’, and it is this structure of operations, Stanner proposes, that rightly constitutes the more concrete ‘matter’ in relation to which one may speak of a structure of functions, or regular forms of relations among (categories of) persons which, as in rite, sometimes presuppose a segmental structure. Thus, the totemic principle is relevant to certain types of social acts (e.g. the performance of rite, and perhaps to a lesser degree, many others), and any groups organised according to this principle can only be properly construed as complex functions of the activity types, not as one-dimensional, perduring, organ-like structures constituting society (see Sansom 1980 for recent development and ethnographic application to Aboriginal material of ideas which bear some similarities to these). It is not that Aboriginal sociality/society has no form, but it is the forms and objects of action that are primary, rather than categories and groups, which are to be seen as functions of action.

It is not clear how far Stanner would have thought it appropriate to generalise this view to other societies. In any event, from this interesting beginning Stanner’s use of the term ‘operations’ becomes scarcer, and especially in the later analyses of myth and rite it gives ways to a profusion of other terms—event (page 129), incident (page 212), parallel structures of rite and myth (page 212), sequences of conduct, process, forms of process (page 114)—to which he no doubt wants to relate it, but without ever explicitly doing so. In short, ‘operation’ drops out as an analytical category as the examination of myth and rite deepens, and the reader becomes aware that what Stanner wants to say about these forms here—what they reveal about the ‘ontology
of a type of thought and life’ (page 98)—does not depend upon its clarification.\(^3\)

Before we leave this subject we may note one peculiarity in Stanner’s intended concept of operations which, I think, does owe something to Radcliffe-Brownian naturalist and empiricist influence.

Stanner writes that ‘one may actually see the constituent operations’ of the rite of Punj (page 99); also, that there occur ‘things which I have seen and could have been seen by anyone’; further on (page 166) he refers to operations as ‘manual acts’. The sum of such characterisations (see also BBR 1985:31, Keen 1986:41) leaves little doubt that Stanner was searching for a perceptually-based, empirical point of departure which could be claimed to be at least as real as in the most realist view of social structure. If the matter had been put directly to him, I do not believe Stanner ultimately would have adhered to the view that there is any simple relation between observation—‘things I have seen’—and the interpretation of them as particular kinds of social acts. Nevertheless there is a distinct positivist impulse here, a tendency to want to develop theoretical concepts of the same putative order of reality as social action appears to its participants/observers to be.

But in any case, as we shall see, Stanner’s analysis is not principally directed to real time social acts as these can be observed, but rather to segmentations of rite and myth, and correlations between them, that contribute to his main theme, the interpretation of Aboriginal ontology.

**What Is Aboriginal Religion?**

Stanner is duly cautious about the possibility of defining Aboriginal (or any) religion (page 63). Beyond this, however, it is of interest to consider briefly how he uses the term, for it is nowadays widely

\(^3\) See also Keen (1986:41) for a related critique, that the ‘lack of an adequate theory of action’ is the main defect in Stanner’s approach to the analysis of religion in social life.
thought that Aboriginal life is in some way suffused with spirituality or religiosity, a generalisation with which I think Stanner would agree, and which, in considerable measure, his writing has probably helped to establish.

Above, we have already discussed Stanner’s objection to reductionist/reflectionist views of Aboriginal religion as a ‘dependent variable’ (page 62), a mere secondary reflection of a primary social order (page 99). In his view, many discussions of totemism have been basically flawed for this reason.

Stanner also deplores views that Aborigines have nothing worthy of the name ‘religion’, or—to re-cast this in a way that illustrates the sort of conditions he places on such an identification—that they were a primitive people who ‘could not possibly have had serious thoughts about life’ (page 320). That Aborigines have something worthy of being called ‘religion’ would now certainly be accepted by many, not only because of a general feeling (which, as we have noted, Stanner shared) that to attempt to rigorously define it is futile, but also partly because not all would associate with its definition the high criterion of moral insight (he often softens this to ‘intuition concerning men’s life and condition’, page 299) that Stanner does.

