2. Splitting the Atom of Kinship: Towards an understanding of the symbolic economy of the Warlpiri fire ceremony

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Nic Peterson is probably not best known for his ethnographic description and analysis of ritual, but one of his early papers is a detailed and authoritative analysis of the Warlpiri ‘fire ceremony’ (Peterson 1970)—a ritual designed explicitly to enact and resolve community conflict. His approach to the fire ceremony was broadly structuralist, although more ‘British’ than ‘French’ in style. That is, in examining the ceremony, he concentrated on its sociology rather than its symbolism—more particularly on certain contradictions and tensions existing between matrikin and patrikin in relation to the bestowal of nieces/daughters. In his view, ‘the most economical explanation’ of the conduct of the ceremony ‘is a model of ZD [sister’s daughter] exchange’ (Peterson 1970: 200)—a model that affirms the interests of a woman’s uncle over those of her patriline.

In this chapter, I take a fresh look at the ‘fire ceremony’ and, building on insights from my PhD thesis (Morton 1985), which Nic Peterson supervised, I lead his analysis in the direction of the symbolism that he avoided in 1970. In particular, I ask why it is that conflicts conditioned by bestowal arrangements should be mediated by fire. In the introduction to his paper, Peterson (1970: 200) notes that the phrase ‘fire ceremony’ could be wrongly construed, because it is merely ‘descriptive, referring to self-inflicted burns and the use of flaming torches’ rather than ‘ceremonies...associated with fire “totems”’. As I intend to show, however, this lack of totemic significance does not signal any symbolic deficit on the part of fire. To the contrary, I illustrate that fire symbolism is not only at the heart of the ceremony, but also central to Aboriginal relationships as a whole—specifically as a basic force or element involved in ‘the icon of incest’ (Wagner 2001: 81–96), its ‘passions’ (Mimica 1991a, 1991b) and the ‘sacrificial’ dynamics that modulate its energies (Layard 1945).

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Before broaching the matter of symbolism, I will, however, first furnish a brief ethnographic history of the fire ceremony in order to situate Peterson's 1970 account in relation to other, more recent accounts. As will become apparent, this brief history suggests several important clues to the meaning of fire in the ceremony.

Heated Exchange 1: A brief ethnographic history of fire ceremonies

It is unclear how long the Warlpiri and allied groups have been performing the fire ceremony, but anthropologically speaking the story begins in 1901 when Spencer and Gillen witnessed a Warramungu ritual performed for them during their famous 'across Australia' expedition (Spencer and Gillen 1912). They published a full description of the rite in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904: 375–92) and Peterson (1970: 200) introduced his own later account of the ceremony by quoting them as follows: 'They described the ceremony in detail but commented (1904: 392) that they "...could find no satisfactory explanation of what it meant" except that "...its object was to finally settle up old quarrels and to make the men friendly disposed towards one another.' In his diary, Gillen (1968) described how the ritual involved what he called 'fire combat' between 'men who have had serious quarrels', with this combat somehow wiping 'off all bitterness' and promoting 'a friendly feeling'. He added that people's spectacular use of fire in the ceremony reminded him of 'fiends escaped from Hades' and that '[n]othing more utterly savage could be imagined' (1968: 255). More soberly, he and Spencer wrote in *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (1904: 379) that the ceremony was characterised by 'the greatest license' and a kind of saturnalian overturning of 'the ordinary rules which strictly governed daily life' (p. 380). They concluded that the

fire ceremony is...regarded as a method of settling accounts up to date and starting with a clean page—everything in the nature of a dispute which occurred before this is completely blotted out and forgotten. It may, perhaps, be best described as a form of purification by fire. (Spencer and Gillen 1904: 387)

They did not follow up this last idea—and neither did Peterson more than 60 years later, when the next anthropological episode of the fire ceremony began.

Peterson's paper did not focus on Warramungu, but on their Warlpiri neighbours (for further Warlpiri references in this volume, see Altman, Curran, Keen and

Saethre). He described a cognate ceremony—*Buluwandi*²—in more precise detail and built on Spencer and Gillen’s initial observations about the ritual being moiety related. His argument about how the ceremony worked revolved around the central idea of conflict between matrikin and patrikin over the bestowal of women—a matter I return to in more detail below. Apart from the kinship and marriage angle, however, Peterson briefly noted that the ritual, in its various guises, involves quite typical totemic dramas:

