Kukatja Mourning Rites and Inculturation

ROBIN KONING, S.J.

RéSUMÉ - L'auteur aborde la culture d'une tribu aborigène du Nord-Ouest de l'Australie, les Kukatja, en particulier leurs rites funéraires. Il commence par une analyse phénoménologique et anthropologique de ces rites. De cette analyse, il tire ensuite un certain nombre de conclusions en vue du processus d'inculturation de l'Evangile dans ce domaine de la vie aborigène, même si plusieurs de ces dernières restent encore provisoires et demandent d'être étudiées plus en profondeur.

The Kukatja Catholic Parish, in which I worked for five years in the 1990s, lies at the edge of the Western Desert of Australia, in the north-east of Western Australia. The Aboriginal peoples living in the area have had sustained contact with European settlers for only the last 60-70 years. While there have been significant changes in their lifestyle over those years, many of their original cultural practices remain extant, and this is particularly evident in the important rituals surrounding death. In this paper, I offer a phenomenological analysis of some of these rituals as they are practised today, drawing on the work of Gerardus Van Der Leeuw, Mary Douglas, Mircea Eliade and Victor Turner. From this analysis, I draw a number of conclusions as to possible ways forward for the process of inculturation in this important area of Aboriginal life.

But first a note on terminology. A number of tribes were represented in the area under discussion - Kukatja, Jaru, Walmajarri, Pintubi and Ngarti, to name the major ones. The ceremonies and customs of these various tribes were already closely related before contact with Europeans, and they have become even more homogenized since members of the different tribal groups have settled together in larger communities growing out of the original

Robin Koning is an Australian Jesuit who worked for six years among Aboriginal people in the north of Australia, most of that time in the Kukatja Catholic Parish at the edge of the Western Desert. He is now pursuing doctoral studies in theology at Regis College, Toronto, working in the area of inculturation and focusing on the understanding of culture in the thought of theologians Bernard Lonergan and anthropologist Clifford Geertz.
mission. We have yet to find a simple collective term to describe this reality, and to speak throughout the paper of ‘the peoples of the Kutjunga region’ would be too clumsy. Though it is not an entirely adequate alternative, since it ignores the other tribes of the region, I shall speak simply of the Kukatja. This is the dominant tribe in the largest and most central community of Wirrumanu (Balgo), where I lived, and for that reason, the majority of my informants were at least partly Kukatja. But the reader should be aware that the customs spoken of herein are common to all the tribes, at least as they practice their burials in the Kutjunga region today.

1. Description of Phenomena

Since a full treatment of all elements of the contemporary Kukatja mourning rituals would provide far too wide a canvass, I have chosen to concentrate on those rituals which appear to be concerned with the treatment of the spirit of the dead person, and mention other rituals and practices where appropriate throughout my analysis. The four elements which will provide my major foci are: the abandonment of the house of the deceased and the burning of their personal possessions; the sweeping of the ground where the deceased walked; the taboo on the use of the name of the deceased; and the smoking ceremony used at various times in the mourning process.

Abandonment of House and Possessions

After news of a death and the initial expressions of grief by the family and other members of the community, those living in the house where the deceased used to live move into an open area designated as ‘Sorry Camp’. They leave behind the personal possessions of the dead person – clothes, bedding, televisions, radios etc. Traditionally, all of the person’s possessions would be burned, though such possessions would have been little more than some basic clothing, boomerangs, spears, personal sacred objects and digging sticks. Today, with a greater number of possessions, and more valuable ones, the goods may be distributed among ‘distant’ uncles – that is, people classified as uncles according to the Kukatja kinship system but not closely related by blood to the dead person. The important element of continuity appears to be that the possessions are no longer in close proximity to the close relations of the deceased. Likewise, traditionally the camp where the deceased had been living would be abandoned entirely and never returned to by that small family group, though another family might move there after a number of good rains. Today, with people living in western-style houses and houses at a premium, the house may be abandoned for a period of time, after which an unrelated family may occupy it, making their own house available for the mourning family.

Sweeping of Ground

Some days after the death, there is a ceremony involving a group of people, usually women, who gather with leafy branches in hand. With these branches, they sweep the ground where the deceased has walked, usually beginning with the house and then moving to areas around the village where the dead person would have frequently walked – e.g. the store, the clinic, the place of work. Sometimes branches are tied behind vehicles and dragged along the roadway over which the person may often have driven. For example, with the death of one person at Yaka-Yaka, some 90 kilometres from the church at Wirrumanu where he was to be buried, vehicles of the mourning party swept the road for the entire distance. On another occasion, when a child had died in a vehicle accident on the main ‘highway’ to the nearest town of Halls Creek, people were not allowed to travel on that road until the area where the accident had occurred was swept clean, thus ‘opening up’ the road. And in 1999, a ceremony was held at the place where a plane had crashed, killing its two occupants, some years before. The place had never been ‘opened up’, which meant that some people were not able to muster cattle near there.

Smoking Ceremony

Smoking rituals are used at a number of points during the mourning rites. This ritual involves the burning of green leaves to produce clouds of smoke. One way this is done is to place the branches in a hole dug into the ground, in which case the smoke either wafts over the people or they are invited to walk through the smoke and ‘wash’ themselves in it – i.e. bend over the fire and use their hands to waft the smoke over their heads and bodies. Another alternative is to have the burning leaves in a large tin, which is then carried around to where the people are seated or standing, so that they are washed in the smoke from the tin.

If Mass is held in Sorry Camp, as is sometimes the case, a smoking ritual is often incorporated. Later on, the house where the person died may be smoked and also blessed with holy water. At the funeral itself, the church, with the coffin in place, will be smoked before people enter, and the tins of burning leaves left beside the coffin during the ceremony. Church leaders have also asked that the vehicle which has been used as the hearse be smoked at the end of the funeral.
Smoking ceremonies are used at other points in Kukatja life. Newborn babies are smoked 'to make them grow strong'. Smoking is used as a healing and strengthening rite, and also to drive away evil. It may be used as a general blessing, as for people who are leaving the community to work or live elsewhere. People speak of smoking as a purifying rite, a cleansing away of evil and sickness and weakness.

**Name Taboo**

As soon as someone dies, their name is not to be spoken. Instead, they will be known simply as mirri (the dead one) or by the replacement term, Kumunuyijayi. Likewise, anyone else with the same name either uses a different name or is referred to as Kumunuyijayi. The same also applies to any words, in whatever language, with a sound similar to that of the name of the deceased. For example, when a man named Richard died, a girl in the community named Bridget began to be referred to as 'Squeaky', a nick-name based on her Aboriginal name puny-punjya ('mouse').

For very young children, sticks may be broken near their ears while they sleep, or stones rattled in a can, so that they will 'forget' the name of the deceased and not inadvertently speak it. But for older children and adults, the change happens almost instantaneously. The day after a young man died whose nickname was 'W' (derived from his surname Woodley), one teacher reported that the children in her class had automatically ended their recitation of the alphabet saying, "... U, V, Kumunuyijayi, X, Y, Z". The change is reinforced by correction. If someone inadvertently uses the name or a similar sounding word, another person may interrupt them with the word, Kumunuyijayi, reminding them of the taboo. Common Kukatja words may be replaced by another Kukatja synonym, or by a word from a neighbouring language, or by the English equivalent. For people with the same or similar names, they may revert to a second or third name, or choose a new one, or develop a nickname. This is not quite the problem one might think, in that Kukatja people will have a number of names to start with - an English name, a Kukatja name, often a nickname, and a kinship group. They will also be addressed by others simply by the appropriate relationship term - e.g. kurti ('brother') or ijatja ('grandchild'). Still, people are now more often giving their children a number of names at birth so that they have a fall-back should their first name become Kumunuyijayi. Alternatively, they may choose an unusual name which is unlikely to become 'Kumunuyijayi'. One sad example of this was a baby boy whose mother gave him the name 'Zechariah' since no one else in the region had that name. The tragedy was that Zechariah himself was killed in a vehicle accident a few months after his birth.

An associated custom we should note in passing is that the image of a dead person may not be shown, either as a photo or on film.

Fred Myers, ethnographer of the closely related Pintupi people, speaks of the name taboo as based on concern not to cause further grief to the relatives of the deceased, who will be upset to hear his or her name mentioned. In my experience, this is not the primary concern of the Kukatja. Rather it is a concern not to entice the spirit of the deceased back to the side of the living. The fear is that the spirit, which at this stage is still in an indeterminate state between this world and the next, may cause mischief. As one group of informants put it, the dead person misses his loved ones and may want to take them to the other side as well. In this light, all of these four customs are of a piece. Since the spirit will most likely hover around familiar places - house, possessions, places which the person had frequented or where the person had walked - these are destroyed or avoided or smoked or swept to keep the spirit at bay. The spirit will also be attracted by the mention of its name, and so that name is avoided. Smoking ceremonies are designed to remove spirits which may be lingering, and to purify places associated with that spirit. Hence smoking of the house and the church and the vehicle used to transport the body.

