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Kim McCaul

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24

The making of a Simpson Desert clever man

Kim McCaul
Culture Matters Consulting

1. Introduction

Across Aboriginal Australia there is a category of people, both men and women, who use a combination of medicinal plants, physical manipulation and energetic and psychic healing in providing ‘health care services’ to their community. They play an important social role, covering the domains of medical practitioner and psychologist, as well as spirit medium and exorcist. While the names for this category naturally vary across language groups (e.g. Wangkangurru *minparu*, Diyari *kunki*, Pitjantjatjara *ngangkari*), in English these people are consistently referred to as ‘doctors’ or ‘clever people’.

Two comprehensive studies on these ‘doctors’ were published around the middle of the twentieth century. Petri (1952) was published in German and remained obscure and inaccessible to most Anglophone researchers until its recent translation (Petri 2014). By contrast Elkin 1994 is widely known. Elkin coined the expression ‘men of high degree’, a phrase that captured the fact that these people are extremely learned in all aspects of their culture, above and beyond the level of most of their compatriots (Elkin 1994)¹.

As a topic of inquiry, doctors exerted a fascination on European commentators from the earliest period of colonization. On the one hand, this may have been due to the strange and fascinating stories that often surrounded them, including tales of supernatural powers and experiences. On the other hand, it may have

¹ The focus in early ethnographies, including Elkin’s study, is almost exclusively on clever *men* (the Gason quote below is a significant exception). Yet during native title research I have regularly encountered stories of women who are believed to have abilities and traits that would appear to be the same as those attributed to male doctors, and even in the highly gendered Western Desert, female *ngangkari* are common and well regarded (NPY Women’s Council 2013). As such it appears that the early emphasis on men is more reflective of a research bias than the actual cultural reality of traditional Aboriginal Australia.

been simply a reflection of the centrally important role these people played, and despite the dramatic social changes experienced by Aboriginal societies across Australia, continue to play in many Aboriginal communities (e.g. McCaul 2008; NPY Women's Council 2013).

Here I will be analysing an account recorded by Luise Hercus in 1968 from Mick McLean, an Arabana-Wangkangurru man from the Simpson Desert-Lake Eyre region of South Australia, who described what was involved when he was 'made' a doctor or *minparu*. This article follows a number of others that have commented specifically on clever men from the Lake Eyre region, although they were exclusively focused on the Diyari, the south-eastern neighbours of the Wangkangurru. The Diyari attracted intense early ethnographic interest (e.g. Gason 1879, Howitt 1904, Reuther 1976, Siebert 1910), and as early as 1879 the mounted trooper and amateur ethnographer Gason (1879: 283) provided an account of how a person became a *kunki* among the Diyari:

The Koonkie is a native who has seen the devil when a child (the devil is called kootchie), and is supposed to have received power from him to heal the sick. The way in which a man or woman becomes a doctor, is, that if when young they have had a nightmare or an unpleasant dream, and relate this to the camp, the inmates come to the conclusion that he or she has seen the devil.

This is clearly a highly abbreviated description, but it nonetheless shares a key element with many subsequent accounts, namely the role of a spirit (*kutyi*, translated by Gason as 'devil') who interacts with the future doctor during the sleep state, as if in a dream.

The Lutheran missionary Otto Siebert, who served at Killalpaninna Mission on Cooper's Creek in the 1890s, provided an equally rudimentary description in which if the postulant is able to see a *kutyi* this is interpreted as a sign that he is now a *kunki* (Siebert 1910: 55).

Berndt & Vogelsang (1941) provided a more detailed account of a doctor's 'making' among the Diyari, including a substantial Diyari text in which a man, identified by his Diyari name, *Palkalina*, describes how he became a doctor. Again ancestral spirits played a key role in the process, teaching Palkalina certain rituals that he does not identify (Berndt & Vogelsang 1941: 370-372).

The importance of spirits and dream or trance states to the making of doctors is ubiquitous in both the nationwide surveys of Elkin (1994) and Petri (2014).

