

All around Australia and overseas: Christianity and indigenous identities in Central Australia 1988

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This paper discusses the themes and practices of Christian performance at the Western Desert Aboriginal community of *Warlungurru* in 1988,¹ six years after the Pintupi return to their homelands (see Myers 1986; McMillan 1988; Nathan & Japanangka Leichleitner 1983) and the enthusiastic Christian revival—nightly Gospel singing, a ban on gambling—experienced in the first years of their return. My concern is with how a distinctively Lutheran focus in Pintupi Christianity (in opposition to competing Pentecostal orientations in Central Australia at that time) was grasped by some Pintupi as a structure organising relations between Indigenous people and others in the world, and how specialised knowledge constituted positions of prestige and authority. Thus, I explore certain convergences between prior Indigenous formulations of personhood and relatedness and the way in which Lutheran Christianity was articulated during this period.

INTRODUCTION

1988 was the year of Australia's Bicentennial celebrations. With celebrations of 'settlement'—or protests against 'invasion', as Indigenous activists proclaimed it—relations between Indigenous people and the settler nation were highlighted. These themes appeared in many forms in Central Australia—struggles over Aboriginal futures in media (Ginsburg 1991; Michaels 1987) and in popular culture, over education and Indigenous control (Keeffe 1992), as well as in new articulations of Christianity (see Albrecht 2002). In neighboring Yuendumu, for example, a striking image on a billboard-style backdrop for concerts outside the Baptist Church proclaimed a message of 'harmony'. While this church had long combined traditional religious imagery with Christian stories in its stained glass windows, the backdrop was specific to the time. On the left, Neville Poulson had placed a land rights map of Australia with a cross; on the right was a bicentennial map with a cross. These were 'the two Australias, white and black'. Planning to put 'Jesus is our Peace' between the images, Poulson wanted to proclaim his understanding of Jesus as the only way to establish the harmony between the two groups.

That religious formulations might provide in practice the medium for organising people in larger 'communities' has long been recognised as a significant mode

of Aboriginal sociality (Durkheim 1912). Many anthropologists have noted such cultic expansions—ranging from those in the Kimberleys (Kolig 1989), to those in Arnhem Land such as Kunapipi, to those in Central Australia like the Red Ochre cult and the Big Sunday described by Meggitt (1967)—as marking an Indigenous response to Euro-Australian settlement and disruption.² More recently, Swain (1993) has pointed out the difficulties faced by these indigenous constructions—and the land-based Indigenous mode of being—in incorporating ‘strangers’, those who lacked a specifiable identity with place in the Australian continent. The responses that drew on indigenous cultural resources, he argued, seemed unable to constitute a moral community that transcended the differences marking contemporary life, and thereby failing to universalise a common identity for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. In contrast, the formulation of Christianity as an articulation between white and black has been an important dimension of local understandings of Christianity in Central Australia and elsewhere (McIntosh 1997). The effect of deterritorialisation and/or sociospatial reorganisation has, indeed, been understood as part of a *general* tendency in Christianity (Robbins 2006; see also Carter 1996: 31). However, the ‘articulations’ of Christianity that have emerged in Central Australia have been more than an abstract embrace of Western modernity. Rather, they are the particular formulations of different communities and traditions; their own emplacements and reterritorialisations of Christianity need to be understood before any larger understandings can be approached.

*Warlungurru*³ is the Western Desert name of a Pintupi homelands community near the Northern Territory/Western Australia border, 500 kilometres west of Alice Springs. The community of some 400–500 persons (primarily speakers of Pintupi and Luritja) is situated in what appears on Australian maps as the Kintore Range, with the name ‘Kintore’ also in frequent use among local Aboriginal people for the current community. The movement of Pintupi people back to their Warlungurru homelands in 1981 was a signal event, a significant assertion of their distinctive cultural and historical identity and a separation from the larger Papunya community of which they had been a part for twenty-five years (Borum 1993; Myers 1986; Nathan & Japanangka Leichleitner 1983). One motivation for the move was to save their young people (especially men) from the devastations of alcohol abuse enabled by their proximity to Alice Springs.

There were many other changes in Aboriginal life in the 1980s. Whereas it had been relatively unusual for people to travel outside Aboriginal communities in the 1970s, both men and women were now frequently going away for various training programs as part of efforts to discourage dependency and support government policies of ‘Aboriginalisation’. The Northern Territory government was also beginning to charge for electricity, water and services, and shifting from welfare payments to Community Development based programs of employment (CDEP). Mining companies and land councils called for frequent consultations and negotiations, and representatives from communities were needed to attend meetings to be informed or to make decisions. Video watching—and even pornography—was

becoming a common practice, with available electricity and inexpensive televisions and VCRs.

Such changes, in professional engagement as well as in consumption, involved an expansion of what identities Aboriginal persons could take in the world. Christianity's renewed uptake was concurrent, therefore, with intensified engagement of Aboriginal people in Central Australia with a range of institutions outside of their communities, an expansion of the forms of community with which Aboriginal people felt they could identify, and with a set of distinctive threats posed by modernity (emblematically in the form of 'disco'—popular music and entertainment) to the reproduction of the local social world. I argue that, through providing an existential framework beyond the legalistic extension of civil rights and citizenship in the previous decades (insofar as everyone is equal in God's eyes), Christianity offered a similar opportunity to expand the opportunities for identification, but one in which they hoped to contain or constrain the younger people—especially men—who were drawn to the seductions of these new forms both for their sensual pleasures as well as their potential to identify with communities beyond the local.