The Walbiri [Warlpiri] perform three versions of the...ceremonies...Two have names similar to...those mentioned by Spencer and Gillen...they are *Djariwanba* (Spencer and Gillen’s *Thaduwani*...) and the *Ngadjagula* (Spencer and Gillen’s *Nathagura*...). The third version, *Buluwandi*...is only of recent standing in its present form...*Djariwanba* belongs to the djuburula, djagamara, djambidjimba and djangala subsections, which together form one moiety. The mythology associates it in particular with the travels of *Yaripiri*, a snake, of the djuburula and djagamara subsections...Both *Ngadjagula* and *Buluwandi* belong to the opposite patrimoiety (djabaldjari, djungarai, djabunungga and djabangari). The mythology of the former relates to the travels of the [rufous hare wallaby], *mala*...*Buluwandi*’s most important associations are with a bird [the barn owl] and a snake [possibly the death adder]. (Peterson 1970: 201, and see pp. 202–3)

In 1977, the (then named) Institute of Aboriginal Studies edited and published screen footage of a Warlpiri *Ngatjakula* (= *Ngadjagula*) ceremony, which had been filmed by Roger Sandall (with Nic Peterson’s assistance) in 1967 (Sandall et al. 1977), this being the ceremony described in Peterson’s 1970 paper. Kim McKenzie did the final editing and the film carried a voiceover commentary by Peterson. The film was short and sharp, condensing the lengthy ceremony into about 20 minutes of footage, giving the viewer not only an explanation of the ritual’s conflict resolution—framed as something between opposing patrimoieties (‘owners’ and ‘managers’)—but also a sensuous and dramatic feel for the force of Gillen’s ‘fire combat’. In contrast with Peterson’s 1970 paper, however, the film’s explanatory framework was simple and low key.

By 1977, however, anthropology was fully in the land rights era and the insertion of politicised *angst* into anthropological representation. When in the early 1980s Eric Michaels came to Australia to investigate what he later came to call ‘the Aboriginal invention of television’ in Warlpiri country (Michaels 1986), filmic representation came to be increasingly hitched to discourses and practices

2 In this chapter, I use spellings of Warlpiri words as they are found in the original texts cited. These usually differ from conventional contemporary spellings (for example, *Buluwandi* would now be rendered as *Purluwanti*), but I have avoided the cumbersome procedure of indicating contemporary spellings at every turn.

of self-determination, resistance and cultural maintenance. To some extent, this made the recently released Institute of Aboriginal Studies film something of a target for cultural critique. Michaels (1989: 58) came to note that the fire ceremony, as described by Peterson, was '[v]isually and thematically' the kind of ritual performance that 'satisfies the most extreme European appetite for savage theatre', although he admitted that the 1977 film failed to properly approximate such theatre 'partly due to the technical limitations of lighting' and 'partly because of the observational distance maintained throughout the filming'—the latter making the film 'more properly "ethnographic"'. Indeed, it was to be later observed by Marcia Langton (1993: 77) that Peterson's ethnographic commentary was 'rather in the style of David Attenborough'.

Michaels (1989: 57) referred to the ceremony as 'Warlukurlangu' ('Belonging to Fire'). His presence in Warlpiri country, along with the general development of the Warlpiri Media Association, fired people's imaginations about the potential for 'self-representation', sometimes specifically in relation to the fact that the fire ceremony might be 'out there' for general viewing in an appropriated form—although senior men remained appreciative of the 1967 film tapes (Michaels 1986: 67). The Warlpiri Media Association in fact filmed another version of the ceremony in 1984, although it has never been used outside Warlpiri country. Michaels' discussion of this film tends to suggest that the 1984 film was more authentic than the 1977 film, if only because the Institute of Aboriginal Studies was, at about the same time, transferring the Sandall et al. footage to videotape to 'put into general distribution without...informing the community that this was being done' (Michaels 1989: 67). So by now the emphasis had shifted from an alien, albeit 'scientific' or 'expert', understanding of Indigenous meaning in the fire ceremony to an understanding of its 'politics of representation'.

The Warlpiri Media Association later approached Ned Lander and Rachel Perkins to make another version of the fire ceremony that could be placed into wide public circulation to balance the representation of the ritual made by Sandall, Peterson and McKenzie. This was due to the fact that the different versions of the ceremony are moiety based, so that the moiety opposed to the one that staged the ceremony released on film in 1977 desired to have its own version in public circulation (Langton 1993: 79). Sponsored not only by the Warlpiri Media Association, but also by the Warlukurlangu Artists Association and the Australian Film Finance Corporation, the result was the 1993 film *Jardiwarnpa* (= *Djariwanba*) (Lander et al. 1993)—a film that not only illustrated the fire ceremony from an opposite moiety point of view, but also extended the ethnographic presentation to almost an hour.