Stanner says he uses ‘religion’ indicatively, to point to ‘the content of a devotional life’ (page 62). In the second article (page 96) he diagrams his view of the partition of reality according to an Aboriginal scheme. There, things he defines as of the order of religion only represent a portion of the lived order, overlapping with, but of lesser extent than, things of the social order. Insofar as social and religious orders can be distinguished in this way, Stanner views the social as providing a language of ‘shapes’ (page 133) through which religious reality is expressed (see also page 301 on the importance of distinguishing between the nature of symbols and the ‘things of ultimate religious concern’ for which they stand). All experience is encompassed within the ontology of the Dreaming.

The character of the devotional life is sacramentalist; that is, men act through signs which, he asserts, betoken dependency on
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an endowment and flow of benefits (totemic in character), and such actions are performed also under a plan for distributing the flow of benefits among men. Thus, Stanner defines the main parts of what he terms the religious economy (page 100) as: the totemic endowment with its flow of life-benefits; the exchange of signs (in rite); and the plan of distributing the flow among men (social institutions). Though the entire religious economy is set within and suffused with the ontology of the Dreaming, the focus, or high points, of the religion are the rites in which signs of the endowment (e.g. sacred objects such as the bullroarer, sacred designs, etc.) are manipulated and exchanged. In the initiatory rites discussed in the first article, for example, it is shown that there is a passing on of rightful knowledge of the efficacious signs from seniors to juniors, initiators to initiands, conceived as a conferring of understanding and adulthood.

Not all socially significant acts are sacramental; that is, not all involve devotional use of signs of the endowment. Stanner notes, for instance, that ‘neither birth nor marriage attracts rites and ceremonies of a sacramental kind’, so that these occasions, in his sense, are not treated as ‘religiously significant’ (page 103). Thus, though all religious practice and, in theory, all the instituted forms of life are encompassed within the foundational Dreaming, not all of social life is, in his definition, religious in character.

In his discussions of rite throughout the essays, Stanner describes the ‘exchange of signs’ and, as well, there is discussion of aspects of the ‘distribution of the flow’ among men (see e.g. page 298 a reference to a ‘ruling stratum’ of older men, and to the ascendancy of men over women). His portrayal of the distribution, however, tends overall to be a-political in character: though he observes (page 321) that ‘political force was used to impose and maintain’ received tradition, his broader assumption is that because there was a ‘notion of an original endowment of each clan with the means of life’, their relation in the religious rites could only be one of support, not of competition: ‘There could be no struggle for a division of what had already been divided’ (page 323). He concedes the possibility of individuals acting to maximise their own
interests, but sees this as a perversion by which the religion itself should not be judged.

Finally, Stanner explores the totemic endowment partly through discussion of what he calls ‘existence classes’, that in linguistic description (Walsh 1976) are called ‘noun classes’. Stanner, however, would not be happy with this narrower view of them as grammatical phenomena, the nature of whose relation to conception is more or less indirect. He describes the classes as ‘ontological conceptions’ which ‘divide all significant matter in the world into classes’ (page 170), so that the ‘very language through which the more mundane things of life are dealt with is itself dense with symbolical import’ (although he adds, in a way that distinctly lessens the impact of such an assertion, ‘it may be somewhat indeterminate’). The claim that these classes are imbued with significances relating to the constitutive patterns of the Dreaming goes, I believe, well beyond anything he is able to establish. But it is also his claim, here (page 177) and elsewhere, that symbolisation in the medium of language is not privileged in the practice of Aboriginal religion. With that, let us turn to consider the senses in which Stanner’s approach is, and is not, concerned with issues of symbolic analysis.

**Symbolisation in Aboriginal Religion**

A large part of Aboriginal religion, Stanner remarks, is focussed upon ‘the rightful possession and dutiful use of the efficacious signs’ (page 85). But with some exceptions (see e.g. comments on the significance of human hair, page 251) Stanner does not embark on a minute analysis of the detailed sign elements of rite and myth (though there are extensive reports of the contents of both, especially in essays IV and V). His reason for not focussing closely on the symbolisms is perhaps best summarised in his remark that he thought it more important to ‘study the symbolised rather than the symbols’ (page 308). His general view of the relation between social phenomena and religious expression, a form of problem inherited from Durkheim but in some ways
an inversion of Durkheim's reflectionist proposition that religion is a
projection of the form of society, is that rite and myth present people
with images of the unknown and mysterious in the terms of the ‘known
and non-mysterious—the social order’ (page 135). Thus, for Stanner,
the ultimate objects of religion lie beyond the social order: ‘The society
was not the real source and object of the religion’ (page 300). And in
any case, considerable difficulties stood in the way of pursuing the study
of the meaning of the religion through the elicitation of close comment
from the Murinbata.

