

On Aboriginal Religion: Stanner's Work

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Although in a broad sense Stanner's monograph is based on the research he carried out in the Daly River and Port Keats region between 1932 and 1959, there is no doubt that the rich observational material forming the empirical core of the thesis was obtained during a brief but critical period in 1935. In June of that year Roman Catholic missionaries set out from Darwin to establish a mission among the Murinbata at Port Keats, and Stanner accompanied them. He had previously encountered individual members of the Murinbata tribe at the Daly River, but this was his first trip to their homelands.

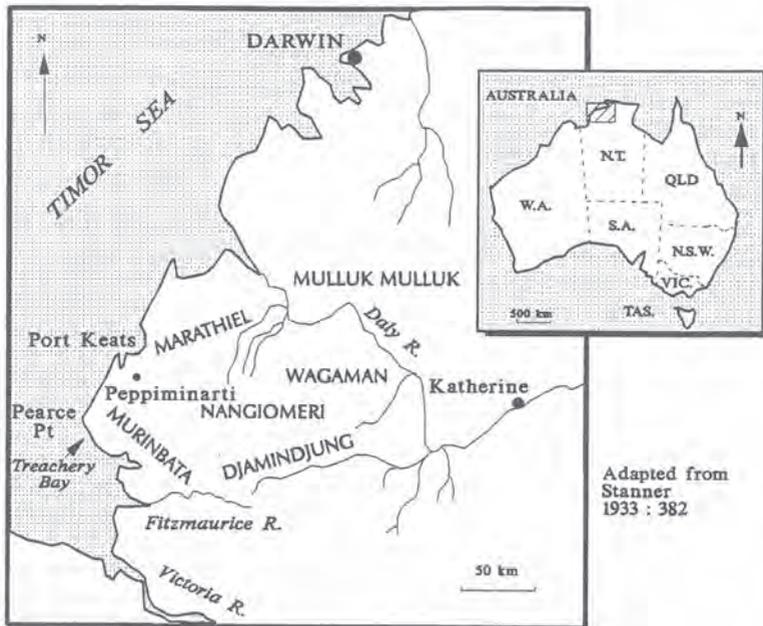
The Aboriginal population in the vicinity of the mission was about 150. Despite depopulation caused by disease and migration, the ceremonial life remained vigorous. Stanner stayed at Port Keats for two months (1936:192). By the time of his next visit, after World War II, traditional religious practices had been 'replaced by a systematic education in Christianity' (Falkenberg 1962:19).

Prior to the monograph *On Aboriginal Religion*, Stanner had published only one full-length article on the Murinbata. This was 'Murinbata Kinship and Totemism', which appeared in the December issue of *Oceania* in 1936. Here the Murinbata are described as 'the most important remaining tribe in the salt-water country on the north-west of North Australia' (p. 186). They once occupied a territory of some 500–700 square miles between the Fitzmaurice River and Port Keats (see Map). In 1935 the tribe was still nomadic, few people spoke English, and the people were regarded as 'uncivilised' (p. 187).

'Murinbata Kinship and Totemism' has been widely quoted because of its account of the adoption of the subsection system by the Murinbata (see especially Lévi-Strauss 1969:125, 152–55). The only

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reference it makes to ceremonial life is a brief statement on increase ceremonies, including a reference to 'the culture-hero of the Murinbata – Kunmanggur, the Rainbow-Snake Man' (pp. 193–94). An article on 'Djamindjung Kinship and Totemism', published in the June issue of *Oceania* in 1936, offers brief comparative notes on Murinbata conception beliefs, cult totems, and the 'bull-roarer cult at secret initiations' (pp. 448–51). The only other published references to the Murinbata prior to World War II occur in 'Aboriginal Modes of Address and Reference in the North-West of the Northern Territory' (*Oceania*, March 1937). Stanner notes that postulants for initiation are referred to as 'wild dogs' (p. 313), and he makes a passing reference to the revelation of *karwadi* bullroarers (p. 313).



Daly River and Port Keats area

Stanner returned to Port Keats in 1952. The visit revived memories of the ceremonial life he had witnessed seventeen years earlier, much of it now rendered inactive by the mission regime. Some time in 1953 or 1954, after returning to Canberra, he sketched plans for a book on ritual, to include chapters on 'valuation by expressive signs', 'institutional transactions', 'the All-Mother', and 'the Dreaming' (Barwick *et al.* 1985:283). All these topics feature prominently in *On Aboriginal Religion*. Stanner's celebrated essay on 'The Dreaming', first published in an anthology in 1956, was probably based on the relevant chapter of the projected book. Although obviously informed by first-hand experience, it makes no explicit reference to the Murinbata or their congeners.

Stanner made three further visits to the Daly River and Port Keats region during the 1950s. The first published intimation of the empirical content of *On Aboriginal Religion* appeared in several passages of 'Continuity and Change Among the Aborigines', Stanner's Presidential Address to Section F of ANZAAS in 1958 (reprinted in Stanner 1979 from the *Australian Journal of Science*). In section 4 of the paper Stanner summarises the myth of Kunmanggur, the Rainbow Serpent (see below), adding 'A book could be written – indeed, I cannot promise not to write it – about the symbolisms of the myth' (1979:55). He goes on to suggest that the decline of the cult of Kunmanggur and the rise of the cult of Mutjingga (see below) should be seen as a response to colonisation: Kunmanggur is the All-Father who failed his people, Mutjingga is the All-Mother who brings new hope (1979:61).

