

**The 2008 AAMS and PACT Conference**

**Christian Mission in the Public Square**

**2 – 5 October 2008**

**Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture**

**Canberra. ACT**

**Hosted by**

**Australian Association for Mission Studies  
Public and Contextual Theology, Charles Sturt University**

# Missiology and Australian Aboriginal Missions: A Personal Journey:

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## Introduction

On the evening of the 3<sup>rd</sup> May 1958 I stepped from the Ghan train at Finke station near the South Australian/Northern Territory border. I was met by the Superintendent of Ernabella Mission in the far north-west corner of South Australia and two Pitjantjatjara men. We camped that night in our swags before setting off on the 310 kilometre journey on the mission truck to Ernabella where I had been appointed as assistant to the Superintendent. As we sat on our swags near the railway line to eat our evening meal, dogs from the nearby Aboriginal fringe camp came near looking for food. I found that my calls of 'shoo' had no effect. I had to learn the Pitjantjatjara term 'pai!', which the dogs understood. It was a sign that I was entering into a new cultural world in which I had much to learn if I was to adequately communicate not only with the dogs, but much more importantly with the people to whom I had been called to serve. In this paper I will reflect on my half-century journey with missiology. In preparation, I have looked back through old journals and books to see what passages I had marked as being relevant to my journey. The paper is structured around references to my earlier writings to identify the writers with whom I engaged and who helped me work through the issues which confronted me as a missionary working with Aboriginal people.

## Preparation

What preparation had I received in my earlier life and university years for Christian service in such a different cultural setting? In fact, very little! Born and raised in a storekeeping family in the small Wimmera township of Lubeck in Victoria there was virtually no cross-cultural experience. Through Sunday School prizes I read stories of gallant missionaries who had gone to far-off exotic places. I read little about Aboriginal people although a book on my father's shelves, *A Man From Oodnadatta*, and a picture of Simpson's Gap in Central Australia in a school reader triggered an interest in the remote inland. A guest in our house in the 1930s as a Bible Society deputationist was Ernest Kramer who had been an itinerant missionary in Central Australia. I recall him showing lantern slides of that region. Travelling on Wimmera roads as a boy I saw monuments that bore inscriptions that 'Major Mitchell passed by here'. These implied that this event was the beginning of history in the region. It reflected what Stanner later identified as 'the great Australian silence' in Australian history.<sup>1</sup> Leaving school, I worked in the Wimmera as a clerk with the State Savings Bank of Victoria. A conversion experience in 1948 led me in 1950 to commence training at the University of Melbourne and Ormond Theological Hall for the ministry of the Presbyterian Church.

At university I studied Ancient, British and Modern history but no Australian history. If there was such a subject offered it probably gave little attention to Aboriginal history. There were probably no staff members or students who identified themselves as being Aboriginal. I could not study Anthropology as the universities of Sydney and Western Australia were the only ones in Australia offering subjects in the discipline, apart from a short course offered by Donald Thomson to history honours students at Melbourne. When I inquired about attending these classes in 1957, Thomson informed me that it was

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<sup>1</sup> WEH Stanner, *After the Dreaming*, The Boyer Lectures 1968, Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1969, p.18.

not offered as he was undertaking a field trip to the Bindabus (Pintubi) in central Australia. My theological course included no specialised subjects to prepare students for mission service, although several fellow-students went out to the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu), Korea and India. The syllabus contained no mission history or missiology. This reflected the influence of British models on theological education in Australia. Despite the significant British contribution to the modern missionary movement, the study of missiology attracted less attention in the United Kingdom than in Germany and The Netherlands. Timothy Yates regrets that the rise of schools of missiology in other countries is ‘still, sadly, not reflected in Britain by any widespread attention to this important branch of Christian theology’.<sup>2</sup> Missiology has been defined as ‘the science of missions’.<sup>3</sup>

What preparation I did receive was mainly through my active participation in the Melbourne University Evangelical Union. Regular meetings were held at which missionaries spoke and missionaries were prayed for at the Daily Prayer Meetings (DPMs). Under the influence of Dr Paul White (The Jungle Doctor) and others, missions received prominence in the Inter-Varsity Fellowship and its annual conferences. It was a time of momentous change for mission strategists. The China Inland Mission was one of the strongest mission societies. Following the Communist ascendancy in China, that field was now closed to foreign missionaries. At conferences I met people such as Ted Brailey and Alan Cole who had either been forced to leave China or were unable to go there. Through the Evangelical Union I was first introduced to the writings of Roland Allen, an Anglican clergyman who served in China for a few years from 1895. He became disenchanted with prevailing missionary methods and advocated a return to the methods of St. Paul. These did not involve the establishment of mission stations or the permanent presence of missionaries, professional clergy or dependence on foreign money but rather the spontaneous expansion of the church by which Allen meant:

The expansion which follows the unexhorted and unorganized activity of individual members of the Church explaining to others the Gospel which they have found for themselves; I mean the expansion which follows the irresistible attraction of the Christian Church for men who see its ordered life, and are drawn to it by desire to discover the secret of a life which they instinctively desire to share; I mean also the expansion of the Church by the addition of new Churches.

I know not how it may appear to others, but to me this unexhorted, unorganized, spontaneous expansion has a charm far beyond that of our modern highly organized missions.<sup>4</sup>

I heard from a staff member some time after my arrival at Ernabella that one of the men who met me at Finke, Andy Tjilari, on seeing me alight from the train exclaimed in Pitjantjatjara, ‘It’s that man again.’ As a staffworker with the Inter-Varsity Fellowship in 1964 I had visited Adelaide at the time of Queen Elizabeth’s first royal tour. Aborigines at Ernabella expressed interest in seeing the Queen and a group of young people, the

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Yates, *Christian Mission in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Glazik, ‘Missiology’, in S Neill, GH Anderson and J Goodwin (eds), *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1970, p.387. A fuller definition is found in J Verkuyl, *Contemporary Missiology: An Introduction*, Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978, p.5

<sup>4</sup> Roland Allen, *The Spontaneous Expansion of the Christian Church*, London: World Dominion Press, 1949, p.10.

