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2. *Tjukurpa* Time

Diana James

Introduction

Before it was written it was told and sung; this ancient land resounded to the language of its first peoples. The Indigenous history and creation ontology of Australia has been continuously retold in story and song, and performed in dance passed down through countless generations, before ever lines on a page tried to fence it into the timeline of written history or authoritative text. The Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara peoples of the Western Desert refer to their history as a continuum of ancestral to present time in their country – one that is both spiritually and physically remembered. Anangu locate both creation ancestors and their intergenerational history within the continuity of *Tjukurpa* time. The *Tjukurpa* is not relegated to a past ‘Dreamtime’, but rather is an active continuous time.

Tjukurpa iriti ngaringi munu kuwari wanka nyinyangi.

Tjukurpa has existed from a long time ago and is alive today.¹

This sense of nonlinear time challenges the western conceptual framework that divides time into prehistory, history, present and future.

History written in the land

Nganyinytja, a Pitjantjatjara woman of elder high degree, learned to read her people’s history written in the land. As she stated in 1988:

We have no books, our history was not written by people with pen and paper. It is in the land, the footprints of our Creation Ancestors are on the rocks. The hills and creek beds they created as they dwelled in this land surround us. We learned from our grandmothers and grandfathers as they showed us these sacred sites, told us the stories, sang and danced with us the *Tjukurpa* (the Dreaming Law). We remember it all; in our minds, our bodies and feet as we dance the stories. We continually recreate the *Tjukurpa*.²

1 Nganyinytja Ilyatjari, Senior Pitjantjatjara Law Woman, pers. comm. 1990.

2 James 2005: 272.

The Anangu concept of history is here described as inseparable from their creation ontology of *Tjukurpa*, which tells of the creation of the rocks, hills, waterholes, plants, animals, people and the law of the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara (APY) lands. This creation story is written in the land; the marks of the ancestors' footprints are clear to see for those who have memorised the long song sagas that recount the ancestors' activities at sites along their travelling routes. A trained eye notes the subtle signs of the human hand in the clearing of vegetation around sacred sites, stone arrangements, engraved or painted marks on rocks or cave walls. The cultural landscape is not one of constructed temples and monuments, but rather the land itself is imbued with religious significance. The interconnectivity of humans and the sentient land is celebrated in song, story and dance. The land comes alive as the places, food and water sources created by the ancestors are re-energised through caring for *Tjukurpa* in place and spirit.

Western Desert peoples lived lightly on the land, their only possessions those that they could carry as they traversed the land seasonally. The desert environment is characterised by low rainfall with cycles of plenty followed by long droughts, cycles of boom and bust.³ Survival for humans depended on high mobility and knowledge of water and food sources across vast tracts of country. People constructed transient windbreaks or shelters at the end of each day. During the dry season, when the ephemeral waters across the plains had evaporated, they returned every year to more substantial campsites located near semi-permanent waterholes. By adding spinifex to the bare bones of mulga-branched domes, shelters at these campsites could be revived. People travelled in tune with the seasonal cycles of 'hot time' *waru*, 'cold time' *wari* and 'springtime' *priyakutu*, always following the spatial distribution of rain.

Family groups returned annually to *ngura walytja*, their homeland or 'country of my spirit'.⁴ This return was part of a cycle of relationship renewal to kin-country; renewal of relationship with *Tjukurpa* ancestors and the spirits of forbears who have passed into the rocks and trees of their home-country. Returning to country with *nguraritja*, people belonging to that place, is like walking into the land as a multi-dimensional text. Through their eyes and voice the spirit of place comes alive. When she located remnants of her mother's *wilytja* that she had not seen for 40 years, it was as if Nganyinytja, aged 63, was transported to her childhood. The weathered mulga stumps of a once comfortable spinifex shelter were redolent with memory and the history of her family hunting, gathering food, living and loving in this place. Her husband Ilyatjari explained the intimacy of people's connectivity to place, explaining

3 Robin et al. 2009.

4 Downing 1988.

how the imprint of a body on the ground where a person slept holds both the physical and spiritual memory of that person.⁵ The desert winds, rain and harsh sun may erase physical traces of humans in this landscape over time, but the spiritual imprint of their soul is absorbed into the land, and remains there. In the Western Desert, it is not the built environment that marks and holds people's history; rather it is the land itself that holds the history of creation and the people who have walked upon it. The *tjina* footprints of the creation ancestors and the grandparent generations can be read by those who tell their stories and sing their songlines alive.