Later on, though, some time after the death, the concern does seem to shift to the family's sensibilities, as Myers states. We discovered that some slides could be shown because the relation would not mind, while others had most definitely to be set aside and not shown because of the concern of one or more relatives. For example, it was clear to others that Mark Boiling would have no problem with an image of his dead father being shown, but there was no way that one could show a slide of Francis Mosquito, the dead son of an old woman, Munyija Mosquito, since she would be too distressed. Likewise, his name is still Kumunuyijayi more than ten years after his death. Another example occurred at Mass one day. We were singing a hymn entitled 'New Hope', which the local church leaders had selected. But when we sang the words of the song's title, a woman in the congregation began to wail. We...
discovered that it was the mother of a woman named ‘Nula’ who had died a couple of years previously. She had recognised her daughter’s names in the words ‘New Hope’ and was distressed as a result. For no one else but her was it a problem.

We now turn to an analysis of these customs in the light of various categories suggested by anthropologists and phenomenologists of religions.

2. Anthropological Reflection on the Phenomena

Having offered an initial description of these phenomena, let us now analyze them in the light of various categories, beginning with those offered by phenomenologist of religion, Gerhard Van Der Leeuw. For Van Der Leeuw, the primary category for analyzing religious phenomena is that of power. Early anthropological analyses of power made use of the Melanesian term mana, which denoted an almost physical force or power or excellence possessed by a person. It included such attributes as influence, strength, authority, capacity - whatever was seen and experienced as strong. Power at this most primal level is always authenticated empirically. It does not apply to what is natural in the sense of what is ordinarily to be expected, any merely ordinary influence or authority or capacity, "what confers efficiency on objects and persons in ordinary circumstances." Rather, mana refers to the extraordinary — any "unusual or great, effective or successful" manifestation, anything which "manifests itself in some very striking way." Such power can be experienced in a variety of ways: in things or in particular localities; in a person who is "some definite bearer or possessor from whom it emanates"; or in spirits who may have the power and impart it. But in all these instances, power remains, at this most primal level, basically impersonal, operating at the level of almost spontaneous emanations from these objects, places, people or spirits.

Kukatja people certainly understand the spirits of the dead, especially the recently deceased, to be powerful. But their understanding of this power is significantly different in at least two ways from the understanding of power outlined above. Firstly, this power is not immediately experientially based - it is not necessarily authenticated empirically. The Kukatja do not wait for the spirit of the dead person to exert its power before regarding it as powerful. Rather, they presume the person's spirit will be powerful, and immediately move into customary forms of dealing with this power so that it is not a threat to the living. This is not to say that people did not have experiences of the power of the deceased in the past, or that they do not still continue, on occasion, to experience such power today. Indeed, one might presume that such experiences are at the root of the common belief in the power and threat of the recently deceased. But the ways in which the Kukatja deal with death and the deceased are prompted not by immediate experience in each instance, but by a system of beliefs which express themselves in the sorts of phenomena I have described in the previous section - rites and customs which are enacted independent of and prior to any experience of the power of the deceased in any particular instance, and aimed precisely, as we shall see, at minimizing any threat that power might hold for the living.

Secondly, the power of the deceased in Kukatja culture is not understood as an impersonal power, but as very much the personal power of the deceased. It is a power allied with the person's will. Thus, to analyze these Kukatja rites and customs, we need to move beyond the realm of power as direct experience of a strikingly extraordinary impersonal force. This is the case even though some of the customs might appear, at first sight, to suggest a certain fetishism, a dynamic power present in objects - for example, in the footprints of the deceased, in the house where they once lived or in their possessions. These are not powerful in themselves, but only because they are familiar to the deceased, and may attract their unwanted attention and their willed exercise of power to take people with them into death.

The various prohibitions we noted, though, are of significance if we analyse them in terms of the relationship between power and taboo. Van der Leeuw speaks of taboo as grounded in a view of life as "a broad current of mighty powers whose existence we do not specifically observe, but which occasionally makes itself conspicuous by either the damming or the flooding of its waters." The example he gives is from Toradja culture, where a
broken earthen pot is a sign that the current of powers has been interrupted, and there follows a concern that more things may be broken. *A fortiori* one might see in death a definitive sign of a break in the usual flow of powers. Certainly the Kukatja concern is that, since one person has gone over to the other side, others might be lured or taken there or suffer some other trouble. The normal flow of life is broken and extraordinary measures need to be taken to protect the living. There come into play various taboos, defined by Van der Leewu as follows:

*Objects, persons, times, places or actions charged with Power are called *tabu*. It indicates 'what is expressly named', 'exceptional'. *Tabu* is thus a sort of warning: ‘Danger! High voltage!’ Power has been stored up, and we must be on our guard. The *tabu* is the expressly authenticated condition of being replete with power, and man’s reaction to it should rest on a clear recognition of this potent fullness, should maintain the proper distance and secure protection.\(^4\)

The prohibition on use of the name of the deceased; the destruction of their possessions or their disposition to distant relatives; the avoidance of the place they had lived in; the sweeping away of their footprints; the various smoking rituals – all suggest a Kukatja concern to ‘maintain the proper distance and secure protection’ in the face of a situation ‘replete with power, and . . . potent fullness’. There is a strong sense of ‘Danger! High voltage!’ in the face of an extraordinary source of power. But here again, one needs to be clear that, with the Kukatja, it is not the footprints, the name, the possessions, or the house in themselves which are full of power, but their association with the deceased. The power is primarily in the dead person’s spirit; other things and places become taboo insofar as they are places or things where the spirit may hover or which will attract the spirit back to cause possible harm.

In his discussion of taboos, Van der Leewu speaks of anything concerned with the sexual as “exceptional” and “full of potency.”\(^5\) One might easily make the same point about death and anything concerned with it, certainly in the Kukatja world view. It is, *par excellence*, one of those “critical times (which) must never be allowed to pass unnoticed but must be met by some relevant exceptional behaviour.”\(^6\) Among the Kukatja, concern for ‘Sorry Time’ takes precedence over nearly all else, affecting all other decisions of the family and relations for the full duration of the mourning period. And today, this period from death to burial is not short, but may extend from three to six weeks, the body being stored in the nearest hospital morgue until the funeral. Apart from the rituals and avoidances we have discussed at greater length, we should also note that Sorry Time is a period of fasting (from red meats, milk, sweet things, for example), of a certain quiet and decorum in ‘Sorry Camp’, and, traditionally at least, of complete silence on the part of a widow, who needed to communicate by sign language. These are all further examples of the “avoidance of deed and word” – i.e. taboo – “springing from awe in the presence of Power,”\(^7\) the Power here being that of death and the dead person’s spirit. There are also elements of a specially elaborated taboo language\(^8\) around death, since close relatives of the deceased are referred to by special Kukatja terms during Sorry Time. For example, the usual terms for mother, father, grandmother, and grandfather receive the suffix ‘-puka’ when applied to people in these relationships to the deceased, while his or her brothers and sisters are referred to by the special term ‘kurumpu’.\(^9\)

One element of Van der Leewu’s analysis of taboo which is not confirmed in relation to Kukatja death taboos is that of the automatic nature of the penalty for violation of the taboo. He asserts:

> Violation of the *tabu* brought in its train not punishment, but an automatic reaction of Power, it was quite unnecessary to inflict any penalties when Power assailed one spontaneously ... Power questions not as to guilt or innocence, it reacts, exactly as the electric current shocks anyone who carelessly touches the wire.\(^10\)

As we have already noted, the Kukatja interpret their taboos in terms of a concern that the spirit of the deceased will be attracted to familiar places or objects or to the sound of its name, and may seek to take others with him or her into the realm of the dead. To inadvertently break the name taboo, for example, is not to risk an automatic reaction but rather to risk drawing the spirit’s attention to oneself. Perhaps Van der Leewu draws his boundaries and distinctions too firmly here, for he speaks of only two options: on the one hand, there is a concern for guilt or innocence, the former resulting in punishment by the infliction of a penalty; on the other, there is an automatic

---

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 43-44.  
\(^{15}\) Ibid., 44.  
\(^{16}\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 45.  
\(^{19}\) Gracie Grene Nangala, Gracie Mosquito Nangala, Patricia Milner Napangarti, interview by author, written notes, Wirrumanu, 21 March 1996.  
\(^{20}\) Van der Leewu, 46.
reaction whereby the offender against the taboo is spontaneously assailed by power. While in the Kukatja understanding it is true that the power of the spirit "questions not as to guilt or innocence," and the danger is not a matter of external punishment or penalties for breaking a rule, the alternative is not an automatic reaction like an electric shock. Rather, it is the response of a spirit who has a will, so that Van der Leeuw's analysis of taboo needs to be expanded at this point to embrace his understanding of Will.

