religions

MDPI

Essay

From Esotericism to Embodied Ritual: Care for Country as Religious Experience

Yin Paradies [1,*] and Cullan Woods Joyce [2]

[1] School of Humanities and Social Sciences, Deakin University, Burwood 3125, Australia
[2] Contemplative Studies Centre, Melbourne School of Psychological Sciences, University of Melbourne, Parkville 3010, Australia; cullan.joyce@unimelb.edu.au
* Correspondence: yin.paradies@deakin.edu.au

Abstract: Colonisation, genocide, ecocide, and climate derangement are ongoing, unfurling, global tragedies. In so-called Australia, spiritual practitioners can respond to these crises by deepening their engagement with Aboriginal perspectives/practices. This paper contends that some Eurocentric habitual categorisations subtly misinterpret Aboriginal experiences of the sacred, such as identifying creation myths as beliefs comparable to post-Enlightenment representations of the sacred and identifying the performance of sacred activity with similar characteristics to separateness and priesthood. This leads to erroneous characterisations of Aboriginal ritual practices as being based on a strong hierarchy, distinctive castes, and esotericism. We argue that an embodied and practice-based sense of sacredness guides Aboriginal spirituality. As a living culture, Aboriginal ongoing care for Country provides an enfleshed, real, palpable enactment of human spirituality. We argue that Aboriginal spirituality has been fetishised to the neglect of a call to care for Country in the most 'mundane' sense of tending to food, water, air, etc., as embodied religious experiences. Delving into dadirri and death, we elucidate contemporary cases of practical care for Country that illustrate how being on, in, and with Country can be a contemplative experience. We conclude by outlining how caring for Country 'layers' the various expressions of Aboriginal religious experience socially, psychologically, interpersonally, and ritually.

Keywords: Aboriginal psychology; psychology of religious experience; Aboriginal spirituality; contemplative research; meditation

Citation: Paradies, Yin, and Cullan Woods Joyce. 2024. From Esotericism to Embodied Ritual: Care for Country as Religious Experience. *Religions* 15: 182. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15020182

Academic Editors: Natasha Tassell-Matamua and Eleanor Brittain

Received: 15 December 2023
Revised: 19 January 2024
Accepted: 28 January 2024
Published: 31 January 2024

1. Introduction

Eurocentric capitalist cultures are experiencing their own death, both literally and virtually. People within the cultural West (Europe, North America, Australasia) are experiencing the late-stage impacts of their own colonialism, economic extraction, and gratuitous violence toward the Earth and kin. The last few decades have entailed the long, slow collapse of the extractivism and ecocide that defined late (16th–21st Century) Eurocentric cultures. Since these societies are so dependent on extractive ways of being, the death of these ways has brought with it an incredible fear and terror over what will happen next. By contrast, for over 60,000 years, Aboriginal peoples have been growing cultures that recognise the mutual vulnerability of kin and Country. For Aboriginal peoples, Country encompasses and consists of land, water, sky, animals, plants, stories, songs, intuitions, feelings, etc., as they exist in flowing, mixing, merging waves of resonating place–time. For this reason, Aboriginal cultures are clear evidence that humans do not have to live a life founded on the violent extraction of resources from Country and the exploitation of life. Accordingly, the living cultures of Aboriginal peoples can speak with a voice based not on the presumption of our imminent demise, but from a space of vibrant and evolving being and becoming.

Aboriginal cultures provide an (in)coherent expression of spiritual life that implicitly critiques many of the categories of religion that developed in Eurocentric scholarship following the Enlightenment. Although not every non-indigenous religion fuses its tenets and conceptual habits with the violence of colonial power (Harisson 1972), in the eyes of these authors, the conceptual habits formed by colonial perspectives persist today, shaping how Aboriginal beliefs and practices are read. This paper weaves its way through contemporary examples of the subtle and not-so-subtle tendencies of Eurocentric thought that consistently misrepresent Aboriginal expressions of religion and spiritual life. Aboriginal expressions of ritual, religion, and spirituality are far more grounded in the sacredness of everyday life—eating, drinking, travelling, tool making (Mountford 1941), and their connection with Country (Sahlins 2022, pp. 21–22)—than in esoteric practices, fetishised by Eurocentric onlookers. We argue that Aboriginal spirituality is characterised by an ontology of interdependence and mutual vulnerability, and for this reason, it is a mistake to privilege certain functions of 'sacred life' or vocations within Aboriginal cultures (for instance, by singling out the medicine man or some other exotica as the centre of religious practice and experience). Furthermore, we call for an approach to religion that is grounded in the experience of Aboriginal people, who can speak for themselves (as the Wakaya first author of this paper does) and do not need their experience to fit into Eurocentric categories in order to be considered valid.

2. Eurocentric and Aboriginal Knowledge Systems

Eurocentric approaches generally place the production of knowledge within a teleological framework, assuming that the accumulation of knowledge comes with some form of progress, development, or improvement. Eurocentric approaches also tend to regard the abstract accumulation of decontextualised knowledge as a valuable end in itself, regardless of its utility, application, or consequences. There are valid reasons for this, but in these critical times, we need to interrogate these assumptions.

From an Aboriginal perspective, knowledge is not necessarily an end in itself. Instead, there are important questions that need to be asked when evaluating the accumulation of knowledge, such as: how will this knowledge (re-)create Country? How will it help us care for, as, and with Country as kin? What relationships does this knowledge have with Country? One might even say that, within Aboriginal epistemology, all knowledge is of Country. And what is knowledge of Country? Knowledge of Country is practical mysticism that fills your belly, quenches your thirst, awes your be(com)ing, and, more generally, shows you how to be in the right relationship with reality.

In contrast to the linear teleological focus of Eurocentric approaches, Aboriginal cultures focus on cycles, spirals, and rhythms, in which the observance of reality requires constant sensitivity, vulnerability, and (re-)engagement. If one were to assign a telos to Aboriginal knowledge accumulation, it would be the harmonious, balanced flourishing of all life. However, Eurocentric analyses of life, death, and time, often tend towards one-dimensionality. For example, seeds are planted, sprouts emerge, and these, in turn, become trees which then produce seeds. Eurocentric approaches may focus on seeds as the locus of plants while Aboriginal perspectives support whole systems, wherein seeds, for example, can also become food for animals as a 'successful' entelechy rather than simply a 'failure' to become a tree.