Ernabella Choir, travelled to Adelaide on the back of the mission's truck. I heard them sing in the Teachers College and spent some time with them. Andy was one of those young men. The following year I visited Alice Springs with an Ecumenical work party to assist in laying a stone forecourt at the John Flynn Church. On the way we met a Landrover returning from Finke to Ernabella. Andy was one of two Aboriginal men in that vehicle. Although I later worked on the kind of mission station that Allen had abhorred, his writings influenced the way I worked with Andy Tjilari and other church members who were to play a central role in the expansion of the Pitjantjatjara Church.

### **Ernabella Mission**

Ernabella was established by the Presbyterian Church in 1937, mainly through the advocacy of an Adelaide surgeon, Charles Duguid.<sup>5</sup> Having heard stories of abuses of Aboriginal people from a patient, a Methodist missionary in Arnhem Land, Duguid visited Alice Springs and arranged to tour the homelands of the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people near the junction of the South Australian, Western Australian and Northern Territory borders. Some of these people had moved east because of drought and to obtain the introduced foods and other commodities through working on pastoral stations. Duguid heard reports of abuse of Aboriginal labour and observed the lack of medical services for people who were suffering from introduced and other diseases such as yaws, chest infections and sexually transmitted diseases. He envisaged Ernabella as a buffer station that would stop the eastward drift and provide medical services, education and employment. The Ernabella block had been leased as a sheep property since 1933. The Church obtained the lease and maintained the sheep work to enable training in shepherding, shearing, fencing, well-sinking and other tasks. A school was commenced in 1940 and a clinic staffed by a nursing sister was opened in 1945. Duguid was aware of mission approaches the International Missionary Council had developed since the first world missionary conference held at Edinburgh in 1910.<sup>6</sup> He later identified the following principles on which Ernabella was founded.

There was to be no compulsion nor imposition of our way of life on the Aborigines, nor deliberate interference with tribal custom ... only people trained in some particular skill should be on the mission staff, and ... they must learn the tribal language.<sup>7</sup>

There was no pressure for immediate conversions to Christianity but solid foundations were laid through translation of gospels and hymns, teaching of bible stories, catechising, and the example of Christian living in daily work. Four hundred people attended the dedication of a solid cement block church building in November 1952. In the afternoon, 20 young people made their confession of faith and were baptised. By the end of 1957 a total of forty-three adults and seven infants had been baptized. From the beginning, Pitjantjatjara church members played active roles in services by reading, praying and preaching, this reflecting the emphasis in their traditional ceremonial and other aspects of life on being participants rather than spectators.

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<sup>5</sup> WH Edwards, 'Charles Duguid', in Di Langmore (ed.), *Australia Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 17 : 1981-1990, A-K, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2007, pp.338-40.

<sup>6</sup> David J Bosch, *Witness to the World: The Christian Mission in Theological Perspective*, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1980, p.2, p.159.

<sup>7</sup> C Duguid, *Doctor and the Aborigines*, Adelaide: Rigby, 1972, p.115.

Soon after commencing work at Ernabella I sensed that the Board of Mission had appointed me, not so much on the basis of my tertiary studies, but because of my store and banking experience. My experiences at Ernabella resonated with the comments on Aboriginal missions in a 1960 issue of *The International Review of Missions*: ‘Few regions afford a better illustration of the total responsibility that can fall to the churches to care for both spiritual and material well-being than do the islands of the South Pacific and Northern Australia’<sup>8</sup> The Superintendent whom I had come to assist resigned soon after my arrival because of family health problems. I was appointed Acting Superintendent, and later Superintendent, with personal responsibility in the material sphere for supervising accounts, store, garden, maintenance and kitchen as well as oversight of staff engaged in education and medical services, the sheep and craft industries and vehicle maintenance and, in the spiritual domain, I was the ordained minister of the church. With no preparation in my ministerial training for undertaking these roles in a cross-cultural setting, where was I to turn for guidance and understanding of the nature of mission in such circumstances? I was isolated from other Presbyterian missions and collegiate support. At that time, missiology in Australia was very much a DIY experience.

### **The beginning of my journey**

I am thankful for three things that helped me through this experience. Firstly, the policies on which Ernabella had been founded encouraged me to learn Pitjantjatjara language and to seek understanding of Pitjantjatjara culture. Before going to Ernabella I attended an 11 week Summer Institute of Linguistics course at Belgrave Heights near Melbourne. This provided tools to help me learn the language. Notes on Pitjantjatjara grammar and a vocabulary were available at Ernabella. The teacher, a previous teacher who was married to one of the technical staff and Gordon Inkgatji, who worked with me in the store and office, helped me so that after eight months I wrote and read my first sermon in Pitjantjatjara. Secondly, I continued tertiary studies by correspondence at Ernabella to complete a Bachelor of Education. In such situations it was easy to be so immersed in daily duties that one could lose touch with the world of ideas. This study enabled me to maintain academic standards, explore ideas and commence writing in the area of missiology. My first published paper, on Aboriginal Education, was based on an assignment undertaken during this course and was enriched by discussion with the school teacher, Nancy Nicholson (now Sheppard), who directed me to relevant research and writings.<sup>9</sup> Thirdly, I commenced subscribing to two overseas journals which provided me with stimulating ideas from Africa, Asia and other spheres of mission activity. They were *Practical Anthropology* which in 1973 was incorporated into a new journal *Missiology* and *The International Review of Missions*, with a subscription to the Evangelical Missions Quarterly added in 1967. The latter acquainted me with the writings of Charles Taber, Peter Wagner, Arthur Glasser, Allan Tippett, Ralph Winter and Donald McGavran.

Articles relating to Australian Aborigines were rare in these journals. Two 1943 issues of the *International Review of Missions* contained sections headed The Aborigines of Australia. Referring to those who lived in remote areas, JH Sexton asserted: ‘Anthropologist and missionary alike favour the policy of leaving them undisturbed for

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<sup>8</sup> A Survey of the Year 1960, *The International Review of Missions*, Vol. 50, No. 197, January 1960. p.67.