While *Jardiwarnpa* was a far more comprehensively Aboriginal-owned film than *Ngatjakula*, it also extended the anthropological explanation of the ceremony in significant directions, particularly in its relation to the ritual's mythic

underpinnings in the story of *Yarrapiri* (= *Yaripiri*) the snake (Mountford 1968). The film revealed, for example, that the *Yarrapiri* mythology is also involved with an emu dreaming, as well as with hare wallaby and dingo stories (also see Mountford 1968 for further detailed information; and Capell 1952: 126–7). Peterson's *Ngatjakula* voiceover, however, was displaced in *Jardiwarnpa* by the voice of Aboriginal singer/songwriter Kev Carmody, who is perhaps best known for his collaboration with Paul Kelly in the writing and performance of the land rights anthem *From Little Things Big Things Grow*, which was released about the same time as *Jardiwarnpa*. The voiceover script was written by Marcia Langton, who also helped to brief Lander and Perkins. So by now, *Aboriginal* anthropology and an anthropology more 'in the style of David Attenborough' were seemingly in tension in the public domain, with both Michaels (1989: 23) and Langton (1993: 80) endorsing the idea that this struggle over representation was a matter of what one Warlpiri man called 'fighting fire with fire'. There is no doubt that the 1993 film, having been commissioned for release on SBS Television, was the bigger, better and brighter production, and it was far more anthropologically informative. It was also unarguably more inclusive and thus more contemporary for its time.

The metaphor of 'fighting fire with fire' was a potent one in this context, although it was not taken far by commentators; however, Langton did say:

As explained by Peterson, the ceremony does not concern any fire totem, but rather the name refers to the spectacular use of fire. Of all the public ceremonies or public sequences of Warlpiri ceremony, this is the most visually spectacular. Fire, a powerful and polysemic symbol in the Warlpiri iconography, has the special significance of ritual cleansing as, for instance, in the practice of seasonal burning of tracts of land. There is also a more esoteric significance as becomes apparent in the polysemy of symbols which appear in the ceremony, and in the paintings and dances. (Langton 1993: 77)

The suggestion was, then, that the measured use of fire was, as Spencer and Gillen had originally suggested, some kind of 'purification', but how this might have been played out in the ceremony and what the polysemy of fire might consist of were questions left hanging in the air, in spite of much relevant mythology and song being aired in the 1993 film. Most certainly, Langton was correct in drawing attention to the idea that Warlpiri associate fire with 'purification' and the 'cleaning' of country (Vaarzon-Morel and Gabrys 2009: 469–70); and it is also true that (camp)fire is associated with the warmth of sociality (Musharbash 2008: 28–32, 113–23; Vaarzon-Morel and Gabrys 2009: 469). The viewer, however, could seek a more expansive explanation only by

viewing the film(s) and calibrating their readings against what had previously been written—most particularly by Nic Peterson. As far as I know, no-one has yet taken the time to do this.

Heated Exchange 2: Peterson’s analysis of the ceremony

Figure 2.1 is a slightly modified version of the key diagram in Peterson’s paper (1970: 209). It encapsulates his argument about the way in which the fire ceremony works and configures the situation using a ‘Djabaldjari’ (= Japaljarri) man as ego, although this is no more than a convenience of exposition; the diagram would work the same way through the substitution of any other male subsection name. What is critical is the substantive kin relationships involved, which I spell out below.

Figure 2.1 Ceremonial interaction between ‘owners’ and ‘managers’ in the fire ceremony

The ceremony involves a kind of intergenerational, cross-patrimoiety ‘attack’ by uncles (MBs) on their nephews and by sons-in-law (DHs) on fathers-in-law—

and such attacks are by fire; ego is burned through the agency of an uncle or a son-in-law. On the other hand, ego is also principally supported by men of the opposite patrimoiety but of his own generational level (cross-cousins/MBSs), and secondarily supported by other members of the opposite patrimoiety who are of both his own and adjacent generational levels—his own nephews (ZSs) and fathers-in-law (WFs) and his brothers-in-law (ZHs/WBs); or, as Peterson (1970: 211) puts it, ‘in terms of the interaction of the owner and worker [= manager or guardian] patrimoiety males, the primary attack is between generations but within matrimoieties, and primary support within generations but between matrimoieties’.

The initial part of this summation refers to the ceremony being generally conceived of as workers punishing the wrongdoings of owners, where owners are those who have patrilineally inherited the ancestral identities and paraphernalia acted out and used in the ritual performances, while managers, who police such performances, are principally drawn from the opposite patrimoiety. The matrimoiety divisions, however, are significant inasmuch as one’s opposite matrimoiety is called ‘the origin of shame’, referring particularly to the fact that it contains one’s mothers-in-law. As such, it is also called ‘without anger’. On the other hand, one’s own matrimoiety is referred to as ‘lacking shame’, implying that it is also ‘with anger’ (Peterson 1970: 210).

These references to anger and shame are the first real clues to the meaning of fire in the ceremony, since anger, if not shame, is an emotion readily understood in terms of fire. There is, in fact, a Warlpiri myth located at Warlukurlangu (near Yuendumu) in which a mean-spirited and greedy blue-tongue lizard father sorcerises his two devoted sons for unwittingly killing and feeding him a taboo animal. The old man’s angry intent is expressed as a raging, uncontrollable bushfire, which chases his sons everywhere they run, constantly burning them on all points of their bodies (Nampijinpa 1994). Something not dissimilar happens in the fire ceremony when Gillen’s ‘fiends from Hades’ scenario is in full swing near the end of the proceedings, when the intergenerational attacks occur through the delivery of showers of fire from blazing ceremonial poles. These intergenerational attacks are primarily intra-matrimoiety relationships and are therefore ‘without shame’ and ‘with anger’.