The challenge for people who rely on written texts is to lift their eyes from the page and attune their aural senses to other ways of knowing history through song and poetic prose, and the visual performative arts of sand and body painting, dance and drama. These are the aural and visual arts of history and religious storytelling in which the Indigenous people of Australia excel. Their sense of history is one embedded in an intimate spiritual and physical sense of place.

Nganyinytja's account of learning her people's history is told in terms of a past, present and future tense of experience that takes place within the continuous time of *Tjukurpa*. Her way of knowing history and place arises from the holistic Anangu ontology of *Tjukurpa*, the Dreaming Law, that explains the past creation and present continuous existence of all things. To appreciate this concept of time and history, this chapter discusses the key concept of *Tjukurpa* Dreaming Law, then it explores how this elucidates Anangu concepts of time and history, using versions of *Tjukurpa* stories, songs and the visual arts that are 'open' to discussion with a wider public.⁶

***Tjukurpa* time: Dreamtime**

The metaphysical aspects of Tjukurpa, the Dreaming, need to be understood as central to Anangu ontology – as the first principle of things, which include concepts of being, knowing, substance, essence, cause, identity, time and space. Tjukurpa is an unfolding mystery in Western Desert society, the meaning of which has to be acquired throughout one's lifetime, where individuals earn the right to progress through stages of initiation into ever more complex layers of cultural knowledge. Outsiders looking into this metaphysics of being can only partially understand its complexity. However, the publicly shared songs, stories and art provide a valuable pathway into some of the meaning and understandings of Tjukurpa.

⁵ Charlie Ilyatjari, Senior Pitjantjatjara Law Man, pers. comms, 1994.

⁶ *Tjukurpa* includes both secret sacred law restricted to senior men or women and also versions of creation stories, songs and performance open to men, women, children and the outside wider community. Only knowledge of the sacred that has been shared in an open context is discussed here.

The translation of the term *Tjukurpa*, and related terms in Western Desert dialects, as 'the Dreamtime' or 'Dreaming' historically arose from the ethnographic tradition established by early anthropologist Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen in their pioneering publication in 1899 on the Aboriginal peoples of central Australia.⁷ Frank Gillen was the Alice Springs postmaster and sub-Protector of Aborigines from 1892 to 1899, and also a keen amateur anthropologist with a particular interest in local Aboriginal languages. In his notes in the 1896 Horn Scientific Expedition to Central Australia Report, Frank Gillen glossed the Arandic term *Alcheringa* as 'dream-times'.⁸ Spencer and Gillen's use of 'Dreamtime' to denote the mythic primordial times of Aboriginal religion established the precedence for all anthropological literature in Australia since 1899. Elkin reported that during his fieldwork from 1927 onwards he found that Aboriginal people had adopted the English term 'Dreaming' to refer to their totemic ancestors, 'in southern, central, north-western and northern regions of Australia, whatever the term, it was the "Dreaming"'.⁹ The veracity of this original translation and the now ubiquitous use of the term 'Dreamtime' or 'Dreaming' have been thoroughly critiqued elsewhere by linguists and anthropologists.¹⁰ It is not my current purpose to argue for or against the use of these terms, but rather to expand the understanding of *Tjukurpa*.

The usefulness of the terms 'Dreamtime' or 'Dreaming' is limited by the common connotation of 'dream' as a world of unreality. Many early anthropologists relegated the Dreaming stories to the realm of an imagined past time inhabited by mythic beings.¹¹ This position has been critiqued by Patrick Wolfe¹² who disparages the continued use of the term 'Dreamtime' because of its connotations of unreality, mystery and fantasy. However, Morphy provides a counter argument in defence of an expanded concept of the Dreamtime which has developed as anthropologists have come to appreciate the complexity of Aboriginal religion.¹³ Elkin during the 1930s notably progressed understanding of the Dreaming as a 'spiritual reality' by recognising the link, via the totemic ancestors, between the mythic past to the present. He proposed the concept of the 'eternal dream-time' not as an endless succession of time-periods rather, in a philosophical sense, as an ever-present spiritual reality.¹⁴ Eliade in 1949 recognised all religion as ontology, thus providing a framework for studying Aboriginal religion as a philosophical system that embodies abstract metaphysical concepts expressing