<sup>9</sup> WH Edwards, Aboriginal Education – Aims and Principles, *Journal of Christian Education*, Sydney, June, 1961.

the present, allowing them to carry on their tribal customs and practices without interference, thus preserving their tribal integrity as long as possible.<sup>10</sup> The following issue contained short articles by pioneer missionaries: the Presbyterian, Robert Love, the Methodist, Theodore Webb and the Anglican, Ernest Gribble. Love's outline of the aim of missionary work among people whose tribal organization was still intact summed up the practices of that era:

preaching of the Gospel; the care of the sick; the teaching of the children in such things as can be correlated to their future life within the tribe; the preservation of all that is good in the tribal system, using it as a basis on which to build the higher way of Christianity, and supplementing the often very uncertain life of the old tribal way with such husbandry and industry as the locality may make possible.<sup>11</sup>

A few of the articles relating to Aborigines in these missiology journals were written by anthropologists and linguists.<sup>12</sup> The attention given in the past to some notable conflicts between missionaries and anthropologists has overshadowed the more positive relationships that often existed between the two and the important role played by clergy in the development of anthropology and linguistics in Australia.<sup>13</sup> In his history of Aboriginal missions, John Harris records that the Church Missionary Society committee included 'an anthropologist, Professor A.P. Elkin, and a linguist, Dr. Arthur Capell, both of Sydney University and both ordained Church of England clergy', and refers to them as 'Australia's most distinguished anthropologist and linguist'.<sup>14</sup> Elkin suggested that 'the missionary has a unique opportunity to try to fill the spiritual void or ease the bewilderment caused by contact with us'.<sup>15</sup> Capell emphasized the need for missionaries to learn Aboriginal languages and suggested that they recognize the sacramental nature of traditional rituals and seek adaptation 'whereby Christian faith could be presented in aboriginal (sic) dress'.<sup>16</sup> In my paper on Aboriginal Education I referred to Capell's article in the *International Review of Missions*

One missionary who took Capell's injunctions seriously was Wilf Douglas whose article on vernacular languages was published in *Practical Anthropology* in 1961. Douglas acknowledged that: 'Anthropologists and other trained persons have helped us gain a more enlightened outlook on aborigines (sic).'<sup>17</sup> Douglas was a valued colleague in my own journey. I first met him in 1954 when, as a staffworker with the Inter-Varsity Fellowship, I stayed for a short while in the CIM Home in Melbourne. Douglas visited there from Western Australia and I arranged for him to speak at the annual IVF conference at Geelong in January 1955. He had commenced his mission work with the

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<sup>10</sup> JH Sexton, The Aborigines of Australia, *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 32, No. 126, April 1943, p.198.

<sup>11</sup> JRB Love, The Aborigines of Australia; 1. A Threefold problem, *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 32, No. 127, July 1943, p.302.

<sup>12</sup> J Lauriston Sharp, Steel Axes for Stone-age Australians, *Practical Anthropology*, Vol. 7, No. 2, March-April 1960, pp.62-73.

<sup>13</sup> Claude E Stipe, Anthropologists versus Missionaries, *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 21, No. 2 April 1980, pp.165-79; Catherine H Berndt, Anthropology and Mission Activity, *South Pacific*, Vol. 10, No. 2, Nov-Dec 1958, pp.38-44.

<sup>14</sup> John Harris, *One Blood: 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity: A Story of Hope*, Sydney: Albatross Books, 1990, p.783.

<sup>15</sup> AP Elkin, Civilized Aborigines and Native Culture, *Oceania*, Vol. 6, 1935-36, p.146.

<sup>16</sup> A Capell, Christian Missions and Australian Aboriginal Religious Practice, *International Review of Missions*, Vol. 39, No.154, April 1950, p.188.

<sup>17</sup> Wilfred H Douglas, The Vernacular Approach to the Australian Aborigines, *Practical Anthropology*, Vol. 8, No. 2, March-April 1961, p.63.

United Aborigines Mission (UAM) in an environment in which Aboriginal cultures and languages were largely denigrated. The UAM mission philosophy was one of replacement rather than of adaptation. However Douglas developed an interest in Aboriginal languages and was a student at the first Summer Institute of Linguistics Summer School in Australia. In 1958, he was an enthusiastic lecturer in linguistics when I attended the SIL course. His assistance was invaluable to me as he specialised in Ngaatjatjara, a dialect of the Western Desert language group, as is Pitjantjatjara, the language I was to learn. Douglas visited Ernabella in June 1962 and impressed the people with his language ability. The men invited us to attend a traditional ritual one night. Because of the UAM policy, Douglas had no such opportunity previously. He experimented with the use of traditional symbols to convey the Christian story. Douglas took seriously Harold Lindsell's advice relating to syncretism: 'Evangelicals must be willing to listen to what others have to say, and must really *listen*.'<sup>18</sup>

Although I was isolated from other Presbyterian missions, I was able to establish contact with Lutheran, Baptist and Roman Catholic missionaries in Central Australia. Pastor FW Albrecht who had served for many years from 1926 at Hermannsburg Mission was based in Alice Springs when I began work at Ernabella and on the rare occasions I visited that centre, I sought his counsel. He graciously expressed his regret that the Lutherans had not followed some of the Ernabella policies. Albrecht followed the Lutheran Board policy that missionaries should not attend traditional ceremonies. His son and successor, Pastor Paul Albrecht outlines a paradigm shift in the mission's attitude and his own journey through this change:

It is my conviction that ultimately only Aboriginal Christians themselves in the light of God's Word can decide what to keep of their culture and what as Christians they must discard. If I am able to dialogue with them and help present the fullness of God's Word to them, then I believe I am helping them in this vital task.<sup>19</sup>

One of FW Albrecht's major contributions was the training and placement of Arrernte evangelists on cattle stations to minister to Aboriginal stockmen and their families. Whether Albrecht had read Roland Allen or not, I do not know, but this initiative reflected Allen's insistence on trusting local people with responsibility in evangelism and church ministry. Albrecht commented that the presence of the evangelists on cattle stations had wider effects with some station managers paying better wages, opening stores and improving accommodation for their workers.<sup>20</sup> This outreach from Hermannsburg eventually extended to 15 centres with approximately 1,100 Aborigines.<sup>21</sup>

References I found helpful in my early writings were published lectures by TGH Strehlow, son of an early Lutheran missionary at Hermannsburg and linguist at the University of Adelaide. Strehlow emphasised the importance of language and of recognising Aboriginal customs and social norms. In 1960, Strehlow addressed the

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<sup>18</sup> Harold Lindsell, Attack Syncretism with Dialogue, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4, Summer 1967, p.205.