WARLUNGURRU: PINTUPI CHRISTIANITY

Pintupi people at Warlunguru who are Christian are most commonly Lutherans, an association deriving from the activities of the early Lutheran mission among the Arrernte people at Hermannsburg, which started in 1877 (see Albrecht 2002; Leske 1977). Some Pintupi, moving eastward from their Western Desert homelands, came into contact with that Mission as early as the late 1920s, and the later arrivals were integrated mainly into Lutheran practices and were serviced, after a fashion, by the Finke River Mission out of Alice Springs.⁴ By the 1920s and 1930s, trained native evangelists were meeting Pintupi and Luritja people in the western areas, and the outpost depot of Haasts Bluff was established by the Mission in 1941.⁵ This lengthy period of encounter has undoubtedly meant that the experience of Christianity has varied for different waves of Pintupi migrants.

THE MOMENT OF CENTRAL AUSTRALIAN MISSION CHRISTIANITY

The period of the 1960s and 1970s saw significant change in the Mission's attitude and practices. As one of the agents of this change, Pastor Paul Albrecht (long-serving field superintendent of the Mission and son of a previous pastor, F.W. Albrecht, has explained that the Finke River Mission (FRM) was—and is—engaged in its own transformation from mission to church; a movement to Indigenise Lutheran practice into congregations that would take their place within the broader community of Lutherans in Australia (Albrecht 2002).⁶ This would mean, among other things, Indigenous pastors running their congregations. Further, as Albrecht then analysed the project of transformation and the many mistakes the Mission had

made, he argued that the missionaries had to shed their own assumptions about what Aboriginal people thought. The Aboriginal Church, as it might be, necessarily involved what Albrecht came to regard as a distinctive and different ‘concept world’. The proper concern of the FRM, in his resulting view, lay with bringing the Christian message to Aboriginal people, but not necessarily Western or Euro-Australian culture. The Mission’s focus under Albrecht’s own direction has been on separating ‘Western culture’ from the offering of God’s word. Referring to Claus Westermann’s (1984) commentary on Genesis 1–11, Albrecht discussed how the Word would make its own way in the Aboriginal cultural context. Aboriginal people, he said, were capable of deciding what was ‘Christian’ and what was just part of ‘our culture’ (Albrecht, personal communication, 14 September 1988, Alice Springs). From this perspective, embraced by the FRM, the significance of the Biblical Word has always to be worked out *within* a community.

The basic features of Christian practice in the area derive from Finke River Mission’s teachings—fairly orthodox in Lutheran doctrine and, as Paul Albrecht told me, ‘sacramentalist’ (personal communication, 14 September 1988). Differentiating the Lutheran view from that of many other Protestants, ‘sacramentalism’ refers to the belief that God works through ‘physical things’ to produce spiritual effects—material forms such as communal service, collective singing and so on. ‘Aborigines’, he told me in the interview, ‘see it [Christianity] as a corporate body rather than the individual emphases [on conversion] earlier missionaries pushed.’

Albrecht’s explanations were offered partly in response to my comment, at the time, that I had heard no ‘born again’ discourse or Christian life story narratives. When asked to tell how they became Christian, consultants emphasised the history of the Mission (a kind of proximity), joining an existing community, and/or the effect of Ken Hansen (an Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) linguist) translating the Bible and teaching them to read and to know it. The accounts by Long Jack and Murphy Roberts (Albrecht 2002: 228–231, 233–235) are good examples of a common, rather matter-of-fact way of framing one’s engagement with Christianity.

The pillars of Pintupi Christianity, then, are the sacramental orientation, the *ingkarta* pastoral structure (using the Arrernte word for ‘pastor’),⁷ the translated Bible and hymns as the basis of Sunday services and sermons, Gospel singing, and Bible study courses held in varying local sites (see Albrecht 1977; in Albrecht 2002: 35).

By 1988, several Pintupi men, with other evangelists, had been to these ‘Bible study courses’ run by the Finke River Mission. Typically lasting a week, the courses included Western Desert and Arrernte speakers. They had lectures on the Bible and discussions, with translation of the English into Arrernte (by Paul Albrecht) and Western Desert Language—Pintupi, Pitjantjatjarra, Luritja (by John Heffernan). At the course I attended in October 1988, twenty-five men came from several different communities, speaking Arandic and Western Desert languages and having very different degrees of sophistication in English and in Christian practice. These courses have been, I believe, extremely important for their impact on Pintupi people’s

understanding of the Bible and its 'orthodox' interpretation, although they have some emphases which may be their own, on liturgy, and possibly on styles of preaching. One explicit aim is for the Aboriginal people (all men) to learn how to relate exegesis to particular passages of the Bible.

While the courses provide social support to the community via their role as *ingkartas* (religious leaders, pastors), there has long been a significant tension in the organisation of relations between the FRM and the Indigenous communities. Extending a local cultural model of authority (Myers 1980a), Indigenous evangelists and ordained pastors regarded the Mission as responsible for 'looking after' them, while the Mission was attempting to transfer authority from itself to the Aboriginal people. Indeed, it was rumoured that some of the Warlungurru Christians had invited the Pentecostals from a nearby community to come, because they felt their 'own church was not looking after them'.

This was a vexed issue for the Mission. While Lutheran practice was 'for pastors to be remunerated by their own congregations' (Albrecht 2002: 36), Aboriginal pastors expected the Mission to pay them at a commensurate level. Aside from the Church Council's view that lesser requirements were expected of Indigenous pastors and that better-trained pastors would still be required, Albrecht himself was concerned about continuing to tie the Aboriginal ministry to the Mission rather than to its own church. While the Mission decided to supply rations and three issues of clothing per year as a means of maintaining evangelists in the congregations they were serving, this practice was perceived by the Indigenous community as a lesser recognition of their pastorate. It was a sore point with the Indigenous evangelists and pastors, but not only on the grounds of remuneration. As Albrecht more generally suggests, the 'concept world' of Aboriginal Christianity at Warlungurru involved a distinctive interpenetration of ideas—especially about authority.