7 Spencer and Gillen 1969 [1899].

8 Gillen 1896: 161–186.

9 Elkin 1964: 210.

10 See Morphy 1996: 163–189; Austin-Broos 2010; Green 2012.

11 Radcliffe-Brown 1945: 75.

12 Wolfe 1991: 197–224.

13 Morphy 1996.

14 Elkin 1964: 210.

ideas on the nature of reality through myth, rite and symbol.¹⁵ Stanner, in agreement with Eliade, exhorted anthropologists to respect and attempt to understand the complex ontology of the Dreaming: 'we are clearly dealing with a world-and-life view expressing a metaphysic of life which can and should be elicited'.¹⁶

Current linguistic study continues to develop the metalanguage terms Dreaming and Dreamtime to refer to the complex metaphysics of Aboriginal religion. Jenny Green has provided a thorough analysis of the Arandic term *Altyerre* and the related word *Alcheringa* which became glossed as 'dream-times' by Gillen in 1896.¹⁷ While Green agrees that the translation of the Arandic terms is highly contested and problematic she does support Gillen's logic in coining the term 'dream-times' as a reasonable interpretation. Green compares the Central Australian Aboriginal languages Arandic, Walpiri and Western Desert and finds a widespread 'incidence of "dream"/"Dreaming"/"Dreamtime" polysemy in these languages'.¹⁸ In Pitjantjatjara, for example, the verb *tjukurmananyi* refers to the act of dreaming while the noun *Tjukurpa* refers to the Dreaming or Dreamtime.

It is useful to reflect on how 'the Dreamtime' or 'the Dreaming' became associated with a past primordial era shrouded in mystery. An overview of the history of translation of Aboriginal religion as the Dreamtime suggests that the influence of Christian religious concepts was very significant. Spencer in 1905 noted the use by Hermannsburg missionaries of the term *Altyerre* for God and he later wrote that Hermannsburg natives who speak English refer to a man's *Alchera* as 'his dreaming'.¹⁹ In his 1989 work *Encounter in Place*, the historian John Mulvaney claims that Gillen was not the first to use the term 'Dreamtime', but that precedence in its use belongs to the German missionary Carl Strehlow at Hermannsburg, in the heartland of the Western Arrernte country.²⁰ This early translation of Aboriginal religious concepts in Christian religious terms provides a clue as to why 'Alcheringa' has been interpreted as referring to a 'primordial time', the presupposition based on a belief in the western Biblical mythological concept of primordial time being 'in the beginning' when God created all things.

Anangu have recognised the Christian religion as the nearest philosophical equivalent in western culture to the *Tjukurpa*. A logical conceptual association as both are sacred religious systems of knowledge honouring the past acts and journeys of religious heroes whose spiritual power and significance are renewed

15 Eliade 1960.

16 Stanner 1959–63: 45.

17 Green 2012: 158–178.

18 Green 2012: 13–14.

19 Spencer and Gillen 1927: 306.

20 Mulvaney 1989.

and sustained ceremonially through song, story and ritual. Some Pitjantjatjara people refer to Christianity as 'whitefella dreaming'.²¹ *Tjukurpa* is listed in the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Dictionary as having both meanings; the lowercase *tjukurpa* refers to 'story' and 'word' or 'what someone says', while uppercase *Tjukurpa* refers to the 'Law' and 'Dreaming'.²² Anangu commonly use the term '*Tjukurpa*' to translate the Biblical concept of 'the Word of God', as both word and Dreaming Law are *Tjukurpa*. There is a sense in both Christian and Anangu ontology that the 'word' either spoken or sung activates life, it is the creative force that brings God or *Tjukurpa* to life. Thus Rabbi Cooper convincingly argues that the Judeo-Christian concept of 'God' has no gender nor is a noun, but has the dynamic qualities of a verb.²³ Elkin experienced this active quality of *Tjukurpa* when included by some Western Desert men in the ritual performance of their *Djukur(Tjukur)* three times a day for a week. He was profoundly impressed by the active presence of the Dreaming:

In those rituals we were 'in the Dreaming'. We were not just commemorating or re-enacting the past. Whatever happened in the mythic past was happening now.²⁴

People of the Book and the Dreaming experience 'God' and *Tjukurpa* as active creation forces that continuously create all things in the 'past' or *iriti*, a long time ago, and continue to sustain all things today and into the future. In this sense '*Tjukurpa*' is an active verb, not just a noun signifying a past creative time 'the Dreamtime' or a continuing religious tradition 'the Dreaming' but *Tjukurpa* is also an active continuous creative force in all time and space.

While understanding the ontological concept of *Tjukurpa* can be expanded by comparative religious analysis, there are limitations inherent in cross-cultural conceptual translation. The Biblical concept of 'in the beginning' has been uncritically transposed into translations of Aboriginal religious concepts of time. The Pitjantjatjara language, for instance, does not have a word or phrase equivalent for the western concept of 'in the beginning'. The nearest equivalent is *iriti*, which refers to a long time ago, the time of the *Tjukurpa* creation ancestors but can also refer to the time when grandparents were alive. Cross-cultural language translation requires an awareness of one's own cultural presuppositions about reality, the western linear sequential conception of time is one such 'belief' that needs to be suspended while translating different cultural ontologies. In English translations, the Dreaming or *Tjukurpa* is commonly assumed to have existed 'in the beginning', but careful translation of Anangu

21 Peter Nyangu, Pitjantjatjara Christian Minister, pers. comms, 2002.

22 Goddard 1992: 155.

23 Cooper 1997.

24 Elkin 1964: 210.

expositions of their philosophy challenges this interpretation. Nganyinyntja's statement on the importance of *Tjukurpa*, at the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science Conference in Adelaide in 1980, presents a very different concept of sacred time:

Kulila, nganana tjukurtja tjunkunytja iriti ngura nganamapa winki Australiala winki tjukurtja tjunkunytja – kulila:

Listen to us; we were putting down the *Tjukurpa* 'Dreaming' creation law a long time ago in our many home lands, all over Australia the *Tjukurpa* creation law was laid down – Listen!²⁵

Nganyinyntja tells us the *Tjukurpa* was laid down all over Australia *iriti*, a long time ago, and it was put there by *nganana*, we the first peoples of Australia. *Anangu Tjukurpa* does not refer to a beginning time before sentient life on earth, rather it tells us of the time when totemic beings walked the earth. The *Tjukurpa* is inhabited by the first creative beings that were both animal and human, and who purposefully created landforms, trees, food plants, water sources and fire. These beings were *tjukuritja*, of the *Tjukurpa*, and are the direct ancestors of *Anangu* living today. The creative ancestors were beings with extraordinary powers that were able to shift their shapes between animal, plant, rock, tree and human form, thus establishing the *Anangu* Law of continuous connectivity between humans and the natural environment. *Anangu* living on their lands today sing and dance the song sagas of the *Tjukurpa* to keep their country, the plants, animals and human beings alive.

Elders like Nganyinyntja are exhorting us to 'listen and understand' the importance of the *Tjukurpa*, Aboriginal peoples' creation law laid down all over Australia. They are sharing their knowledge with the wider community through stories, song and dance, through the visual arts or rock and acrylic painting and by teaching visitors to their country to recognise the marks of the creation ancestors in the land. The following open versions of *Tjukurpa* stories provide further insights into *Anangu* concepts of time and history.

Intergenerational time and history

Learning to read history in the land is passed down from one generation to the next. Nganyinyntja tells us the most important learning came from the *Tjukurpa* Creation Law stories told to her by her father and mother, grandfather and grandmother, uncles and aunts. Some of these were explanations of how the

²⁵ Nganyinyntja Ilyatjari 1983: 55; re-translated in James 2005.

world was formed, how people first got fire, why crows have black feathers and some gave instruction about the importance of respecting water sources in the desert. There were also *tjukurpa* stories with a small 't' called *ara irititja*, stories about the olden days when her grandparents were young, the coming of the first white men, the first time they saw camels or tasted white bread; the oral histories of her people.