3. Anthropological Misinterpretations of Aboriginal Religion and Spirituality

Some early anthropologists often represented Aboriginal beliefs and worldviews through origin stories, moral tales, and myths (Roberts 1969; Reed 1970; Parker et al. 1895; Mountford 1976; Baglin and Moore 1970). These stories seemed aligned with various Eurocentric and Near Eastern creation accounts because they were immense in their scope, fantastical, and involved divine-like beings creating worlds. Like the standard readings of Near Eastern and Hebrew myths, Aboriginal creation stories seemed to describe an event that occurred in a distant time with an ambiguous relationship to present practice.

But this way of representing Aboriginal belief systems leads to a hermeneutic break with dreaming stories, which are intrinsic to living Aboriginal cultures. Aboriginal genealogy and cosmology are more complex than linear forms of time (Troy 2023); hence, origin stories describe how things are experienced in the living present. They are concerned not with taxonomies of transcendence, but with immanent ancestral connections that are still active presences informing decision-making around 'mundane' events. In this sense, Aboriginal experiences of creation are 'non-dual', such that Eurocentric binaries of past/present, transcendence/immanence, and sacred/mundane are unhelpful and even obfuscating.

Eurocentric analyses of Aboriginal religion have also been prone to habitual references to hierarchies, essences, and teleology as being foundational to religion. This tendency partially explains the early focus of anthropologists on genealogy and kinship relations via hierarchies and power relations. Seemingly aware of the problems the traditional analysis of religion has in interpreting non-European cultures, Durkheim and others attempted to reduce the role of strong hierarchies in their analyses of the relationships between the human and the more-than-human. Nevertheless, Durkheim still saw the relationships with the more than human, between a person and an animal, ancestor, or totem, primarily as a relationship centred around the organization of social binds, excluding, or down-playing a principal partner: Country (Durkheim 1965, pp. 122–34). Unfortunately, emphases have effects; downplaying the role of Country in the relationships mentioned would be like trying to analyse a Catholic sacrament such as marriage while omitting the role of the divine person; relationships between human persons can still make sense, but the partnership that co-constitutes the basis of sacredness (here sacramentality) falls apart. Additionally, kinship relationships in Aboriginal cultures are highly complex, with many contributors to Aboriginal genealogy being more-than-human persons and, of course, such kinship is grounded in Country. Anthropologists have developed multiple analytical approaches to characterise marriage and other relationships in Aboriginal cultures (e.g., Selby and Buchler 1968, pp. 293–94; Radcliffe-Brown 1968, pp. 67–69; Geertz and Geertz 1975, chp. 3). However, these approaches are generally dominated by the view that Country is merely a geographic place, a location where people happen to be.

The sterilisation of Country into a mere locale is partially responsible for the impoverishment of Eurocentric anthropological understandings of Aboriginal genealogy and creation mythology. Eurocentric conception and birth genealogy only explains how a certain pattern of life emerges; that is, how a specific line of births, deaths, and a range of other factors, culminates in a person. However, it is now recognised that Aboriginal notions of genealogy are not uni-directional, but interweave cyclically, such that your great-grandmother can also be your niece (Yunkaporta 2019, p. 44). Future-ancestors are being born now. Thus, while Aboriginal origin or creation stories often do explain why a certain order of the world exists, more significantly, they serve to explain why certain ways of life appear now. These, in turn, provide an account of and context for current ceremonies, rituals, and practices. In other words, Aboriginal genealogies and creation stories embed the ritual space in, and as, an emplaced system of meaning. Furthermore, Aboriginal kinship relationships often defy standard hierarchies of family trees, where a common ancestor explains a connection between several persons. In contrast, Eurocentric understandings of Aboriginal kinship tend to embed a hierarchical tendency into the analysis of social order, including the position of figures involved in performing rituals. For Aboriginal peoples, there are multiple forms of relationship, some hierarchical and some not, and a ritual is not necessarily concerned with adopting a participant into an authority structure that governs other groups of persons. If authority does emerge from a ritual, it may pertain only to certain spaces, topics, and times, and not to others; certain types of authority might only exist inside ritual spaces. As A. P. Elkin is at pains to note in *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (Elkin 1994), the medicine man is perfectly normal and part of the community, ordinary in every way. This comment seems to be in stark contrast to the ritual space, which, from a Eurocentric perspective, is portrayed as strange and esoteric. But Elkin's point is well-made: neither the ritual space nor the communal is strange. A reader of

Elkin's book might expect a ritual mysticism that creates an eldritch emergence and confers an aura of spiritual authority upon the ritual leader. However, Elkin explicitly states that rituals are not experienced in this way. The authority structure of the religious sphere does not necessarily exert dominance over any other space. Hence, although genealogy and kinship relationships are significant for ritual life, anthropological approaches have relied on analytical structures that interpolated causal power where there was little evidence of such and asserted the presence of hierarchical authority structures where there were none. In other words, hierarchies, similar to a priesthood, were conceived as being present in Aboriginal rituals, based on models of priesthood in which the priest is 'separate' from others.

Country is not just geography or location. It is a layered palimpsest of kinship, history, connectedness, and the sacred, with its own integrity and personhood. Thus, overemphasising hierarchies and omitting the role of Country approaches Aboriginal religion and spirituality while missing a foundational characteristic of Aboriginal praxis. A person is not 'just here' on Country, they are melded and moulded to, with, and via it; they are shaped by it, experiencing the specific sacredness of this particular distinct Country rather than the sacredness of another.

4. Sacredness, Ordinariness, and Connection with Country

This section discusses how Eurocentric anthropology of religion tends to distinguish systems of spiritual practices from 'non-spiritual' practices. Though often subtle, this kind of distinction usually operates with the presumption that there is a strong difference between sacred and non-sacred, that the sacred comes with strange or weird characteristics which demarcate it from the non-sacred, and that persons who operate within sacred spaces are, or must become, odd in proportion to the difference between normal and sacred life. This section examines how some influential historical and contemporary studies read Aboriginal spiritual/religious practice with lenses that over emphasise aspects of Aboriginal spirituality, leading to distinctions that create subtle fetishisations and dualisms.