While the Mission, then, organised for a transition to local control, imagining—with some complexity—that the local form of Christianity would involve Aboriginal engagements with God's Word and not necessarily take on a Euro-Australian culture, they saw Aboriginal Christians as stepping into parity and equality with other Christians. They insisted on conformity to doctrinal commitments. The interpenetration of concepts, practices and histories, however, made this re-engagement—the separation and rearticulation as independent congregations—more fraught than expected.

The *ingkartas* expected a good deal of respect for their role—a respect that paralleled local ideas of authority that I have described elsewhere in the framework of 'looking after' (*kanyininpa*) (see Myers 1980a,b, 1986). This had two related consequences. First, they did not see themselves as being supported by the local community but as working *for* the Mission, while the Mission imagined them to be working *for* the congregations. So, there was a good deal of complaining from *ingkartas* and church-goers that the Mission—the ultimate authority for Christianity—was 'not looking after them properly', that the Mission representatives did not come to visit enough.

As a second consequence, the preaching style of those who were *ingkarta* reflected a conception of the *ingkarta* role as privileged and respected: some of the preachers seemed to make little effort to be understood or to reach their audience. One Mission associate suggested to me that the *ingkarta* regarded themselves as ‘knowledgeable’ (*ninti*); a formulation drawing on the terms of the indigenous religious knowledge (see Myers 1986). This understanding implies that it was up to the listener(s) to understand—to work out—the meaning of what was being said by those who had learned. This view of knowledge, if practically true for the preachers, certainly prevailed in the fundamental Indigenous areas of knowledge, ceremonial and environmental, and as a style of instruction where knowledge is the basis of respect and authority. It is central to the structure of Christianity in the Hermannsburg orbit.

HISTORY AT WARLUNGURRU: RETURN, REVIVAL AND THE HOMELAND

If the reach of Mission plans and practices owed a good deal to the effect of distance and personnel, the moment of my own research was indicative of the continuation of these effects. Some of the more active Christians were away for much of this period, on training courses for the Education Department in Batchelor, hundreds of miles away. Another, perhaps the singular organiser of Christian activity in the early days at Warlungurru—Smithy Zimran Tjampitjinpa (now deceased)—had withdrawn from the Church, and identified himself principally with the Health Service. Reticent to talk, Smithy offered no reasons for his withdrawal. Such absences of key personnel and committed leaders were common in remote communities, hindering the ability of institutions to function effectively.

The singing of hymns has been one of the premier forms of Christian participation for many people in this area, enjoyed even by those who did not formally become Christians. Singing focuses largely on hymns translated into Arrernte, Luritja and/or Pintupi, a practice that seems to have started in the time of Carl Strehlow at Hermannsburg at the turn of the nineteenth century and continuing in the present.⁸ It has not required literacy, and many Pintupi are familiar with the basic hymns. Transformed into ‘Gospel singing’ in the early 1980s, this form of sociality seems to have been buoyed by people’s enthusiasm—in 1981 and 1982—for being back in their own country for the first time in decades.

It is likely that the upsurge of Pintupi Christian activity in the initial period at Warlungurru expressed their sense of revived identity. As early as 1981, when Warlungurru had no electricity and few services, nightly hymn singing was the primary social activity and was seen as expressive of Warlungurru as a community. The Kintore Choir’s performances of Gospel singing in group festivals around the desert provided yet another range of contacts and contexts for forging new identities and relationships. This was intensified by the recent development of a Lutheran liturgy in Pintupi language.

Until the early 1980s, church services and most hymns were conducted in Arrernte (which many of the recent Pintupi migrants did not understand). The

Pintupi-language liturgy was produced by Ken Hansen for the Finke River Mission around the time of the Pintupi move to Warlungurru (Hymnbook 1984), and Hansen began to work at literacy and Bible reading with Warlungurru people at the same time as the ‘green Bible book’ (the Pintupi/Luritja *New Testament* [1981] translated by Hansen) was dedicated—in 1982. By 1988, the Warlungurru evangelists were very proud of the service in their own language. Their ability to present it gave them confidence in the face of the longstanding Arrernte domination of the Lutheran mission. This history is eloquently expressed in the ‘Memory Place’—a set of stone monuments erected in 1984 out of local materials at Warlungurru ‘to commemorate the work of those who brought God’s word to the people of this area’ (see Figure 1). The plaque named Pastor F.W. Albrecht, Titus Rengkaraka, Epaphras Intamintama, Kamutu Tjungarrayi (the Lutheran Missionary to Hermannsburg in the 1930s to 1958), two Arrernte evangelists, and the first important Pintupi convert.

Smithy Zimran, who originally started Gospel singing at Haasts Bluff, incorporating the playing of electric guitar that connects it with the popular country and western music, brought it to Kintore when he moved there (see Albrecht 2002: 228; Hodson 2002).⁹ ‘He wrote down many Christian songs for us’, Pintupi remember, ‘so that we could continue to sing and praise God’.¹⁰ Just as this Gospel singing drew on the instruments and tastes of popular music, so too did it stand in the place that public forms of traditional ceremony once had among the Pintupi—in integrating people who lived together in a community into a participatory social



Figure 1 Kintore ‘Memory Place’. The set of stone monuments was erected in 1984 out of local materials ‘to commemorate the work of those who brought God’s word to the people of this area’. 1988. Photo by Fred Myers.

form. Traditional public ceremonies had begun to decline in frequency in the 1980s, but it is telling that a similar emphasis on shared singing in the performance of expanded community was explicit in the ritual activities of the secretive Indigenous religious movement known as ‘the Balgo Business’, which offered competition to Christian pan-local identity.