<sup>19</sup> Paul GE Albrecht, *From Mission to Church 1877 – 2002: Finke River Mission*, Adelaide: Openbook Publishers, 2002, p.73.

<sup>20</sup> FW Albrecht, Aspects of Mission Work among Aborigines Living on Cattle Stations, Typescript, Alice Springs, October 1956, p.7. (Copy held by the writer).

<sup>21</sup> FW Albrecht, The Hermannsburg Congregation – A Review, 1926-1956, Typescript, Linden Park, April 1967, p.8. (Copy held by the writer).

Lutheran Student Fellowship at the Adelaide Teachers College on the topic of Christianity and the Australian Aboriginal.<sup>22</sup>

In 1956, Lutheran, Baptist and Presbyterian missionaries from the region had met together in Alice Springs to discuss their spheres of influence. At the end of my first three-year term of service at Ernabella, I reflected during my furlough on what had been a very busy and varied period and contemplated some new initiatives. On my return to Ernabella, I made contact with the other missionaries in the region and invited them to attend an inter-missions conference at Ernabella. In October 1961, four Lutherans and two Baptists joined me for three days of discussion, sharing, and visiting the newly established Ernabella cattle outstation of Fregon. Particularly memorable was the final evening when we joined with the Ernabella people in a camp setting with the singing of Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte hymns. This conference alerted me to the problems experienced by four of the Lutheran and Baptist pastors who lived on government settlements. At times, government staff who were hostile to the missionaries' aims put barriers in their way, despite the fact that those long-serving pastors were involved in community development projects and were often the stable influence on settlements that had frequent staff turnovers. Having experienced the support of others at the conference, all expressed a desire to meet again. The conference spurred my own interest in seeking a deeper understanding of the culture of the people among whom I lived and more effective ways of sharing the Christian message with them. I therefore welcomed the publication of a new volume in the Christian Approach Series: *The Christian Approach to the Animist*. However I was to read: 'The Australian aborigines (sic) have often been thought of as typically primitive, or animistic, or totemistic. However this may be, they are few in number, only about 50,000 and not likely to concern many of us.'<sup>23</sup> As I was to write later: 'So much for those of us who are concerned with them.'<sup>24</sup> Another conference was held at Hermannsburg in September 1963, with Wilf Douglas sharing his experiences with language with the Lutheran and Baptists pastors and myself.

## Communication

Having witnessed my first traditional ceremony within a few months of arriving at Ernabella in 1958, I was gradually invited to observe more of them, including sacred increase rituals at the remote sites of the native fig Dreaming in 1963 and the emu Dreaming in 1965. Pitjantjatjara men who had been baptised participated in these ceremonies and they saw no incongruity in my being present. For my part, I recognized the need to understand more of the Aboriginal methods of communication and of their basic concepts about existence to assist me in communicating the Christian message. As Sundkler wrote from African experience: 'A theologian, who with the Apostle, is prepared to become to the Jews as a Jew ... and therefore, unto Africans as an African, must needs start with fundamental facts of the African interpretation of existence and the universe.'<sup>25</sup> I drew on my observation of the processes of communication I had observed at those ceremonies as well as on my reading of Eugene Nida, Hendrik Kraemer, JH Bavinck, Jacob Loewen, John Taylor and others in presenting a paper, *Communicating the Gospel to Australian Aborigines*, at the next inter-mission conference in Alice

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<sup>22</sup> TGH Strehlow, *Christianity and the Australian Aboriginal*, Adelaide: The Strehlow Research Foundation, Pamphlet no 6, vos. 3 & 4, 1980.

<sup>23</sup> WT Harris & AG Parrinder, *The Christian Approach to the Animist*, London: Edinburgh House Press, 1962, p.10.

<sup>24</sup> WH Edwards, *Communicating the Gospel to Australian Aborigines*, *The Bulletin - Communication*, Manila: Christian Institute for Ethnic Studies in Asia, July 1967, p.11.

<sup>25</sup> Bengt Sundkler, *The Christian Ministry in Africa*, London: SCM Press, 1962, p.100.

Springs in 1965. In addition to the Lutheran and Baptist pastors attending this conference were a Catholic priest from Santa Teresa Mission and the Rev Jim Downing who had been appointed to minister with the United Church of Northern Australia to Aboriginal people in Alice Springs. Commenting on Sundkler's observation, I wrote: 'We will commence this process as a child does, having to learn everything including language, customs, taboos, etc. Our learning will save unnecessary offence, as well as prepare for significant communication.'<sup>26</sup>

I drew on Kraemer's distinction between two aspects of communication: 'communication of' and 'communication between', and more fully on Nida's identification of three essential factors in communication: the source, the message and the receptor.<sup>27</sup> Nida's diagrams, using squares, circles and triangles to signify different cultural contexts, were used frequently as I sought to share what I was learning with others. He introduced me to the need to seek a functional rather than a formal equivalence for words and concepts.<sup>28</sup> Thus my understanding of communication was informed by Nida's insights and my observation of the following factors in traditional Pitjantjatjara communication: that teaching is progressive, it involved periods of intensive instruction, emphasis is on the concrete rather than the abstract and education is primarily through imitation and participation. As John Taylor suggested, from his experience in Africa: 'The Western adage "I think, therefore I am" is replaced by "I participate, therefore I am."<sup>29</sup> This resonated with my observations of the Pitjantjatjara. Drawing on both these observations and reading of missiology texts, it was suggested that the following be used to assist in communicating the Gospel: the language of the people, vivid story telling, the known and familiar as a starting point, visual images, music, drama and ritual.<sup>30</sup> Weber's comment was appropriate: 'we must learn, and use, the illiterate's methods of communication. We must proclaim picturesquely and dramatically.'<sup>31</sup>