As described below, a spirit also played a key role in the process by which Mick McLean became a *minparu*; to that extent his account follows this well established pattern. But beyond simply confirming features that are already well known and documented in the existing literature, Mick McLean's description of his own experience adds important and valuable additional information to what is essentially a piecemeal corpus of variable quality.

To my knowledge it represents the only Arabana-Wangkangurru account of the initiation of a traditional doctor, thereby adding yet another cultural group to the record. It is especially valuable because it consists of Mick McLean's

first-hand account, rather than simply a summary by a researcher who may have obtained a first-hand account, but likewise may have only been given a generic account by a regular community member. The value of the account is increased, because through his extensive work with Luise Hercus we know that Mick McLean was highly intelligent, extremely knowledgeable and a reliable consultant. This is important because anthropologists and amateur ethnographers have often dismissed the kind of experiences described by McLean and the world view that underpins them as the fantasies of primitive minds (Jedrej & Shaw 1992). It is clear that Mclean was anything but, and in my view this invites a reconsideration of the cultural preconceptions with which we might approach accounts like his.

2. Mick McLean *Irinyili*

Mick McLean *Irinyili* was born in the Simpson Desert, circa 1888. He spent the first 12 years of his life living in the country of his ancestors until his family left the desert, eventually living on what had become a cattle station on Arabana country (Hercus 1985). Luise Hercus was first told about Mick McLean in 1965 when she sought advice from Norman Tindale prior to her initial fieldwork in northern South Australia. Tindale suggested that ‘she should look out for a Wangkangurru man with a Scottish-sounding name, who had unique knowledge of Aboriginal language and culture’ (Gara & Hercus 2005: 9). That same year she met McLean and began a collaboration that continued until his death in 1977. Hercus describes the significant contribution of McLean in the introduction to her Arabana-Wangkangurru grammar (Hercus 1994: 2):

He made me aware of the importance of traditions and we went on expeditions twice and even three times a year gradually covering most of the north-east of South Australia. Over a long period of time he recited all the vast store of oral literature that he held.

In Gara (this volume) and Gara & Hercus (2005: 16-17), Luise Hercus reflects on Mick McLean’s approach to teaching her during fieldwork:

Mick McLean’s methodology was impeccable: he would plan each field trip and say ‘this time we will go along the Woodmurra Creek, we will go to Manarrinna and I will show you all the places along the way and then we will go to Woorana and go back a different way ...’ The only disadvantage of these neat plans was that he – and we – would be most disappointed if rain or some trouble with the car stopped us from following the plan. Every evening he would sing, following particular song cycles. This was all thought out beforehand, e.g.: ‘I will sing the Two Boys all the way this trip. Tonight I will take them as far as Parraparra’.

Mick McLean was well aware of the dramatic social changes affecting his people and the accompanying loss of traditional knowledge. He was

deliberately and skillfully transmitting his vast body of cultural information for posterity (Hercus 1989: 105).

McLean was fluent in Wangkangurru, Arabana and Lower Southern Arrernte. In addition he had a good working knowledge of Diyari, through time spent working on Murnpeowie Station, and of the Western Desert Antakirinya variety, following the easterly migration of large numbers of Western Desert people into Arabana country. Not only did he speak those various languages, but he knew religious songs and creation narratives in all of them.

As a result, his contribution to the record of the totemic geography of the Lake Eyre basin was immense. While he was not necessarily the sole consultant, he contributed significant information and songs to at least 32 major story lines as well as another 13 more localized creation narratives relating to an area that stretches from the Simpson Desert and Dalhousie in the north to Port Augusta and Murnpeowie in the south, and from Indulkana in the west to Innamincka in the east (Gara & Hercus 2005: 21-23). The acquisition and maintenance of such a vast, multilingual store of cultural tradition and his skill in conveying it for the record are testament to McLean's keen intellect and inter-personal intelligence.