Stanner spent part of 1959 at Port Keats, and it was during this visit that he drafted his first article in the *Oceania* series 'On Aboriginal Religion'. In the same year, he wrote his splendid biography of Durmugam, a man of the Nangiomeri tribe he had known since 1932 (published 1960, reprinted in Stanner 1979). Here Stanner gives further substance to the view that colonisation provided the critical context for the fall of the All-Father and the rise of the All-Mother. He goes on to relate the circumstances of his own admission to the cult of the All-Mother, which he describes as 'messianic' or 'nativistic', and comparable with Melanesian cargo cults (1979:85).

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In mid-1961, after four of the six articles had been published, Stanner presented a paper to the Association of Social Anthropologists (Australian Branch) in which he sought to clarify his objectives. Entitled 'On the Study of Aboriginal Religion', the paper began by setting out four 'self-imposed restrictions', which later appeared as the second paragraph of the introduction to the monograph. After rejecting the approaches of Durkheim and (more peremptorily) Freud, it made a plea for an anthropology 'not of men, or men-in-roles, or men-together-in-groups, but of men-acting-jointly about things of value and doing specifiable things in identifiable situations of life with ends in view' (p. 11). It ended with a pronouncement that the highest Murinbata ritual has as its centrepiece the Mime of the Blowfly, symbolising corruption or living on corruption.

Stanner's last statement on Murinbata religion is an unpublished document entitled 'Big Sunday at Peppiminarti'. In 1978 ten Aborigines from the recently-established Peppiminarti settlement (see Map) visited him in Canberra. They had heard that he was not expected to live much longer and wanted to see him before he died. They were also keen to obtain from him any ritual objects from the Daly River that might be in his possession, for use in a forthcoming Punj ceremony. In the event Stanner made the journey to Peppiminarti for the ceremony itself, where he presented three bullroarers he had received as gifts during the 1930s (one of them from Durmugam). Despite illness and an inability to write, he formed impressions that, on returning to Canberra, he recorded with characteristic sensitivity and candour.

Much remained as he had witnessed it in 1935. Some of it even struck him as the most powerful and suggestive 'theatre' he had ever seen. But the objectives of the cult now seemed to have taken on a political cast in the context of inter-tribal rivalries. Stanner noted a degree of severity in the treatment of novices that seemed to express a greater desire to impose the authority of the cult upon them than to inculcate 'understanding, a sense of mystery or the other loftier things' (p. 11) he had attributed to it in his monograph.

Last, but perhaps not least, the Mime of the Blowfly was missing from the repertoire. In its place was a new performance, the Mime of the Aeroplane.

In 1980 Stanner drafted plans for a book entitled 'The Murinbata: a Religious Aboriginal Society' (Barwick *et al.*, 1985:307). The name 'Murinbata' is a conjunction of *murin*, 'language', and *bata*, 'good' (Falkenberg 1962:11). Chapter 1 was to be called 'The People of the Pleasing Tongue'. The book was never completed.

The Ethnographic Contents

The main raw materials of the monograph, in order of presentation, consist of (a) the bullroarer rite (Punj or Karwadi; p. 92); (b) the myth of Mutjingga, the Old Woman (p. 118); (c) the myth of Kunmanggur, the Rainbow Serpent (p. 183); (d) the circumcision rite (p. 230); (e) the death rite (p. 245); (f) the myth of Kukpi, the Black-Snake Woman (p. 256); (g) the season-changing rite, (Tjimburki p. 279); (h) pre-puberty initiation rites (Karamala and Djaban; p. 285); (i) the myth of Crab and Crow (p. 301). Interspersed between these segments are accounts of Murinbata totemism, noun classes, religious concepts, and modernisation. The empirical materials are subjected to analysis and woven into an original and well-integrated argument.

The three most important beings in the Murinbata pantheon at the time of Stanner's research in the 1930s were Mutjingga, Kunmanggur, and Kukpi (see p. 207). Mutjingga was central to the bullroarer ceremony, but neither Kunmanggur nor Kukpi figured directly in contemporary cults.

In offering a precis of the monograph, I shall begin with the main ethnographic components. I shall then summarise Stanner's interpretations and line of argument.

The Bullroarer Rite

This is a post-circumcision rite inducting youths into the cult of the Mother. The ceremony traditionally took place annually and lasted for one or two months.

1. The postulants are led by a senior man to a secret clearing. Initiated adult males have already assembled. When the youths arrive, the initiates enclose them in a tight circle. They sing a psalm which ends with an invocation of the Mother. The men return with the novices to the main camp, where the latter sit in a position of honour.
2. Before dawn on the following day, the lads return to the ceremonial ground. The day's proceedings begin with singing and institutionalised obscenities (*Tjirmumuk*). The rest of the morning is devoted to singing, the novices again encircled by the initiates. In the early afternoon the youths set out on what they believe is a hunting expedition. Once away from the ceremonial ground, their guardian instructs them to remove their clothing and ornaments. From now on they are referred to as 'dingoes', and their personal names are not used. They are informed that soon the Mother will arrive and swallow them alive, then vomit them up. The initiates perform the Mime of the Blowfly, making small agitated movements and a low-pitched buzzing sound. The postulants are then covered with blood, which they are told comes from the Mother but which actually comes from the veins of their future wives' brothers. After more singing, the men return to the main camp. The novices are kept out of sight, while initiates engage in raucous horse-play, obscene joking, and mock food theft.
3. The postulants return to the secret ground before dawn. Ritual obscenities are followed by the Mime of the Blowfly, and then singing. When the time comes for the youths to be anointed with affinal blood, men in hiding swing bullroarers, whose noise is said to be the voice of the Mother. This, combined with the simulated fear of the assembled initiates, produces in the novices a state of terror. Suddenly the men in hiding leap into full view, exposing the secret

of the bullroarers. Brothers-in-law come forward, each bearing a bullroarer covered with his own blood, which he thrusts between the thighs of his sister's future husband at the angle of an erect penis.