On the other hand, the intra-generational axes of support occur a little earlier in the ceremony when ego, acting in the capacity of a totemic ancestor, must voluntarily approach a fire, light one or two stick bundles and inflict burning on *himself*. While some relatives may try to maximise such self-harm by making sure stick bundles are fully alight, cross-cousins (MBSs) in particular attempt to minimise it by brushing sparks away from the body. These intra-generational relationships are also cross-matrimoiety ones so are ‘with shame’ and ‘without anger’—although secondary support for ego comes from relationships that are

both inter- and intra-generational, as well as both inter- and intra-matrimoiety. It is clear, however, that primary tensions in the ceremony are between ego on the one hand and his uncles and sons-in-law on the other, which Peterson (1970: 211–13) explains at length in terms of ZD exchange. As he states:

[T]he conflict which the...ceremonies attempt to resolve results from an opposition of interest between patrikin and matrikin in the bestowal of the former's Ds who are the latter's ZDs. That is...an individual will, when he is the father of a girl being bestowed, conceptualize his rights in terms of D-bestowal; but when he is the MB, in terms of ZD bestowal. The alternation of these positions is reflected in the alternation of the...ceremonies in which the owners in one become the workers in the other. (Peterson 1970: 213)

Domestic Warmth and Wildfire

Kinship and marriage concern the reproduction of life and it has been said that, universally, fire is the 'ultra-living element' (Bachelard 1964: 7). But it is also fundamentally ambiguous:

It is intimate and it is universal. It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky. It rises from the depths of the substance and offers itself with the warmth of love. Or it can go back down into the substance and hide there, latent and pent-up, like hate or vengeance. Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be so definitely attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and apocalypse. It is pleasure for the *good* child sitting prudently by the hearth; yet it punishes any disobedience when the child wishes to play too close to its flames. It is well-being and it is respect. It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. It can contradict itself; thus it is one of the principles of universal explanation. (Bachelard 1964: 7)

This fundamental ambiguity undoubtedly pervades Aboriginal ideas about fire (Langton 2000:7), giving the 'ultra-living element' the kind of widespread material, social and moral significance that anthropology has tended to subsume under the rubric of 'kinship and cosmology' (Maddock and Barnard 1989).

Bachelard (1964: 36) does not discuss much Aboriginal material, although one of the myths he draws attention to is a central Australian (Arrernte) myth of the origin of fire. In this story, fire was originally possessed by a large euro (common wallaroo) whose travels were shadowed by a man of the same totem. Unable to strike fire, the man learned how to cook food by watching the euro in its camp,

but he was still unable to make it by himself. Eventually, he killed the euro and examined its body carefully to see where fire was secreted. He pulled out the animal's long penis, dissected it and extracted a 'very red fire' (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 446), using it to cook the euro meat. After this, the secret of fire passed into his possession and he found himself able to make it at will.

This scenario is highly reminiscent of the operations of circumcision and subincision. While I am unaware of any Warlpiri myth explicitly about the origin of fire, we do know that Warlpiri connect initiation ceremonies and genital modification with the bifid reproductive organs of macropods, as well as with an imputed early mythical use of fire for genital modification (Cawte 1974: 120–37). We know, too, that the life of an uncircumcised initiate is symbolised in initiation by a firestick held by his mother (Meggitt 1962: 289, 294) and that the actual moment of circumcision is signified by the dashing to the ground of a blazing ceremonial pole and the mother's extinguishment of the firestick, symbolising the initiate's 'death' at the hands of his circumciser (Meggitt 1962: 294, 303–4; and see Curran, this volume). Wild (1977: 16) reports that there is an initiation dance that is actually called either 'Fire or Foreskin (or Boy with Foreskin Intact)' and in which 'fire is a metaphor of circumcision' (1977 :17). In the performance, circumcision is likened to the creation of 'burning sticks left over after [a raging] fire had passed through the country' (Wild 1977: 17). Since circumcision is ideally performed by a father-in-law on his son-in-law (Meggitt 1962: 299–300; Peterson 1970: 209), one can say that, in initiation, the former 'draws fire' from the latter, and does so by employing his own 'fiery rage' (cf. Strehlow 1971: 398–403). It is this very relationship, contained within ego's matrimoiety, which is marked by Warlpiri as 'lacking shame' and 'with anger'.