Stanner describes the difficulty of eliciting exegesis of meanings
from informants, and concludes that there is a general attitude of
‘uninquiring acceptance’ (page 150) of things that would appear to be
symbolic in character, standing for something beyond themselves. The
religion involves expression in diverse media, and all present difficulties
in this regard. Song words are often obscure (page 156). The meaning of
spatial motifs of rite, as well as the denotation of many visual signs, often
cannot be successfully probed by direct inquiry (page 156). People will
make some comments on myth, but beyond these ‘The usefulness of
both direct and indirect questions falls off sharply’ (page 123). A lack
of explicit teaching is also typical of those aspects of the secret-sacred
Karwadi ceremony which have to do with the initiation of young men
(page 92). Discursive (i.e. explicit, indigenously made and recognised
meanings) do not predominate, while in the brilliant use of music, song,
mime and dance, presentational symbolisms—indeterminate in sense
and reference, but still powerful vehicles of effect—abound (see page
168 for Stanner’s application of this distinction, developed by Susanne
Langer). If understanding of rite and myth is to pass the threshold of
resistance to interpretation, ‘then it must be by other means’ (page
151) than the usual forms of inquiry. Ultimately any inquiry about
rite, myth and things of religious significance results in comment from
Aborigines that they are done to ‘follow up the Dreaming’. There is an
adherence to things and patterns laid down, but obscurity pervades
inquiry into them, and Stanner senses that mystery is an important part
of Aboriginal feeling for them.
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Stanner warns us we should not, on account of the obscurity, make the old mistake of thinking that Aboriginal religion is ‘lifeless adhesion to a deadened routine’ (page 150). For participants there is ‘rapt absorption in things that have emotional appeal and give aesthetic pleasure’ (page 149). In Stanner’s view, the simple Durkheimian sacred-profane dichotomy is inadequate to yield understanding of the complex and ‘crescive’ (page 313, i.e. cumulative and overlaid) symbolisms. What form of analysis can yield some understanding?

In relation to the multi-media expression of Aboriginal religion, and even to different tokens of the same type of medium (e.g. different myths), Stanner develops a notion of ‘congruent symbolising’:

Act, myth and spatial forms belong to distinct orders. We are thus not discovering the same phenomenon under different names. What we find by analysis is a set of congruences between components of a whole which are expressed according to the technique and system appropriate to each mode of symbolizing (page 168).

He summarises the congruence among forms of religious expression even more pithily, thus:

It is one of analogous elements arranged with similarity of form or pattern and having a commonness of import manifest in different types of symbolism (page 181).

What is that whole of which the various types of expression are components; what is the commonness of import into which religious expression permits a view? Stanner tells us that the religion expresses the insight of a complex sense of people’s ‘dependence on a ground and source beyond themselves’, a sense inherently of ‘good-with-suffering’, ‘order-with-tragedy’ (page 165), a ‘fatal impairment’ (page 323) from the beginning, and thus subjection to the ‘joint imperium of the good and the bad’ (page 147); and that this insight is considerable (though it is his opinion that the intuition of moral freedom or perfectibility is an even greater one, page 145); and that in the religion the insight is expressed with a ‘certain nobility that transcends the strange symbolisms’ (page 147). Thus:
The symbolistical activities do not manipulate objects of life but express the valuations placed on them, and the desires for them (page 92).

The Method: Congruence of Myth and Rite

Confronted by the difficulties, already sketched, of gaining indigenous exegesis, Stanner remarks that many anthropologists might feel that they must transpose the study to phenomena of the unconscious mind (page 151). But in a dismissal perhaps typical then of those of British social anthropological background, Stanner tends to see such a psychological approach as mutually exclusive with an anthropological one:

...the symbolisms are constituents of collective acts of mutuality, with a logical structure, a detectable range of meanings, and an aesthetic appeal as well as a preeminent place in the social development of individuals. These relations may be appropriately studied by the methods of anthropology (page 151).