4. Each day, from now until the final day, proceedings follow a regular pattern: singing in a tight circle, ritual obscenities, the Mime of the Blowfly, songs and dances celebrating totem ancestors. On the penultimate day, the impending conclusion of the ceremony is signalled by a particularly vigorous engagement in obscene horse-play, following by a graceful dance.
5. On the morning of the final day, the youths are anointed with blood and presented with gifts or apparel by their brothers-in-law. They are no longer 'dingoes' but fully-initiated men. All the men then proceed to the main camp, where the female kin and affines of the newly-inducted youths have been assembled. The men form two long lines, one for each patrilineal moiety. On a signal from the elders, the youths emerge from concealment and crawl through the tunnels formed by the legs of men of the opposite moiety from their own. On emerging, each youth sits for a moment in front of his mother, while all the assembled women wail and lacerate their heads. The lads then return through the tunnel of legs, and all the men rush back to the ceremonial ground. A week after the end of the ceremony, the youths bathe and have a cryptic insignia of the bullroarer painted on their bodies. They return to the main camp to resume normal life, except that from now on they must not go near their mothers' hearths. After a couple of years they are judged to be ready for marriage.

The Myth of the Old Woman

In the Murinbata language, *mutjingga* is the generic term for an old woman. The myth of Mutjingga is about an ancestral Old Woman, otherwise designated as 'the Mother of us all'. She is the Mother of the bullroarer cult just described.

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The myth tells how, in ancestral times, the people decided one day to go on a honey-foraging expedition. Before setting out, they asked the Old Woman to take care of the children. After bathing in the river, the children gathered around their minder, who suggested a mutual delousing session. Taking up each child in turn, the Old Woman swallowed them one after another and then departed.

The parents returned and realised what must have happened. The men set out in pursuit and overtook the Old Woman as she crawled underwater along a creek bed. A man called Lefthand speared her through the legs, while another called Righthand broke her neck with a club. When they cut open her belly, they found the children alive and well in the Old Women's womb. The two men lifted them out, washed and adorned them, then returned them to their mothers.

The Myth of the Rainbow Serpent

The Murinbata know the Rainbow Serpent as Kunmanggur. In the beginning Kunmanggur was a beneficent culture hero, a man of super-human size and powers who was transformed into a huge serpent associated with the rainbow.

Kunmanggur had two daughters and a son (Tjiniman, the Bat). One day the daughters set out on a hunting expedition. Tjiniman followed them and proposed sexual intercourse. They indignantly refused but, under duress, submitted to his rapacious demands.

The following day the two sisters escaped and later enticed Tjiniman to climb after them up a cliff-face by rope. As he neared the top, they severed the rope and he fell onto the rocks far below. By magical means he repaired his injuries and returned home.

Disgruntled by his experience, Tjiniman invited the people to a ceremony in honour of Kunmanggur ('the Old One', 'the Leader-Friend'). As the dancing drew to a close, the son speared his father in the back. He ran off, wondering what people would do, but no one took revenge. Kunmanggur, in great agony, died slowly, performing various miracles before disappearing into the sea.

The Circumcision Rite

When a boy reached puberty, he was publicly circumcised. The Murinbata used a number of regional song-and-dance styles for the accompanying ceremony, but the basic procedures remained constant.

6. On a pre-arranged day, people gather at the camp of the boy's father. Close relatives form a cluster in a central position, while singers, musicians and dancers perform for several hours.
7. On cue, the music stops abruptly and a future wife's brother of the novice steps forward and places a hand on the lad's shoulder. He may utter the words: 'Now I take you to make you a man'. Amidst wailing and self-mutilation, the boy is led away by his affine from the cluster of close kin.
8. The brother-in-law takes the boy on a tour of neighbouring and distant communities, accompanied by singers and dancers. The journey might last several months, during which the novice enjoys the excitement of seeing new places and people. At the same time he is subject to new disciplines, including food taboos and obedience to his guardians and mentors.
9. The escort party dramatically announces its return by throwing a ceremonial spear into the centre of the home community's circle of camp-fires. At the sight of the white tuft quivering in the firelight, the boy's close kin give forth with lamentations.
10. On the afternoon of the next day, following a morning of growing excitement, a long line of decorated men appears about 500 metres away, heading towards the main camp. After a series of advances and retreats, over several hours, they bring the novice to within 50 metres of his close kin. Weeping profusely, the latter rush forward and attempt to wrest the lad away from his guardians.
11. The men interpose themselves between the boy and his mother, and form a dense screen around the novice. Four of his classificatory brothers-in-law interlace their legs to make a platform on which the boy is placed and held while a surgeon removes his foreskin.

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12. For several weeks the circumcised youth stays in the care of his brother-in-law, though provided with food by his mother. Then he is ritually cleansed and decorated. Food taboos are gradually relaxed.

The Death Rite

The Murinbata practiced a form of double disposal, or delayed final burial, for men. The bodies of women were placed on a platform and left to rot. Children were wrapped in bark and finally abandoned in some sheltered place.