In this paper I noted that of the 51 parables in the Gospels, five had some relevance to traditional Aboriginal life, although not related to everyday happenings, thirty refer to aspects of life which had been introduced through culture contact, including shepherding and gardening which had become meaningful through the mission's program, and sixteen had little or no relevance. Having studied theology during a period when Bultmann was advocating de-mythologising of the scriptures, I now played on that term to suggest the need for re-mythologising. I sought to find analogies from familiar features of life such as hunting, tracking, dingoes, ant-lions and eagles in accord with Nida's advice:

In addition to the selection of culturally relevant elements in the Scriptures, one must find cultural parallels which will make possible apprehension of the Biblical truth within the context of contemporary life ... such contemporary analogies are not substitutes for the Biblical message, but, rather, useful supplements to the communication.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> WH Edwards, 1967, p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Hendrik Kraemer, *The Communication of the Christian Faith*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1960, p.11; Eugene Nida, *Message and Mission: The Communication of the Christian Faith*, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960, p.33.

<sup>28</sup> Nida, 1960, p.59.

<sup>29</sup> John V Taylor, *The Primal Vision*, London: SCM Press, 1965: p.50.

<sup>30</sup> WH Edwards, 1967, pp.11-15.

<sup>31</sup> HR Weber, *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates*, London: SCM Press, 1957, p.19.

<sup>32</sup> Nida, 1960, p.60.

The Pitjantjatjara preachers were able to take these suggested ideas to a far greater deeper level than I imagined.<sup>33</sup> Although the New Testament world with its Greek and Roman influences presented some problems much of the Old Testament world offered parallels to Pitjantjatjara people. The Israelites had been at times a people 'on walkabout', crossing deserts, obtaining water from rockholes and relating to sacred places. On one occasion when I was wearing sandals, a woman observed: 'Nyawa! Tjina wiru', 'Look at his beautiful feet'. My feet usually protected by shoes contrasted with Pitjantjatjara feet scarred by walking barefooted over rocks, hot sand and sticks, just as the sandal-clad feet of messengers from a palace contrasted with the feet of Israelite exiles. Suddenly, I had new understanding of words which had been sung at my ordination: 'How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who bring good news.'<sup>34</sup> When visiting a remote site I observed on a sandhill the tracks of a dingo and a euro. Andy Tjilari who was travelling with me used his tracking skills to follow the tracks. He showed me where the dingo had followed the euro, attacked it where there were scuffle marks in the sand and then dragged the euro towards a nearby rocky hill to feed its pups. I had seen some tracks. Andy saw a story. Passages that refer to 'those who have eyes but cannot see', took on a new meaning.<sup>35</sup>

### **Adapting to change**

Ten people attended the fourth Central Australian Inter-Missions Conference held at Ernabella in June 1967. At this I presented a paper with the strange title, Reflections on an Expo Aborigine: or Why are we no-hoppers? Earlier that year when on furlough, I attended in the Melbourne Town Hall an Expo Aborigine with photographic displays, films, bookstall and seminars. Dr. Colin Tatz who spoke at the University of Melbourne was quoted in *The Age* as saying: 'A large proportion of those who work for Aboriginal welfare were "deadbeats" and "no-hoppers."' <sup>36</sup> When I commented when addressing an Expo seminar that I was representing the 'no-hoppers', Tatz protested that he had been misquoted.<sup>37</sup> However, what I found interesting was that terms frequently applied to indigenous people were now used in referring to those who worked with them. I therefore explored the possibility that there was some commonality of experience between missionaries and Aborigines. Both groups were minorities, faced language, cultural and communication problems, experienced some degree of institutional living, were subject to stereotypes and were often frustrated and uncertain about the future. In the notes I prepared for this paper, there are several marginal references to articles from the missiology journals referred to earlier as I found supportive examples from other fields. Among suggestions made to deal with the problems were encouraging better language learning for both parties, the minimising of institutionalism and providing opportunities for people to develop skills in those areas in which they had ability.

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<sup>33</sup> One of these men, Tony Tjamiwa, later became Chairperson of the Mutitjulu Community at Uluru (Ayers Rock). The Australian writer, Barry Hill wrote of his 'resonant' preaching and of his roles in church and community at Uluru. Barry Hill, *The Rock: Travelling to Uluru*, St. Leonards NSW: Allen and Unwin, 1994, pp.256-62.

<sup>34</sup> Isaiah 52: 7. See also VJ Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, London: SCM Press, pp.197-98.

<sup>35</sup> Isaiah 43: 8; Mark 8: 18.

<sup>36</sup> *The Age*, Melbourne, 15 April 1967.

<sup>37</sup> Tatz had come from South Africa to research Aboriginal administration in the Northern Territory for his PhD. He visited Ernabella briefly soon after his arrival. Later as Director of the Centre for Research into Aboriginal Affairs at Monash University he invited me to present papers at two conferences organised by that Centre.