Some of this material resonates with Maddock's (1970) study of 'Myths of the acquisition of fire in northern and eastern Australia', which made significant generalisations about Aboriginal fire symbolism. In the first place, it was evident to Maddock (1970: 197–8) that fire universally signifies what he called 'life in the flesh'—a phrase somewhat reminiscent of Bachelard's notion of the 'ultra-living element'. In the second place, Maddock (1970: 176) showed how the acquisition of fire invariably engages themes of reciprocity—as in his key (Dalabon) myth in which the rainbow bird forcibly takes firesticks from their selfish owner, the crocodile, in order to share them with humankind. Indeed, the basic theme in the myths discussed by Maddock is not simply that fire is discovered, but that it passes from more or less exclusive possession to wider human circulation. This resonates with the function of initiation, which deals with initiates' transitions from kinship to affinity and creates 'the social person' through 'elaboration of the ties of relatedness to others' (Myers 1986: 228).

According to von Brandenstein (1978, 1982), section and subsection terms did not originate simply as adjuncts to kin classification, but have functioned as general classifiers of natural qualities circumscribing what he calls a vast 'Aboriginal World Order' (1978: 149). The basic form of this classification, he suggests, is quadripartite and involves principles identical to those involved in Empedoclean philosophy, with its universal categories of air, earth, fire and water (cf. Hallam 1979: 78–90; Langton 2006). The basic structure of this quadrant is the negation of a negation—a 'structure of bisected dualities' (Mosko 1985: 3). Hence, as indicated by von Brandenstein's diagram (1978: 134, reproduced as Figure 2.2): warm : cold :: dry : moist. This formula implicitly references a master opposition between Maddock's life in the flesh (warm and moist) and death (cold and dry). Von Brandenstein's view (1978: 135, 137) is that the systematic articulation of the quadrant, in its association with other qualitative oppositions, models a cycle of general reproduction involving the interpenetration of cosmic 'humours': 1) choleric (classically associated with fire); 2) melancholy (associated with air); 3) sanguine (associated with earth); and 4) phlegmatic (associated with water).

Figure 2.2 The basic properties of four sections

I particularly draw attention to the warm sectors 1 and 2 in the quadratic structure. Sector 1 (warm and dry) is associated with sharpness (von Brandenstein 1982: 53), particularly in relation to active aggression and 'sun, fire, heat' (1978: 135), while Sector 2 (warm and moist) is associated with pliability and gentleness (1978: 135, 1982: 53–4)—an implicit opposition between the masculine and feminine qualities of heat associated with initiation as a movement from the exclusive female possession of contained, domesticated fire to its capture and aggressive release in a masculine domain. In Warlpiri *tjiliwiri* (an antonymic 'upside-down' or 'funny' speech learned by young men after circumcision; see also Curran, this volume), water or rain must be referred to as fire (Hale 1971: 474–5, 478, 481), implying that at some fundamental level these two semantic elements are identical or 'con-fused', as they are in 'life in the flesh' and in their common mythical conjunction (Dussart 2000: 181; T. G. H. Strehlow 1969a: 144–9; cf. Vaarzon-Morel and Gabrys 2009: 472). In Arrernte 'shame talk' (*angkatja kerintja*—C. Strehlow 1913: 28–33), a code cognate to *tjiliwiri*, wife and mother must be called by the one word, *eroatitja*, which is also used to refer to certain

creatures and the sun, which is understood to be a woman whose rays are her pubic hairs (C. Strehlow 1907: 16–17). The corresponding masculine term, *ngeraruka*, is used for father and male elder, but likewise refers to corresponding animals, as well as the cabbage palm (which is part of a fire dreaming—T. G. H. Strehlow 1969b: 25–6). It also refers to a brightly flaring fire—one that ‘blazes up’ and for a time ‘rages’. This division of fire into masculine and feminine elements is consistent with von Brandenstein’s (1982: 102–3) suggestion that Aboriginal totemic fire is generally plural in character, and also resonates with Bachelard’s global statement about the ambiguity of the ‘ultra-living element’.

Splitting the Atom: The containment and release of fire

Throughout a large part of central Australia, there is widespread belief in a sky-world occupied by beings dwelling in a state of physical perfection. The most extensive and complex survey of this belief is by Róheim (1972: 64–85), but the clearest description is by T. G. H. Strehlow (1971: 613–21) in relation to the Arrernte. The chief character among these perfect beings is a man who is eternally beautiful and in the prime of life; he is wholly human, save for his feet, which are those of emus. He has several wives, who are likewise beautiful and in the prime of life, although they have dingo paws for feet. The man and his wives have many children, but they are the same age as their fathers and mothers, similarly eternally youthful and with their gender marked by emu feet (sons) and dingo paws (daughters). As T. G. H. Strehlow (1971: 619) suggests, physical perfection and homeostasis are signified in these beliefs by role reversal and the elimination of exchange, since male emus raise their families without female assistance, while ‘dingoes, the main enemies of the emus on earth, have become in the sky the wives of the emus’, with the two species living in peaceful coexistence. Although Strehlow did not note it, dingo bitches are also exclusive parents (Corbett and Newsome 1975: 376–7; Meggitt 1965: 12–13), so that peaceful coexistence in this ideal world is totemically signified as marriage without intercourse—or what Róheim (1972: 80) calls endless and supreme ‘pleasure’ without ‘libidinal and aggressive trends’ (p. 86).