1. After a death, close kin of the deceased paint themselves white as a sign of bereavement. The dead man's hair is removed by clansmen and sent to his brother-in-law. With the exception of his stone axe, which is given to an affine or some other close friend, and of his blanket, all his belongings are broken into pieces and wrapped in a bundle. The corpse is placed on a platform and the camp abandoned.
2. When the corpse has dried out, the forearm bones are removed. The body is then cremated and the ashes given to the deceased's mother (or classificatory mother).
3. Several years later close kin of the deceased invite his affines to a feast at which his possessions are burnt. The guests present their hosts with trade valuables.
4. After a further passage of time, the remains of the deceased are finally interred. To mark the occasion, clans throughout the region assemble. Gifts are placed on the grave, around which men in regional formations parade and utter ritual calls throughout the afternoon.

The Myth of the Black-Snake Woman

Kukpi is conceived by the Murinbata as half-woman, half-snake. She is a great singer and song-maker.

Kukpi went on a journey, looking for a good place to stay. As she walked, she tested the ground with her digging stick, creating springs that exist today. At length she settled down at Purgala.

Soon after she arrived a hunter approached, pursuing a wallaby. Kukpi uttered a magic word, and the animal fell down dead. Kukpi told the hunter to roast it. She then directed him to carry it onto a high cliff. Uttering the same magic word, she caused him to fall to his death.

A kinsman followed the dead man's tracks to Kukpi's place. She told him to keep following them to the edge of the cliff and then look down. She uttered the magic word and he fell.

A third man suffered the same fate. Then Padurutj, a wise old man, ventured forth to discover what was wrong. When he arrived at Kukpi's place, she was singing to the accompaniment of clap-sticks. He realised she was responsible for the death of the three men. He also recognised the songs as secret male cult songs.

On a second visit Padurutj received from Kukpi's son two stone bullroarers with secret markings. These became prototypes for bullroarers made from wood. Subsequently two women went to Kukpi's place and brought back more stone bullroarers. The men killed them with axes.

The Season-Changing Rite

Tjimburki is the name of a defunct secret male ceremony, last performed towards the end of the nineteenth century. It took place over five or six months, during which the participants refrained from all sexual intercourse and verbal communication (apart from singing). Hardly anything of the content or purpose of the rite is remembered, though it was apparently concerned with bringing the Wet season to an end and ushering in the Dry.

The rite began at grass-burning time, when youths were inducted into severe but otherwise forgotten disciplines. All participants were blackened from head to toe with charcoal. They danced around a painted pole erected in the middle of a large circular excavation, while the ceremonial leader swung a bag or basket over their heads. Men slept at the secret ground for the duration of the ceremony. The women provided them with food and at the end of the ceremony greeted their return with wailing and self-mutilation.

Pre-puberty Initiation Rites

The Murinbata adopted circumcision as a puberty rite within living memory. Prior to the innovation, boys were initiated by means of a non-circumcising ritual called Karamala. Following the introduction of circumcision, Karamala became a pre-puberty preparatory ritual. At some later period Karamala was replaced by a ritual called Djaban.

Karamala

When boys were within a few years of puberty, they were taken by their potential future brothers-in-law to a friendly neighbouring community. After a stay of some weeks, their hosts returned with them to their home community, laden with gifts. The lads were ceremonially handed back to their close kin, who wailed and fondled them.

At the end of the ceremony the boys formally presented the gifts to their fathers. By doing so they entered the inter-tribal exchange system. From now on they had to observe certain food taboos and were allowed to sleep together away from the family hearth.

Djaban

Djaban was a more complex and intimidating rite than Karamala.

1. As a prelude to the ceremony, the boys were taken on a hunting trip by initiated men. That night they were told to sleep in the centre of the camp-circle.
2. The next morning the boys were taken to the ceremonial ground, where they were placed under the guardianship of their brothers-in-law. From now on they were referred to as 'dingoes'.
3. Later in the day they were taken to a spot not far from the ceremonial ground, then led back with their heads bowed. On their arrival, one group of singers and dancers erupted into obscene horse-play, while another suddenly appeared from behind bushes and instructed the boys to join them in a dance repeated throughout the afternoon.

4. That night the boys were placed under a speech taboo and fed outside the main camp by the affines. After more raucous horse-play, this time in the camp itself, the novices were escorted to their sleeping positions of the night before.
5. The next seven days were occupied with singing and dancing at the ceremonial ground. Boys thought to be in need of discipline were forced to lie face up in the sun with eyes open.
6. At the end of this phase, the boys were told by a guardian that all the men had left the ceremonial ground to prepare for a fight. Pretending to be concerned for their safety, he led them back towards the main camp. On the way, the boys noticed fires burning close to the path. Suddenly masked men leapt from hiding, grunting ominously and hurling weapons. In fear of their lives, the novices ran widely back to the ceremonial ground where, on arriving safely, they were given fire-drills by their brothers-in-law.
7. That night the men engaged each other in licentious horse-play. The following day the novices were decorated by their affines at the ceremonial ground. They then returned to their female kin through the legs of men of the opposite moiety, as in the bullroarer rite. Returning to the ceremonial ground, they were painted with the insignia of the bullroarer.
8. The newly-initiated boys were not allowed to speak to their female kin for another month. In due course a final rite was celebrated in which affines were presented with gifts of food cooked on fires lit by the fire-drills they had previously given to the novices.

Myth of Crab and Crow

This tells how humans learned to die.

Crab, an old woman, fell ill; and, thinking she was dead, people buried her. After five days she emerged with a new shell.

Everyone was happy, except Crow. 'That is not the way to die,' he said, 'it takes too long.' With that, he pecked out the Crab's eyes. Then he fell down backwards, rolled his eyes and died immediately.

