

“They Jump Up of Themselves” Gesture and Identity in Central Australia 1

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Aboriginal peoples in central Australia have a distinctive form of ritual dancing that involves repeated jumping movements. The technique involves a sudden explosive jump to considerable height with the body fully upright, yet the jump seems to come without preparation, an explosive yet effortless movement.

I’m going to develop a fairly extensive amount of context and background in order to set the stage for the interpretation, understanding, and appreciation of this jumping dance in Australian Aboriginal culture and religion. I want to appreciate and understand this dancing and the Arrernte culture that dances this dance from the perspective of self-othering and gesturing.

The Arrernta word “*altjira*” is the crossing point for a complex series of histories and stories that played out in Central Australia beginning in the late nineteenth century and continuing ... well I suppose right up to this lecture. *Altjira* has been rendered in many ways—dreamtime, ancestors, the Christian God, for starters—with results that have had widespread and deep impact. The Hermannsburg missionaries arriving in Central Australia in 1877 understood the importance of using local languages to present Christianity to Aboriginal peoples. A. L. Kempe acknowledged the extreme difficulty of learning Arrernte language with no common language bridge, yet by the mid-1880s he had identified what he believed were five Arrernte gods. He then wrote, “All of them, the good supernatural beings, they also call ‘altgiva,’ [later standardized as *altjira*] ...the word ... signifies that these had an everlasting existence.”¹ Kempe adapted this adjectival term to use as the word for “God.” These early very hard years exhausted the several missionaries who abandoned the station in 1891. In 1894 Carl Strehlow arrived to resume the work and quickly began a major ethnographic study of these aboriginal cultures, though he never attended any of their cultural or ritual functions. His work published in German, *Die Aranda* (1907-1920), began with a section titled “*Altjira*” in which he reported that the Arrernte have “a being, called *Altjira*, who embodies the highest good (*marra*)”² showing no awareness that this figure had likely arisen at the instigation of his predecessor Kempe.

Baldwin Spencer a young London biologist who had been appointed by University of Melbourne to establish the study of biology in Australia was hired by the Horn Expedition (1894), the first great scientific expedition to explore and document life in Central Australia. Spencer saw little if any difference between the people and the plant and animal life and soon became an ethnographer contributing one of the most influential ethnographies of the late nineteenth century, *Native Tribes in Central Australia* (1899). His co-author was Francis (Frank) Gillen a telegrapher operator and station manager at Alice Springs. During this crucial period from 1894 into the first several years of the

¹ Gill, *Storytracking*, p. 87.

² *Ibid.*, p. 98.

twentieth century, Spencer was in regular contact with Sir James George Frazer in London who was embroiled in the controversies that would establish the basis for twentieth century anthropology. One of the major areas of debate at this time was the presence of the “high god” among “primitive peoples” set in the context of explaining when in the evolution of culture religion occurred. Strehlow’s identification of Altjira as the Arrernte high god was unwelcome to the position of cultural evolution being developed by Frazer with the support by field evidence fed him by Spencer. Writing to Frazer in 1903, Spencer reported,

Twenty years ago a man named Kempe, one of the first missionaries, seized upon the word Altjira (= our [i.e., Spencer and Gillen’s] Alcheri) and adopted it as the word for “God.” He knew nothing of its significance to the natives, or of its association with the word “Alchiringa” (Acheri=dream; ringa=of, belonging to) but he saw that it had some special and sacred significance. Now after these twenty years (when the station has not been closed or the missionaries away) of endeavouring to teach the poor natives that Altjira means “God”, Strehlow comes forward with the momentous discovery that in the Arunta, “there is a Being of the highest order called Altjira or Altjira mara (mara=good); ... that Altjira is the highest divinity; he is the creator of the world and maker of men” The paper ... has more utter misleading nonsense packed into a small space than I recollect having come across before.”³

The connection made between the term *altjira* and dreams and dreaming which Spencer refers to in this letter was expanded by Frank Gillen to the term “Dreamtime” which has, despite many deconstructions and criticisms, entered the vocabulary of twentieth century Aboriginal self-understanding and remains today a distinctive marker of self-identity to many Aboriginals.

Kempe later confirmed in a 1910 letter to Spencer that he remained well aware that *altjira* “is not ‘God’ in that sense in which we use the word—namely, as a personal being—but it has a meaning of old, very old, something that has no origin, mysterious, something that has always been so, also always. ... We adopted the word [*altjira* for] ‘God’ because we could find no better and because it comes nearest to the idea of ‘eternal.’”⁴

Spencer himself was not innocent of such sins. In *Native Tribes* he relied on two sets of Frank Gillen’s field notes to describe the “Origin of the Alcheringa Ancestors.” Comparing Spencer’s text as it represented Gillen’s unpublished notes I found that the selection, combination, and presentation of Gillen’s notes almost wholly construct the results. Of most relevance here, Spencer combines different figures from Gillen’s notes and attributes them with the origin of ancestors. He renders the Arrernte word *ungambikula*, an adjective means something like “they jump up of themselves” or “out of nothing” or “self-existing” as the class name Ungambikula designating these figures.⁵

Then, in Spencer’s 1927 revised edition of *Native Tribes*, which he completed years after Gillen’s 1912 death, published under the title *The Arunta*, the process continued. Spencer, still bitterly hostile to Carl

³ Ibid., p. 99.

⁴ Ibid., p. 100.

⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

Strehlow's constructive ethnography, ended up repeating the same maneuver that seems the common thread in all these stories, the rendering of an adjectival term into a noun and then allowing that to become a proper noun. Spencer's principal aboriginal consultant for his extensive field study in 1926 was an English-speaking tracker with the English name Charlie Cooper. During their conversations, Cooper told Spencer a creation story for the *tjilpa* or wildcat people which featured the figure Numbakulla as a creator, Numbakulla now a proper noun derivative of *ungambikula*. This story features, among other things, Numbakulla erecting a pole, painting it with blood, climbing the pole and telling the *tjilpa* man to follow. The man tried to climb the pole but slipped down and then Numbakulla drew the pole up after him and was never seen again. Spencer added a whole new chapter to *The Arunta* presenting this material and, unwittingly it seems, offering his own evidence of an aboriginal "high god." There are a number of concerns about the credibility of Cooper and Theodor Strehlow, the son of Carl Strehlow and an eminent scholar, later reported that Charlie Cooper had told him that he had contrived the story for Spencer's benefit. Theodor Strehlow was about as critical of Spencer's work as Spencer was of his father's, that is, Carl Strehlow's. Still, it is relatively clear that Numbakulla is a transformation that occurred during the first forty years rendering the adjective *ungambikula* that describes the non-origination feature of figures known to the Arrernte into a class noun and eventually into a proper noun naming a creator figure, Numbakulla.

The term *numbakulla* eventually enters the field of the academic study of religion mid-twentieth century when Mircea Eliade began to regularly use an example that I have termed "Numbakulla and the Sacred Pole," which he took wholly from Spencer's *The Arunta*, as the prime and often single example by which to establish his understanding of religion, which turned on the valuation of a world axis that connected humans with deities and that held that myths of origination offered the pristine religious condition. The study of religion again turned on Jonathan Z. Smith's critique of Eliade's use of this example and offered his own understanding, developed against a careful reading of the story traditions of the *tjilpa* or wildcat people, as the basis for establishing an alternative theory of religion. Thus, since mid-twentieth century this example has played a significant role in the defining discussions of the study of religion.

In the recording of the story traditions, the less contested, but certainly as divisive was to use the terms "*altjira*" which was an adjective describing something about the figures in these stories as the noun "ancestors" that named this class of figures. The term *ungambikula* could also describe them. Géza Róheim, consulting with Aboriginal elders, clarified that they assured him the term *altjira* means "the eternal ones from the dream" or "the eternal people who come from dreams."⁶

While this is quite the remarkable story and I've only given the barest outline, it is not exceptional. We have come to understand, however uncomfortably, that the academic study of other cultures, other peoples, is an interactive process in which certain projections, effected by theories, classifications, translations, and selections, occur that result not only in the creative construction of the other on paper, but also in reality. Spencer indignantly recognized the process a century ago when he accused Carl Strehlow of discovering the "high god" only because his own mission had introduced the idea as part of their process of proselytization years before. Géza Róheim recognized this process when he went to

⁶ Ibid., p. 105.

Australia to do fieldwork in 1929. His objective was to establish a subfield of “psychoanalytic anthropology” in which extensive psychoanalysis would be part of the preparation of an ethnographer for field work because, Róheim argued, most of what occurs is “projection” anyway, so best to know what is being projected.

What I’m doing here in this lecture certainly does not escape this loop and accepting the implications of this process, in the spirit if certainly not the categories of Róheim, is how I hope to remain responsible.

First, I want to note that an ontological core value for all of the non-aboriginal renderings of *altjira* is time. From Kempe’s “eternal” to “everlasting existence” to Gillen’s “dreamtime” to Spencer’s concern with cultural evolution (interestingly the term religion does not appear in the index of any of Spencer’s books), to Eliade’s *in illo tempore*, to Smith’s event/memorial ... all of these perspectives are based in an ontology that holds time sovereign.

In his 1993 book, *A Place for Strangers*, Tony Swain offered an alternative to this assumption of the appropriateness of temporal ontology by presenting evidence and argument that at least at the time of contact, the aboriginal ontology was based fundamentally on space, rather than time. While, he noted that aboriginals experienced time, he believes it held no sovereignty for them. Swain proposed that it is more appropriate to understand “dreamings” as Abiding Events which “are characterized by the fact that they take shape and are maintained as world-form.”⁷ He calls upon the work of Nancy Munn to articulate the basic tenet of Abiding Events as “that something came out of, moved across, and went into, the earth ... Graphically, Desert societies render this by employing two basic iconic elements: the concentric circle representing sites and lines standing for tracks between sites. In the boldest of terms, Aboriginal ontology rests upon the maxim that a place-being emerged, moved, and established an abode.”⁸ While I’m convinced by Swain’s argument, I empathize with the difficulty he has had trying to describe a space-based ontology against the established language of ancestor, mythology, and dreamtime, all evoking a strong temporal dimension. While the term “abiding” certainly denotes qualities like permanent, unshakable, and steadfast that do not strongly invoke time, it also denotes long-lasting, enduring, and surviving all of which have a temporal implication.

I want to return to these issues to offer yet another perspective on the Arrernte. This seems rather ludicrous really since I have strongly argued that there is no suitable generic Arrernte ethnography, but rather only a number of ethnographies each inseparable from the particular European ethnographer who engaged and described the people and their culture. And I have argued that whatever we do is in significant ways a projection of ourselves, our world views, our language, our concerns, onto the others with the potential that what we have to say constructs their world both in the frame of our academic fictions and potentially at least in the physical reality of the contemporary lives of the members of the culture we imagine.

I want to return to several aspects of Arrernte culture for another look. I want to reconsider the stories that are associated with the land, the stories that provide identity to the tracks of land by which

⁷ Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers*, p. 28.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

Arrernte identify themselves. Contemporary Aborigines commonly refer to these tracks as their “dreamings,” but alternatively as “songlines,” “country,” and “track.” I want also to look briefly at the Arrernte understanding of how this land-based identity is bestowed upon a human being. And finally I want to look at the distinctive features of Aboriginal ritual dancing, here finding only contemporary examples available.