Nightly Gospel was prominent as early as 1982 and stopped shortly before Christmas of 1987. The decline, regularly noted by the active Christians, was partly a consequence of the destruction of the equipment (amplifiers, guitars, and the like) that the band had used. The tensions at Warlungurru were illuminated in a social drama. The most recent sound equipment had been purchased under a grant from the Aboriginal Development Corporation for what was called ‘the Kintore Youth Band’. The Gospel Band had gained control of it and refused to allow it to be used for ordinary rock and roll music, which they regarded negatively.

However, the original recipients of the grant had been the rock and roll group, and the Christians, with greater access to public power, had simply asserted their claims. When the Christian group eventually did agree to some terms of sharing, the result was the destruction of the instruments—possibly because neither group regarded themselves as responsible or possibly because of the attitude of hostility that had prevailed over the issue. The equipment was simply left out in the open. The tensions within Warlungurru between commitments to Christianity (spiritual) and commitments to popular culture (fleshly)—seem to have been central to the marginalisation of Christianity’s most public performance, Gospel singing.¹¹ These two competing groups, both involving young men, represent two different kinds of openings to the world then available to them. The Christian use of music recruits young men through both sensory and phatic engagement, away from what were regarded as dissipating attractions of modernity into participation in an ordered, moral community.

EVANGELICAL IMMEDIACY

The tone of Christian practice at Warlungurru in 1988 was a far cry from reports about the activity of Pentecostals in some other Central Australian communities. In the first years at Warlungurru (1981–85), there had been a sense of evangelical immediacy about an immanent event. There was a lot of talk about the ‘three-six mob’ (a reference to the number 666 in The book of Revelations), who would be coming to punish people who did wrong—especially those who gambled and played cards. In 1988, card playing had again become quite public and common; there was little negative censure of it nor mention of ‘666’. We should probably ascribe the evangelical fervour of the early 1980s to a Billy Graham-style evangelical meeting in Alice Springs. Originating among Elcho Islanders, such meetings affected a range of people, beginning with the Warburton Range community who transformed it and passed it on to their kin at Warlungurru. Such evangelical immediacy declined in force over time, and the only upsurge of evangelical practice was in the production

of two Christian videotapes at the end of 1987. These very simple, camera-edited productions emphasised the singing of hymns in country-music form by a number of different individuals (and groups), occasional homilies, and some exegeses of Biblical passages. Video was being used to document meetings with government representatives, to capture football games for future viewing, and to film school activities, and the evangelical tapes were produced at the Adult Education Centre, which had been overseen by a White Australian who took a personal interest in local Christian activities. The two main Warlungurru trainees in video production in 1988 saw themselves as Christian activists, proselytising in the new medium.

THE SOCIAL FOUNDATIONS

Only a core of Christians at Warlungurru remained active in 1988, although almost everyone regarded himself or herself as nominally Christian. The regular attendees of Church services came from what people referred to as the 'eastern side' of Warlungurru. These 'old Pintupi' had left traditional life in the bush earlier than their western relatives and come eastward to Hermannsburg and Haasts Bluff, communities that were originally managed directly by the Finke River Mission.

Several men who had received training as 'native evangelists' or *ingkata* were particularly active in the Church. The first ordained man at Warlungurru had been Smithy Zimran. After he withdrew, two younger evangelists—Lindsay Corby Tjapaltjarri and Reggie Baldock Tjapangarti, with some support from Joe Young Tjupurrula—took his role. These four resident Christian 'leaders' were all related affinally to the leading traditional owners of the Warlungurru area. There were other, indeed more senior, ordained pastors—Long Jack Phillipus and Murphy Roberts—who were identified with the local community by kinship but who visited from Papunya (250 kilometres to the east).¹² Another closely related Lutheran congregation was at Yamunturrngunya (at Mt. Liebig), under the leadership of Gregory (Tapa Tapa) Tjupurrula and a few rather knowledgeable and impressive young men—again people formerly associated with Haasts Bluff and the earlier migrations.

Nonetheless, attendance at Sunday Church services—with prayer, hymns, and sermon announced with the ringing of a bell—provides one of the ongoing manifestations of Christian life.¹³ These events represent a way of communicating ideas and information that can be compared with other speech events; the Christian sermon style seems markedly different from others—rather halting and dependent on the citation of the translated Pintupi Bible passages by those whose literacy skills are limited.

While there was considerable variation among the men, most of the active Christians seemed to have replaced a concern for the 'traditional religious life' with the pursuit of Christianity. The *ingkata* remained participants in the basic activities of the indigenous religious practices, such as initiation, but they did not pursue the prestige available through other ceremonial activity. Indeed, while the Mission had

once opposed initiation and all traditional ceremony as ‘false religion’, they discovered after many years that even their most devout converts had given up most ceremonies without giving up initiation (Albrecht 2002).

Particular configurations of age and status marked active participation in Christian religious life at Warlungurru. It is interesting that two of the most active preachers at the time were *not* themselves native Pintupi or Luritja speakers. Their fathers were Warlpiri, and they were married to Pintupi women, daughters of the leading traditional owner. Their new religious status gave them a standing in the community that they could not otherwise have achieved. Although they had literacy skills, they demonstrated no particular linguistic eloquence. Few of the preachers were particularly eloquent in the non-Luritja (‘proper Pintupi’) forms of the language, and most were not fully middle-aged or of full senior status. This differed from Papunya: Long Jack Phillipus, ordained in 1984 *was* eloquent and a senior man, and Murphy Roberts, ordained in 1982, was also senior. At Warlungurru, Reggie Baldock (eventually ordained in 1998) was in his early 30s and Lindsay Corby probably no more than 35.¹⁴ A few older men came to church, some very regularly.