Robin Dunbar's (2022) recent study on the evolution of religion places sacredness alongside ideas of transcendence, mystery, and distance. Dunbar contends that the early stages of religion are primitive (in that they are unexplained), and that later stages contain clearer codifications and critical reflections. In this way, Dunbar presumes that the religious life of 'primitive' societies can be framed via categories drawn from Eurocentric conceptions of religious patterns, such as the ideas that mysticism, trance, and other 'unusual' experiences are primary (in conceptual and evolutionary terms), and codified doctrines emerge in more sophisticated stages. However, having the 'mystical' as the initial starting point is radically normative in that Dunbar effectively dismisses the idea that, say, the sharing of food or wayfinding through place contains primary expressions of, or origin points for, sacred sensibility.

Like Elkin's *Aboriginal Men of High Degree* (Elkin 1994), Dunbar's work focuses on the weird and mysterious as likely sites of Aboriginal religion, but it does so without Elkin's appreciation of how context and setting minimise the uncanniness that we associate with 'shamanism'. Elkin respects that the seeming strangeness of Aboriginal sacred practice evolves from within an experience of non-duality, of the interweaving of sacredness though all existence. Effectively, Dunbar implies that there is a strong difference between the basic life of the person and their sense of the sacred. The consequence of this is that, when you take the exemplars of sacred action to be mystical states, highly intricate initiations, or religious rites performed by a special class of individuals that a non-participant cannot explain, you are effectively repeating the Enlightenment miscalculation which sees religion as either ethical—thank you, Kant and Fichte—or as mystical—Swedenborg (and Kant, again, surprisingly!). These divisions have rent religion and sacredness from the everyday.

A similar interpolation of Eurocentric expectations about the sacred can also be detected in Worms and Petri's *Australian Aboriginal Religion* (Worms and Petri 1998), which catalogues various stories and rituals that the authors could observe from outside the

ritual space. Lacking a clear sense of what Aboriginal religious and ritual practices were concerned with, this cataloguing focused on identifying the relation of ritual objects, events (cutting, circumcision, make-up), and totems to creation myths. Worms and Petri acknowledge the deficit in their understanding of the character of the changes that Aboriginal participants underwent (Worms and Petri 1998, pp. 215–16), but nevertheless maintain that the function of rituals is to enable participants to receive status and assume authority in the community. However, changes in genealogy, kinship, and status that occur in rituals mostly describe why a person comes to a ritual space and how they leave, rather than what occurred during their participation: how they and Country changed and/or were renewed. In other words, an analysis of politicised power relations swallows the spiritual and topographic significance of the ritual. Significantly, Worms and Petri rarely address anything about why the places in which rituals were performed were significant for, or related to, food, water, or other processes of life and living on Country. In this way, they overlook the ways in which spirituality in Aboriginal culture is embedded in the most basic aspects of everyday life.

Studies like Bell's (1998, p. 58) might seem to vindicate Worms and Petri's (1998) interpretation of the role-giving, hierarchical function of rituals and initiations. However, as Bell notes (Bell 1998, pp. 21–22, 72–73), Country is an active participant in the ritual process, which means Aboriginal ritual spaces are specific relationships first, before they are instances of a universal norm (Eliade 1960, pp. 198–201). Further, as Elkin (1994) and other writers mention, while it is true that gaining knowledge in these ritual spaces does provide power when those ritual spaces are reconstituted, this 'status' is interwoven and distributed within the life of community and Country. Knowledge holders have status primarily when supporting other people in the ritual space. Hence, asking permission to (en)act in a ritual space is fundamentally a form of acknowledgement, grace, reverence, and respect in which the space is shared. In Aboriginal ritual spaces, the function of showing respect is to promote sharing among egalitarian equals, even while the younger party (whether an individual, group, or even the human species considered as a younger sibling of other older animal and plant species) recognises that they do not yet know the place as well as the elders, although they may come to do so over time. However, respect or deference in one (ritual) space may not carry over into another if a person who is junior in one space happens to be a knowledge holder in another.

Luhrmann (2020), in contrast with Dunbar, takes a more nuanced approach to belief in deities. Luhrmann begins with an account of different types of knowledge and argues that human knowledge involves both intuition and understanding, which interact and converge to form a living system. Luhrmann's description of this knowledge system as the product of a long evolution of the cultural transmission of experience and discussion echoes recent Aboriginal accounts (Yunkaporta 2023, pp. 7–13). Knowledge of Country generates advice you follow because it helps you survive and thrive. Luhrmann argues that larger narratives (i.e., deities and sacredness) become enshrined in everyday life. When a larger story includes sacredness and deities; then, as the larger story is told intergenerationally, this story fuses with the story of material needs; a larger story of sacredness and connection (understanding) becomes fused with the systems a person uses to orient themselves within the world (i.e., intuition) until the two are indistinguishable. Luhrmann refers to the interaction between intuition and understanding as a reason why two distinctive stories can become fused into a non-dual perspective.

Despite the accommodation Luhrmann makes for deities and sacredness within systems of knowledge, Luhrmann nevertheless affirms the division between inert nature and active imagination made by the Enlightenment. Echoing Enlightenment perspectives, Luhrmann holds that subsistence and necessity (e.g., hygiene, food, and the everyday 'non-imaginative') have greater relevance than enacted imaginations about spiritual beings. For Luhrmann (2020, pp. 16–17), rituals perform the task of maintaining the connection between the two stories/modes of knowing, and rituals require effort in proportion to the perceived distance that one has from the sacred. This leads Luhrmann to argue that

it is more difficult to affirm the existence of the sacred than the existence of mundane fact, a position opposed, systematically, by Sahlins (2022, pp. 36, 39, 41, 69). Unfortunately, Luhrmann's analyses express Eurocentric conceptions of God, transcendence, and sacredness that entail an intrinsic differentiation from the sublunary. As with Dunbar (2022) and Worms and Petri (1998), the separation between the sacred and the quotidian is presupposed at the outset in Luhrmann's framework, hence Luhrmann's framework cannot be appropriately applied to analyse Australian Aboriginal spiritual cultures.