In the first article Stanner discusses the ceremony of Punj or Karwadi, in II the associated myth, in IV and V the myth of the Rainbow Serpent or Kunmanggur, the rite of male initiation, mortuary rite, and the myth of Kukpi, the Black Snake-Woman. Important to Stanner’s mode of analysis is that in only some cases are a rite and a myth presently linked: the rite of Karwadi and the myth of Mutjingga, the Old Woman, form such a clearly associated pair. In other instances we have ‘riteless myths’ (i.e. myths, even apparently great and portentous ones such as that of the Rainbow Serpent, which are not associated with rite), and ‘mythless rites’ (e.g. male puberty rites).

The problem of the relation between rite and myth was of long standing in the study of religion. Stanner was obviously influenced by Robertson Smith, who saw rite as fundamental and myth as a secondary development in relation to it. Yet Stanner was not wholly satisfied with this view. Despite a measure of disbelief (page 185) that
an important myth such as that of the Rainbow Serpent should never have been associated with any known rite (he cites in partial support of his incredulity the apparent association of the myth with two major rock art sites in the region), Stanner is inclined to give definitive priority to neither form. (He does, however, later suggest that myth may have a longer life than cult, page 304). Rather one may, with due caution, adopt the method of looking:

within presently dissociated myths for the structural forms that would enable them to be compared with myths still demonstrably connected with rites, and to elicit from myths of both classes their kerygmatic elements—the statements of abiding truths about life—for comparison (page 186).

For Stanner has no doubt that:

Each myth has something to say—something significant, said beautifully and tragically—about the first and last formula of things, the ultimate conditions of human being, the instituted ways in which all things exist, and the continuity between the primal instituting and the experiential here-and-now (page 186).

And there is evidence of improvisation, innovation, vitality, in religious tradition. The Aborigines are not, as T.G.H. Strehlow (1971) would have had it, decadent in a social-evolutionary sense, a people in decline living off the spiritual capital of the past (page 189).

Having segmented and compared the various forms of myth and rite—rite and myth together, mythless rite and riteless myth—Stanner is willing to take an interpretive ‘leap in the dark’ (page 210) to hypothesise: there is a congruence of structure among all of them. The reader must examine the divisions into phases, and the posited structural parallels among myth and rite forms (e.g. page 212) to determine whether the segmentations, and the alleged parallels, seem apt; Stanner makes no effort to justify them closely. That he senses possible difficulty here is shown by an early comment that, when it is ontology that is under study, ‘some degree of implicit valuation’ is unavoidable (page 96); and a
later one, that there is the ‘problem of reducing the impressionism of
the approach’ since the materials ‘transcend controlled methods’ (page
273). But he asserts that it is a methodological improvement over the
social structural analysis he criticises because it ‘arranges for further
study the empirical similarities’ rather than postulating holism (page
268).

At some level of abstraction from the actual narrative content
Stanner proposes that all the forms show a common design with this
patterning of content:

Someone is sent or withdraws from a safe, habited place to a
place of solitude. In the second place—the place of removal,
or in the place deserted—wildness or terror, and a sort of
corruption, become ascendant. Something—trust, young
life, innocence—is destroyed there. Then, after a pause, there
is a return to the first place. But it is now not the same as
before; there has been a change; the old is not quite annulled
and the new not altogether unfamiliar (page 224).

And at an even higher level of abstraction, Stanner finds that all
exhibit the formula, very similar to the van Gennepian one: there is
a setting aside, a withdrawal, a transformation and a changed return
(page 268). All rites and myths may be seen as varying ‘material
manifestations’ of the structure (page 269).

What are the meanings of such a structure? Though Stanner makes
some observations concerning this in a number of places (see e.g. on
the one hand, his noting the demands made upon young males, page
224; and on the other, the emphasis upon transience within forms of
permanence), it is really in the final essay, subtitled ‘Cosmos and Society
Made Correlative’, that he makes a sustained effort to put together a
portrait of the ontology of which this structure is part, and the limits of
the kind of meaning he attributes to it become clear.
The Dreaming