The differential participation for women was marked. While women attended church at a two to one ratio over men, they typically sat in places where they could hardly hear the sermon. Neither did they participate as lay preachers, but were instead extremely active in the singing of hymns, and took part enthusiastically in the nights of Gospel singing. Their influence may have been exercised more informally, but the division of labour was markedly similar to the ceremonies of traditional life. For women, young and old, an attraction of Christianity is the control it promises over the excesses of violence and drinking that were increasingly common in Aboriginal life, and which had been a motivation for the movement to Warlungurru in the first place. There were distinctive attractions for men, too. Some hymns had been written by local people, principally by younger men who may have been looking for new forms of power and status. They were motivated, too, by the opportunity to bridge their interest in popular music with an acceptable sociality.

Obviously, attendance at church services did not include the majority of community residents, although many of these had previously participated in Gospel singing. Thus, knowledge of Christianity was more widely distributed than attendance suggested, but it was not that deep. Funerals were Christian, and almost everyone accepted the idea of God (*Mama Katutja*, ‘Father from Above’). Most people thought the Bible had some power to ward off harm, and many people believed in a vague way about ‘Judgement Day’. Some basic ideas of Christianity included (i) the importance of listening to God’s word, (ii) the fact that God’s word is ‘for everybody’ (*yuwankarraku*): for whites, *Yanangu* (‘Aboriginal people’), and ‘half-caste’ (mixed race) as one preacher constantly reiterated, ‘all around Australia and overseas’. This universality of God’s word and the equivalence of people before God are reiterated in a variety of ways. To a lesser extent, but well-represented in

sermons, is the idea that (iii) people have to change, that in gaining God's spirit, you become different. Everybody has the idea that (iv) after death, one's spirit (*kurrunpa*) goes to God, which they say they did not know before, but which seems important now. Among the preachers, I heard reference to (v) the fact that people are still bad (*kurra*, sinful) and need to change before it is too late, but this theme was more prevalent among some preachers than others.

THE DISCOURSE OF BELIEF

I heard little or no discussion among Warlungurru Christians about 'faith' or about changes in internal state. The discussion of Christianity revolves around the word *kulininpa*—listening, hearing understanding—as a mode of relationship to God's Word. This is a relationship that Pintupi regard as appropriate to a subordinate, to one who accepts the authority of another, and it stands in for what might be discussed as 'belief' in English. They talk about the 'right way' and the 'wrong way' (*wiyawana*) or wrong path, with a metaphorical emphasis on direction rather than interiority. While wary of linguistic determinism, I am not certain how much opportunity the language provides for discussing changes of internal state; Christians talk about the 'spirit' (*kurrunpa*) being happy or calm (*tjipatjipa*) or steadfast, brave, and so on; concepts of disposition made available through Hansen's translation practice, which was based not on literal translation but on linking Christian discourse to local idioms.

Some knowledgeable local non-Indigenous Christians told me that what they regarded as 'true' or 'real' Christianity was not much developed in the Indigenous community, that the Indigenous understanding of Christianity was still 'superficial'. While this obviously represented a view of what *orthodoxy* is or what Christianity should be, it also suggests a different emphasis. Thus, I was impressed by the emphasis on kindness, love and compassion among the Pintupi Christians—for stopping fighting and trouble, and for good relations among whites and blacks. The questions of when these values were applied and the contexts of their discussion in community life were far less well developed. Certainly, they prevailed at the official scenes of the church, but only for some people did they carry over into many other contexts, such as conflicts over food and resources. An example may help to clarify the ways individual Pintupi organised their thoughts.

From a younger, middle-aged generation, Reggie Baldock had a sustained interest in making sense of God's Word. Before one of his sermons, he boiled the order of things down to a simple few values for me: 'Number 1 is God; number 2 is earth and stars [the physical world]; number 3 is family.' On this day, too, he was thinking about the Old Testament story of Babel, with the confusion of languages, and he saw it related to 'Judgement Day, God's Day—when those who have done bad ['sin' = *kurra*] will go into the flames [*yanku warukutu*]. They are "all split up" [divided, *yirraputitja*]. Reggie understood the Babel story as people believing only in themselves—and not relying on God's Word. But the main message for him is

kindness and love for others: ‘it doesn’t matter if white, *yarnangu* (Aboriginal person) or half-caste’. He liked the idea of all the different languages, ‘but we still have only one, God’s Word, *martupurra lingku* (the essential thing)’ (Reggie Baldock, personal communication, 28 August 1988, Warlungurru).

SERMONS

The Christian Word was understood and circulated most centrally through its enunciation in Church services and sermons. In these sermons, I was struck by the common embedding of Indigenous persons in an imagined larger community of persons—either in terms of the racial or cultural categories of *yarnangu*, *walypala*, *yapakatja* (‘Aboriginal’, ‘white’, ‘half-caste’) or in geographical terms of ‘all around Australia and overseas’. Perhaps this sense of Australia and overseas was in the Bicentennial air of 1988, but the universalising appeal of Christianity seems stronger than that. Indeed, it is critical to Christianity in Central Australia that identification conjoins one to this larger community—transcending the local identity.