The Argument

In his initial article, Stanner argues that the bullroarer rite can be understood as a sacrifice in which the youths are offered to the Mother Goddess. First the lads are consecrated by setting them aside, reducing them to nakedness and anonymity, and anointing them with human blood. They are then assembled in the 'presence' of the Mother, who 'swallows' them. In return, the novices are made 'men of mystical understanding', and society as a whole shares the benefits of their transformation.

The suggestion is not developed in later articles and is only briefly alluded to in the conclusion (p. 317). It should accordingly be treated as tangential to the main argument and not as an introduction or direct entry into it.¹

The central thesis of the monograph is stated in section 4 of the second article. Here, under the heading 'The Search for a Paradigm', Stanner pithily describes Murinbata religion as 'the celebration of a dependent life which is conceived as having taken a wrongful turn at the beginning, a turn such that the good of life is now inseparably connected with suffering' (p. 116). From this formulation he isolates and amplifies three dominant motifs: (a) 'the celebration of dependence'; (b) 'the wrongful turning'; and (c) 'the connection of suffering and good'.

Dependence is conceived both materialistically and spiritually: humans are dependent on nature for the means of subsistence; nature in turn is dependent upon the creative powers of the totemic ancestors. The

¹ For discussions of Stanner's thesis on 'the lineaments of sacrifice' in Murinbata religion, see Worms 1963; van Baal 1971; Maddock 1985; Keen 1986. See also Durkheim's section on 'The Elements of Sacrifice' in Book 3 of the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Keen's essay is a general review of Stanner's monograph and in important respects is complementary to the present Introduction. Other general (though brief) discussions of *On Aboriginal Religion* occur in Eliade 1973; Hiatt 1975a; Yengoyan 1979; Koepping 1981; Swain 1985; Morphy 1988.

'celebration of dependence' is the solemn yet joyous memorialisation of ancestral powers that constitutes the core of Murinbata ceremonial life.

Although Murinbata religion lacks a clearly-articulated notion of perfection or original sin, it is permeated nevertheless by an inference that, but for the wanton and perverse behaviour of certain ancestral beings, life might have been a lot better than it is. This misdirection in human affairs at the beginning of history bequeathed a life of qualified goodness, a flawed sociality where security is undermined by latent treachery and joy coexists with suffering.

The thesis of the monograph is briefly recapitulated in section 4 of the third article. The Murinbata, according to Stanner, conceive the dependence upon transcendental powers to be of a kind entailing 'good-with-suffering' and 'order-with-tragedy' (p. 165). This conception, expressed symbolically rather than explicitly, is reiterated in the main Murinbata myths and rites and accordingly constitutes a structural core of Murinbata liturgy and exegesis.

The Demonstration

Stanner extracts the elements of his thesis from the empirical corpus and arranges them in a number of tables purporting to exhibit homomorphism. Although the structures of myth and rite are interconnected, some clusters of congruent elements illustrate particular aspects of Murinbata ontology better than others. Thus from Table 5 ('Structural Plans of Three Dramas'), we can see how the notion that benefit is conditional upon loss or suffering is distilled from 'the acquisition of fire through the death of the Father', 'conservation of young life through death of the Mother', and 'attainment of understanding through the pain of initiation'. Table 1 ('Myth and Rite: the Empirical Order of Events') reveals that the perception of life as 'a joyous thing with maggots at the centre' (p. 114) is not only articulated in the myths but played out in the rites as well. The bogus hunting expedition in Punj and the spurious report of violence in Djaban, both preludes to terrorisation of the

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novices, are offered as examples and placed alongside ritual obscenity and the Mime of the Blowfly.

The apprehension of primal malfeasance is expressed with great dramatic force in the perfidious cannibalism of Mutjingga and Tjiniman's wilful parricide. Stanner gives prominence to both examples. But there is also the case of Kukpi who, under the pretence of goodwill, despatched men to their destruction; and of Crow, who maliciously attacked the regenerated Crab before imposing irrevocable death on humanity by his own example.

Not surprisingly, Stanner spends little time substantiating his characterisation of Murinbata religion as a 'celebration of dependence'. The assumption that human destinies depend on transcendental forces is, after all, a basic feature of religion wherever it occurs. We merely need to appreciate the special totemic forms in which the Murinbata have cast their conceptions of ancestral power and to note that they regard their dependence upon it not as a cause for brooding and anxiety but rejoicing.

Commentary

At the beginning of his monograph, Stanner acknowledges that the bullroarer rite is indubitably an **initiation** rite (p. 67); and, towards the end, he remarks that the Murinbata material in many respects is 'a remarkable confirmation of the worth of Arnold van Gennep's schema as set out in *Les Rites de Passage*' (p. 275). Nevertheless Stanner does not wish to be constrained by this conception. Nor does he wish to be limited by Murinbata interpretations of their own religious culture (p. 169). It is true, he says, that initiation ritual has a powerful socialising effect and that its proclaimed objective is to make young men 'understand'. The challenge, however, is to make sense of features that the instructors themselves do not understand.

The thesis that the Murinbata myths and rites are cryptic disquisitions on the most general features of human existence is thus

an attempt to transcend native exegesis, or lack of it, in order to render intelligible what the cultists regard as mysteries. We must now consider whether this ascription of an unconscious or inchoate ontology can be justified.

If we put to one side the ritual and mythological treatment of death, together with the dimly-remembered and hence poorly-documented Tjimburki cult, the remainder of the Murinbata corpus presented in the monograph constitutes an elaborate male induction complex.² According to Stanner, the effect of the initiatory experience is to transform boys into men, and then into men of mystical understanding (p. 101, p. 232). In his judgment the second phase or aspect constitutes the critical, albeit enigmatic, element in Murinbata religious life and therefore deserves the main effort of elucidation. The first aspect he regards as secular and unproblematic. Nevertheless, it may help to clear the ground for assessment if we spend a moment contemplating its salient features.