By contrast, when Aboriginal persons describe spirituality, their own relationship with Country, a much more integrated and 'non-dual', or, more properly, 'layered' or 'nested', picture emerges (Nicholson 2023). As Graham (2023, p. 14) writes, 'no-one was searching for a spiritual truth; it was already present all around, immanent.' In an Aboriginal setting where the cultural story does not presume distance between the sacred and the mundane (rather, presuming their commingling), rituals and connections to sacredness have a completely different purpose than bringing the deity back to the fore. As Sahlins (2022, p. 2) says: 'until they are transformed by the colonial transmissions of the axial ideologies, Christianity notably, peoples (that is, most of humanity) are surrounded by a host of spiritual beings—gods, ancestors, the indwelling souls of plants and animals and others.' In the ritual, the sacred is not a hidden reality that is being brought into the world, so much as it is an ever-presence that is welcomed, respected, recognised, acknowledged, and engaged with, in an ongoing process of kinning. The tone of sacredness in ritual spaces associated with these primary stories is not about representing or curating unusual connections with transcendent powers, but performing activities of living kinship-making. In Aboriginal sacred practice, the interweaving of sacredness, story, and subsistence, mean that mundane and supramundane life are mutually co-constitutive.

If sacredness is an integral part of life that is equal to and interwoven with others, then it becomes much more difficult to differentiate what is sacred from what is 'secular'. As noted above, in the West, this distinction was represented by a priestly class, who exist due to a community or a divinity singling a person out for special duties. Singling someone out brings with it special training, the generation of a new language, and the (re)creation of institutions. This pattern suggests that education curates a form of difference or set-apartness in the initiated that mirrors the transcendence of the sacred over the mundane. In effect, the separation of the individual from the community mirrors the separation of the sacred from the everyday. Therefore, this priesthood's ritual is a special event, often holding only an attenuated relationship to the myriad forms of life that comprise the person's or their community's existence.

Why do fewer tensions between the sacred and the mundane exist in Aboriginal cultures? When you learn about Country, you are learning to survive and thrive. If you fight Country, you cannot prevail over Country or its peoples. Your respect for Country and kin is based on mutual vulnerability, and that vulnerability comes through participants in ritual spaces being in susceptible, sensitive, interdependent relationships with one another and Country. Persistent dominance-based authority are impractical when Country and culture are so complex and mutually vulnerable. The mutual vulnerability of Aboriginal practice ties sacredness to subsistence and culture to Country so intrinsically that the connection is experienced as intuitive, and therefore normal and normative. Hence, boundaries between the sacred and secular are permeable in Aboriginal cultures; the interweaving of life and sacredness means that there is no need to bring the divine, the sacred, into the presence of the believer (who is, in any case, more practitioner than believer).

Permeable boundaries do not mean separation. Thus, when an intentional act to establish a ritual space emerges, the character of the intentionality is not to mediate sacredness, which is already interwoven and intrinsic. Rather, for the spiritual person, there is a propinquity between the presence of sacred existences and the experience of those existences. If a spirit(ual landscape) changes, is harmed, or benefited, the person also feels this. The person is attuned to the constant porosity of different experiences and existences, and this attunement is as much an ontological state as an existential one. Intentional acts

of connection in rituals are about offering gratitude and seeking connection, rather than engaging in sacrifice, entreaty, or appeasement. Fundamentally, they are about respect and reverence for the grace of Country's life-giving abundance.

A sacredness that is inseparable from the mundane intermingles with all domains of life. For instance, since the sacred has a connection to interpersonal relationships, then the role of wise council from an elder has a sacred component. Since the sacred is connected to food gathering and the preservation of life, then learning about food is sacred, as is playing with children. The same goes for finding water, tool-making, and other skills that help a community survive and thrive. Effectively, the sacred is infused in, and co-emergent with, the banal via the role of ritual and ceremony as creative repetition (rather than simply secular routine), which cultivates conscious intentionality in almost all aspects of everyday material existence. However, anthropologists and sociologists of religion have tended to ignore the distribution of sacred presences throughout these domestic forms of life, concentrating instead on forms of sacredness that retain the separateness and distinctiveness present within classical forms of Eurocentric religious practice. Thus, in Eurocentric accounts, the model of the witch doctor, the Aboriginal man (or woman) of high degree, medicine or clever-man/woman, shaman, healer, bard, sage, seer, or spirit-medium predominates. The focus of analysis is those spaces and figures which we associate with the strange and odd as tokens of transcendence. Although it is true that such 'prophets' are indeed odd people, it is also the case that eccentricity was, and is, much more prevalent in Aboriginal cultures than in the conformity of modernity, and this peculiarity was, and is, normative in Aboriginal societies, and so not strongly demarcated.

Anthropologists have struggled to explore the deeper spiritual and transformative aspects of Aboriginal ceremonial rituals. Even in the presence of living Aboriginal cultures, contemporary studies of religion find it difficult to generate conceptual structures that can explicate Aboriginal religion/spirituality without falling into seductive conceptual categories inherited from Eurocentric studies of religion. Country is alive with the interconnectedness of the sacred and the prosaic in various facets of life, challenging conventional sociological perspectives on religion and highlighting the role of ritual and ceremony in imbuing everyday existence with sacred significance.

5. Being on and in Country as Sacred Ritual

'Layering'—the interwoven, nested connections of sacred patterns of life—informs the psychology of Aboriginal spiritual experience (Nicholson 2023). Practically, this means that imaginal aspects of Country, Aboriginal praxis, and orality provide the basis for any psychological explanation of meditative introspection in an Aboriginal context. This differs from standard approaches where the tendency is the analysis of a given contemplative practice into its constitutive techniques (e.g., 'open-monitoring', 'focused attention', etc.). This section examines stories of Country that provide the basis for a first-person, psychological account of meditative introspection. We begin by outlining why first-person perspectives are vital for any account of the meaning and significance of ritual. We then provide examples from elders walking on Country while preparing for ritual and use a further analogy about environmental activism to illustrate our argument.