I have argued elsewhere (Morton 1985: 165) that this narcissistic self-sufficiency is an Aboriginal variation on the Hegelian theme of pure being as ‘not unequal to another’ and having ‘no diversity within itself nor any reference outwards’ (Hegel 1969: 82). The image is in fact based on totemic allusions to self-containment, since the male emu houses a penis within its own cloaca (King and McLelland 1975: 88–90), while a dingo bitch mirrors this situation by the possession of a particularly prominent clitoris, making it similarly androgynous

in character (Ewer 1973: 117). Hence, pure being is virginal (as either ‘uterine father’ or ‘phallic mother’), is ‘autonomous and dependent on nothing’ and simply ‘roots in itself’ (Jung 1953: 307). Hence, the sky is a place bereft of reciprocity; it is also a place bereft of ceremony, tending only towards sorcery and magic (Róheim 1972: 66–7).

The sky-dwellers’ family can be taken as a kind of ‘atom of kinship’ (Lévi-Strauss 1972: 72), whose nuclear structure is mapped at Figure 2.3, where the father/husband (F/H) and son (S/B) are both designated as Emu, while the mother/wife (M/W) and daughter (D/Z) are designated as Dingo. In formal terms, there is a situation in which gendered difference is not *relative* difference, but *absolute* difference; husband and wife are utterly distinct, as are father and daughter, son and mother, and brother and sister. Likewise, similarity is not *relative* similarity, but *absolute* similarity; father and son are completely alike, as are mother and daughter. That is, the family is a negative model of the dynamic quadrant represented by the quasi-Empedoclean principles outlined by von Brandenstein. While it *contains* those principles, it does not *express* them. It is pure potential.

F/H	W/M
Emu	Dingo
S/B	D/Z
Emu	Dingo

Figure 2.3 A central Australian atom of kinship

The diagram also illustrates how kinship and affinity are completely conflated. There is no distinction between a mother and a father’s sister, because the father’s wife is absolutely identical to the son’s sister. Likewise, there is no distinction between a father and a mother’s brother, because the mother’s husband is absolutely identical to the daughter’s brother. All of this implies a situation in which a son fully occupies the place of his father (and vice versa) and a daughter fully occupies the place of her mother (and vice versa). With no mother’s brother or father’s sister, it also follows that there is no such thing as a cousin, a niece or a nephew. Marriage may only be between a brother and a sister, with bestowal by their father and mother; and since adjacent generations are identical, such marriage is also both father/daughter and mother/son incest. All is kinship (identity) and nothing is affinity (relation), and energy (fire) and drive (desire) are wholly bound.

Initiation, as ‘symbolic castration’, can be construed as a transfer of energy from feminine containment to masculine movement, with the foreskin being regarded as ‘a female component of the body’ equated with both ‘feminine blood’ and ‘the sun’s rays’ (Munn 1969: 192, 203). To that extent, one is entitled to say that, in the Aboriginal situation, masculine fire represents the energy that is released when the self-sufficient atom of kinship is split or ‘smashed’ (Paul 1976: 343–5). This atom of kinship, however, is not that made famous by Lévi-Strauss (1972: 46–51, 72–3), since that family situation is already molecular. But neither is it quite the atom of kinship that Gillison has described for Melanesia:

Incest or the chaos it produces is not the consequence of a ‘bad’ or ‘wrong’ transaction but of *no* transaction; the purpose of exchange is not to link discontinuities but to create them. Rather than say, as has Lévi-Strauss, that ‘reciprocity...is the most immediate form of integrating the opposition between self and others’...I would say that reciprocity is the most immediate form of *creating* opposition between self and others. And rather than say that ‘the agreed transfer of a valuable from one individual to another makes these individuals into partners’...I would say the transfer separates them into individuals. (Gillison 1987: 199)

While splitting the atom of kinship certainly individuates along a generational axis, implicitly referencing generation moieties, it does so in just the way Lévi-Strauss describes—by ‘integrating the opposition between self and others’ and making ‘individuals into partners’ across a gendered moiety divide. Hence, fission and fusion occur simultaneously and dialectically, with ‘transactions’ dividing and uniting at the same time. While the singular atom is split, plural atoms are joined, so that unity lost (chaos) is also unity regained (order) (cf. Mosko and Damon 2005).