The most conspicuous and colourful roles in a youth's initiation are played by men related to him as *nanggun*. The term recurs many times in Stanner's descriptions and may be glossed provisionally as 'brother-in-law'. As noted above, novices are placed under the guardianship of their brothers-in-law in the Karamala pre-puberty rite and the circumcision rite, and taken on journeys to neighbouring communities. In the circumcision ceremony, brothers-in-law form a platform on which the operation is performed. Men of the *nanggun* category present the novices with firedrills in the Djaban rite and bullroarers in the Punj rite.

2 Although Kunmanggur and Kukpi are not contemporary cult deities, both are clearly related to male initiation. Stanner says that the myth of Kunmanggur could stand in the same relation to the Punj ceremony as the myth of Mutjingga (p. 226). The myth of Kukpi describes how men obtained bullroarers for the Punj ceremony (p. 264). The fact that Stanner thinks it might be an accretion hardly changes its significance. There is, incidentally, an interesting parallel between Kukpi and Mumuna, the Mother-Goddess celebrated in the Kunapipi of south-east Arnhem Land (see Berndt 1951: 148–52; Hiatt 1975b:150–51).

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At various times they clothe the novices, feed them, decorate them and even anoint them with their own blood.

At the beginning of the circumcision ceremony, the novice is led away from his close kin by an individual who says: 'Now I take you to make you a man' (p. 237). Ideally the person who plays this role is a brother of the novice's betrothed wife. Stanner gives the information without comment. Yet surely there is a question here worth trying to answer: why is the brother-in-law accorded such a key role in the cultural construction of Murinbata manhood?

Until a boy approaches puberty, his relationships with others are largely confined to members of his own small community, especially his family, other close kin, and male coevals. Initiation ushers him into an expanding social universe: the lad is formally introduced to neighbouring communities, given junior status in the ceremonial trade network, and progressively incorporated into the inter-tribal secret cult milieu of adult males. Somewhat later he marries a woman who may belong to another community but in any case should not be a member of the kin group in which he spent his childhood (Stanner 1936b:197-98). Murinbata culture, it would appear, deems that the most appropriate person to guide him on this journey into a wider geographical and social space, which is simultaneously a biological transition from boyhood to manhood and ultimately fatherhood, in his future wife's brother.

Stanner tells us practically nothing in his monograph about the Murinbata system of kinship and marriage. As Morphy has observed (1988:243): 'It is a pity ... that Stanner's opposition to Durkheim led to a perhaps reactive neglect of the political and social dimensions of Aboriginal religion' But neither does he say much about affinal relationships in his sole article on Murinbata kinship (Stanner 1936b). Fortunately this lacuna in the ethnographic record has been filled recently by A. and J. Falkenberg's book *The Affinal Relationship System* (1981), based on fieldwork at Port Keats in 1950. References to the Falkenbergs' data will be given at appropriate points below. Of particular interest at the moment, however, is their statement that, before circumcision, maturing boys often experiment sexually with forbidden girls of their

own patrilineal local clan (1981:77–78). Immediately after circumcision they are warned by senior men that, although they are now eligible for sexual relationships, they should on no account have anything to do with their clanswomen (1981:79; see also Falkenberg 1962:25).

A recent trend in the anthropological study of religion has been to approach ritual as a form of theatre. Turner, for instance, says that 'ritual is, in its most typical cross-cultural expressions, a synchronisation of many performative genres, and is often ordered by dramatic structure, a plot' (1982:81).³ As a working hypothesis, then, let us suppose that the Murinbata morality play in which Youth is the central character is conceived at some level as a journey from Mother and Sister to Wife. The drama is in four acts.

Act 1 (Karamala) is the first stage in the removal of the boy from his family circle. It is done tenderly, with loving kindness. After a brief sojourn, the lad is returned to his parents laden with gifts. A gentle prelude to more traumatic separations.

Act 2 (Djaban) is the boy's introduction to the secret cult life of adult males. Having been taken to neighbouring communities in the Karamala, he is now conducted to the men's secret meeting place. Until the end of the ceremony, the novices are called 'wild dogs'. In the initial stages they spend the day at the secret ceremonial ground, sleeping at night in the centre of the general camp, and are fed on its outskirts by their brothers-in-law. They are subjected to painful disciplines, though their brothers-in-law are permitted to comfort them. In the penultimate stage their anxious attempt to return home is blocked by men grotesquely disguised as warlocks, and they flee in terror back to the security of

³ See also Turner's posthumous essays in *The Anthropology of Performance*, with a preface by Richard Schechner. It is perhaps worth noting that the approach to male puberty rites as a form of drama was developed at some length in a dissertation submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Yale University in 1943 by Lucille Charles (see Charles 1946). This in turn was inspired by an earlier work from Yale on 'primitive theatre', Loomis Havemeyer's *The Drama of Savage Peoples* (1916).

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the ceremonial ground. Here they are presented with fire-drills by their brothers-in-law, who must ensure that the fires produced are used only by the novices. The ceremony ends when the novices return to their female kin through a tunnel of legs formed by men of the opposite moiety. Their mothers and sisters wail and lacerate their legs. A month passes before the boys are permitted to speak to them again. Later the lads cook food for their brothers-in-law and commit their fire-drills to the flames.