This was the beginning of an era of change in policies concerning Aboriginal people. Mission agencies were involved in formulating and implementing these policies. For example, the move from the policy of assimilation through integration to self-management gained support through a series of pamphlets issued by the National Missionary Council and the Australian Council of Churches which advocated the right for Aboriginal groups to choose for or against separate development, land rights, and the right to maintain culture, customs and languages.<sup>38</sup> This involvement with Aboriginal people in these social and political changes enlarged, to use Max Warren's phrase, 'the scope of the mission'.<sup>39</sup> Just as Warren found young African Christians challenging churches to see God not just as the God of the Church but also as the God of politics and social life, missionaries working with Aborigines were called to walk with their people in these other spheres. From experience in South America, Samuel Escobar reminded Evangelicals that evangelism should lead to social responsibility.<sup>40</sup> Escobar emphasized that this involvement in social and political spheres must be carried out in the spirit of service.<sup>41</sup>

In this period of post-colonialism and emerging Aboriginal political movements there were internal and external pressures for change. One aspect of this was a realisation that it was time that missions devolved some of their institutional roles and transfer responsibility to Aboriginal people where possible or to appropriate government departments. For example, responsibility for the Ernabella mission school was handed over to the Department of Education from 1971. A writer who influenced my thinking at this time was the Political Scientist, Charles Rowley who had written about the limited success of Aboriginal missions.<sup>42</sup> In a paper published in 1967, Rowley advocated the incorporation of missions and government settlements as communities under their own Aboriginal councils.<sup>43</sup> The Presbyterian Board of Missions aimed at 'the incorporation of all the Aboriginal Communities by December 1973, in ways which are felt appropriate by themselves'.<sup>44</sup> Ernabella and Fregon became self-managing incorporated communities from 1<sup>st</sup> January 1974. In February 1972, I transferred from Ernabella to Mowanjumb Mission near Derby in the north-west of Western Australia. One of my main tasks there was to oversee the incorporation of the community and transfer of administration from mission to community. A paper I wrote was probably a unique document as a commentary on these changes written from the field. It concluded with a section on the role of the Church which ended as follows:

However, I believe that the new era is an exciting time in which Churches and Christians have the opportunity to build on rapport which has been established with Aboriginal people in the past, to concentrate on the central task of mission without having to divert attention to the many tasks imposed upon us by

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<sup>38</sup> *The Future of Aboriginal Missions*, Sydney: Australian Council of Churches, 1967.

<sup>39</sup> Max Warren, *The Christian Mission*, London: SCM Press, 1951, p.9.

<sup>40</sup> Samuel Escobar, 'The Social Responsibility of the Church in South America', *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring 1970, p.150.

<sup>41</sup> Escobar, 1970, pp.140-45.

<sup>42</sup> CD Rowley, "And Some Fell Upon Stoney Places", *Journal de la Societe Des Oceanistes*, December 1969, 137-49.

<sup>43</sup> CD Rowley, 'Causation in Relation to Aboriginal Affairs', in Ian G Sharp and Colin M Tatz (eds), *Aborigines in the Economy: Employment, Wages and Training*, Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1966, pp.345-55.

<sup>44</sup> 'The Gospel and the Aboriginal Communities in the 1970s', Document 73-2-A, Board of Ecumenical Missions and Relations, Sydney: Presbyterian Church of Australia (Typescript held by the writer).

Missions, and to explore and experiment with new roles of service in partnership with the Aboriginal Church.<sup>45</sup>

An article by Raymond Davis in the *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* was helpful at this time of change.<sup>46</sup>

Following the year at Mowanjum I returned to the Pitjantjatjara lands in 1973 as Area Chaplain based at Fregon, a cattle outstation of Ernabella established in 1961. I no longer had the responsibilities of a mission superintendent and was free to engage in a pastoral role covering Ernabella and Fregon, two government settlements, Amata and Indulkana and a cattle station, Mimili, which had been purchased and handed over to the Aboriginal people. In the opening paragraph of this paper I referred to 'the people to whom I had been called to serve'. I used the term 'serve' with some reservation, for throughout my term at Ernabella I was referred to by the term 'mayatja', derived from the English 'master'. Pitjantjatjara had no direct equivalents for such terms as boss or master. They adapted English terms and applied them to station managers and superintendents and others who appeared to have a position of authority. Being no longer a superintendent enabled me to more easily fulfill the role of servant. There was now more time to attend to production of Pitjantjatjara Christian literature and the training of church Elders. At the beginning of 1974, two of the Elders attended a six week course at Aurukun Mission on Cape York. They were then given, with Aboriginal Elders from other Presbyterian missions, authority to administer sacraments.

Although through the early period of my missionary service missiology was very much a DIY experience, I had some distant contact with others who were exploring the same issues. In Arnhem Land, the Methodist missionary Gowan Armstrong edited *The Arnhem Land Epistle*, an occasional roneoed bulletin which included short papers by several missionaries including his colleagues Jack Goodluck and Bernard Clarke. Armstrong wrote on developing Aboriginal leadership.<sup>47</sup> Goodluck prepared a paper on Culture and Gospel in consultation with Arnhem Land Church members.<sup>48</sup> Clarke wrote a report, *Free to Decide*, as the charter for transfer of Methodist missions to Aboriginal incorporated councils.

After 16 years of mission work, I was given a sabbatical year in 1974 and studied in Suva, Fiji at the Pacific Theological College and the University of the South Pacific. This was my first opportunity to study sociology. My reading of Marshall Sahlins on the politics of Pacific islands familiarised me with the terms 'ascribed status' as applied to chiefs in Polynesian societies and the 'achieved status' of 'Bigmen' in Melanesian societies.<sup>49</sup> This helped my understanding of the basically egalitarian nature of Aboriginal societies with their limited and diffused authority and influenced my later reflections on Aboriginal ministry in churches. Interaction with staff and students from several Pacific Island cultural backgrounds was enriching. Research for an assignment

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<sup>45</sup> WH Edwards, *The Changing Climate of Aboriginal Development*, *Interchange: Papers on Biblical and Current Questions*, No. 14, 1973, p.80.

<sup>46</sup> Raymond J David, *What Missions Must do to Survive in the 70's*, *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Vol. 6, No. 4, Summer 1970, pp.221-26.

<sup>47</sup> G Armstrong, *Developing Aboriginal Christian Leadership in the Church*, Typescript, nd. (Copy held by the writer).