Since one cannot have sister exchange until one makes a distinction between sisters and cousins—which also implies that one cannot have niece bestowal until nieces are differentiated from daughters—we can more readily understand how initiation is correlative with both circumcision and the control of fire. Initiation is closely tied to bestowal and, among other things, installs an initiand’s intensely shameful and sexually prohibitive relationship with his mother-in-law (Meggitt 1962: 151–3)—hence the ‘with shame/lacking anger’ dialectic of one’s opposite matrimoiety (Peterson 1970: 210). Avoidance also circumscribes the relationship between an initiand and his father-in-law/circumciser (Meggitt 1962: 158, 190), yet a daughter’s husband’s attack on his wife’s father is one of the key axes of aggression in the fire ceremony and takes place within a ‘with anger/lacking shame’ relationship. This suggests that the ‘saturnalian’ fire ceremony somehow overturns relationships typical of initiation and its relationship to fire and bestowal.

Conclusion: The sorrow of the brothers and the burning of the fathers³

Owners approach the fire to burn themselves in the fire ceremony because, as Peterson states in *Ngatjakula*, they must acknowledge being at fault. He suggests that the problem relates to them exercising insufficient control over their sisters—although the niece-bestowal model explored in 1970 is more emphatic about problematic relationships between fathers and daughters, the latter being women in whom uncles also have a stake in bestowal arrangements. These two matters, while evidently linked, are not identical and it is possible to show that they are differently implicated in the two types of burning that happen in the fire ceremony.

In the *Jardiwarnpa* film, it is stated that the relevant ancestors committed ‘rape and murder’, for which they were punished by being chased, cornered and showered with fire. One ancestor is specifically said to have committed fratricide and to have stolen his brother’s wife, although another, who is blind, is portrayed as a man pathetically betrayed and abandoned by his relatives, for whom he cries and searches in vain. This myth fragment is associated with the way in which owners approach the fire to burn themselves, since the latter ancestor is said to ‘give himself up to the fire’ and burn himself ‘out of grief and rage at being deserted’, although at the end of the ceremony both ancestors are shown surrendering themselves to the fire in a similar way. Thus, while only one ancestor is reported as having committed a crime, the other ancestor shares his fate—and presumably also some responsibility for ‘rape and murder’ (see Mountford 1968: 63–7 for a possible description of related events). Since fire directed against the self is said to dramatise ‘grief and rage’, this presumably means that fire (rage) is directed inwards, manifesting itself as self-burning (grief)—a situation that duplicates the common situation where loss of someone or something dear leads to ‘self-punishment as often as to anger and revenge against the cause’ (Myers 1986: 117). In this particular part of the fire ceremony, then, there is no question of the owners venting ‘anger and revenge’, like the Warlukurlangu blue-tongue lizard man. They may only mourn, expressing ‘grief’ as ‘rage’ turned against the self—what can fairly be called a combination of guilt, remorse, humility and contrition.

‘Anger and revenge’, however, certainly do characterise events when the owners are finally burned by managers carrying blazing ceremonial poles. In *Ngatjakula*, a male owner is shown angrily walking away from the final scene, complaining that the delivery of fire had been too severe. In *Jardiwarnpa*, a

3 With apologies to Schieffelin (1977).

female owner similarly complains that she and her kinsmen had been ‘burned like dogs’. What is specifically revealing, however, is that the torches that burned these people are

mainly wielded by the younger men, often a number of unmarried men who have only been watching until the last night. Those who are a potential [son-in-law] to an ego have the motivation to burn their [‘father-in-law’] if there has been a delay or failure to give a daughter promised. [‘Sons-in-law’] are in a potential niece exchange relationship with ego’s [brother-in-law] who may have promised his [own brother-in-law’s daughter] to one man but have been thwarted by her father giving her to another [‘son-in-law’]. (Peterson 1970: 212)

This situation is remodelled in Figure 2.4, which illustrates tension between conflicting interests of patrikin and matrikin. The diagram also illustrates how the fire ceremony inverts initiation, because ‘firing up’ against a father-in-law displaces the latter’s ritual killing of a son-in-law—a killing that, as stated earlier, is marked by the dramatic extinguishment of a blazing ceremonial pole and for which the father-in-law will promise the son-in-law a wife (the father-in-law’s daughter). Implicit in this role reversal is a sexual threat against the mother-in-law and the denial of that ‘with shame/lacking anger’ relationship. Mother-in-law/son-in-law relationships figure prominently in *Jardiwarnpa* (although I cannot discuss them here), while illicit sexual commerce between men and mothers-in-law is a common ‘saturnalian’ theme in central Australian mythology (Meggitt 1962: 261–2, 1966: 113–20; T. G. H. Strehlow 1969a: 114–15). Moreover, the phallic nature of the burning ceremonial poles wielded by sons-in-law is obvious enough, in spite of Spencer and Gillen’s (1904: 380) assertion that the fire ceremony is ‘free from all trace of sexual license’. But while the sexual threat is implicit, aggression is explicit, suggesting an ambiguous situation similar to the one famously described by Freud (1913) in terms of a primordial desire to murder ‘the father’ and possess ‘the mother’. In this case, however, the murderous and incestuous scenario occurs in relation to mothers and fathers ‘in-law’.