Act 3 (Circumcision) begins when the boy, having reached puberty, is ceremonially led away from his family and close blood relatives by his future wife's brother. From this point until the end of the ceremony, he is known as 'wild dog' or 'penis person'. The guided tour extends his range of contacts beyond those established in the earlier excursion. In the wake of a festive homecoming, his guardians shoulder aside his weeping mother and enclose him inside a tight circle of men. There a surgeon removes the protective cover from the head of his penis, thus putting an end to boyhood and conferring upon him the badge of manhood.

Act 4 (Punj) is the induction of the now-circumcised youth into the cult of the Mother, from which all women are excluded. Symbols of his humanity are temporarily withdrawn, and again he is referred to as 'wild dog'. Each day begins with a formal exchange of obscenities between 'affines' (see below). At the climax, the novices are anointed with the blood of their future wives' brothers, threatened with destruction by the Mother, and finally presented with bullroarers by their brothers-in-law. The curtain falls as the youthful initiates bid farewell to their grieving mothers.

Let us now see whether the main dramaturgical and mythical metaphors are consistent with the hypothesis:

Wild Dog

In the whelping season, Aboriginal hunters often took dingo pups from their mothers in order to tame them (Meggitt 1965:14). The analogy with novices (who are regarded by adult males as 'egotistical and

refractory', p. 71) may thus be a direct one. In a more abstract mode, it could be said that to designate novices as 'wild dogs' is to highlight their liminality. The dingo was not normally hunted for food; rather, it scavenged around camps for food left by hunters (Meggitt 1965:11). Even pet dingoes sooner or later returned to the wild (Hamilton 1972:294). The species is thus marginal, neither a part of human society nor yet entirely outside of it. The novices, too, are marginal: expelled from boyhood, but not yet fully qualified for manhood. Their quasi-exiled status is underscored by divesting them of their personal names and clothing.

Firedrills and Bullroarers

To be a husband, a man must be able to make fire. A campfire is the centrepiece of Aboriginal domestic life. But there are also explicit figurative associations in Australia between fire and male sexuality.⁴ Firedrills are symbols of virility par excellence: they produce fire by friction when one stick (often designated as 'male') is inserted vertically into a hole in the second, horizontal stick ('female') and twirled.⁵

Bullroarers are also often associated with masculinity.⁶ Their ithyphallic status in the Punj rite is transparent.

Bearing this symbolism in mind, we can say that the following sequence occurs in Act 2 (Djaban) and is repeated in Act 4 (Punj): youths are separated from their close female kin, placed in terrifying circumstances, and then presented with symbols of sexual potency by their future wives' brothers. In Act 3 (Circumcision), this same category of men forms a platform under the novice while his penis is physically made ready for sexual intercourse. In terms of our hypothesis, the message seems redundantly clear: 'the road back to the Mother is fraught with danger; you must not seek your manhood there; return

4 See Morton 1987:107; Spencer and Gillen 1899:446. Basedow (1925:292) reports a cave painting near Murinbata territory depicting a flame linking a man's penis with the vagina of an ancestral woman.

5 Cf. Roheim 1974:154–55.

6 For example, Roheim 1925:156, 1974:150–51; Strehlow 1947:89.

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briefly only to say goodbye; then, with the impetus received from your affines, and the guidance of the male cult, proceed along the proper path towards the goal of conjugality’.

Cannibal Woman

This too is a widespread motif in Australia (Waterman 1987:90–95). The key to its deployment in the Murinbata initiation complex is provided by the Mutjingga myth: the devouring Mother has to be killed, as ‘the condition of the perpetuation of human life through its children’ (p. 181). Immediately following the denouement of the mystery of the Mother in the Punj rite, each youth sees springing from his loins an erect bullroarer anointed with the blood of his future wife’s brother.

Tunnel of Legs

Metaphors of parturition occur regularly in Aboriginal initiation dramas (Hiatt 1971, 1975a, 1975b). In essence men take boys from their mothers so that they may be symbolically killed; then they reproduce them as adult males. In the Djaban and Karwadi rites, youths crawl out from between the legs of men of their mother’s moiety, emerging in front of their real mothers. Stanner thinks the purpose is to humble the lads (p. 80), but maybe the inference should include their mothers as well. In other words, the mime is intended as a commentary on the role of women: men take the raw products of natural parturition (cf. dingo pups) and effect their metamorphosis into fully-fledged cultural beings.

Reciprocal Obscenity

The ribald relationship known in the Port Keats area as *Tjirmumuk* is between quasi-affines: individuals, that is to say, who address each other by affinal terms but who are not related by true affinity. The categories involved in *Tjirmumuk* are ‘wife’s brother’/‘sister’s husband’, ‘wife’s father’/‘daughter’s husband’, ‘wife’s maternal uncle’/‘niece’s husband’.

True affines are exempt: 'there is an unwillingness to risk offending men intimately linked by actual marriages' (p. 72).

The prominence of *Tjirmumuk* in the Punj ceremony is consistent with the central role played by the brother-in-law. Each day at the ceremonial ground proceedings begin with a demonstration of unity and harmony, as the initiates sing together in a close-knit circle. The singing comes to an end with an exclamatory cry 'Karwadi' (secret name of the Mother). Immediately afterwards the choir breaks up as *Tjirmumuk* partners snatch at each other's genitals, trade sexual insults, and otherwise seek to outdo each other in outrageous persiflage.