<sup>48</sup> J Goodluck, *Culture and Gospel*, A statement prepared corporately by the Methodist Church members of Arnhem Land and the Executive of the Department of Christian Education, Darwin, N.T., 1971-72. (Copy held by the writer).

<sup>49</sup> MD Sahlins, *Social Stratification in Polynesia*, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1958.

on Roland Allen enabled me to question the full application of his principles to Aboriginal hunter-gatherer peoples. During my absence from the Pitjantjatjara area, the Elders whom I had trained were exercising effective ministries in all of the communities and there was a feeling that my return might suppress this initiative.<sup>50</sup> Although I still felt that there was unfinished business, in 1975, I lectured in Aboriginal Studies at Torrens College of Advanced Education and enrolled in an MA entrance qualifying year in Anthropology. I pursued my interest in Aboriginal politics by completing a dissertation on Leadership in Aboriginal Societies.

## **Gospel and Culture**

During 1975, I was invited to return to the Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara region during the period of the homeland movement with some families moving from the larger communities to establish outstations in their traditional areas. There were now five major settlements with populations ranging from 100-400 and several small homelands established or developing. The Church Elders at Amata requested that we live there. As it was close to the centre of the 600 kilometre wide parish, it was a suitable placement. Arriving there in March 1976, my wife and I agreed to stay there for 4-5 years until our two sons required further education. By this time there were more government and non-missionary staff working in the region and one often heard ill-informed criticisms of the past missionary work, with comments such as: 'The missionaries destroyed the culture.' I responded to this by writing a paper, *The Gospel and Aboriginal Culture*. Drawing on writers including Cecil Northcott, Elton Trueblood, AC Bouquet, Kenneth Cragg, JH Bavinck, John Taylor and Eugene Nida, I argued that missions had done more than any other agency to enable the preservation of elements of Aboriginal culture. Furthermore, missions had played a significant role in effective cultural changes. The paper was written soon after an Easter Convention at Amata attended by over 1000 Aboriginal people, including some visitors from other regions and three Solomon Islanders. I concluded it by commenting that although Christianity is often identified as a White peoples' religion: 'A visitor from space arriving at Amata during Easter would have concluded that Christianity was a Black peoples' religion and that they were finding it difficult to win White converts because of the seeming incompatibility of the White Australian culture with the Gospel.'<sup>51</sup>

One example of change referred to in that article related to burial practices. At Ernabella, the mission had not imposed a change from traditional practices, but after 36 years, these practices were somewhat inimical to the changing social, political and economic structures. Following the death of the mother of a church Elder in 1972, he and other Elders initiated a change by holding a service in the church and commencing a cemetery. Once instituted, this model soon spread to other nearby communities. Because of the conservatism of Aboriginal societies such changes could be viewed with suspicion but in this case, an older person had a dream which validated the change. Later at Amata, an older man sought instruction for baptism following a dream in which Jesus had appeared at the top of a ladder and called his name. Once again, reading about the significance of dreams in African experience as interpreted by Taylor and Sundkler, helped me to appreciate their significance for Aboriginal Christians.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> This training comprised not so much formal teaching but was based on an apprenticeship model with church leaders sharing in ministry and accompanying me on my visits to other communities. Imitation and participation are essential elements of traditional Pitjantjatjara learning.

<sup>51</sup> WH Edwards, *The Gospel and Aboriginal Culture*, *Interchange*, No. 24, 1978, p.204.

<sup>52</sup> John V Taylor, 1965, p.58; Bengt Sundkler, 1962, p.22.

Reflecting earlier comments in this paper on the role of churches in wider social and political movements, I found my experience with language and cross-cultural communication called upon soon after arriving at Amata. Previously there had been no pan-Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara political structure. In July 1976, residents from several communities met at Amata to form a Pitjantjatjara Council. I was invited to interpret at the meeting and appointed joint Secretary with an Aboriginal man, and asked to take the minutes in English and Pitjantjatjara. I continued in the roles of interpreter and minute secretary for four years. The main focus of the Council was its pursuit of, and negotiation with the government of South Australia for the granting of land rights. When I later wrote an article for *Missiology* on The Church and Indigenous Land Rights, Brueggemann's, *The Land*, assisted in identifying similarities in the biblical and indigenous concepts of land.<sup>53</sup>

There had been no opportunity for studying missiology before commencing my missionary work. However, in May 1980, on my way to a Land Rights symposium in Canberra I visited a World Council of Churches conference on mission in Melbourne and met Gerald Anderson and Arthur Glasser. At their invitation, on leaving Amata in August 1980, I travelled to the United States of America on Long Service Leave with my family. We were hosted by Glasser for two weeks at Fuller Seminary and by Anderson for three weeks at the Overseas Ministries Study Centre (OMSC) at Ventnor, NJ. At Fuller I attended classes conducted by Paul Hiebert, Charles Kraft and Peter Wagner and heard lectures by Donald McGavran and David Hubbard. In Ventnor I attended week long courses conducted by Paul Hiebert, James Sherer and Father Thomas Stransky. A highlight at both centres was the sharing with people from diverse backgrounds, including Catholic Sisters from Central America, nationals from Japan, Taiwan, Thailand and India and missionaries who had working in Zaire, Nepal, Borneo and other countries. Contact was maintained with some of them in later years. Although this experience was too late to contribute to my mission work, insights gained from those classes and discussions informed my later writings.

On returning to Australia, from 1981, I again lectured in Aboriginal studies at the Torrens CAE in Adelaide, later to be incorporated in the South Australian CAE and from 1991, in the University of South Australia. I also undertook further studies in Anthropology at the University of Adelaide. By this time Father Martin Wilson had begun editing, *Nelen Yubu*, an Australian missiological journal first published in 1978. Drawing upon my studies of Aboriginal politics and my experience of mentoring Pitjantjatjara church leaders, my contribution to this journal was an article on Ministry in Aboriginal Churches in which I warned against the imposition of Western orders on ministry without due consideration of Aboriginal cultural and historical factors. I acknowledged the influence of Pastor Paul Albrecht who had written about problems encountered when effective Arrernte evangelists were ordained, and of the Catholic priest, Vincent Donovan. Writing from his experience with the Masai in Africa, Donovan argued that just as other cultures had influenced their models of priesthood as individualistic and hierarchical, cultures 'like an African one for instance, with its communitarian, nonhierarchical structure, should have an equal right to respond with its valid form of priesthood'.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> William H Edwards, The Church and Indigenous Land Rights: Pitjantjatjara Land Rights in Australia, *Missiology*, Vol. 13, No. 4, October 1986, p.485. W Brueggemann, *The Land*, London: SPCK, 1978.

