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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are warned that this thesis may contain images, transcripts or names of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples now deceased. It may also contain historically and culturally sensitive words, terms and descriptions.

Becoming Contemporaneous with the Ancestors

An Existential and Faithful Approach to the Dreams and Deeds of Kuku Yalanji Elder Roy Gibson

Submitted by

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In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted in any form for another degree or diploma at any university or other institution of tertiary education. It should be noted, however, that some stories in this thesis rely on empirical material from my MA fieldwork and thesis (Aaberge, 2007) which I have reanalysed and theoretically reworked in this thesis. In particular, I rely on two stories in chapter 4: my medicine dream recounted in chapter 4.1 “Prelude” and dubu encounter in chapter 4.7 “The Test”. Two other short stories are also reworked from my MA material: The story about “Torch-slinger” in chapter 2.2 “What’s in a name” and the story in chapter 7.1 about “Oldfella” which was reanalysed to tease out Kierkegaard’s notions of “recollection” and “repetition”.

Information derived from the published or unpublished work of others has been acknowledged in the text and the list of references given. Generative AI technology was not used in the preparation of any part of this thesis.

As a candidate I also confirm that I have authored a publication as joint author. The article is based upon the findings of my PhD research and is referenced in the research where applicable.

The publication is:

Aaberge, B. R., Barnard, T., Greer, S., & Henry, R. (2014). Designs on the future: Aboriginal painted shields and baskets of Tropical North Queensland, Australia. *eTropic: Electronic Journal of Studies in the Tropics, 13*(2), 56-74. https://doi.org/10.25120/etropic.13.2.2014.3314

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Cultural Advice

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this PhD thesis may contain images and names of deceased persons.

Acknowledgements and Contribution of Others

Please note that many of the people I thank below have passed on.

This PhD thesis is dedicated to Roy Gibson. It is thoroughly inspired by his words and actions, although these are irreducibly rendered and reinterpreted by me. Critical aspects of the text have been worked out in dialogue with Roy over the years, and significant sections were read out loud for him to check, but that is as far as it goes, text-wise. As such, the thesis is my representation of Roy's words and actions, paired with my own existential appropriation and experience of these. And then there is a bit of my thinking in this thesis too. To say that this thesis was *written* collaboratively may be politically up to date, but it would be essentially misleading. Nonetheless, I owe this thesis to him. In familial settings we refer to each other as brothers. When accounting for our relationship to outsiders, I tend to refer to Roy as my *teacher*, and I think that better captures his relationship to me than "informant". An informant is someone you get your data from. A teacher changes the way you think, and by that token Roy has been the greatest teacher I have had. No living person has had such a transformative influence upon me as Roy, I am a changed man because of him, and it is this change that I aim to put into use in this monograph. However, it is still my voice and conceptual concerns that gives expression to this thesis. Thus, the representations, and the misrepresentations, within this thesis are mine.

Heartfelt thanks go to Roy's children Andrew, Katrina, Terrence, Janet, Kaylene and their mother Pauline Douglas and her family. Thanks also to Roy's brothers John Roberts, Edward, Rexie and Darryl Gibson and Darryl's wife Karen Gibson who for many years has served as chairperson of the Mossman Gorge Community Council, also known as *Bamanga Bubu Ngadimungku* (mostly referred to as BBN). I am especially grateful to Roy's sister Cynthia Roberts and her children Donna, Roberta and Hans Henning who let me stay on their property in Cape Tribulation. I am forever in the debt of Harold Tayley, CJ Fischer, Raymond Buchanan, David Buchanan, Brian Toby, Willy Denman, Shaun Creek, Tommy Creek, Greenbelt Pearson, all of whom I have learnt much from camping out together in Cape Tribulation and elsewhere. I also want to acknowledge valuable contributions from elders from the time of my first fieldwork for my MA in 2002; Peter Fischer up at *Buru* (China Camp), Polly Fischer, Henry Walker who often came south and camped with me in Cape Tribulation and Billy Denman in Mossman Gorge. Their knowledge and wisdom continue to inspire me. Lastly, I thank Roy's two grandchildren, Zion and Zaina Gibson, who from the

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Turning to the academics who have contributed towards my thesis, I want to start by giving my sincerest gratitude to my main supervisor Dr Michael Wood. Given the length of time of this PhD project, the supervisory team is bound to go through some changes, but Mike has been there with me from the start to end, even if that meant doing it pro-bono after his retirement. Mike is also the type of scholar whose "door is always open" and he has been extremely generous with his time for supervision, inspired chats and detailed feedback. Our perspectives have not always aligned, and we have at times disagreed. However, my thinking and writing over the years have changed for the better as a result of this productive engagement with Mike.

My secondary supervisor, Professor Jennifer Deger, also offered to keep supervising me after leaving JCU for Charles Darwin University, for which I am sincerely grateful. When I found myself confused and lost in my own writing and direction, Jennifer invariably provided clarity and reminded me to reconnect with my basic orientations before proceeding. What I particularly value is Jennifer's remarkably cogent and beautifully formulated feedback, both verbally and in writing. Her thoughts and reflections based on her experience with Yolngu people have been formative and inspiring for my own work.