Licensed obscenity between quasi-affines is not peculiar to the Murinbata (Hiatt 1965:60–62). Presumably it functions in some way as a counterpoint to the punctilio and reserve characteristic of relationships between true affines. Brothers-in-law are expected to be the best of friends.⁷ Yet the subject they must never discuss, and that must never be discussed in their presence, is the very thing that unites them viz. the sexuality of the woman who is the wife of one and the sister of the other. The two aspects of the relationship, overt solidarity and unspoken sexual transactions, are thus beautifully symbolised in the 'intimacy, altruism and unison' (p. 155) of the choir and then parodied through the 'anti-structure' of ribaldry, horse-play and obscenity in *Tjirmumuk*.

Mime of the Blowfly

In Australia circular excavations on secret ceremonial grounds are often symbols of female reproductivity.⁸ In the Punj rite, the hole is conceptualised as a nest or wallow in the sacrosanct place 'where the real presence of the Mother is supposed to manifest itself' (p. 124). Each day initiates cluster inside the excavation and emit the humming sound of the blowfly. The association is with rotting flesh (p. 73).

⁷ Stanner was classified as the 'brother-in-law' of his great friend Durmugam (Stanner 1979:83). See also Falkenberg 1979:47ff.

⁸ See below, p. 65. Also Roheim 1945.

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We may infer, then, that the mime signifies the death of the Mother or, more precisely, the dissolution of links with the Mother's flesh as a condition of virility and admission to the male domain of the spirit. Such an inference entails an inversion of subject and object in Stanner's initial thesis: it is not Youth who is sacrificed to the Mother for the sake of the general good, but rather the Mother who is sacrificed by Youth in order to achieve Manhood.⁹

Sibling Incest

The most conspicuous behavioural element common to the Murinbata Rainbow Serpent Myth and its impoverished Wagaman and Nangiomeri variants (p. 191) is sibling incest.¹⁰In the Murinbata version, the Son consummates a lust for the Sisters in the immediate wake of circumcision (p. 196), then kills the Father. The myth thus stands as a regressive 'antithesis' to the transformative process; an acknowledgement at a psychological level of the 'primal' forces that need to be resisted and overcome if the journey from Mother and Sister to Wife is to be made successfully.¹¹

9 I am grateful to my student Philip Taylor, who formulated this inversion in an essay on Stanner's theory of sacrifice in 1988.

10 In the Wagaman version, the Rainbow Serpent steals the wives of his brother-in-law, who presumably are his sisters. In the Nangiomeri version, the Rainbow Serpent's sisters desert their husband and return to their brother 'with sexual intent' (p. 193). Cf. Falkenberg 1962:192-93.

11 The myth of Kunmanggur is such obvious grist for the Freudian mill that one wonders whether it had anything to do with the fact that sometime during the 1950s Stanner drafted a polemic against Totem and Taboo (see Stanner 1982, together with Michael Young's editorial note). It is also worth noting the resemblance between Stanner's summary characterisation of Freudian psychology, which he rejects ('relations flawed through and through by ambivalence, domination, illusion, imbalance, instability, frustration, infantilism'; Stanner 1982:7) and the ontology he attributes to the Murinbata ('at the centre of things social, refuge and rottenness are found together ... an intuition of an integral moral flaw in human association'; see below, p. 124).

Theft of the Bullroarers

Kukpi the Black Snake is an archetypal woman who specialised in creating water (Falkenberg 1962:90) and killing men. She also possessed the bullroarers and sang the songs that are nowadays central to the Karwadi cult. The representation of Woman as monumentally untrustworthy if not treacherous, the primal theft of her sacred property for the purpose of male secret cults, and the infliction of cautionary sanctions on female pretenders together constitute a motif of world-wide distribution and critical significance in the comparative study of religion.¹²

Conclusion

Stanner's monograph *On Aboriginal Religion* is the most important account of an Aboriginal religion written in the modern period. Certainly, no other work has claimed my attention to such a degree. What I have written, however, is not meant to be definitive. In my exegesis I have tried to stay close to the spirit and substance of Stanner's argument, and in my interpretations I have tried to stay close to Aboriginal exegesis. Nevertheless, it is merely one way of reading the thesis and one way of making sense of the materials. I have no doubt there will be many others.

My deliberations, as set out somewhat laconically above, have raised in my mind the question whether Stanner's ontological formulations are superstructures ingeniously, but gratuitously, raised on the more prosaic foundations of rites of passage. Put another way, there is the possibility that the 'discovery' of a higher level of meaning in the mytho-ritual complex has been achieved at the cost of detaching semantics from pragmatics. Whatever awkward silences and inarticulateness are produced by the anthropological quest for a rational metaphysic (p. 307), Aboriginal men are unanimous in their

¹² For two recent publications on this theme, see Hiatt 1979; Gewertz 1988.

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affirmations that the liturgical arts are 'work' or 'business'; and that, in the case of the induction process under consideration, the object is to 'make men' (cf. Herdt 1982a). To argue that its purpose is to inculcate a world-view that the teachers themselves are unable to articulate seems prematurely adventurous.³ If in the end we have to cut the cable and enter into free flight, so be it. Till then the sounder procedure is to work within a problematic anchored to exegeses offered in good faith by local authorities. From that perspective, the genius of Aboriginal religion may turn out to lie not in the field of ontology but of applied psychology.¹³

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¹³ With regard to the initiatory complex, induction techniques take effect at three inter-related levels: the re-orientation of libido away from prohibited close female kin towards potential spouses and the male cult (e.g. Roheim 1945; Morton 1985; Avery 1985; Hiatt 1987; cf. Herdt 1982b); the firm delineation of masculine identity (e.g. van Gennep 1960; Mol 1982; cf. Poole 1982); and reproduction of the power and privileges of senior males in relation to knowledge, wealth and women (Maddock 1972; Bern 1979; Keen 1986; cf. Langness 1974).

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