For Van der Leeuw, power in some of its manifestations is a power which has acquired or been endowed with will. 21 In fact, he sees belief in spirits as the earliest stage in the development of an understanding of a willed power. On this point, he quotes Söderblom to the effect that, within the understanding of an impersonal, mana-type power, "belief in souls and spirits initiates the apprehension of a spiritual presence which, more closely defined, is a realm of will." 22 When it comes to the spirit of the deceased, their will is in fact often enhanced beyond the normal capabilities of the will of the living person. "The dead … are more potent than the living: their will imposes itself: it is irresistible. They are superior in strength and insight." 23 For the Kukatja we have seen the concern that the dead person, still hovering around, will take someone with them to the other side, so that great care has to be taken to ensure that people are not in situations where they might have contact with the spirit and its power. Presumably, on the basis of all the precautions which need to be enacted, this power is thought of as superior to that of the living. Van der Leeuw also speaks of certain cosmic powers ascribed to the dead in a number of cultures – e.g. power over rain, fertility, and the productivity of hunting or fishing, as well as protection in war or at sea. 24 This is verified amongst the Kukatja, who speak of the dead person's spirit, after returning to its own country, still looking after the family when they are hunting and travelling. The spirit may also appear to members of the family in a dream, giving them songs, dances, good stories "like how to lead these people," 'maps' of the country or, for women, how to be Law women (i.e. ceremonial leaders). Patricia Lee Napangarti, for example, speaks of how her uncle brought her back a dancing song, to be used in ceremonies. 25 The spirits of the deceased are also thought to be grateful for continuing respect shown to them. This became evident one year as I returned with some people after we had cleaned up the cemetery and celebrated the All Souls' Day Mass there. As we drove home, a rock hit the bottom of the car with a loud bang – not an uncommon occurrence on those dirt roads. When one woman got out of the car, she said that the sound of the rock had been her daughter expressing thanks for the care they had shown her grave.

While noting this enhancement of will in the deceased, Van der Leeuw also speaks of a concomitant diminishment of form. Form is a key category of his analysis of religion, completing the triad – power, will and form – in which "there lies practically the entire concept of the Object of Religion." 26 Being so central to his analysis, it is strange that Van der Leeuw does not give a clear definition of the term except in a footnote. There he speaks of form as equivalent to Gestalt – a whole or a unit. It is always "visible, or tangible, or otherwise perceptible; and thus Endowment with Form or Form Creation, indicates the crystallization of the originally formless feelings into some kind of perceptible and unified Forms." 27 Therefore Van der Leeuw does not use 'spiritual' as meaning invisible and intangible. "For Power which acquires Will also receives Form," 28 and for Van der Leeuw, form is always visible or otherwise perceptible. This is verified in the Kukatja understanding. For when they speak of spirits, they seem to speak of visible, or at least potentially visible spirits, recognisable because they have the same shape and appearance as the deceased, only in ghostly form. 29

This visibility of the Form of the deceased is a point Van der Leeuw takes up in his treatment of "The Mighty Dead". He notes that, for animism at least, form is indispensable, so that the concern is not with the invisible soul of the deceased, but the power of their "living-dead forms." The dead person is not a "soul without a body, but another corporeality" – leading a shadow life, "nebulous and misty," 30 but still resembling the living and thus able to be "recognised, seen and spoken to." 31 We have noted the potent will of this 'spirit' of the dead, but need also to note, as Van der Leeuw does, how

21 Ibid., 83, 87.
22 Ibid., 89.
23 Ibid., 129.
24 Ibid., 129, 131.
26 Van der Leeuw, 87.
27 Ibid., 87-88, n. 3.
28 Ibid., 89.
29 I think it is safe to say that when Kukatja speak of spirits, they are not speaking of pure spirit, which is ultimately unimaginable. Some spirits may not be seen by everyone, but only by some members of the family, or by magarn men – i.e. traditional healers – or by dogs, which is one reason people like to keep dogs.
30 Ibid., 128.
31 Ibid., 129.
there is at the same time a certain loss of power in death, as is suggested by the diminishment of Form. This decreased power is further evidenced among the Kukatja in that the dead seem capable of being easily fooled when they return to draw people to the other side. Whereas a living person could look around the camp to see where their relatives are if they are not at home, the spirit of the dead person seems unable to do this, being confined to getting clues from familiar places or sounds. Movement away from the house, destruction or dispersal of property, removal of footprints, the non-use of their name, smoking—these suffice to keep the spirit "off the scent" and out of harm's way. The power of the person has in some ways been enfeebled.32

The dead, therefore, have an ambivalent status in that they are at once enfeebled and enhanced in their power. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that formless power, or at least power with diminished form, is more dangerous than that which is fully formed. This is a point Australian poet Bruce Dawe makes, in a completely different context, when he speaks of the role of poetry in expressing what may be "bugging" us so that we can deal with it: "It is the formlessness of things we find hardest to handle; art is one way of giving handles to those things."33 This concern for the dangerous power of what is unformed or not fully formed is a point to which we shall return when we examine the "liminal" nature of the deceased.

But first we should note a further possible ambivalence concerning the dead, the sort of ambivalence suggested by Van der Leeuw's examples of peoples who prepare food for the deceased but then are sure to drive them away after they have had a chance to eat.34 The Kukatja have a similar ambivalence in that, despite the concern to keep the spirits of the dead at bay, they also practice other behaviours which would appear to ensure that the spirit's attention is in fact drawn to the mourners. Some examples are the loud wailing of the mourners; their attempts to draw blood by cutting their heads or gashing their limbs; and, perhaps most clearly, pali-waru—this is, the practice of hugging or even laying prostrate on the coffin during the funeral rites, wailing the whole time.35 The tension seems to be between two

values—the importance of expressing love for the deceased by showing the depth of one's grief (which at the same time serves as a protection against any accusation that one may have been responsible for the death), and the importance of protection from any possible harm the deceased may seek to do, not so much out of malice as out of love for the living and the desire to be once more united with them. But this ambivalence may also be understood as an example of what Van der Leeuw describes as a normal tension in the human experience of awe in the face of power—there is an impulsion both to avoid and to seek power. "In the human soul... Power awakens a profound feeling of awe which manifests itself both as fear and as being attracted."36 This is a point Rudolf Otto makes with respect to the human experience of the mysterium tremendum—that while this experience has "the element of daunting 'awefulness'... it is clear that it has at the same time another aspect, in which it shows itself as something uniquely attractive and fascinating."37

The power to awaken such awe is not empirically experienced by the Kukatja with each death, as we have already noted. Rather, the belief that the spirits of the dead have power has become part of their system of beliefs, presumably through some experience in times past and still on occasion in the present. Therefore, the response of awe in the face of power has developed by now into observance; the intense dread has lessened to a more formal performance of the required customs to ensure that the power does not threaten the living.38 But intense awe remains as the presupposition of this observance, in Van der Leeuw's terms, and the now usually "benumbed awe" can still be awakened in the face of particular experiences of the spirits of the dead.39 That these are regarded as extraordinary expressions of power is evident in the intense interest the Kukatja show in reports of such experiences. In the customs by which they seek to deal with such power, we have an example of what Van der Leeuw describes as the "essentially religious" nature of custom, which is "the enduring with form of fear and of awe before superior Power."40 Not only is power itself endowed with form, therefore, but so too is the human response of awe in the face of power. While there is normally a sense of distance from this power, "conduct and custom aim at bridging this interval and rendering possible some definite and

---

32 Ibid., 128.
34 Van der Leeuw, 131-132.
35 Traditionally this was practised directly over the dead body immediately after death, and this still happens some times if the person dies in camp. But with most deaths occurring in hospital, or away from the community as in the case of vehicle accidents, today the pali-waru usually is practised over the coffin when the body returns for the funeral.
36 Van der Leeuw, 48.
38 Van der Leeuw, 49.
39 Ibid., 50.
40 Ibid., 454.
satisfactory relationship towards Power."41 This is another way of looking at the Kukatja ambivalence towards the dead we have just noted – their desire to avoid the spirit of the dead person and to avoid drawing its attention to them, while at the same time drawing attention to themselves in various ways. In the light of Van der Leeuw’s comments, this may not be as much an ambivalence as first appears. Rather, it may be that the correct performance of the mourning customs ensures that a “definite and satisfactory relationship” to the spirit is established, thereby allowing for those expressions of grief for the deceased and of intimate closeness to the body which custom also allows and expects.