3. The making of Mick McLean

Luise Hercus recorded Mick's account in Maree in 1968, while documenting songs from him, his sister Topsy McLean, another Wangkangurru man called Jimmy Russel, and Kuyani woman Alice Oldfield. The original text is in a mixture of English and Wangkangurru and I reproduce a full transcript with interlinear translation in the Appendix below. The following is my paraphrase of the account.

The account starts after Alice Oldfield just finished singing a song. Mick McLean suggests that this song had originally been transmitted by an *ampaka*, a spiritual being translated by Hercus as a 'changeling' (pers. com.). Alice herself then suggests that it was in fact the deceased 'old man Toby', who in spirit form had provided the song, to which Mick responds, 'my old man'.

This prompts his reminiscence of the time this old man 'took his spirit'. This happened when Mick was camping at a place called *Kadni-milharu*. Mick was lying down on one side of a fire, his cousin on the other side. As soon as Mick fell asleep, he saw the spirit of the old man approaching him with a huge club (*kanti*). The spirit man raised it up and brought it down on Mick, 'putting him to sleep', i.e. making him lose consciousness. He did this to give Mick the powers of a doctor. This involved him 'putting large things' into Mick's body. These 'things' were blazing with flames and made Mick feel as if he were burning up. The following day Mick and his cousin moved on to Margaret Springs, which is associated with a snake from the Two Snakes history (Hercus & Potezny 1995), and he continued to feel himself 'burning up'. The 'things' were too hot (and overwhelming) for Mick, who wanted to focus on his station work, and so he 'chucked them away'.

Having explained this, Mick acknowledges that Luise may not believe him and emphasises that what he is saying is true; the dead man really 'burnt him',

he ‘cooked him’ on a big fire. Then Mick clarifies that of course it was only his spirit that was burnt, not he himself. Following this it is ambiguous whether the remainder of the account actually applies to Mick, or whether he is explaining what would happen if a person did not ‘chuck away’ what he was given by the spirit. As Mick explains it, the experience leaves you so sick you feel like you are dying, and you must rest for a week. If you want to become a *minparu* you cannot seek support from an already practicing *minparu*, but have to go through this period alone. During this phase you may only drink water. If you eat anything it will come straight back out. The reason for this is that the spirits are working on your guts (‘cutting off’ is the phrase used by Mick). Many dead people (spirits) gather to watch the initiate’s spirit being burnt and talk to him while this is happening. Again Mick clarifies that they are talking to his spirit, not to him. They tell him that he cannot eat fatty meats, only lean meats, and that from now on a spirit will accompany him and tell him the cause of sickness whenever he touches a sick person.

4. Discussion

Mick McLean’s account is very rich, and without the ability to now clarify some of his comments the finer details of his experience and understanding may not be fully recoverable.

His description is substantially more detailed than the accounts collected by Gason (1879) and Siebert (1910), and even the narrative from Palkalina recorded by Berndt & Vogelsang (1941). The process of being given the powers of a *minparu* does not simply involve seeing a spirit or experiencing a nightmare, although it is understandable why Gason might have construed it as such. A ‘dream’ in which one is being clubbed with a giant *kanti* and cooked on a fire by a deceased ancestor could easily be interpreted as a nightmare. More than simply a terrifying dream, however, this experience seems to have had very tangible repercussions, including physical sickness and the enigmatic references to being burnt and emitting blazes of fire.

As stated, Mick McLean’s account is ambiguous when it comes to whether the final stages of the making, the week-long rest period and water-only diet, applied to him. He is quite emphatic about having thrown away the hot ‘things’ put into his body by the spirit. On the other hand, he is very clear that he was ‘burnt’ and ‘properly cooked’ so the actual experience may have included that longer period.

Where Mick’s account is both clear and makes another important contribution to the literature is his emphasis that the experience was not happening to him, but to his spirit. I expect this distinction would have been self-evident to the other Aboriginal people present and he was making it explicit for the benefit of the non-Aboriginal recorder.