According to the ontology as Stanner interprets it, all that exists does so in terms fixed ‘once-for-all’ (page 296) by the acts of mythic creator figures in an ‘everywhen’ time/event dimension (Stanner 1965). (This dimension has come to be called the Dreaming, following some Aboriginal usage, both in English and some indigenous languages; and the mythic figures themselves are called ‘dreamings’ by Aborigines in many parts of the continent). Existing things belong to types established by the founding creative dramas, and also persons and places are linked to and defined by their relations to those mythic events, relations expressed largely in an idiom of totems, forces which continue to be immanent in the landscape which they created. In the terms of these concepts, the very existence of things is proof of their links to the founding creative acts: what is, is true (page 308) and bears witness to those acts, in which things simultaneously became determinate and endowed with meaning. There was instituted a pattern of relevances and a moral order ‘such that the totality of life was a cosmological structure’ (page 297). Not only the ‘structures and process of life were settled’ by the founding creative dramas, but ‘man's whole lot, including the possibilities of his life’ (page 302). Besides the ‘archaist outlook’, ‘reactionary temper’ and ‘conservative impulse’ associated with such a deterministic conception in general, in Aboriginal society older men in particular comprised a ‘ruling stratum’ who ‘enforced a general assent to the terms of life which they... had adopted at pain and cost’ (page 298).

Throughout the essays Stanner finds evidence in myth of a dominant theme of ‘immemorial misdirection’ (page 118), or ‘irreparable injury to man at the beginning of life under instituted forms’ (page 319), exemplified by the cruel treatment of youth entrusted to the care of the Old Woman of the myth associated with the rite of Punj or Karwadi.

The major rites simulate the events of the founding dramas and thus are symbolic affirmations (page 299) of them:
Each ritual occasion vivified in the minds of celebrants the first instituting of the culture, deepened the sense of continuity with man's beginnings, and reaffirmed the structures of existence (page 298).

The rites dramatise and make manifest the possibility of assent to the instituted conditions of life, despite its inalterable element of tragedy:

The myths are evidence that they reflected and felt a fatal impairment, but the rites are evidence that they met the issue in a positive way. They brought the inexorable within the total economy of living and put positive values upon it, so as to integrate it with social actuality and actuality’s values (page 323).

During the founding dramas, two domains of life became distinguishable but remained interdependent: the corporeal and incorporeal (page 298).

The principle of the religion was to make fleshly, determinate and social life correlative with the spiritual cycle (page 317).

A human life as spirit was subject to movement along an inexorable course at the same time that ‘it had to be given value and status appropriate to progressively developing functions of its worldly life’ (page 318). The segmentation of the spiritual course was not entirely fixed and underwent historical change, and as part of this process there occurred changes in the allocation of social value. The possibility of developmental change in Murinbata religion is an important theme mentioned in several of the essays, and below we return briefly to Stanner’s ideas about the evidence that myth and rite provide for it.

As a result of the conjoint, social-spiritual definition of necessity within the scheme of once-for-all foundation, the ‘person himself was treated as helpless’ (page 318), required to surrender to imperatives dramatised and embodied in the symbolisms already sketched, of removal from human fellowship, transformation, and restoration, accompanied at each stage by the removal of social value, status and
functions, their destruction, and the conferring of enhanced value, status and functions (page 318). Throughout these essays Stanner argues against views of Aboriginal social life as static, and of the religious practice as adherence to a lifeless routine. But his writing distinguished from this, and brought into focus, Aboriginal valuation of continuity and the imposition upon events of an image of persistence ‘as the main character of reality’ (page 321). In the final essay he suggests some sources of change in Murinbata religious tradition that were compatible with the forms of permanence of the established ritual life. These are revaluations at two loci in the rites which make and keep correlative the corporeal and incorporeal domains: first, change in the relation between ‘life-situations’ (page 317, stages of human development) and their ritual recognition; and second, change in the recognised value of ritual transformation (and ultimately, in keeping with this, changes in the valuation of particular kinds of rite with respect to each other). In relation to the first point, Stanner cites the preeminence of admission to the rite of Punj over, for example, circumcision: the latter is said to simply confer adulthood or, in the Aboriginal expression, to ‘make men’, while the former is more highly valued in that it is meant and said to make men understand (page 103). Stanner sees the higher valuation of understanding over the attainment of manhood/adulthood through initiation as the last major historical development in rite before European influence set in (page 317). He sees as a possible kind of change the valuation as of ritual significance of birth and perhaps other life-situations, but he finds there is no evidence of this. There is some direct evidence of changes in Murinbata ritual tradition (see e.g. mention of the obsolescence of formerly great rites, page 141), yet there also appears to be considerable historical persistence of ritual form. Partly on the basis of the evidence of changes, Stanner returns to the problem of what is to be made of the existence of great myths dissociated from rite, and of rites without myths. Suggesting that perhaps the true function of such myth is to rationalise the exalting of things to the status of cult objects, he concludes with an hypothesis of the historical relation of myth and rite, namely that myths not attached
to any recent or extant rite are ‘memorials of old formations of cult’ (page 304). As undemonstrable as this may be from the Aboriginal material, it is part of Stanner’s continuing preoccupation with what he was able to distil and make sensible to others as a crucial feature of Murinbata orientation to lived experience, namely, the constant working to assimilate change to the instituted forms of permanence. He saw this as possible within terms of life encompassed by the Dreaming.