A related way of understanding these mourning customs is in terms of the link between the sacred and the impure or polluted. For Van der Leeuw, sacredness and impurity can be identical since both are related to power and “the potent is dangerous.”42 For example, the Maori word for taboo, tapu, “means ‘polluted’ just as much as ‘holy’; but in any case it carries a prohibition with it, and therefore prescribes keeping one’s proper distance.”43 This relationship between pollution and taboo is elaborated in great detail by Mary Douglas. For her, dirt or pollution is “matter out of place.”44 It offends against order. As such it is not absolute since different cultures have different constructions of what is in order.45 Even within one culture, what is ‘dirty’ in one context is not so in another, as in the example Douglas gives of shoes not being dirty in themselves but being so – that is, being out of place – on the dining room table.46 Such matter out of place is not so much something to be feared as something to be dealt with so that the total environment can once more be organized.47 Hence the importance of various rituals of purity and impurity which seek to create unity in experience.48

Within and without, about [sic] and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.49

In this light, we can look at the mourning rites we have been examining in terms of the power of the deceased being now out of place where once the person belonged. The dead should be with God, as one group of contemporary Kukatja informants put it,50 or should return to their own land, as was traditionally believed. Either way, they are out of place around the people with whom they once lived. There is a place for the living and a place for the dead, and preferably the twain shall not meet. If there is a chance they will, a “cherished classification” is threatened, and pollution behaviour is used to prevent such confusion.51 In the case of the Kukatja mourning rites, this is done in the various ways Douglas speaks of in the quotation above – by demarcating and separating (moving away from the house and distributing possessions to ‘distant’ relatives); by purifying of ‘remnants’ of the person (not using their name, sweeping away their footprints, burning their clothes, smoking the house); and punishing transgression (at least at the level of being corrected if one uses a Kumunyiyari word, for example, or does not behave correctly in Sorry Camp). All these customs seek, as Douglas says, to impose some system “on an inherently untidy experience” – that of the potential presence of the dead among the living. One suggestive way in which the Aboriginal people of Groote Eylandt speak of smoking ceremonies after a death is as a ‘cleaning up’ of the remnants of the spirit,52 nicely verifying Douglas’ understanding of pollution as ‘matter out of place’ and needing to be ‘cleaned up in some way’. Though these people are unrelated to the Kukatja, the Kukatja rituals appear to carry this same connotation.

Douglas also speaks of pollution or dirt as “what must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.”53 In contrast to form or order, uncleanness is formlessness or disorder, which “is destructive to existing patterns.”54 Yet it also provides the unlimited materials from which patterns and relations can be formed, and thus represents unlimited potential for patterning. Because of this, it “symbolises both danger and power.”55 Douglas notes this ambivalence in the way various cultures treat people in marginal states. The
examples she deals with are the unborn child for the Lele and Nyakyusa, the menstruating woman among the Maori, and initiates in many cultures. All these are in transition, liminal, not fitting into the arranged pattern, they have power and are dangerous, to themselves and to others. Clearly, for the Kukatja, the recently deceased is a marginal, liminal person, hovering somewhere between life and death, between this world and the next. And like others in liminal states, these deceased spirits are powerful and dangerous in the ways we have seen. Furthermore, just as Douglas notes the crucial role of ritual in controlling the power and danger of pollution and disorder in general, so we have noted the various customs and rituals by which the Kukatja seek to control the possible power and danger in the particular case of the dead. In some ways, in fact, death is the paradigmatic transition, the transition from which other transitions often draw their imagery – most notably, perhaps, in initiation rites, which are often understood as a movement through a ritual death into new, initiated life. Douglas alludes to this paradigmatic nature of death as a metaphor for pollution when she writes, “Reflection on dirt involves reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness, life to death.”

The ambivalence of people in marginal and transitional states noted above – their simultaneous powerfulness and their danger to others – is examined by Victor Turner in his treatment of liminality, which is a key category in his analysis of the role of ritual within cultures. In The Ritual Process, he examines such liminality in a number of Ndembu rituals – those dealing with infertility, with the ‘excessive fertility’ represented by the birth of twins, and with the installation of a new chief. In each case, the ritual follows a tripartite structure corresponding to the structure of rites of passage which “accompany every change of place, state, social position and age.” This basic structure, which Turner borrowed from Arnold van Gennep, distinguishes the following three phases:

1. Separation, which “comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions (a ‘state’), or from both.”

2. Margin, the liminal period, in which “the characteristics of the ritual subject … are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few if any of the attributes of the past or coming state.”

3. Reaggregation, by which “the passage is consummated. The ritual subject, individual or corporate, is in a relatively stable state once more and, by virtue of this, has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and ‘structured’ type; he is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position in a system of such positions.”

Turner is particularly interested in the second stage of this process, the period of transition and liminality, and he examines this stage in some detail in his case studies. The state of liminality is a state of transition whose attributes are necessarily ambiguous. It is “neither here nor there, betwixt and between,” and is frequently likened to such ambiguous or transitional states as death, being in the womb, invisibility, bisexuality, wilderness, or eclipses. In our earlier analysis, employing the categories of Van der Leeuw and Douglas, we have already noted various liminal elements in the Kukatja understanding of the spirits of the dead – they are diminished in power with respect to form, but have enhanced power with respect to will; they are not living, but yet not fully in the realm of the dead – “betwixt and between,” as Turner puts it; they have left their loved ones yet maintain an attachment to them; anything tangibly related to their memory is erased (footprints, clothes, possessions, name, photos), while at the same time they are affectionately and vigorously mourned; they have potential both for harm (taking someone with them to the other side) and for good (giving songs and dreams).

But amongst the Kukatja, as amongst other Western Desert Aboriginal tribes, it is not the liminality of the dead person which is at the heart of mourning and funeral rituals. For these rituals are not primarily concerned with ensuring the safe passage of the deceased to their place of rest, however that is envisioned. Certainly this is a significant aspect of mortuary rituals in

---

61 Ibid., 95.
62 Ibid., 95.
63 This point may connect with Turner’s understanding of liminal states as being states of creative community, connected with myth and song and philosophy (127-128) – hence the possibility of the Kukatja dead giving songs or ceremonies to the living who survive them. But I am not sure that such creativity occurs during the liminal phase, or only after the burial when the threat aspect of the spirit has been dealt with. This is something I need to check in further fieldwork in the desert.
other parts of Australia. For example, in Arnhem Land we see elaborate ceremonies, dances and use of symbols which ritualise, through mimetic action, the journey of the dead to the Land where they are to rest. For the Kukatja, the mourning and funeral rites, at least as they are practised today, show no such concern for enabling the spirit to make the transition out of liminality. What is ritualised is the behaviour of those who remain and mourn. And in these rituals of mourning, we find enacted the usual pattern of separation, liminality and return. The chief mourners are separated from their house, their possessions, their usual occupations and all tangible evidence of the deceased. After the funeral (or for some, after the first major rains) they return to normal life once more. But in between, during Sorry Time and in Sorry Camp, they live a liminal existence. This is evident if we note which of Turner’s liminal elements are verified in the context of Sorry Camp:

1. Silence: We have already noted that Sorry Camp is a place of quiet and decorum for all, and that, traditionally, widows were to remain completely silent.

2. Obedience, humility, heteronomy: Those in Sorry Camp are the passive mourners, or yirrkapari — those related to the deceased as mother or father, uncle or aunt, husband or wife. They are attended to by the active mourners, the tilitja, the ‘workers’ — those related as brother, sister or cross-cousin. The tilitja make all the arrangements for the funeral and for the various ceremonies of Sorry Time, while the yirrkapari submit humbly to their instructions.

3. Nakedness or uniform clothing, homogeneity: Those in Sorry Camp are painted with white or yellow ochre over their face and hair, and sometimes over their torso as well. This homogeneity is further accentuated by the cutting off of their hair.

4. Transition: Those in Sorry Camp are very much betwixt and between — divorced from their usual employments and activities, with all attention focussed on ‘sorry business’.

5. Simplicity: Life in Sorry Camp is simpler even than ordinary Aboriginal life. There are few distractions, and simple requirements — chiefly, being available to greet any people who come to mourn. One is not meant to move around outside Sorry Camp, though exceptions are made if the person needs to transact important business. Even then, it is preferable that they move around in a vehicle rather than walking around openly. There is also a greater simplicity of food, with the diet stripped of red meat, sweet foods and dairy products.

6. Communitas: This is a key category for Turner, denoting the spontaneous sentiment of humankindness based on the recognition of an essential and generic human bond. Such communitas is evident in the sharing of grief in Kukatja mourning ritual. This happens even before the separation phase of the ritual, when people from all over the community come to ‘cry with’ the family of the deceased. But it continues throughout Sorry Time, with any visitor to the community going to cry with those in Sorry Camp, and a number of major sorry meetings in which the community, along with visitors from other communities, gather to ritually express their shared grief through crying with and hugging those who mourn.

7. Acceptance of pain and suffering: Kukatja mourners fast from various foods. Living outdoors, they also endure the suffering of the unrelenting heat of summer or the cold winds of winter.