The histories of grandparent generations are also marked in the land. Some early contact history of the Musgrave Ranges is recorded in the rock art figures of men on horses painted in ochre on the ceiling of the large overhang at Cave Hill. This human history is recorded alongside symbols of the *Kungkarangkalpa* Seven Sisters *Tjukurpa*. Outside the cave entrance, a large single rock embodies Wati Nyiru, the ancestral man who pursued the sisters across land and sky; he is intently watching the sisters inside the cave.

Apu palatja (Wati Nyiru) *Kungkarangkalpa nyanganyi*:
That stone [the Ancestor Man Nyiru] is watching the sisters.²⁶

The rocks and trees embody ancestral beings of *Tjukurpa* and may also hold the spirit of deceased grandparents of the living. Anangu visiting sacred sites or waterholes in country will call out to their ancestors, their grandparents and the *Tjukurpa* spirits of place, greet them and let them know they are coming to get water or clean a site.

Apu ngangatja ngayuku tjamu:
This rock is my grandfather.
That's a really important, sacred thing that you are climbing ... [the rock].
You shouldn't climb. It's not the proper thing.²⁷

Anangu are not just talking about rocks as being 'like' people or representing them; they 'are' the person. They act towards these rocks as relatives. They respect, sing to, care for and interact with particular rocks as sentient beings in the landscape that can affect their lives. The rocks can watch, listen and get angry and shake people off their backs, as Nellie Paterson says of the Devil Dingo in Uluru, 'He shakes off tourists'.²⁸ Not only is *Tjukurpa* time continuously present, there is movement between the worlds of *Tjukurpa* and everyday experience, so *Tjukurpa* is a fluid concept of time and space.

26 Stanley Douglas, pers. comms, 1994.

27 James 2005: 57.

28 Nellie Paterson, Uluru Traditional Owner, pers. comm., 1978.

***Tjukurpa* and history**

Wati Ngintaka, the perentie lizard who stole the grindstone, is an important *Tjukurpa* creation story that traverses the lands of the Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara people. Nganyinytja tells this story where the Songline of the Ngintaka man goes through her father's country of Angatja in the Mann Ranges. The Ngintaka *Tjukurpa* contains many levels of knowledge. Some knowledge is restricted to men, while some knowledge is open to women and children, and this story is shared widely with the public through Anangu acrylic painting. It is said that the Ngintaka man journeyed from his homeland in the west at Arang'nga over 300 kilometres to the east to steal a good quality grindstone from relatives at Wallatinna. This is a creation law story about the importance of good grindstones and the grass seeds ground on them to make people's daily bread. It is interesting to reflect on how much this *Tjukurpa* may include historical information.

Mike Smith, an archaeologist who accompanied Anangu to Ngintaka sites in western APY Lands, found that the stone available for flat large millstones in the Mann and Musgrave Ranges is not the best quality for seed grinding. There is evidence that grinding stones were traded across large areas of the desert and particularly from the Anna Creek quarry to the east of Indulkana.²⁹ The Ngintaka ancestor could well have been travelling a trade route to obtain a good quality grindstone and been killed for stealing a special grindstone, and thus transgressing the reciprocity rules of trade. This historical dimension to the story enhances the significance of *Tjukurpa* as the repository of detailed Anangu knowledge of the physical world. It also underlines the importance of their laws of reciprocity around scarce resources like good grindstones for the production of food.

The simultaneous multi-dimensional time and space of *Tjukurpa* allows for the Ngintaka man being both a creation ancestor of *Tjukurpa* Law from ancient times and also to have been engaged in the more recent practice of trading grindstones along this east–west route. *Tjukurpa* time is essential for understanding how living elders are spoken of as incarnations of ancestors of the *Tjukurpa*. Mulkuya Ken, a traditional owner of the Ngintaka *Tjukurpa*, speaks of her father as Wati Ngintaka and says he *tjukurtja tjunkunytja*, literally he 'laid down' the Ngintaka *Tjukurpa* when he lived at Arang'nga.³⁰ Her father's position of authority is recognised by other senior traditional owners of Arang'nga, the highly significant site where Wati Ngintaka was eventually cornered, speared and died. This is a site in Ngintaka's home country in the Northern Territory near the tri-state border with South Australia and Western Australia in the north-western Mann Ranges.