Figure 2.4 Matrilineal and patrilineal interests in bestowal

Figure 2.4 also models niece bestowal, although it does so from an opposed point of view in relation to the reciprocal relationship between alternative fire ceremonies (cf. Peterson 1969: 34; and see Curran, this volume), because a father-in-law burnt in a particular ceremony is not the brother-in-law of the uncle who burns a nephew in that ceremony; rather, it is the father-in-law himself who, as a nephew, is burned by his mother's brother (as shown in Figure 2.1). Figure 2.4, however, illustrates the intrinsic symmetry involved in the tension between daughter bestowal and niece bestowal, both of which are encountered in Warlpiri country, along with their characteristic transactions (Maddock 1982: 79–80). While there are always likely to be problems in reconciling different interests, niece bestowal is the more legitimate form. As Meggitt (1962: 121) states: 'The mother's brother and [mother's mother's brother] of [a] girl consult her father in the matter of her betrothal, but they may over-ride his objections to their choice of a particular spouse.'

If the final acts of burning in the ceremony are principally attacks on fathers-in-law, it is likely to be uncles who are principally involved in ensuring that nephews do a good job of burning themselves at the fire. This is not explicitly stated in the ethnography, but seems to be an entailment of the way in which the ceremony is articulated by 'atomic' and 'nuclear' energies. Meggitt (1962: 121) states that the relationship between a father and his daughter is warm, affectionate and good humoured, with men surrendering their daughters to sons-in-law only 'with a show of reluctance' and often delaying obligatory

transfers—the very situation that makes sons-in-law ‘fire up’. While a son-in-law may express anger in this situation, it is also the case, however, that the father-in-law himself ‘is grieved by the thought that his daughter must eventually leave his camp’ (Meggitt 1962: 121). That is, he, like the ancestral figures who ‘give themselves up to the fire’, experiences remorse.

Meggitt (1962: 138) states that uncles take a ‘deep interest’ in their nephews and that affection felt for a sister ‘extends to her children’. Uncles are consulted about all important developments in their nephews’ lives, but the relationship is indulgent and jokey (Meggitt 1962: 139–40). Most significantly, an uncle gives his niece away in marriage—literally, since he carries her to her husband and at the same time ‘publicly announces the betrothal’ (Meggitt 1962: 140; also see Lévi-Strauss 1985:71–2). It is evident, then, that the relationship between uncles and nephews in the fire ceremony is, like that between fathers-in-law and sons-in-law, the inverse of normal circumstances, since an uncle’s indulgence turns to aggression. It is, however, aggression of a quite particular kind. While the action of a son-in-law against his father-in-law is intended to break the latter’s bond with his daughter, the action of an uncle against his nephew is intended to break the latter’s bond with his sister. These correspond with two opposing moments in the splitting of the atom of kinship: one cross-generational (F/D), the other cross-gender (B/Z)—the same two moments that Freud originally modelled (albeit somewhat differently) as, on the one hand, parricide and incest, and, on the other hand, remorse and avoidance.

Spencer and Gillen, then, were perhaps right to suggest that the fire ceremony is ‘best described as a form of purification by fire’, since nuclear-family energies are both ‘re-bound’ and ‘re-leased’ in the ritual proceedings. A brother’s grief and a son-in-law’s rage are fundamental forces serving to ensure that the nuclear family’s exclusive possession is avoided and continually surpassed. While the mother’s brother ensures that his nephew duplicates the same fission of the gendered sibling tie that distinguishes the mother’s brother from the father, the son-in-law ensures that his father-in-law guarantees the same fusion of opposites that allowed the father-in-law to originally obtain a wife. But as the periodic and cyclical holding of the fire ceremony indicates, the situation remains explosive from one generation to the next.

As Figure 2.1 suggests—albeit in a limited androcentric way⁴—the symbolic expression of fire is not exhausted by a brother’s grief and a son-in-law’s rage. There are numerous countervailing and mitigating forces embodied in other relationships, including those involving the warmth of compassion, which is

4 Figure 2.1 might give the mistaken impression that women do not figure prominently in the fire ceremony. As all the relevant ethnographic descriptions make clear, however, women *do* figure prominently in the proceedings, even though they do not appear to handle fire. Women are also influential in bestowal arrangements (Meggitt 1962: 127, 134).

itself organically related to grief and anger, as well as to shame and respect (Myers 1988: 594–600). Unpacking the further symbolic complexity of these embodied relationships is a task for the future, but for now I offer this partial analysis as an extension of the work of an erstwhile generous mentor who is now a warmly regarded colleague and friend.

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