Edward Burnett Tylor, one of the early anthropologists with an interest in traditional religious systems, suggested that ‘primitive people’ could not tell the difference between dream and reality (Jedrej & Shaw 1992). No doubt he

was influenced by accounts like these, where there appeared to be a blurring between physical and oneiric experiences. A superficial engagement with Aboriginal accounts, both of experiences such as Mick McLean's and of their creation narratives, may well lead to such an impression. While accompanying Luise Hercus on a field trip with Linda Crombie, another of her long term Wangkangurru collaborators, I found that Linda's narratives frequently blended historic events and family reminiscences with the actions of creation ancestors such that, as a new researcher in the area, I repeatedly had to confirm with Luise whether the information being given related to the former or the latter (Hercus & McCaul 2003). Just like the spirits of the dead who can be contacted in sleep states, so the creation ancestors of the Dreaming are tangibly present and interwoven with human life. The physical and non-physical are experienced as connected and not commonly disentangled in conversation, so this perspective can readily confuse the inexperienced outsider.

Similarly, many of the accounts about the 'making' of clever people compiled by Elkin may seem quite implausible if taken literally. Like McLean's account they involve violent actions that a person should not be able to survive such as disembowelment, strangulation or breaking of the neck (Elkin 1994:18-25). Naturally these accounts too do not actually describe physical events, a fact Elkin was quite aware of. But unlike McLean, it appears many of the earlier consultants did not specifically clarify this, and some of the early recorders either believed that their consultants were describing physical events or that they were confusing fantasy or dreams with reality.

From the Aboriginal perspective, however, such experiences are not matters of fantasy or dream, but encounters with a non-physical reality. As such, their accounts do involve a blending of the physical with the non-physical, but this does not, as Tylor suggested, reflect an inability to distinguish the two. Like McLean, people are quite aware that some experiences are physical and others non-physical. This does not, however, mean that the two are clearly demarcated or unrelated. By contrast, in the Aboriginal world view the physical domain is intimately and inseparably entwined with this non-physical domain. Unlike the Judeo-Christian religions, in which there is generally a clear divide between the physical life of the present and the non-physical life expected after death, Aboriginal societies view the two as co-existing and interacting. There are spirits of the dead, of the Dreaming ancestors, of nature (fauna and flora) and of various other types (see e.g. Clarke 2007; Hume 2002; Kenny 2004; Marett 2000).

Spirits can interact with humans in benign and malign ways. In Mick McLean's account spirits transmitted song knowledge (see also e.g. Hercus & Koch 1996) and of course the power to heal others. But spirits can also be harmful, causing sickness or accidents (e.g. Howitt 1996: 357). Humans, however, are not just passive victims to the whims of spiritual forces. Through ceremony and song humans can influence the spirit world to act in accordance with their wishes, be it to bring rain, ensure an abundance of game or harm an enemy. This is a basic part of the traditional Aboriginal worldview,

which on the basis of my native title work in numerous communities across Australia remains largely unchanged today, even if people's ability to be proactive through ceremony has often been greatly reduced. It is a worldview that places Aboriginal Australia squarely at odds not only with the everyday world view of most of non-Aboriginal Australia, but also with the accepted research paradigms of even the most sympathetic social scientists seeking to document and understand Aboriginal culture. For the most part we document that domain of our consultants' lives descriptively, but do not engage with the content as a reality.

When people like Mick McLean clearly and openly describe their unusual experiences I feel it behoves us to try to understand what they are seeking to convey. This is not just as an idea or a cultural construct, but potentially as an insight about an objective aspect of reality that our culture is ignorant of. But where do we start when the very foundation of his world view cannot be accounted for by our paradigms?