8. Some of these symbols of mourning liminality seem to indicate a similar “structural invisibility” to that which Turner notes of novices in initiation rites who “are secluded from the spheres of everyday life, may be disguised in pigments or masks, or rendered inaudible by rules of silence.”

And we might also note that Aboriginal cultures put little value on distinctions of wealth, property, rank or status. Therefore it is not surprising that the disregarding or homogenizing of such distinctions, while important in some of the cultures with which Turner deals, are not features of Kukatja Sorry Camp liminality.

Sorry Camp itself has certain attributes of ritual space, though in a less structured way than is often noted in other cultures. In Turner’s terms, it is the space in which the important liminal stage of the ritual process is lived out by the mourners. Having separated from the profane world, and before returning to normal life again after the burial, they live in Sorry Camp in seclusion from at least some aspects of ordinary secular life. Such separation from ordinary life also features in Mircea Eliade’s definition of

---

63 Turner, 106-107.
64 Ibid., 113, 125-130, 131-133.
65 Ibid., 169.
sacred space as a space set apart from the profane, constituting “a break in the homogeneity of space.” The religious person understands that space is not homogeneous, that “some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.” Sorry Camp represents such a definite break in the homogeneity of space. It is marked off by restrictions – on who can camp there, noise levels, food restrictions, the need for mourners to wear ochre – restrictions which do not apply to ‘Top Camp’ or ‘Bottom Camp’ or ‘Kayili (North) Camp’, or any of the other ordinary camps around the community. Its sole purpose is to be the place where the ‘sorry people’ (to coin a phrase) stay, and where they welcome visitors coming to express their shared sorrow.

In other aspects, though, Sorry Camp does not fit easily with the elements of sacred spaces which Eliade notes in a broad spectrum of cultures. There appears to be no absolute fixed point or centre; no door or threshold to mark demarcation and transition from one kind of space to another; rather a continuity with the rest of camp; no special opening to the sky (since the whole camp and much of Kukatja existence is lived in openness to the sky), no special sign or hierophany marking it as a sacred spot; no consecration ritual that I am aware of; no representation of an arizx mundi allowing communication between earth and the divine upper regions or the lower world of the dead.

More fundamentally, Sorry Camp fits uneasily into Eliade’s separation between formed, sacred space (cosmos) and unformed, indeterminate space around it (chaos). Turner, too, uses this distinction in speaking of how the Ndembu, in their soma rite, create a sacred space, which is “a small realm of order created in the formless milieu of the bush.” Such a distinction may be valid for the permanent sacred spaces they are set up today, for there is a permanent men’s Law camp, in the bush outside camp, and a permanent women’s Law camp, also outside the boundaries of the camp. These are clearly demarcated areas, the former to be entered only by initiated males, the latter only by females. But Sorry Camp is different. It is usually an open area near the edges of camp, but not beyond its fairly fluid boundaries. There is little in the way of special construction of the space; rather, it comes into being when the ‘swags’ – i.e. the bedding – of the mourners are moved into that area. This creates an outdoor living area, with perhaps some makeshift wind-breaks. But since many Kukatja live outside of their houses anyway, especially during the long, hot months, Sorry Camp is indistinguishable in any structural way from other outdoor living areas around camp. It is not unambiguously a formed space set up in contradistinction to Turner’s ‘formless milieu of the bush’ or Eliade’s ‘chaos’ outside the boundaries of structured ‘cosmos’.

This difficulty in placing Sorry Camp into categories of chaos/cosmos points to an apparent ambiguity in Eliade’s discussion – he does not make clear how the sacred/profane distinction intersects with the cosmos/chaos distinction. It is not as simple a correlation as Sacred = Cosmos while Profane = Chaos, for profane space may well be structured – as is evident in Eliade’s example of the church in the midst of a modern city – and, if so, it pertains to cosmos. Furthermore, Eliade’s division of space into cosmos and chaos appears to be in some tension with his sense that the religious person views the whole world as having a structure, as being “not a chaos but a cosmos ... an organism at once real, living, and sacred.”

This leaves little room for any unstructured chaos. Likewise, Turner fails to note that even the ‘formless milieu of the bush’ has some structure, since the Ndembu choose the site for their Isoma rite by finding an animal’s burrow near the source of the stream. What appears to be formless bush is not so formless to the Ndembu (and likewise not to the Kukatja), and they become co-creators as they construct a sacred space around the elements of structure already discerned in the ‘chaos’.

Thus it seems that Sorry Camp fits well into the broadest definition of sacred space, but does not easily fit into the more detailed ways in which such space is delineated by Eliade and Turner. Perhaps one way of viewing Sorry Camp is to see it as a liminal sacred space. The Kukatja landscape does have permanently structured sacred spaces - the Law camps already referred to, but also the various sacred sites which the Ancestors established by their travels and actions. Sorry Camp is not permanently structured, but has a more liminal nature. It lies at the edge of camp, but not in the unformed bush. It is not strictly delineated from either camp or bush, but forms something of a continuum with both. It is neither chaos nor cosmos, but somewhere ‘betwixt and between’. It is not a permanent settlement, but survives only until the
burial is completed; its existence as a ‘sacred’ space is coterminous with the period of Sorry Time. One might say that the space itself is liminal, and is therefore homologous to the liminality of the deceased and, even more so, of the mourners who live there. Any distinctive ‘structure’ is a function not so much of the clear demarcation of space as of the special behaviour incumbent on those residing there, and of the interplay of relationships, especially between tilija and yarrkapari.

Sorry Time also does not fit neatly into Eliade’s definition of sacred time. True, it is radically distinguished from profane time, and is marked off from such time by breaks. The first break is when the person dies (or news of the death reaches the community), signalling the beginning of a time in which mortuary and funerary rituals will take precedence over all else. The return to profane time is signalled by the final rituals in Sorry Camp after the burial, one of which is the rubbing of fat or meat under the noses of those who have been fasting, to show that their time of fasting is over. Sometimes the family of the deceased chooses to move away from the community after the burial, in which case another break in time occurs after the first major rains, which signal the possibility of their return. (One might note here, in passing, the role of water in this break in time, in light of Eliade’s treatment of the waters as the rains serve a purifying function, washing away all traces the deceased may have left on the land; they also promise new life, augmenting the transition to more abundant food resources after the scorching heat of the late dry season.) But apart from this general correspondence with Eliade’s definition of sacred time as being separated from profane time, Sorry Time has little in common with other elements in Eliade’s treatment. This may be because he is concerned primarily with periodic festivals, which he understands as being “by far the greatest part” of all religious festivals. In such periodic festivals, the original, primordial, mythic creative time is made present once more, bringing the participants into contact with the creative energy of the gods. This is a scenario which fits the major Kukatja Law ceremonies, in which songs and dances and rituals bring the participants into direct contact with the Ancestors and their creative activities. But I am not aware of such significance in relation to any of the mourning rituals.

3. Theological Reflection on the Phenomena

Having analysed some aspects of Kukatja mourning rites, we now turn to a more direct interaction between our understandings of these phenomena and theology, particularly in terms of what light our analysis might shed on possibilities for a deeper inculturation of the Gospel in the Kukatja context. I shall begin by looking in turn at each of the four phenomena with which we began, and then raising three broader issues for inculturation.

A. Inculturation and the particular phenomena:

Abandonment of House and Possessions

The first phenomenon we described was that of the movement of the family out of the house where the deceased lived, and the destruction or distribution to distant relations of all their possessions. The underlying framework here involves at least these elements – an understanding of a close connection between a person and the things he or she touches, wears or uses; a concern that the spirit will be attracted to these things and places; and a subsequent desire to avoid these places and things, and in some ways to erase the memory of the deceased. We shall return to the last two points later, when we deal with fear, but for now, we will examine the first idea of an intimate connection between the person and the things with which they have been in contact.

We have already noted that the avoidance of things belonging to the deceased is not so much that those things have power in themselves, but that they are familiar to the dead person and therefore are places or things around which his or her spirit may hover to do possible harm. It is not entirely clear, though, whether there is some sense of the spirit or parts of the spirit actually residing in these objects and places. Certainly, the Groote Eylandt understanding we referred to, in which ceremonies were seen as ‘cleaning up’ the remnants of the spirit, suggest the possibility of a similar understanding among the Kukatja. Either way, though, the nexus between person, their power and things they have touched or places they have inhabited is evident.

This is a view readily to be found in the pages of Scripture. In the Old

---

76 Eliade, 68.
77 Ibid., 71.
78 Ibid., 129-122.
79 Ibid., 68-69.
80 We might also note, as further evidence of this understanding, the view of one informant that mourners in Sorry Camp cut their hair short “because the deceased person would have touched their hair.” (Mary Darrie, “Some of the cultural practices in the desert communities when a death occurs,” unpublished paper, Kururrungku, Western Australia: 1996.)
Testament, we note, for example, that the ground near the burning bush in which God appears to Moses is holy ground, requiring the removal of sandals. We also have the warning to those at the foot of Mt. Sinai not to touch the mountain while the Lord is appearing to Moses (Ex 19:11-12); the mountain itself is sacred and powerful because of the Lord’s presence there. Likewise with the Ark of the Covenant, which was not to be touched, under pain of death, as Uzzah discovered as he innocently sought to steady it (2 Sam 6:3-7). More happily, Elijah’s mantle carries his power, and not just when he uses it himself (2 Kg 2:8) but even after his departure when Elisha picks it up and repeats Elijah’s action of parting the waters of the Jordan with it (2 Kg 2:13-14).