In the following discussion, I follow one sermon by Reggie Baldock Tjapangarti, from a service on 21 August 1988. Reggie rang the bell of the simple sheet-iron church building with a cross above the front door. This morning service was held outside the church, perhaps because Reggie was not ordained and could not offer the sacraments. He read 1 Corinthians 2:14–3:3, page 474 in Hansen’s Pintupi New Testament, which he thought would speak to the issue of ‘*manta wiyantjangka*’ (the earth/world ending), or ‘Judgement Day’. The service began with a prayer, then a hymn, followed by a second prayer (pp. 145–148 in *Turlku Yinkapayitjarra*, a collection of hymns and choruses¹⁵), and then a reading of the passage from Corinthians, followed by a sermon, and then another prayer, and a hymn (p. 67).

Drawing on my own translation of the Pintupi version of this passage, I summarise here. The passage is notable for the distinction between ‘spiritual’ and ‘fleshly’ (‘earthly’/‘natural’) things, and the metaphor Paul uses of treating the Corinthians as immature, not ready for all of God’s Word—i.e., feeding them with milk rather than meat. The Pintupi translation of ‘natural’/‘fleshly’ is ‘without God’s Spirit’ (*Katutjaku kurruntjarrawiya*) and ‘spiritual’ is ‘with God’s Spirit’ (*Katutjaku kurruntjarra*). Most commentators agree that Paul’s letter to the Corinthians addresses what he has heard of the divisions and factionalism—jealousy, strife—that have arisen among them. Paul reminds the community that the church’s existence is grounded in God’s call and grace, not in human initiative.¹⁶

THE SERMON¹⁷

Having read the passage first, Reggie spoke as the *ingkarta*. A translation of his sermon follows:

We are all hearing God's word (*Katutjaku wangka*) today; in the whole world, we are hearing it. Like that. Whitefellows, blackfellas (*yarnangu*), and half-castes, now we all hear it even those with different languages (*tjaa* – 'mouth').

Reads verse 14 and 15 to the start of the quote in verse 16. Then he explains:

Over the whole world we all have God's spirit (*kurrunpa*) in us, one Spirit; everyone. But some people have trouble understanding. They have trouble understanding. But people in other places have God's spirit; they have God's spirit. Other people still love/want God. Others are living and God loves them. In other places, people there can have God's spirit; whitefellas, halfcastes and all the Aboriginal people. But we are ignorant. *Yalatji* ('like that').

This is saying that we are like babies that drink milk. You gotta really learn God's word (*pulkara Katutjaku wangkaku nintirri*), like babies. We have to really learn God's word because it is really important/essential (*martupurra lingku*). It is the 'main one' (*martupurra* [referring to an essential/integral part]) we should be hearing. *Yalatji*.

Today in every place, people are hearing God's word. We are learning God's word. After learning it, we understand it. But some others, no, they don't listen.

Reggie begins to read again (from 1 Corinthians 2:15)

'Don't chastise others like someone who doesn't hear God's word'. *He stops reading and continues as before.*

Everyone has God's spirit; over the whole earth (*manta winkingka*). You are maturing (as Christians) (*marrpanyarrinyi*) after hearing God's word and by way of God's word. It is like this; it is important. Older men and women are living, all right; it is essential/important for old men and old women, for important men, that they hear God's word. They become mature/strong by way of hearing God's word. God's word is the 'main one'. His Word is essential/important for people. We should become really knowledgeable about it: men, children and women, you should listen properly. Those who have gone to school, today in our community, all over, who have learned from their mothers and fathers, they are listening. In other places children learn a lot; they hear God's word. And they also have God's spirit.

In other places (you might think) 'They have their own spirit or have whitefella spirit... Or, I have my own spirit'. No, he is not thinking beyond (*katu munkarra*). He is thinking his own way. He goes, "Oh, I don't know." It's like this: Our spirit was given to us from God above. They should think seriously about this. That some people think more about this; by way of God's word. Some people don't understand it but we hear it clearly. We should maintain this spirit by way of God's word – it is essential so we can mature as Christians. God's word is really essential. We should listen to his word. (In English) If you go somewhere, or maybe you go to school, if you go somewhere, Canberra way, the people – Christians there – listen to God's word.

It is like this that we understand/believe all over Australia and overseas, that people listen to God's word. And another thing: (...unclear)...with another spirit, living their own way. It is not right. They lives with God's spirit. Still God's spirit holds them.

Perhaps living their own way, not caring about things/others, living each to his own with their own money (not sharing). He/she does not think about God.

This is it (God's word), lots of messages.

After a break in the recording, the sermon continues as Reggie specifies the threat popular entertainments (guitar, disco, gambling) pose for hearing God's Word—a problem for whites, Aborigines, and mixed race people—in Australia and elsewhere. Then, he concludes:

We should not live by other ways, (for example) by disco, not that. That is the wrong way (*wiyawanu*), wrong way. You have to listen to God first. Do you hear me? You might be 'going back' (*marlakurrinyi*) to the earth [*manta*, to the worldly ways], going back. What I am teaching today is important for the whole earth (*manta winki*). We have to think a lot about this.

The service ended with a reading of the Apostles' Creed, a prayer, the Lord's Prayer, a Blessing, and Grace.

The first emphasis in Reggie's sermon is that it repeatedly locates Aboriginal people at Warlungurru within a larger community of Christians. Like others, they are attracted by carnal pleasures—disco and rock and roll music, gambling (at the Casino)—rather than attention to God's Word. This is shared by Aboriginal, White, and Mixed-race people, those 'all around Australia and overseas'. Some others are working hard at God's Word, and the people at Warlungurru should be like them. The second emphasis is on the necessity and centrality of God's Word. Jesus' Word, God's Word, he says repeatedly, is 'martupurra'—a word that can be translated as 'the main one', the essential part, or even 'that on which we rely'. God's Word is also described as a 'big/important word' (*wangka purlkanya*).