<sup>54</sup> Bill Edwards, Ministry in Aboriginal Churches, *Nelen Yubu*, No 40, Spring 1989, p.7; VJ Donovan, *Christianity Rediscovered: An Epistle from the Masai*, London: SCM Press.

During the years of lecturing, my writings on Aboriginal missions tended to relate to history and short biographies of missionaries and Aboriginal Christians, although some papers retained a missiological focus. A chapter published in 2005 was written in response to an American anthropologist (and a good friend), Aram Yengoyan, who following research in the Pitjantjatjara region asserted that the Pitjantjatjara had not converted to Christianity because they lacked 'a prior text' to enable such conversion.<sup>55</sup> His argument was based on the conservative nature of Pitjantjatjara culture and the limitations on individuals making decisions because of the emphasis on group allegiances. Having baptised hundreds of Pitjantjatjara/Yankunytjatjara people and worked closely with church Elders I gave illustrations of ways in which they had expressed a genuine Christian faith through storytelling, preaching, prayer and singing.<sup>56</sup>

Song was central to Aboriginal social life. As Myers commented: 'To the Pintupi, singing provides a salient image of sociability'<sup>57</sup> One of the fulfilling experiences of working with the Pitjantjatjara people was the training of the Ernabella Choir. On tours to Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Fiji, while they performed traditional dances, the Christian component of performances was the singing of hymns in western four-part harmonies. Reference was made earlier to Capell's call to seek the presentation of the Christian message in Aboriginal dress. This was most notably done in the early 1980s when Warlpiri Christians performed Christian corroborees.<sup>58</sup> While there was some experimentation with this in the Pitjantjatjara lands the close association between form and message in Aboriginal music made this problematic.<sup>59</sup> The ethnomusicologist, Catherine Ellis, referred to this as the interlocking of the melody and the text through the rhythmic segments of traditional Pitjantjatjara music.<sup>60</sup> Pitjantjatjara Christians appear content to express their Christian faith through translations of western hymns and to accept the association of their traditional music with their Dreaming heritage.

The missiological and historical writings referred to above culminated in my retirement project, the writing of a thesis on the Moravian Aboriginal Missions in Australia. In this task I drew on many of the writers of missiological texts referred to in this paper, as well as the influential works of David Bosch and Kenelm Burridge, the latter an anthropologist and Catholic who ably exposed the stereotypes which have so often blurred the presentations of mission histories.<sup>61</sup> Visits on study leave to the Overseas Ministries Study Centre (now in New Haven) in 1994 and to the Centre for the Study of Christianity in the Non-Western World at the University of Edinburgh in 1991 and 1994

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<sup>55</sup> Aram a Yengoyan, 'Religion, Morality, and Prophetic Traditions: Conversion among the Pitjantjatjara of Central Australia', in Robert W Heffner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993, pp.233-57.

<sup>56</sup> Bill Edwards, 'Tjukurpa Palya – the Good Word: Pitjantjatjara Responses to Christianity', in Peggy Brock (ed.), *Indigenous Peoples and Religious Change*, Leiden: Brill, 2005, pp.129–53.

<sup>57</sup> Fred R Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*, Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986, p.112.

<sup>58</sup> Tony Swain, 'The Ghost of Space: Reflections on Warlpiri Christian Iconography and Ritual.' In Tony Swain and Deborah B Rose (eds), *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies*, Adelaide: The Australian Association for the Study of Religion, 1988, pp.452-69.

<sup>59</sup> Bill Edwards, 2005, pp.146-47.

<sup>60</sup> Catherine Ellis, *Aboriginal Music*, St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1985, p.104.

<sup>61</sup> David J Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991; Kenelm Burridge, *In the Way: A Study of Christian Missionary Endeavours*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1991.

enabled fruitful discussions with Paul Hiebert, Andrew Walls and others. Contact with Pitjantjatjara people has been maintained during my years of lecturing and retirement as the skills I had developed to assist in communicating the Christian message have been called upon to provide interpreting services in health, legal and other sectors. This carryover of knowledge, understandings and skills developed in the missionary task to the role of lecturer in Aboriginal Studies and interpreter in lands rights negotiations, Royal Commissions and in courts, prisons and hospitals is relevant to the theme of this conference, The Christian Mission in the Public Square. At times, those who have been critical of missions for their alleged destruction of Aboriginal cultures and languages have had to reconsider their judgments when the person lecturing on Aboriginal culture, teaching an Aboriginal language and interpreting for an Aboriginal defendant is a former missionary.

## Conclusion

This journey over 50 years has been challenging, inspiring and fruitful in many ways. It has enabled me to gain from the insights of others who have had similar experience in a variety of cultural settings. I have been able to share a little of my own limited experience. I have been abundantly privileged as Aboriginal people have taken me bush and shared with me much of their traditional stories and understanding of life. The writers referred to above have helped me interpret the things I have learned from Pitjantjatjara people. As I have walked book in hand, or hand in hand with AP Elkin and Jacky Tjupuru, Eugene Nida and Gordon Inkatji, Paul Hiebert and Andy Tjilari, John Taylor and Tony Tjamiwa and Jan Sensbach and Nganyinytja Ilyatjari my personal life and understanding of the Christian faith have been enriched. Yet, as I have walked with them I am constantly reminded of the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'O the mind, mind has mountains, cliffs of fall, sheer, no-man-fathomed.' However much I have grasped of Pitjantjatjara thought and knowledge, there is still so much unfathomed.

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