²⁹ Smith 2013: 283–284.

³⁰ Mulykuya Ken, Ngintaka Traditional Owner, pers. comm., 2012.

Mulkuya's father had a wounded foot, the same as the Ngintaka man; he was *tjukuritja* of the *Tjukurpa*. She speaks of him as both creating the *Tjukurpa* and being created by it. That the Anangu claim *Tjukurpa* has always been there in the country is not contradicted by the present-day existence of descendants who embody this *Tjukurpa* and are responsible for keeping it alive in song, ceremony and caring for sites in country. *Tjukurpa* time is not confined to a lineal time frame. Creation time is not restricted to some past era, it continues today and there is no concept of a time in which *Tjukurpa* did not, and will not, exist.

Seasonal cyclical time in the *Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurpa*

The *Kungkarangkalpa Tjukurpa*, the Seven Sisters, is a story of young girls being pursued by an older clever man, a shape-shifter of great powers who can turn himself into ripe bush tomatoes, great big shade trees, grass seeds ready for gathering – anything to entice the young maidens into his grasp. But the older sister always discerns his disguise and warns her younger sisters to stay away. His desire thwarted, he sings them illness and the older sister starts to bleed uncontrollably, she weakens and unable to escape is raped and dies. Her sisters take her up into the sky to become what is more widely known as the Pleiades; she is the weak, faint star of the cluster. Wati Nyiru's misshapen footprint, Orion's belt, follows them forever.

The *Kungkarangkalpa* sisters' and Wati Nyiru's exploits are written in both the land and sky. Wati Nyiru becomes stone and sits next to us in country at Walingnya where he waits outside the shelter built by the *Kungkarangkalpa* that is now a cave. Inside the cave extraordinary rock art tells their *Tjukurpa* story in ochre and charcoal symbols. Wati Nyiru continues to pursue the women across the night sky; he is the red star that most of us know as Taurus and his footprint is Orion's belt. As above, so below, *Tjukurpa* creation beings walked the earth and rose into the sky – their nightly passage mirrored in the still waterholes of the desert. As they rise over the eastern rim of the horizon before dawn in September and early October the *Kungkarangkalpa* or the Pleiades star cluster heralds the spring in the southern hemisphere.

***Tjukurpa* as sacred time**

The performance of *Inma*, traditional song and dance of the *Tjukurpa*, brings alive the presence of the creation ancestors. Ilyatjari, Nganyinytja's husband, at Angatja in 1990 said that dancing *Tjukurpa* is not *ngunti* make-believe; dancers enter the real world of *Tjukurpa*. The singers enchant the dancers and the dancing ground becomes a numinous liminal space where the *Tjukurpa* comes up out of the ground and takes over the bodies of the dancers and singers. Ilyatjari taught trainee dancers to pay attention to the significance of performing *Tjukurpa*:

Kulila! Nyangatja ngunti wiya! Nyangatja Tjukurpa mulapa.

Listen!: This is not just pretend! This true *Tjukurpa*! You are the *Ngintaka*
Man vomiting up the mistletoe seeds. Pay attention!³¹

Singers, performers and the audience are in sacred time and space, the re-creative continuum of *Tjukurpa* time where past, present and future are simultaneously present. This is a religious or sacred sense of time that is not entirely unusual. Comparative religious scholars like Bede Griffiths³² identify a similar sense of time in other world religions. This would include the Buddhist sense of the 'ever present now' and the interpretations of the Christian 'God' concept as active agency creating the now.³³

Continuously becoming time of *Tjukurpa*

Tjukurpa as ontology can avoid the reality versus myth debate. By acknowledging it as Aboriginal religion, we recognise the historical and moral charter aspects, with the premise that the physical, spiritual and moral worlds are all shaped by the *Tjukurpa*. Sacred time exists concurrently with secular time. *Tjukurpa* time existed before history was written in books; it was inscribed in the land, it is a continuous presence enlivening the land and people through song, dance and story performance and painting on bodies, rocks and canvas. *Tjukurpa* encompasses the time and space of oral and written history in a holistic ontology of the ever present now.

31 James 205: 318.

32 Griffiths 1994.

33 Cooper 1997.

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