Third, the passages of Corinthians, responding to reports of division, quarreling and claims to leadership based on better knowledge, emphasise the centrality of having spiritual knowledge, being informed by God's spirit. The emphasis in interpreting the passage is that only people with God's spirit (*Katutjaku kurruntjarra*) understand. Thus, no matter what language, no matter 'whether white, half-caste or black', like a child drinking mother's milk, one must learn, become knowledgeable significantly (*pulkara nintirri*). I do not know whether this is Paul's own point, since he seems to emphasise that he only taught the Corinthians what they could grasp, that they were not ready for more. The metaphor in Reggie's transmission—giving the undeveloped 'milk' rather than 'solid food'—is that one has to develop to the point of understanding. Indeed, Reggie says at the beginning of his sermon that, 'We are all with God's spirit' (*Nganana Katutjaku kurrunpa winki, yuwankarra*), unifying people—linking those at Warlungurru with people elsewhere—as all fundamentally created by God. Later, in moving to the issue of the necessity of learning, the heart of the 'milk' metaphor, he makes this the goal everyone should follow, whatever maturity they may have in the traditional scheme: 'It doesn't matter', he says, 'if *tjirlpi* (older/respected man) or old woman, one should learn God's Word, in order to be a strong/mature

person (*marrpanya nyinantjaku*). God's word is Martupurra, essential, so people have to listen! This is the path to growth, to life. Fourth, perhaps relating to the text's focus on the necessity of Spirit over human initiative, Reggie tells the congregation, 'We should not think our spirits are our own. It is given from God above'. This is strangely resonant with the Pintupi view that a person's conception Dreaming defines him/her outside of any current social relations (see Myers 1986).

Fifth, the sermon engages contemporary challenges to life at Warlungurru in the form of gambling and 'disco'. 'Whites and yarnangu are the same', he says. 'Only a few are listening to God's word. The disco is full but only a few listen to God's word'. More broadly, older Pintupi have regarded the attractions of youth culture as a significant challenge to their own conceptions of sociality since the mid-1970s. In the sermon, these forms of activity, which Yarnangu share with White Australians, are seen as distracting from the pursuit and learning of God's Word. It is the latter, Reggie says finally, returning to the 'milk' metaphor perhaps, that God 'feeds' us. Reggie uses the Pintupi word *partjaninpa*, which refers to food filling satiating, removing hunger. Alternatively, it is God's Word that makes one's spirit 'happy'. Finally, then, people should fear returning to the worldly (or 'carnal', as it is in some translations of Corinthians). In the Corinthians passages, worldly ways are identified with envy, strife, and division, and the spiritual is opposed to the worldly or fleshly existence. In Reggie's sermon, this opposition is delineated as a path, as 'wrong way' or the 'wrong track'. In this phrase, Paul Albrecht's comment to me that Aboriginal Christians seem to have picked up on the New Testament idea of 'turning around' in this language is apt, but what Reggie wants to turn around is the decline of attendance and Christian worship at Warlungurru.

In other sermons, Reggie continued his interpretive theme—of a universal community of Christians. He asks, for example, 'How will we live? In different cities, like Alice Springs, Perth, and Adelaide? No, in one *ngurra* (camp, country—implying a unity of people living together), together with God'. This theology had not yet worked its way through to the point that Schild (2008) reports twenty years later, in which an Indigenous pastor comments on the disparity he observes between White and Aboriginal people that 'God like whitefella more better I reckon'.

CONCLUSION

Pintupi interpretations of Christianity at Warlungurru in 1988 represent at once a local order *and* a universalising process in the midst of a range of new identifications filtering into the community. For some residents, re-engagement with traditional 'Law', what they often referred to as 'tjamuku Law', was the preferred option, restoring the proper order of young and old as a basis for reclaiming their homelands in the Western Desert and gaining appropriate recognition—and resources—from the Australian/state governments. Engagement with Christianity was, on the other hand, more common with those residents who had earlier and greater contact with government and mission institutions, with English, and with the assimilation

policies of the 1950s. It was both the history of past residence—from Hermannsburg and Haasts Bluff—and the relationships of shared identity produced in that residence as well as the particular search for modes of order to sustain their engagements with a whole new set of people, institutions and problems that led many others to define themselves strongly or weakly as Christians.

The Christian order co-existed with other institutions of obligation and identity. Its appropriation to the local community permitted Warlungurru residents to celebrate and express a distinctive social being in the early 1980s when they returned to the Kintore Range to live. Gospel singing in Pintupi in their own homeland community identified them as Pintupi, as residing at a place, and as part of a larger Christian world of people. As the Kintore Choir, those from Warlungurru were able to travel to music festivals and represent their community, as a place that could be recognised. In the context of 1988, this meant an *equality* of Aboriginal Christians with others. Indeed, the Finke River Mission's commitment to localisation, originally taken up as a response to and an acknowledgement of self-determination, was leading to the development of churches in these communities that would be equivalent Christian congregations. In this development, the Christian message would also be stripped from Western cultural assumptions and allowed to find its own path with and through Aboriginal culture. At Warlungurru, they were particularly receptive to the view that all people were one in that their souls came from God, and that sharing the Holy Spirit makes them one, a community. This resonates, in an unacknowledged way, with an understanding of the consubstantiality of people who come from the same Dreaming.