Elkin was ahead of his time when he sought to understand some of the accounts he collected about doctors by drawing on parallel accounts of seemingly paranormal feats by Tibetan Buddhist monks (Elkin 1994: 59-66). He was essentially trying to find validation in cross-cultural consistency. It was only in the 1960s that the anthropology of consciousness gradually emerged in the United States (Schwartz 2002) and, more recently, paranthropology has started developing as a discipline in the United Kingdom (Hunter 2010). These lines of research do not represent a homogenous field, nor do they operate from an agreed paradigm about the nature of consciousness or non-physical reality. But they broadly invite anthropologists to be open to incorporating their consultants' and their own 'extraordinary experiences' (Goulet & Young 1994) into the research process and to consider, at least in principle, paradigms that allow for the reality of non-physical experiences. How else do we do justice to remarkable people like Mick McLean, when they provide us descriptions of very personal experiences that do not fit into our model of the world?

I have elsewhere proposed a paradigm that could be applied to an anthropology of consciousness (McCaul 2003, 2010) and could meaningfully account for the kind of experience discussed here. There is no scope to set out in detail either the evidentiary basis for this paradigm or all its nuances. However, I will touch on two key aspects, of immediate relevance to Mick McLean's narrative. The first is an acceptance that human beings do have another non-physical body. This body survives the physical death of the human body and, during sleep and trance states, allows our consciousness to experience the subtle energetic dimensions inhabited by the deceased while we are still alive. This would account for how Mick McLean was able to interact with the deceased old man in his 'sleep'.

The second relevant aspect of this paradigm is its acceptance of an invisible but tangible energy referred to in this paradigm as 'bioenergy', but known more popularly by its Chinese and Japanese names *Qi* or *Chi*. The arousal of this energy through a range of techniques is well documented as potentially causing

significant increases in body temperature, and there are stories of Tibetan Buddhist monks able to melt frozen towels on their naked torsos in sub-zero temperatures (Vieira 1999).

Could a paradigm that includes subtle bodies and bioenergy explain Mick McLean's burning perceptions and the impacts his sleep-state experiences seem to have had on his physical body? Perhaps it could, and perhaps the knowledge held by people like Mick McLean would allow us to further refine our paradigms and open new lines of inquiry into areas of life that we as social scientists are only just beginning to research. One thing is certain: without the generous sharing of cultural knowledge by people like Mick McLean and the tireless recording of this by researchers like Luise Hercus significant domains of human knowledge, experience and understanding would have been lost during the colonisation of Australia.

5. Appendix – Mick's original account with interlinear translation

Mick McLean

They been find that, ampaka been give it!

a changeling, also a slightly malicious mythical being

...

Alice Oldfield

Mathapurda kumpira, mathapurdaru kakaru Toby-ri ngunji-nhingkarda.

old man dead, old man-by uncle-by Toby-by give-intensive_verbal_suffix

Mick McLean

Old man, my old man.

...

He take my spirit before, you know. Old man, kurunha mani-angkarda,

spirit he began to take away

you know I been – all the horse been moving round then, I come straight into

tharkayiwalhuku.

stand about for a while

He take my kurunha then. Spirit.

spirit

Luise Hercus

Unkunha anja?

Your father?

Mick McLean

*Old man, yea. Then when we start away camp along Kadni-milharu, dinner
Lizard-nose-from*

*time thangkarda. Get burnt then, really burnin' then. I never said nothing till
sit down*

*we get to Margaret Springs ... where that kanmari come back in the finish.
snake*

*... That's only Margaret they call 'em. This one where the kanmari finish is
snake²*

*Yurrilja.³ Kidni-kathini, that way, that side; big spring.
'twisting its tail/penis'⁴*

*Then there is Margaret [Spring] over there that side. Mankarra-kari see. Then
Seven Sisters (Spring)*

there is all the big spring everywhere then, oh, right back to Leonard. ... I seen 'm

... I lay down that way, facing back that way. Fire in the middle. That bloke, my

cousin back there, his old man a long time, Kemp⁵, he was on that side here see,

when I'd been asleep I could see that old man coming. I could see him, I was

*looking at him then. He come out with a big kanti. Biggest kanti ...
club club*

*[inaudible]. I see 'm come out like behind that tree, lift up his kanti put 'm down
club*

and finish me altogether. Put me to sleep. Next morning I get up, oh! I was just

² This snake is *Yurkunangku*, one of the protagonists in the Two Snakes History (Hercus & Potezny 1995).