Sacredness, from an Aboriginal perspective, is a form of good observation and attention (Gay' Wu Group of Women 2019, chp. 2); it is the careful navigation of Country and the patterns of human and more-than-human systems that constitute it. As such, ritual on Country is not a spectator sport. If you are not participating in the ritual, you are unlikely to know what is consequential to it. Thus, it is often problematic to rely on anthropological accounts of Aboriginal rituals since the observers of these rituals are generally not also participating in them. Mountford (1962) could not fully participate in many of the rituals he made notes about. For a non-participant, it is extremely difficult to discern what the important elements of the ritual are. For instance, although Elkin includes details that pertain to highly restricted information in his descriptions of rituals (e.g., the use of cutting and insertions into the flesh, the role of blood, and the use of crystals and quartz), the

mere presence of such elements does not necessarily mean they are the most important features of the ritual. The emphasis on secrecy and strangeness diminishes the role that interactions between Country and the body may have played. Arguably, discussions of Aboriginal spirituality need to return to connection with Country rather than revisit fetish or incongruity.

The prior section described how Aboriginal religious phenomena fall outside the standard models of Eurocentric scholarship. However, in addition to misrepresenting religious experiences and structures of the sacred, post-Enlightenment scholarship of religion also tends to display a common methodological error. As well as interpolating a false separation between the sacred and the everyday, and the religious figure and the ordinary community, Eurocentric approaches tend to privilege another form of separation, in that they rely on third-person observation that remains fixed in the distinction between the observer and the observed, not recognising that reliable access to reality occurs via a process of communicative engagement and relational intimacy between knower and known (Mathews 2022). Aboriginal epistemologies, by contrast, operate within 'panjectivity', which encompasses both subjectivity and objectivity, as consciousness in context (i.e., direct, first-person experience that is unmediated by ego-selves) (Allen 2022). Panjective consciousness is neither literal nor figurative, and, for this reason, is difficult to describe. However, it can be critically explored via an examination of what it is not, and by metaphorically describing what it is akin to (Allen 2022).

Since Eurocentric models tend to assume that third-person perspectives are the best way to gain insight into what is really happening in a ritual, the observer, deprived of any direct experiential access, can only compare what they observe with extant categories sourced from their own previous experiences, other studies and the history of religions. This not only leads to the misrepresentation of Aboriginal ritual, ceremony, and sacredness, but it also misrepresents how the human species encounters sacredness: as a first-person experience. Aboriginal peoples consistently describe their lives as infused with sacredness within a consecrated cosmos, distributed throughout life, not just confined to specific moments within linear, dissected clock-time.

Aboriginal perspectives are not just introspective or based on the subject's idiomatic experience, they are already entangled, diffuse, diffracted, and encultured. The idea of private revelations captures the way a ritual brings an individual's experience into a given set of consensual convergences, but it overstates the role of individuated subjectivity in the process. Participation in rituals is not the domain of a singular individual so much as it is a process of forming connections to community, place, and the holistic sacredness of the collective, a way of constantly re-consecrating the cosmos, and sharing subjectivity as communal co-becoming.

I personally experienced how being on Country can become a contemplative practice when I was walking with Uncle Max through an area near Gosford in New South Wales, Australia. Max was talking to us about Country. Someone asked: How do you walk in Country? Max replied: Carefully. Then, we walked on. Max saw something on the side of a dry creek bed and went to pick it up, explaining that he would use it for the smoking ceremony we would perform that afternoon. He said that if you know what you are looking for, you can find it on Country. Imagine a group of elders walking to another Country: perhaps some ceremony would occur to welcome the group onto that Country; each group has different things they bring to that welcome. If an important element of the ceremony is needed, the elements of the ceremony are all around the participants. If you know what to look for, you can spot it in Country. If what you are looking for is not there, the absence itself could be significant and indicate a change in the focus of a practice. When an initiated person navigates Country in a sacred way to generate 'ritual', they look around to find what is needed. Country is showing you what you need; Country's layers become revealed through relationships. Only some people can see Country in the way that Max did; Country only reveals itself to knowledge holders. Even so, Country is not hidden from perception.

The first-person experience of ritual sacredness provides eyes to see and ears to hear (or, at times, eyes to hear and ears to see).

First-person experience also explains what sacredness is. A common (especially initial) colonial experience of the so-called 'bush' or 'outback' in so-called Australia is fear, danger, disorientation, terror, horror, and uncanniness (Gildersleeve 2021). There is nothing to eat out here; how are they still alive? How did that person know where to dig to find that yam? Why are we hungry when they are not? Colonists thought there was some weird hidden magic to Aboriginal flourishing, but there was nothing mysterious about it: Aboriginal people knew Country while colonists did not.

It would not be appropriate to describe the intricacies of a complex initiation or other ritual, so here is an analogy to illustrate how ritual functions in Aboriginal spirituality and community. Many protesters in so-called Australia perch themselves on trees to prevent logging (Mackay and Schmitt 2019). When learning to climb a tree with ropes, you need to observe things closely. You need to know which tree or limb is safe for you to climb and able to hold a platform. You need to learn how to tie knots, but also why the knot is being tied that way in case you get into trouble. You need a community to pass you food and take your waste away, and not every member of the community will have been in your position, so they may need to be told what to provide you and when. All these things help you to protect Country. Ritual is like this: it introduces you to different parts of Country, and shows you how to be there safely enough, and how to protect in service to Country. Coming out of such ritual, you see the world differently. Now, when you look up at a tree, as well as seeing its beauty, you look to see if it could support you, to see whether the branches are safe for you. This is what it means to say that we are immersed in manifold realms, which we can learn to perceive, inhabit, co-mingle, and grow with. Your experience becomes increasingly layered, not only in relation to the event itself (here, the anti-logging action), but also to the materiality orbiting each event. For example, if I wore a beret during the action, and I was proud of what we did on that day, then when I wear it, I remember that pride: the hat has an aura about it due to the actions it participated in. In a ritual, an ordinary object, a stick, a cup, a candle, becomes imbued with importance because of how it is fused and bonded in a co-experience with you. In this way, but to a much greater depth and breadth, the materiality of Country is imbued with spirituality.