The emotional force of this view was channeled most directly through music. If Christian music was a phatic channel of shared participation, it was also a form of practice that competed directly with other popular forms of music and it competed most specifically for young men. It was, after all, 'guitar' and 'disco' that were among the principal emblems of the wrong way—standing for attractions that undermined authority and community involvement and which are seen as related to unsanctioned sexuality and drinking. In the light of the following twenty years, this may be seen as an early recognition of a crisis in masculinity that was brewing.

As the Lutherans recognised, however, Christianity was necessarily more than just singing, and expressing a pleasurable group identity. It also involved 'listening' to God's Word, trying to understand it. The mode in which this was to be accomplished depended first and foremost on Ken Hansen's translation of the Bible into Pintupi/Luritja, but equally it depended on the training and practice of local evangelists—ingkarta—and the development of local institutions. Here, the authority of the pastor/evangelist intersected with long-held ideas about authority, respect, and knowledge as sources of value and requirements of those with authority to look after their subordinates. Aboriginal pastors clearly shared a view common to other Pintupi considerations of cosmology—namely, of the essential nature of God's Law as of 'Grandfather's Law'. Both are said to be binding, essential—'martupurra'—in a way that is self-evident. Subjects are meant to 'listen' (to be open, to take advice), to cleave to these Laws.

The Christian message at Warlungurru emphasises their shared identity with all the differently coloured people in Australia, and overseas. They are like them, further, in struggling with the problems of everyday life. In this way, Christianity rejects the view that Aboriginal problems are distinctive of them. The problems they have—jealousy, pettiness, greed—are shared by other human beings. Many saw in Christianity the basis for refusing demands from other kin to participate in problematic activities, to sit down their own way, to take a path towards a quiet and peaceful life, but it equally provided new structures of division and identity—connecting Aboriginal Christians to others ‘all around Australia and overseas’. Finally, those at Warlungurru also recognise the proximity of sin and look for help in overcoming their desires. They fear the coming of Judgement, the upending of the world that will come from wrongdoing. These frameworks of morality were expanding and being articulated in sermons at Warlungurru, but it was the celebration of God’s spirit and their own, in Gospel song, that was the central practice. And even that celebration, in competing with other entertainments, clearly struggled to keep its membership.

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NOTES

- 1 The research undertaken in 1988 was partially funded by a grant from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies on ‘Pintupi Christianity’. Other support came from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Geographic Society.
- 2 Diane Austin-Broos’s (2009) monograph is unusual in exploring how identities (subjects) were reorganised, and how Christianity emplaced—emplaced—itsself in the Arrernte world. See also Austin-Broos (2003).
- 3 My work with Pintupi people in Warlungurru for this project began in late July 1988. Except for a few days at the Pintupi community of Kiwirrkura, research was oriented to the Warlungurru community, with one week at a Bible Study session in Maryvale.
- 4 Albrecht (2002) focuses on explaining the changing nature of the Finke River Mission’s relationship with Indigenous communities in its orbit of influence.
- 5 Originally established in 1943 as a ration depot, by 1954 Haasts Bluff was handed over to the Northern Territory Administration—and later the Department of Aboriginal Affairs—as a settlement/cattle station (Myers 1986: 36). Many of the Pintupi, Luritja and other migrants came to live there during the period 1941–58. When crowding made its water resources too limited, Papunya was built and many people were moved from Haasts Bluff to Papunya in 1959–60.

- 6 Most of my understanding of these changes comes from reading Albrecht's account (2002), but a long interview I had with him in September 1988 previewed much of what he subsequently published.
- 7 The word *ingkata* is Arrernte and was appropriated by Arrente Christians and the Hermannsburg Mission as an equivalent to 'pastor'. It literally refers to leadership, and may have drawn on a reference to 'father' in its original context. As glossed by T.G.H. Strehlow, it meant 'ceremonial chief' (Kenny 2008: 306). Over the past century, it has changed its meaning to 'pastor'—designating the ordained minister to a particular congregation (or native evangelist)—and the Hermannsburg missionary Carl Strehlow seems to have been 'the first white *ingkata*' (Kenny 2008: 306).
- 8 'Western Desert Gospel' was produced by *Imparja* in 1982, recording the Kintore Gospel Band and the Mt. Liebig Band, under Smithy Zimran's guidance.
- 9 A memorial to Smithy Zimran at Walungurru, in front of the church, records this understanding of his role.
- 10 This is recorded on the larger dedication, erected on the fence surrounding the memorial to Smithy.
- 11 The concern about temptations was more about morality than survival, at least at this time. Pintupi differ in this regard from the Western Arrernte (see Austin-Broos 2009), who have seen Christianity as a means of physical survival as much as salvation.
- 12 The stories of these two Aboriginal pastors are presented in Albrecht (2002: 226–228, 233–235).
- 13 I recorded and partly transcribed seven Sunday church services and sermons.
- 14 Reggie's ties to the Warlungurru community were significant. His mother had been a sister of Pantjiya Nungurrayi, whose husband, George Tjangala, was one of the traditional owners. This couple had partly raised him, and he had married into the family.
- 15 This collection, the third edition of which was published in 1984, includes hymns and choruses as well as translations of the Lutheran liturgies and Luther's Small Catechism, and thus it is a resource for structuring the basic components of the Sunday service.
- 16 Thus, a basic theme that is propounded by Paul—as one commentary from the United States Council of Catholic Bishops put it—is that 'Adherence to individual leaders has something to do with differences in rhetorical ability and also with certain presuppositions regarding wisdom, eloquence, and effectiveness (power), which Paul judges to be in conflict with the gospel and the cross'. <http://www.nccbuscc.org/nab/bible/1corinthians/1corinthians1.htm#v10>
- 17 The free translation of Reggie Baldock's Pintupi-Luritja sermon was provided by John Heffernan and his daughter, at my request.

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