The Contribution of ‘On Aboriginal Religion’

Not in sympathy with structural-functionalist attempts to define society, Stanner was more interested in the tenor of sociality—which, as Radcliffe-Brown noted, is not any kind of entity (page 115)—and, incipiently, in what we might now call socio-cultural constructions of meaning. But he had chosen to work with a people for whom discourse about significance was not a typical or preferred mode, except at levels so abstract (e.g. the rite of Punj is done so that men will understand) that they seemed to provide little analytic leverage.

From a slightly different angle, Stanner deplored the treatment of Aboriginal religion as something else—as totemism, and in particular, as an epiphenomenon of the nature and form of society. It was his prime conviction that ‘The first duty of anthropology in dealing with Aboriginal religion is to try to elicit the kind of reality the facts of study have for the people responsible for them’ (page 95). But secondly, he ordained the sort of reality this must be: ‘natural facts of human conviction about the ultimates of life’ (ibid). Hence the tone of profundity and moralism that pervades ‘On Aboriginal Religion’, some would say giving it a distinctively Stannerian rather than recognisably Aboriginal tone, and hence also the degree of divorce in the work of religion from social structure, upon which Keen (1986) and Morphy (1988:243) have both commented.

Despite the weaknesses this divorce introduces into the work, Stanner’s insistence that religious reality must be of that lofty nature
enabled him to accomplish something with his Murinbata materials that no previous study of Aboriginal rite and myth had, and that few have since. Leaving behind any framework which would merely assign trivialising functions, or uni-dimensional structure, to the religious order, he pioneered a way of placing the study of ‘religion’ into broader interpretive study of Aboriginal life. He sought to identify through religious expression the encompassing dimensions of what he called the ‘ontology’, and by this route succeeded in formulating propositionally many of the overt attitudes and less explicit orientations towards lived experience with which many subsequent attempts to describe Aboriginal ways of life resonate profoundly: faithful belief in the fixed once-for-all foundation of the lived-in world, but yet the absorption of transience within these forms of permanence, and others.

How did this mark a watershed? Aboriginal ‘data’ always had an extremely important place in the development of sociological-anthropological theory. But many of the early theoretical uses of Aboriginalist material relied upon the particular kinds of evidence gathered by such avid collectors as Spencer and Gillen. Their descriptions of the rites—the Intichiuma, the Wollonqua, and many others—assumed the cardinal institution of totemism, its familiarity and naturalness as an object of study in ‘primitive’ society. However, one reads dozens of pages of these accounts with the growing realisation that there is little there of ‘the kind of reality the facts of study have for the people responsible for them’. Wading through the detailed descriptions of rite is like restricting one’s observations of foreign cuisine to the preparation of an elaborate meal of many and strange ingredients: enough can be assumed so one thinks one knows what is going on, but at the end, one must acknowledge that the dish remains unpalatably odd, and one has gained little grasp of the overall occasion at which it is to be eaten.