6. Dadirri as an Example of Aboriginal Contemplative Practice

Dadirri is a prominent Aboriginal contemplative tradition from Northern Australia (the Northern Territory (NT)), of which Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr-Baumann is the foremost representative in the contemporary era. Miriam-Rose's descriptions of dadirri suggest that it involves the pairing and interdependence of meditative introspection and extrospective awareness of the processes of Country. That is, the general contemplative experiences, as well as the unusual or 'peak' experiences, that arise in dadirri are conditioned by both psychological and environmental factors. In other words, when the right intentional factors are present, engagement with the living systems of Country is a contemplative experience. And since Aboriginal cultures "encourage reflective engagement in all activities" (Graham 2023, p. 8), it is likely that all Aboriginal nations experience in their care of Country an equivalent of dadirri. Being on Country is essentially contemplative. One implication of this is that Aboriginal stories about Country and the living systems within it can be read as descriptions of introspective and extrospective contemplative experiences.

Dadirri involves a 'practice' of deep listening, which bears resemblances to nature experience practices. In nature experiences, however, nature is generally conceived as a relatively inert, passive participant in the contemplative practice. The purpose of being in nature is to calm the mind (Macaulay et al. 2022), support the contemplative practice (Muneghina et al. 2021), and enhance the benefits that are associated with the contemplative practice being undertaken (Ray et al. 2020). Nature is the setting or backdrop for the contemplative practice, and in this sense the environment is secondary to the introspective, intentional elements of the experience. In dadirri, however, Country is an active participant.

For this reason, dadirri is not just a nature experience. Instead, it is 'a deep and sustained process. . .a learning about Indigenous practices of ethical relationality' with the totality of beings who form Country (Deverell 2023, p. 47).

Several interpretations of dadirri express it as a general way of being, and at the same time, as a contemplative practice comparable to other practices such as nature experiences (O'Donovan 2001). While comparing dadirri with other practices is valuable, there are limitations to interpreting dadirri in primarily psychological terms by analysing the various contemplative techniques that one may detect within it. For example, one might say that listening in dadirri implies a stance of openness and receptivity, and in this sense approximates what Eurocentric taxonomies of contemplative processes refer to as 'open-monitoring' (i.e., a metacognitive awareness of thoughts arising during introspection, Lutz et al. 2015; Bishop et al. 2004). Likewise, since the observation of natural processes requires maintaining attention over a sustained period, one could presume that focused attention (or 'soft fascination') forms part of the practice. Given the way that listening is related to observing living processes, then dadirri has a sense of sustained observation of specific things, with a distinct emphasis on curiosity. Hence, dadirri could be conceived as a practice of sustained, attentional, open-monitoring. While this may well all be correct, the practice of dadirri can only be properly interpreted by seeing it in the context that Miriam-Rose brings to it in her work on Country.

Miriam-Rose's illustrations in *People of the Dreamtime*, authored by Alan Marshall (1978), help to elucidate this. The illustrations show the lives and activity of animals, their young being cared for, and the cycles of life in Country. The illustrations show that listening, or waiting, brings with it knowledge of Country. These illustrations note that what is being listened to is not just Country, as an Aboriginal version of topos, but the cycles of life in this particular place, breathing with Country in order to listen deeply and connect. Seen in this way, dadirri is not only a set of technical processes, but a way of observing Country which can be, or has been, labelled as contemplative.

When read in terms of the living systems of this place, Miriam-Rose's comments on dadirri describe a way of being that reveals things about where she is:

> "And now I would like to talk about the other part of dadirri which is the quiet stillness and the waiting. When twilight comes, we prepare for the night. At dawn we rise with the sun. We watch the bush foods and wait for them to ripen before we gather them. We wait for the right time for our ceremonies and our meetings. The right people must be present. Everything must be done in the proper way. Careful preparations must be made. We don't mind waiting, because we want things to be done with care. Sometimes many hours will be spent on painting the body before an important ceremony" (Ungunmerr 1988).

The 'outcomes' of the practice of dadirri are that you know the conditions/patterns that bring certain flowers, birds, and clouds into your Country. The practice of listening is essentially about the practical process of living on Country, working with Country, being dependent upon Country, which means the introspective or cognitive activities of dadirri are found by analysing stories of Country. The teaching of dadirri is thus not a transmission of contemplative techniques; it is a teaching about how to be on and with(in) Country. And it is through learning how to be in Country that the requisite psychological/contemplative elements are acquired. In this sense, dadirri is not primarily introspective. Instead, it is the contemplative observation of experience, and of Country, in a non-dual sense.

Country is something we learn, even though nothing is hidden. Country is so complex you need to spend (a lot of) time with it. Listening to Country is an intentional learning (Lumber et al. 2017). The flow of life, of Country, can be the flow of meditative consciousness if one spends time intentionally and attentively listening to and learning about Country (Lymeus et al. 2018). Thus, if someone experiences the flow of the natural cycles on Country, regardless of whether a person seeks to apply a technique that is explicitly introspective (or features elements in a contemplative, non-dual, introspective and extrospective, fashion), experiences (and stories) of natural cycles on Country arise. Moreover, Country itself acts

as the condition of these experiences, which means that the source of unusual experiences (e.g., awe) can be, and indeed must be, topographic, if one is to adequately grasp how Aboriginal connections to Country function across, and in, the outer world.

7. Necromantic Parenthesis

Fear of death is keeping us apart from one another, while a lack of connection with death also separates us from the things we value and need. I had something like a near-death experience once during meditation. While meditating, I felt the sensations of an aneurysm that I had in 2017 return, but this time, I knew what it was, and I felt like I was dying. It was sharp and frightening. As it moved through me, I saw that all my thoughts, beliefs, and ideas would not prevent me from dying. I realised that my breath, too, was something I could not take with me. And while parts of my consciousness might persist, I had no certainty about this. As I faced death, everything I held important was being put aside. As it turned out, I was not actually dying; when I came out of the meditation, all my ideas were gone, and when I looked around, I saw the world, and the river, and heard the water, and this seemed enough for me. After this, I felt water, food, and breath as intensely sacred; an expectation of death brought me back to appreciate the sacredness of those things that made and make me human.