In the New Testament, the belief that objects share in the power of the people with whom they have been in contact brings to mind the story of the woman with a haemorrhage who believed she only needed to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment to be healed (Mk 5:25-34). But she was not the only one, for “wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.” (Mk 6:56). Again there are the people in the Acts of the Apostles who sought healing by being ‘touched’ by Peter’s shadow (Acts 5:15), and the healings described in relation to objects which had been in contact with Paul: “God did extraordinary miracles through Paul, so that when the handkerchiefs or aprons that had touched his skin were brought to the sick, their diseases left them, and the evil spirits came out of them.” (Acts 19:11-12) This is part of the scriptural background for the tradition of devotion to the relics of holy people who have died, both first class relics – the bones of the person – and second class, being items of their clothing or other objects with which they have been in close contact. These are seen as putting us in contact with the power of the holy person.

Beyond these healings involving objects connected with the healer, many Gospel stories and summaries of Jesus’ healing ministry attest to the importance of direct touch in Jesus’ healing ministry. This is a clear point of connection with the methods of traditional Kukatja healers or maparn people, who often manipulate parts of the person’s body and are very tactile in their approach.

One application of this understanding in our ministry in the desert was in relation to the Anointing of the Sick. Firstly, we sometimes emphasized that the oil used in Anointing had been blessed by the Bishop, who was referred to as Mamangku Tjarlu (the big or important Father). Secondly, in relation to the importance of touch and the traditional methods of healing, we used to extend the anointing with oil to other parts of the body apart from the forehead and hands. In particular, if it was appropriate, we would anoint the affected area of the body, or the site of most pain. The local people expected this of us – they seemed to see little point in being anointed on the forehead for an injury to the leg. Anscar Chupungoro sees the importance of adapting the number of anointings and the parts of the body to be anointed to the culture and notes how in Medieval times, some anointed the seat of the five senses, as well as the navel or the part of the body in most pain. In fact, the Capitulare of Theodulf provided for no fewer than fifteen anointings. Thirdly, we emphasised the sign-value of the anointing by using generous quantities of oil and, if at all possible, thoroughly rubbing it into the affected area, in some ways mimicking the treatment offered by traditional healers.

Sweeping

The second phenomenon we described was the ‘sweeping away’ of the footprints of the deceased, or of the tracks made on the roadway between places he or she would have regularly travelled by vehicle, or the place where a fatal accident had occurred. In the latter two cases, this was known as ‘opening up’ the road or the country, but I am not aware of this term being used in the case of sweeping around camp. At a simple level of inculturation, we discussed with Church leaders how we could make the Good Friday ceremonies more authentically cultural, and one suggestion was that we sweep the ground around the cross after the processional Stations of the Cross. And so now a group of women brush both the cross and the surrounding area with leafy branches, in silence.

At a deeper level, the notion of opening up a road or country which has been blocked by death is an intriguing one. Three possible connections with the Christian story come to mind in which this metaphor could provide useful catechetical imagery. Firstly, there is the understanding of Jesus as opening the possibility of life where before there was only death. In fact, Christ ‘opens the way’ to life by abolishing death altogether (2 Tim 1:10). Older catechisms spoke of Christ as ‘opening the gates of heaven’, and while one would want to use this sort of terminology cautiously and with some nuance, there is a possibility here for talking in terms of the Christ-event ‘opening up the

country' of heaven, or 'opening up the road' to heaven which had become impassable because of sin and death. This is allied to John's description of Jesus as the Way (Jn 14.6). Secondly, there is the metaphor of life as a journey on which we need to choose from various possible ways, most fundamentally between the road that leads to destruction and the one leading to life (Mt 7.13-14). This latter road is the way that leads to God, and is variously described as a way of peace (Lk 1.79; Rom 3.17), a way of righteousness (Mt 21.32; 2 Pet 2.21) and a way of truth (2 Pet 2.2). In this connection, the Christian life itself is described as the Way, notably in Acts (Acts 9.2; 18.25; 26; 19.9; 23; 24.14; 22; also Mk 10.52). Thirdly, with serious sin seen as spiritual death, one could use 'opening up the road' as a metaphor for opening up what is blocked spiritually. For example, one could speak of 'opening up' a relationship which is blocked or dead, or 'opening up' of our damaged relationship to God through reconciliation, or the Lenten journey as an 'opening up' of the road to God, or Advent as 'opening up' a way in the wilderness for the Lord (Mt 3.3), of making a way for Him in hearts and lives which may have become hardened or dead. One could also envisage rites of reconciliation which made use of this symbolism of sweeping as an erasing of old ways and an opening up of new ways.

Smoking

The third phenomenon we described was the smoking ritual used at various points of the mourning rites—in Sorry Camp, at the funeral itself, in the house of the deceased before it is re-occupied and of the vehicle which had acted as a hearse. We also noted its use at other times and stages of life, and the various understandings of this rite as a purification, as a clearing away of evil, as a healing in sickness and strengthening in weakness. With these meanings, it is more closely allied to the Catholic use of holy water or the asperses version of the penitential rite at Mass than to the Christian use of incense to honour sacred objects or to symbolise our prayers rising to heaven. It also carries some of the meaning and connotation of the anointing with Oil of Catechumens and the exorcisms of the Rite of Baptism. We have experimented with using a smoking rite in place of this pre-baptismal anointing, a change which does not affect the basic substance of the sacrament. In fact, the local episcopal conference can allow the omission of the anointing with the oil of catechumens, at least in the case of the baptism of children.\(^{82}\) At the very least, if a smoking rite is not to substitute for the anointing, it could be included as an illustration, since it has such a clear "connaturality to express the meaning" of the anointing.\(^{83}\)

Naming Taboo

The fourth significant mourning phenomenon was the taboo on using the name of the person who died, or any word which sounds the same. This intimate connection between a person and his or her name is a well-attested primal element in many cultures and religions. John McKenzie puts it neatly in his article on the name in Scripture:

> It is a widespread cultural phenomenon that the name is considered to be more than an artificial tag which distinguishes one person from another. The name has a mysterious identity with its bearer; it can be considered as a substitute for the person, as acting or receiving in his place. The name is often meaningful; it not only distinguishes the person, but it is thought to tell something of the kind of person he is.... Knowledge of the name gives control, and utterance of the name is effective either upon its bearer or as containing the power of the person whose name is uttered.\(^{84}\)

And if we think this is simply a factor in 'primitive' cultures, we need only reflect on the effect on us when we hear the name of someone we love, or, for that matter, someone we hate. Or, in a world of omnipresent advertising, on the power of brand-names, so powerful in fact that some advertisers have recently spoken of important brands as the new religions.

Certainly in the Scriptures we find the same conception of a close identification between the person and the name, as McKenzie also points out.\(^{85}\) In the Old Testament, children were often named in connection with an event occurring at the time of birth. (A Kukatja analogy would be the child's totem or Dreaming, which is suggested by some plant or animal or natural phenomenon which manifests itself in a noteworthy way during the pregnancy.) Furthermore, a later change in a person might be indicated by a change of name, often given by God as a sign of a new relationship, as occurred, for example, with Abram (Abraham) and Jacob (Israel). To speak in the name of an important person, perhaps a king or God himself, was to speak with that person's authority, and, in some texts, to speak the name was


\(^{83}\) Ibid., 81.


\(^{85}\) See also the brief entry under 'Name' in Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Theological Dictionary*, ed. Cornelius Ernst (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 304.
to invoke the presence of the person named. An important way of showing respect for God was to show respect for God’s name, which was not to be taken in vain. God’s name, like God himself, is glorious, great, awful, and exalted, a name by which one is delivered, so that one needs to trust in it, as did David when he went to meet Goliath “in the name of the Lord of hosts” (1 Sam 17:45).66

The New Testament writers continue to use some of these Old Testament understandings, and we find the same use of a change of name to mark a significant change in the person, as for example with Peter (Mk 3.16) and Barnabas (Acts 4.26). But there is also significant development beyond the Old Testament, particularly in the application of the theology of the name to Jesus.67 McKenzie, following J. Dupont, examines this development under a number of headings: the supernatural power of the name of Jesus; the name of Jesus being above every other name; the invocation of the name of Jesus by Christians; their preaching in the name of Jesus; Christian faith defined as faith in the name of Jesus; and the invitation to renounce goods and to suffer in Jesus’ name.