As Malinowski did for the Trobrianders, subsequent major descriptivist accounts of Aboriginal religion (see e.g. Elkin 1964) tended in one way or another to urge that, despite the strange symbolisms, the rites were socially ‘functional’, the orientations and motives of individuals understandable, and some of the social institutions
functionally comparable to our own. But such assurances always come from a perspective that remains unremittingly external to what is under study. Stanner, instead, made ‘sense’ of the Murinbata material, and recognising significant Aboriginal commonalities, through it also indicated possibilities for understanding of Aboriginalist material more broadly, by developing it in relation to a cosmology, which he described solemnly and even reverently. Of the recognition of his achievement, Morphy (1988:243) has recently written: ‘Hiatt (1975:11) was undoubtedly right when he wrote that: ‘There would be a wide agreement among Australianists that [Stanner’s] Oceania Monograph ‘On Aboriginal Religion’ is the most sensitive analysis of the subject to have appeared’. Morphy adds, however, that the work has been little cited and only recently the subject of critical review (in Keen 1986). This leads us to try to spell out how a thoroughgoing sociological insufficiency appears in the work as the negative side of Stanner’s effort to transcend a reductionist structural-functionalism.

Stanner reacted against the limitations of structural-functionalism against the background, which he shared with Radcliffe-Brown, of a pervasive Durkheimian influence (see Stanner’s 1967 critique of Durkheim). Stanner attempts to transcend Durkheim’s conclusion that the most elementary form of religion is a projection and celebration of the segmental form of society, contending instead that the objects of Aboriginal religion, of myth and rite, are things of ultimate concern. Society is not its object; instead, the religion provides the nearest approach to the encompassing ‘ontology’, which is the basis of Aboriginal reality. Religious rites are ‘acts towards whole reality, myths are allegorical statements about it, and social customs are acts within whole reality’ (page 98).

Stanner’s formulation, while seemingly opposite to the Durkheimian original, remains fundamentally of the same kind as Durkheim’s in their shared representationism, that is, in the claim that complex practices encompassed in the term ‘religion’ may be understood as being about some more or less easily defined object. As we have seen, in Stanner’s view the religion is about a founding ‘paradox, antinomy or dualism
common to all the structures of existence’ (page 319), of which myths are allegories, and to which rites are a positive response. For Stanner, instead of closely reflecting society’s form, ‘the religion appeared as the society’s completion’ (page 319), the mysteries and irreparable injury of the human condition ‘adumbrated by means of symbolisms couched in familiar idioms’ (page 299).

Thus Stanner shaped the terms of debate inherited from Durkheim as an opposition between the determination of religion by society, or the transcendental character of religion in relation to society. This was certainly not a matter to him of pure theory, but given earlier extended debate on the nature of totemism and primitive religion, he construed it also as an ethical and philosophical issue of the worth to be accorded to Aboriginal life and culture generally. It is because he constructed the issue, with moral overtones, as one of whether Aboriginal religion is greater or lesser than society, and answered it resoundingly in the former way, that he did not develop themes, for which much material is present in his text, of the religion as complex social phenomenon. Stanner’s representationism, a curious form of reduction given the vastness of what religion is about (‘things of ultimate concern’), gives to his characterisation of the religion an intellectualising, contemplative quality (cf. Keen 1986:44), as if its practices were essentially signifying ones, conveying some importance or consequence of which they are the mere expression. But it is a credit to Stanner as ethnographer the extent to which material that would be needed to develop other themes is suggestively present in the work, as Hiatt’s following Introduction also attests.

We may now return to the earlier statement that the reasons for which this work is not more widely known are complex. Though Stanner had criticisms to make of notions of social structure, he did not refine any alternative concepts through the Murinbata material, and in that sense leaves one major initiative in the work unrealised. But though his major concern is to elucidate Aboriginal religion, he achieves something of far wider anthropological significance in his suggestion of what he called the ‘sacramentalist’ religion, with its associated human and cosmic
relations, as part of a particular form of life which he depicts in part. Because Stanner makes no concession to simple notions of function, and rejects outright simplifying notions of structure, the definition of the religion, and the human-cosmic forms of relations associated with it, cannot be stated formulaically as an easily repeatable, single ‘idea’ (cf. Morphy 1988:243); and so the work falls foul of the canon that what is to be perceived as widely applicable must be simple and crystalline. But in the attempt to characterise the interpenetration—rather than simple functional or structural relation—of the religion with other aspects of the form of life, lie multiple strands of connection which Stanner chose not to explore, which however are suggestive not only for students of Aboriginal social life in particular, but also for those many more concerned with developing better understanding of the social grounds of religious phenomena in general.

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On Aboriginal Religion: An Appreciation

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