Familiarity with death (and other facts of life) can come through the ritual experience of death. In Aboriginal cultures, this is achieved via ongoing 'little deaths' involving the ingestion of entheogens, days of physical exertion (dancing, singing, chanting, stomping, walking, running, etc.), fasting, pain, discomfort, and other forms of revelatory austerity. In this way, we can face death, and by facing it, free ourselves of our fear, and anxiety, and all our futile clinging to life. To face and befriend death, to learn to carry it inside, is to bring yourself closer to your own life and those around you than you ever imagined possible. Death brings us close to those things that sustain us. When we strip back Aboriginal ways of being, familiarity with death (including communion and communication with the dead) is woven into the manifestations of rituals and ceremonies: they are about food, water, flesh, spirit(s), and Country.

Eurocentric culture is undergoing an experience of death. This consists of the collapse of capitalist extractive economics and consumer–industrial modes of existence (Bendell 2023), with ongoing colonial violence (directed outwardly and inwardly) and ecocide demonstrating to those who reside in the coloniser cultures the true cost of Eurocentric ways of life. No sane person can believe that the meaning of human life is the violent acquisition of capital. As this deception collapses, for those who can see, the real value of being human is to be conscious, to have clean water, air, good food, each other, song, dance, art, etc. Our purpose in being human is to live viscerally and vividly, cherishing the short time of consciousness we are afforded. We are called to gently, intentionally, strive for balance and equilibrium with maturity, discernment, and wisdom for ourselves and the planet, until our consciousness passes from us to whence it came. We must comprehend more and more deeply that reality is a blended continuum, an indivisible duration in which there is no essential difference between me and the rest of the universe, at any time or place, and hence, I have not really come from anywhere else and there is nowhere else for me to go (Allen 2022). Our paper is, in this sense, a reflection on how spirituality looks once we stop over-prescribing layers of meaning onto spaces that are already sacred, intrinsically holy, meaningful, and replete with wonder; saying instead: behold, this is enough!

8. Conclusions

When a person is learning how to collect food, they are invited to sense a multiplicity of relations which are functionally interdependent with one another. When a person of High Degree is leading an initiation, they introduce specific stories/practices that pertain to special, sacred spaces, and learning content, which are different from, but overlapping with, other stories/practices. However, like learning about food, the process is a distinctive form of knowledge rather than a part of life that is radically differentiated. You learn about

the sacredness of food; I learn about the sacredness of insects, perhaps through some origin stories of my Country that are reserved for certain people. The knowledge I have of this place may be something exclusive to myself and a select few, but this knowledge is no more important nor of a higher degree of sacredness when compared to the knowledge of other places. The knowledge is collective, and the measures by which a certain knowledge type has authority over another may vary radically depending on the person-place-time context.

Aboriginal cultures and societies are profoundly context-sensitive and specific, especially in comparison to how later (16th–21st Century) Eurocentric reflections on culture and society emphasized abstract generalities. This indicates that a given dynamic around sacredness is subject to revision, depending on the community's needs, flows, and pulses. The weighting of 'sacredness' does not remain static or stand with a specific voice in the community as the eminent proclamation of sacredness; in contrast to how a priest or minister remains the persistent voice of sacredness that a community consults with on matters of spirituality. Sacredness is disbursed, disseminated, and dispensed rather than corralled into a specific person, place, or time to the exclusion of other people, moments, or sites. Each person has a voice which is peculiar and particular to the knowledge they hold. People hold multiple stories/practices, while each story/practice would (usually) be held by multiple people. Aboriginal cultures express sacredness in a far more scattered and contextual fashion. Aboriginal ontologies consistently affirm interdependence and describe the nested and layered aspects of life as a palimpsest of continual be(com)ing. This conveys a central insight: the living Aboriginal experience of Country, the relationship that kin have with Country as a living system comprising wildlife, water, air, sky, and everything, can only emerge from a range of learnings. Reflection and introspection are conditions for participating in the living systems that form the Aboriginal experience of Country.

Aboriginal accounts of Country are the basic premise for a spiritual psychology (Tassell-Matamua et al. 2021). The pattern made by the whole society is recognisable in each thread of life, with all these combined threads making the whole. The whole is more than its parts; the whole is in all its parts (Kwaymullina 2019). To dwell within the eternal, spirit–substance flow of life, rather than the anxiety-ridden, if–then, endless flow-charting of mere living, is to plunge into the ritual architecture of wondrously unique, textural (not textual), sensorial portals to the infinite givenness of first-person experience that exists beyond the barrier of thought which separates us from immaculate, manifest, rippling reality. In embracing the heart- and gut-based experience of a shared, psychic, intertwined existence-scape, rather than a head-based, narcissistic, ego-driven world, we are called to conscious, embodied, loving, reverent co-liberation with each other within the spontaneous, emergent, complex, self-organising, living cosmos.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, Y.P. and C.W.J.; methodology, Y.P. and C.W.J.; writing—original draft preparation, Y.P. and C.W.J.; writing—review and editing, Y.P. and C.W.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Acknowledgments: Thanks to Tom Hardman for editorial support in preparing this manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

Allen, Darren. 2022. *Ad Radicem*. England: Expressive Egg Books.

Baglin, Douglass, and David R. Moore. 1970. *People of the Dreamtime: The Australian Aborigines*. New York: Walker/Weatherhill.

Bell, Hannah Rachel. 1998. *Men's Business, Women's Business: The Spiritual Role of Gender in the World's Oldest Culture*. Rochester: Inner Traditions.