³ The site *Yurrilya* features in the kangaroo story about the creation of Lake Eyre (Hercus n.d.).

⁴ Big Depot Springs.

⁵ Luise Hercus believes this is a reference to George Kemp's grandfather, old man *Warpili*, boss of the Grinding Stone History, from Pirlakaya, Mick McLean's birthplace.

*like fire burning. He wanted to give me doctor. ... Minparu ngunhilhiku
doctor to give*

*ukanha wayarnda.
him wishes*

He did give it to me, and I chuck'm all away (laughing).

Luise Hercus

*Minhaku?
Why?*

Mick McLean

*Too hot. Burn me. See I was working and you could see all that fire coming out
from me then, you could see blaze showing, you know. They're large things and*

*things on your body. What kumpira give it to you, you know. ...
dead person*

... [interruption of conversation]

Luise Hercus

You were telling me just when this girl came about the fire burning you.

Mick McLean

*Makara ngardaka. He did makara ngardaka, you know. You mightn't believe
fire-by burn-past fire-by burn-past*

*it, but he's true. One kumpira, all the dead men, you know. Well that one, dead
dead man*

man, he been properly cook me! Not me, you know he burn my spirit, put'm on

big fire. Dead fellows always roast you. Get your spirit back. Of course that

*didn't burn me, only the spirit. Your mungaRa, mungaRa
mind mind*

*nguparna, put you back again but you got to sit down week. Lay down very sick,
lie prone*

no other minparu allowed to touch you, if you want to be minparu.

Luise Hercus

Tell me that in Wangkangurru.

Mick McLean

Minparu malyka maRa kudninha nguRuru,
 doctor not hand put-should other-by,

minparu nguRuru, nhatjinangkarda nhayi
 doctor other-by watching continually here

thangkanha, warpinangkarda, by and by, sit down one week, half dead laying
 sit-should lying about continually

there.

...

Ngulpa katjiwiRi warpinangkarda. ... Drink only kutha, nothing to eat,
 sick grievously lie about water

thadlyu kutha punthanangkarda.
 only water drink continually

Cause all that got to come right through you. If you eat (laughing). They cut this

off, guts, every night. That kumpiraru ... partjarna what you been eat. And
 ghost-by all

when they fix you back, aratjamalhuku kudnangampa. He tell your spirit.
 fixing up for guts

He not telling you, but he tell your spirit. ... All the kumpira come together, see.

Kumpira partyarna maparndaayarna ukanha nhanhilhiku makara
 dead ones all meet up together him seeing-for fire-by

ngardarndanha.
 being burnt.

Maparnda partjarna. They line 'em up. ... Palkunga tharkalalhuku, ...
 meet up all flesh in in order to stand by him

tharka-tharkalalhuku, Like line, you see. And that kurunha he
 in order to stand and stand by him spirit

tell'm then, he say, "Untu nanhira? Athu nanhira yukarnda manilhiku.

You see? I see come to take

*He tell you, your spirit go then mantayiwalhuku all the way then. You can
in order to take away temporarily*

*see it quite plain and bring'm back. And he'll hit them kumpira then, start'm
dead person (ghost)*

*up. That's all right. They tell you then, "Malyka kathi marni-purru
not meat fat- having*

*tharniyu!" You got to eat lean meat! Marni-padni. You mustn't touch marni,
eat! fat-no fat*

*maRa warru thangkarda, malyka marni idnanha,
hand clean remain not fat touch-should*

*ha! They tell you, "Unkulu unkulu untu walta ngurunga idnarna
ha! When when you time other-at touch*

*pangkangkarda anybody.
sick person*

And he tell you. If he is bad there, he'll be right alongside of you, he tell me then.

(Hercus 1968: 15:35-24:54)

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