This Scriptural understanding of names, and specifically the theology of the name of God and the name of Jesus, offers a rich resource for catechesis among a people, like the Kukatja, for whom names are so significant. In particular, where people are caught up in fear of spirits—a point to which we return later—reflection on the power of the name of Jesus, whose name is above all others, could be one way of awakening faith in the power of Jesus himself to protect them from any harm. For example, one could make much of the scriptural affirmation that it is “at the name of Jesus” that every power “in heaven and on earth and under the earth” shall bow (Phil 2.10), or that demons can be expelled in the name of Jesus (Lk 10.17), or that Jesus is exalted high above “every name that is named”, above all the powers (Eph 1.20-21). And that Christians, baptised in the name of Jesus (Acts 2.38), can with confidence invoke that name in baptising, preaching (Acts 5.40, 8.12, 9.15, 28) and praying together (Mt 18.20). One way to liturgically represent this belief in the power of the name of Jesus in a Kukatja context would be during the Easter triduum. After remembering the death of Jesus on Good Friday, his name could become Kumanuŋuŋajji, like that of anyone else who is dead, thus signifying the reality of his death. Then part of the Easter proclamation that he is risen would be the proclamation that, unlike the names of others who have died, his name can now be spoken again, because he is alive once more, and that the name of Jesus is a name which is stronger than death and which is higher than any other name.

At a more basic level, at the level of pre-evangelisation and basic cultural sensitivity, one should note the importance of Christian ministers paying attention to and showing respect for the names by which Aboriginal peoples are called. In the desert, Bumblebee, Mosquito, Darkie and Sambo are family names, while Donkey Man, Tomato and Ant Bed are personal names. These were often given to Aboriginal people by Europeans, in many cases by one of the early missionaries who never learnt an Aboriginal language or even how to pronounce Aboriginal names. Of course, one needs to note that much of the early work of the missionaries in the desert was the basic work of survival for themselves and their Aboriginal adherents, as they sought to establish a mission, to find water supplies and to provide food in a harsh environment. There was little leisure time available to spend on language study at event the most basic level. Still, the list of derogatory names was one unhappy result, all the more unfortunate in that they have been passed down as commonplace names with little sense of how strange they are. Part of our approach in the desert was to try to discover which names people preferred to be called by—whether their Christian name or Aboriginal name or the nickname (sometimes also derogatory) they received from other Aboriginal people. A case in point was one woman who tells the story of her birth on the feast of St Mary Magdalene, and how the Sisters insisted on her being called Magdalene, though her mother had already given her a Kukatja name. Magda manifests no bitterness over this, but given the chance, she will tell the story and then quietly state her preference for her Aboriginal name, Tjiirli. We also made a point of addressing people by their kinship names and to introduce ourselves by the kinship names we had been given, especially with older, more traditional people who would be hard-pressed to remember our personal names but never forgot the appropriate kinship term.68

A third significance of the power of names could be in relation to adult conversion experiences. In the desert, these are not usually associated with confirmation, but any attempt to help ritualise such experiences could borrow some elements of confirmation rites. For example, in confirmation ceremonies, the candidate used to take a name which signified some saint with whom he or she wished to identify. In recent times, because of the desire

---

66 For a fuller treatment, with Scriptural references, see McKenzie, 603-604.
67 Ibid, 604.
to focus on the link between baptism and confirmation, this claiming of an additional new name has become less common. One wonders, though, whether this tends to de-emphasise the personal appropriation of baptism which confirmation, at its best, can represent — a personal commitment to the faith which was professed for us by parents and Godparents at our baptism. Whatever of that, we found there were people in the Kutjungka Parish who were looking to deepen their personal commitment to their baptism and confirmation. They would not usually put it that way, but they were looking for a radical change in their lives, often associated with the desire to be free of addictive patterns, particularly alcohol and gambling. Often they expressed this by seeking to become Church leaders, seeing this as a way of showing they were getting serious about religion. What is needed, perhaps, is some sort of order of penitents, a program for supporting and instructing people wanting to re-shape their lives. One element of such a program might be a ritualising of their desire for conversion, part of which could well be the choice of a name, of a saint, for example, which signifies what they desire.

B. Broader Issues for Inculturation: Fear

The issue of determining which elements of another culture are based on fear and which are based on healthy respect is a notoriously difficult one, especially for two cultures as different as western culture is from Australian Aboriginal culture. Too often in history, missionaries have prematurely judged aspects of a newly-met culture as fear-based superstitions and have sought to eradicate them rather than 'baptise' them. Therefore, as a western outsider, one needs to tread gently before describing particular aspects of another culture as inspired by fear. There are at least two attitudes which can help this process. One is to remain grounded in the reality that many aspects of western culture — excessive concern for security at personal and national levels, over-emphasis on personal liberty, the over-sexualisation of every aspect of life, for example — are likewise grounded in fears of various kinds, such as the fear of failure, or of death, or of the other. Secondly, it is helpful to remember that there is fear present even in the lives of Christians seriously committed to developing their spiritual lives. In fact, it seems to be almost a dialectic of spiritual growth — a deeper experience of freedom, which then, over time, leads the person to be aware of more fear hampering further growth — e.g. the fear that I cannot bring this feeling to God, or that God will get sick of me if I return to confess this particular sin yet again, or that I need to perform in some way in my prayer.

Having said that, it is difficult to reflect on the Kukatja response to death without detecting, at least as one element, a genuine fear of the spirits of the deceased. This is but one element of a system of beliefs in a variety of spirits, many of which seem to be at least potentially harmful. Besides the mourning phenomena we have described, there are various other phenomena which suggest such beliefs. There are the warnings to western staff not to walk alone near the edges of camp at dusk since spirits will be hanging around seeking to cause trouble. There was a conversation I had with one young woman who spoke of the many different kinds of spirits, some of which could be guarded against by church rituals while others could not. There was the occasion when the ropes by which a coffin was being lowered into the grave suddenly broke, and the ensuing discussion of how some non-human force must have frayed the perfectly good rope. There was the Aboriginal girl brought to the church for a blessing, in a catatonic state, who was said to have been pursued by "Feather-foot men" — humans with the power to change form so that they glide above the surface of the earth leaving no trail — who had tied an invisible hair rope around her and were pulling on the other end of the rope, seeking to draw her towards them. There is the fact that people keep dogs in part because they are more sensitive to the presence of spirits and can warn their owners. These phenomena, so foreign to a western worldview which on the whole is populated by spirits, warrant a detailed phenomenological study as to what people actually experience when they speak of seeing or experiencing spirits.

Short of such a phenomenological study, though, what are the issues for inculturation in relation to the fear element of such beliefs? Let me suggest two such issues and approaches. Firstly, a key element of Judeo-Christian faith is God's encouragement, "Be not afraid." Over and over in the scriptures, both Jewish and Christian, God proclaims this message to the people. It would seem that fear is not something to be skipped over lightly in the life of faith. In fact, some passages present fear as the antithesis of faith. For example, Jesus says to the disciples after calming the storm "Why are you afraid, you of little faith?" (Mt 8:26) and to Jairus on the news of his daughter's death "Do not fear, only believe." (Mk 5:36). Or, as John puts it, with his emphasis on faith expressed in love: "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear." (1 Jn 4:18) Therefore, if there is fear present among people, and especially if in some ways it is a 'structural' fear, re-

---

[80] It is interesting to note that this is thought to happen in liminal space (between the camp and the bush) and liminal time (between day and night).
inforced by cultural beliefs and ways of behaving, the Christian message needs to help name this fear and to open the culture to that perfect love which casts out fear. Perhaps Paul’s rhetoric, when he states so powerfully that where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more, could be reworked along the lines of “where spirits abound, God’s presence abounds all the more”. Another approach, which seems to be helpful among the Kukatja, is to focus on the power of the Holy Spirit – that just as Jesus is the name above all names, so the Holy Spirit, who is God, is the Spirit above all spirits.

Secondly, a helpful pastoral approach in this situation might be to focus on discernment of spirits. Kukatja people focus a good deal of attention on spirits which are understood to be ‘out there’, doing external harm to people. At the same time, low self-esteem and the destructive shame at the root of various addictions, which in fact wreak considerable havoc in individual lives and in the community, are often not attended to. A solid catechesis on discernment of spirits could help people to be in touch with subtler “movements of the spirits” within them, in the Ignatian sense. If their lives are dominated by self-hatred or shame, people will feel afraid, as though they live in a hostile world, with danger threatening at every turn. Becoming aware of these more subtle spirits and their greater destructiveness can be a step toward greater freedom.