Bendell, Jem. 2023. *Breaking Together: A Freedom-Loving Response to Collapse*. Bristol: Good Works.
Bishop, Scott R., Mark Lau, Shauna Shapiro, Linda Carlson, Nicole D. Anderson, James Carmody, Zindel V. Segal, Susan Abbey, Michael Speca, Drew Velting, and et al. 2004. Mindfulness: A proposed operational definition. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice* 11: 230–41. [CrossRef]
Deverell, Garry Worete. 2023. *Contemplating Country, More Gondwana Theology*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
Dunbar, Robin. 2022. *How Religion Evolved and Why It Endures*. London: Pelican.
Durkheim, Emile. 1965. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. New York: The Free Press.
Eliade, Mircea. 1960. *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Reality*. London: Collins.
Elkin, Adolphus Peter. 1994. *Aboriginal Men of High Degree. Initiation and Sorcery in the World's Oldest Tradition*. Rochester: Inner Traditions International.
Gay' Wu Group of Women. 2019. *Song Spirals: Sharing Women's Wisdom of Country through Songlines*. Sydney: Allen and Unwin.
Geertz, Hildred, and Clifford Geertz. 1975. *Kinship in Bali*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
Gildersleeve, Matthew. 2021. Place, Ecological Dynamics and Football. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy* 15: 139–55. [CrossRef]
Graham, Mary. 2023. The law of obligation, aboriginal ethics: australia becoming, australia dreaming. *Parrhesia* 37: 1–21.
Harisson, Tom. 1972. The Advent of Islam to West and North Borneo (An Attempted Reconstruction of Some Possible Sequences). *Journal of the Malaysian Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society* 45: 10–20.
Kwaymullina, Ambelin. 2019. Respect, relationships, renewal: Aboriginal perspectives on the worlds of tomorrow. *Westerly* 64: 121–35.
Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2020. *How God Becomes Real, Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Lumber, Ryan, Miles Richardson, and David Sheffield. 2017. Beyond knowing nature: Contact, emotion, compassion, meaning, and beauty are pathways to nature connection. *PLoS ONE* 12: e0177186. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Lutz, Antoine, Amishi Jha, John D Dunne, and Clifford Saron. 2015. Investigating the phenomenological matrix of mindfulness-related practices from a neurocognitive perspective. *American Psychologist* 70: 632–58. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Lymeus, Freddie, Per Lindberg, and Terry Hartig. 2018. Building mindfulness bottom-up: Meditation in natural settings supports open monitoring and attention restoration. *Consciousness and Cognition* 59: 40–56. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
Macaulay, Rose, Kate Lee, Katherine Johnson, and Kathryn Williams. 2022. Mindful engagement, psychological restoration, and connection with nature in constrained nature experiences. *Landscape and Urban Planning* 217: 104263. [CrossRef]
Mackay, Caroline M. L., and Michael T. Schmitt. 2019. Do people who feel connected to nature do more to protect it? A meta-analysis. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* 65: 101323. [CrossRef]
Marshall, Alan. 1978. Illustrations by Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr. In *People of the Dreamtime*. Melbourne: Hyland House.
Mathews, Freya. 2022. Conservation needs to include a 'story about feeling'. *Biological Conservation* 272: 109668. [CrossRef]
Mountford, Charles Pearcy. 1941. *An Unrecorded Method of Manufacturing Wooden Implements by Simple Stone Tool*. Adelaide: Royal Society of South Australia.
Mountford, Charles Pearcy. 1962. *Sacred Objects of the Pitjandjara Tribe, Western Central Australia*. Adelaide: Government Printer.
Mountford, Charles Pearcy. 1976. *Before Time Began*. Melbourne: Thomas Nelson.
Muneghina, Orso, William Van Gordon, Paul Barrows, and Miles Richardson. 2021. A novel mindful nature connectedness intervention improves paranoia but not anxiety in a nonclinical population. *Ecopsychology* 13: 248–56. [CrossRef]
Nicholson, Mandy. 2023. Remembering country through the durt (stars). In *The Art and Science of Meditation*. Melbourne: University of Melbourne.
O'Donovan, Dan. 2001. *Dadirri*. Kensington: Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit.
Parker, Katie Langloh, Henrietta Drake-Brockman, and Elizabeth Durack. 1895. *Australian Legendary Tales*. Sydney: The Bodley Head.
Radcliffe-Brown, Alfred Reginald. 1968. *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*. London: Cohen & West LTD.
Ray, Travis N., Scott A. Franz, Nicole L. Jarrett, and Scott M. Pickett. 2020. Nature enhanced meditation: Effects on mindfulness, connectedness to nature, and pro-environmental behavior. *Environment and Behavior* 53: 864–90. [CrossRef]
Reed, Alexander Wyclif. 1970. *Myths and Legends of Australia*. Sydney: A.H. & A.W. Reed.
Roberts, Ainslie. 1969. *The Dawn of Time: Australian Aboriginal Myths*. Adelaide: Art Australia.
Sahlins, Marshall. 2022. *The New Science of the Enchanted Universe—An Anthropology of Most of Humanity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
Selby, Henry A., and Ira R. Buchler. 1968. *Kinship and Social Organisation: An Introduction to Theory and Method*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
Tassell-Matamua, Natasha, Nicole Lindsay, April Bennett, and Bridgette Masters-Awatere. 2021. Māori cultural identity linked to greater regard for nature: Attitudes and (less so) behavior. *Ecopsychology* 13: 9–18. [CrossRef]
Troy, Jakelin. 2023. Standing on the ground and writing on the sky, an indigenous exploration of place, time, and histories. In *Everywhen, Australia and the Language of Deep History*. Edited by Ann McGrath and Laura Rademaker. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, pp. 37–56.
Ungunmerr, Miriam-Rose. 1988. Inner Deep Listening and Quiet Still Awareness. Available online: https://www.miriamrosefoundation.org.au/dadirri/ (accessed on 12 November 2023).
Worms, Ernest A., and Helmut Petri. 1998. *Australian Aboriginal Religions*. Nelen Yubu Missiologial Series. Kensington: Nelen Yuba Missiological Unit.

Yunkaporta, Tyson. 2019. *Sand Talk*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.
Yunkaporta, Tyson. 2023. *Right Story, Wrong Story*. Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company.