Reverence and Liminality in Ritual and Sacred Space

Closely related to this issue of fear is the question of proper reverence and awe in religious ritual. One element of our experience in the desert parish was the seriousness and respect shown to Aboriginal Law sites and customs as compared to that shown to Christian sacred spaces and ceremonies. When men’s Law is in progress, for example, there are very clear and strictly enforced restrictions on where people, especially women and children, might travel and what they might see. With these restrictions comes a strong sense of the repercussions of stepping out of line – women and children, for example, are convinced that they would be shot dead by the custodians of the Law if they were moving around at the wrong time or saw the Law men as they passed by. It is hard for an outsider to believe that this would actually happen today, no matter what may have transpired in the past. But local people are convinced that such punishment would ensue, and the fear is very real. Therefore in these ceremonies, behaviour is carefully guarded and children are strictly monitored and admonished lest they inadvertently do something which offends against the Law.

Compared to this, the church building and Catholic ceremonies can seem like a playground rather than a liminal, sacred space. And sometimes they quite literally are. Children are free to run around as they will, with only token disciplinary action; they play and talk loudly and make it difficult at times for readings or prayers to be heard and attended to; they will readily come up to the altar after Mass and handle the sacred vessels in their curiosity. There seems to be little sense of the sacredness of the Christian worship space or of the sacred objects. Needless to say, there are a number of cultural and sociological reasons for such behaviour – different attitudes to discipline for children, the effects of a dormitory system on patterns of parent-child interaction, and the very failure of inculturation which makes it difficult for people to grasp that this is a sacred space when it seems so different to the other sacred spaces to which they are accustomed. Still, the question remains as to how to lead people to a healthy understanding of the sacredness of the Christian rites in a culture in which sacredness seems to be so clearly allied with danger and threat. On the one hand, one does not want to reinforce a sense of servile fear in relation to God; on the other, one knows the importance, not so often in the works of the anthropologists we have studied in this paper, of a clear sense of a demarcated sacred space, sacred time and sacred rituals if one is meaningfully to celebrate the things of God.

A scriptural entree into this question might be the concept of the fear of the Lord98. Fear of the Lord can refer to true religion itself, or to reverence as a key aspect of true religion, so that the religious person is one who fears God (Ps 22.23; 115.9-11; 118.2-4; Lk 1.50; Acts 9.31; Acts 13.16); or to holy terror before God (Ps 2.11; Jer 5.22; Job 23.15). It is associated with walking in God’s ways (Dt 8.6), keeping God’s commandments (Dt 5.29; Eccl 1.13), heeding God’s voice (1 Sam 12.14), knowledge or wisdom (1 Kg 8.3; Prov 15.33), and with departing from evil (Job 1.1, 8; Prov 3.7). Unlike that fear which is driven out by perfect love, the fear of God is not opposed to love for God; in fact, the two are paralleled in some texts (Dt 10.12-13, 13-3-4). “It signifies no contradiction of confident love but rather an element of the latter … which characterizes it precisely as love of God.”99 For all the possibility of trembling and terror, therefore, fear of God is clearly a positive concept –

98 The analysis and scriptural references here follow the article on ‘Fear’ in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Volume 2, general editor Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 289-292. For a much fuller treatment, which would take us far beyond the scope of this paper, one would turn, of course, to Rudolf Otto’s, The Idea of the Holy.
99 See also RAINEY and VORGRIMMER, Theological Dictionary, 172.
the proper awe of the creature standing before the Creator and aware of its creatureliness in relation to the incomprehensible, holy God. But, while we are entreated to fear the Lord in this way, we are equally entreated, as we noted above, to fear nothing and no-one else. From these latter fears, God promises to deliver us. It is as though God is promising that if our life is grounded in our relationship with our Creator – our fear of the Lord – there is no need to fear anything else.

In this light, our question about reverence in relation to Christian ceremonies becomes how to lead people to a healthy and necessary understanding of a fear of God which does not degenerate into a crippling fear. Here I can but throw out a number of questions, since any answers could only come from continuing discussion with local Church leaders. In some ways, in our efforts not to impose western practices on Kukatja culture, we have put little emphasis on those rites which have traditionally marked the entrance into the church as an entrance into a sacred space — e.g. the signing with holy water, genuflection, some measure of decorum and quietness, cleanliness of appearance. Some Kukatja people still follow these practices, but many do not. Is there some way of more clearly marking that this is a sacred space, and that we are entering a sacred time? (This question applies a fortiori to outdoor Masses in the three villages in the parish which have no church building). Likewise, rather than downplaying ritual elements like vestments, candles, a high altar, statues, separation of sanctuary from the body of the church or special presidential chairs, would it be more helpful to make the most of these, in an attempt to encourage an attitude of awe and reverence, and thereby to enhance the possibility of genuine religious experience? Is there also a place for a renewed emphasis on Benediction as a way of highlighting the sacredness and power of the Eucharist, or of processions, which Kukatja people always find attractive? The danger is that parish staff, having themselves been immersed in the pared-back, post-Vatican II western liturgy, will unwittingly impose this minimalist approach on people who are at a very different place in their Christian journey and for whom the many tangible, visible elements of the Christian tradition may be of continuing catechetical importance or even more culturally appropriate. Perhaps what I am speaking about is a greater openness to popular devotion.

92 One exception would be the exhortation in Proverbs to “fear the Lord and the king, and do not disobey either of them” (24:21). Presumably the king here is understood to be sharing in the authority of God. But this is a lone voice in the Old Testament, where elsewhere the Lord alone is to be feared (De 13-4) and the king, as much as anyone else, is to follow the Lord (1 Sam 12:14).

albeit a devotion marked by the sorts of emphases arising in recent reflection on Latin American popular religion — liberation elements, good grounding in scriptural theology, and cultural appropriateness.

Liminality and Catechesis

Another area in which the importance of liminality could be emphasised is in catechesis, particularly in sacramental preparation programs for first Communion, first Reconciliation and Confirmation. At present local church leaders are closely involved in the preparation process, and there is a good deal of effort made to celebrate the liturgy in culturally appropriate ways. But the actual structure of the preparation process is no different from that in use in the average Australian parish: weekly gatherings of the candidates with their parents for catechetical instruction and preparation of the sacramental liturgy. In the traditional Kukatja ritual cycle, however, nothing happened like this on the basis of weekly preparation meetings. The major ceremonies, like male initiation, were on an annual basis, and any preparation or instruction happened once the boys were removed from their usual situation and entered into a liminal setting in Law Camp. The model, then, was one of an intense period of serious preparation immediately prior to the actual circumcision ritual which was at the heart of the ceremony.

One suggestion for sacramental preparation would be an intense period of a few days or a week, culminating in the celebration of the sacrament. The advantages of such a scheme would be the link with what is done in traditional rituals, and the chance to create a liminal setting to highlight the importance of the celebration. This liminal setting could involve some of the liminal elements mentioned by Turner and noted above in the Kukatja mourning rituals, and also verified in Kukatja initiation rites: periods of silence, some fasting, particular clothing or use of ochre to paint the body, the importance of obedience to the elders or mentors (perhaps making more of the role of Godparent or confirmation sponsor), possibly the loss of name during this period, simplicity of lifestyle away from usual diversions of television, sports, music etc. It would also best be done in some setting apart from that of ordinary life — for example, camping out near the church or parish house; or moving to an outstation camp; or going away to the Mirrilingki Spirituality Centre which people know as a holy place which is

93 We have, in fact, toyed with this idea in the past but have not followed through, mainly for logistical reasons and the concern for interruption of work schedules for some parents, and of school programs for some of the candidates.
available for retreats, workshops and alcohol programs. In all of this, we should not shy away from expecting it to be a reasonably tough program, without reproducing the ordeals of initiation rites. One strength of the local Pentecostal church is its insistence that the Christian Law, like Aboriginal Law, is a strict Law, which makes serious Gospel demands on its followers, demands which God and the Christian community will support them in living out. Unfortunately, in the Pentecostal context, this message gets tied up with all sorts of anti-culture baggage. But in a Catholic context, this need not be the case, even while we maintain the insistence on the serious nature of Christian initiation, and mark this with various liminal elements.

Conclusion

In this article, I have outlined some of the key phenomena in mourning rites as they are practised today in the Kutjungka Parish. I then used a number of phenomenologists and anthropologists of religion to explore these phenomena more deeply. This enabled me, in the final section of the paper, to pursue more fully a theological reflection on the possibilities and challenges of inculturation with respect both to the particular issue of mourning rites and a number of wider aspects of the culture. Many of these suggestions for inculturation necessarily remain tentative, calling for further testing in the field, especially through further conversations with local church leaders, a conversation which will hopefully be better informed, on my part, as a result of this analysis. What is immediately clear from this analysis, though, is the way in which a deeper phenomenological study of particular cultural elements can provide helpful insights into the process of inculturation.

Bibliography


GREENE, Gracie Ngangala, Gracie Ngangala Mosquito, Patricia Napangardi Milner, Interview by author, written notes, Wirrumanu, 21 March 1996.