Professor Rosita Henry formally joined my supervisory team towards the end of my project, but she has been a staple support for me ever since I first arrived in Australia for my first MA fieldwork in 2002. She was the first to read a full draft of my thesis while travelling to Norway and spent two days going through the entire thesis chapter by chapter with me, from which I benefitted greatly. In addition to her academic and intellectual contributions, I must also thank her for her kindness and helpfulness that I and many other of her students have felt and experienced in our precarious lives as PhD students.

My PhD project was initially tied to the ARC project *Objects of Possession: Artefact Transactions in the Wet Tropics of North Queensland, 1870-2013*, in which Rosita Henry, Russel MacGregor, Ton Otto and Michael Wood were chief investigators. Even though my PhD project ended up turning away from artefact collecting and transactions towards dreams and contemporary cultural manifestations, I learnt much from being part of this

multidisciplinary research team. During this time I cowrote the paper “Designs on the Future: Aboriginal Painted Shields and Baskets Of Tropical North Queensland, Australia” with Trish Barnard, Shelley Greer and Rosita Henry (2014).

Professor Ton Otto was my initial secondary supervisor (before moving to Aarhus, Denmark), and I owe him thanks for encouraging me to pursue my Kierkegaardian interests over the mentioned ARC project (although he too was part of the ARC team). Ton co-supervised an earlier version of the present chapter 4 “The Paradox of Truth and Believing the Absurd” and helped lift my spirit and gave me belief in writing the kind of thesis I have now submitted.

Although he has not played any part in my PhD thesis, I also want to thank Professor Bruce Kapferer who supervised my MA thesis, and who planted in me the idea to do fieldwork with Kuku Yalanji people in the first place. Many of the ideas I have developed in my PhD project had their seeds in my MA fieldwork, especially my own medicine dream discussed in chapter 4, as well as my first, rather undeveloped, attempt to utilise Kierkegaard’s thinking onto Aboriginal Dreamings.

I want to thank Rafaela Novelli for final formatting, footnotes and references check as well as proofreading chapter 4. I also want to thank Dominique Sandilant, Academic Services Officer at the Cairns CASE office, for always being helpful in administrative matters, as well as librarian Lise Vik-Haugen at Western Norway University of Applied Sciences for helping me with Endnote and formatting issues.

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Last, but not least, I want to thank Dr Daniela Vávrová for mentoring me in visual anthropology and ethnographic filmmaking. Although I do not consider my PhD project as visual anthropology in any sense, using a camera in the field, as well as editing and

transcribing video material, stimulated a renewed, more nuanced attention to detail and allowed for a richer analysis that this thesis benefits from.

Abstract

Many anthropologists have struggled with various paradoxes while trying to understand Dreaming stories recounted by Indigenous Australians. An example from my own fieldwork, reflected in my thesis title, refers to my friend Roy Gibson's avowal, that in a dream while asleep, he was contemporaneous, co-present and interacting with an Ancestral being as it created a known waterhole and "story place".

There have been different anthropological responses to such accounts. One response has been outright dismissal, positing a positivist notion of truth. A second, "representationalist", response has been "bracketing out" the ethnographer's own views, seemingly excluding truth from the analysis altogether. A more recent "multi-naturalist" approach argues for ontological self-determination and moving away from meaning to non-representationalist accounts of things, positing truth as "motile". This "ontological turn", has in turn been challenged by proponents of "critical realism" who reaffirm the "one reality, many cultural intakes" approach.

All these, excepting the first, make claims to study paradoxical alterity or religiosity "seriously". Common to most of them, however, are moves that either explain away, erase, reason out or resolve paradox from the final anthropological analysis. I find all these approaches unsatisfying for my own project to understand how Roy's dreams link Ancestral and human agencies.

In my thesis I argue for leaving paradox in the account, instead of resolving it. I let paradox demarcate the boundary between two ways of knowing truth: faith in subjectivity and objective reason. Following Søren Kierkegaard, I claim that there can be no objective answer to deeply ethical or religious questions regarding existential aspects of the Dreaming. These can only be known truthfully in passion and subjectivity. I argue that my existential engagement with paradox, unlike the above responses, can come to other insights and remain committed to a notion of truth without sacrificing a sense of wonder characteristic of such encounters with religious alterity.

One of Roy's more significant dreams gave him a vision of what was later to become manifest in a gate and visitor centre to control tourist traffic going past their community. My core argument is that Roy is in truth when he claims to have been given Ancestral knowledge in dreams, or indeed asserting contemporaneity and co-presence with Ancestors in dreams. Having received Ancestral knowledge in a dream myself, I came to appreciate such a revelatory epistemology as well as the Ancestral agency presented to me by Roy's dreams.

This thesis traces my existential engagements with paradoxes that arose while living with Roy, hearing about his dreams and stories, seeing his worldly achievements, and existentially aligning myself to a revelatory epistemology which includes Ancestral agency. Truth thus shifts from being objective and intellectual to something beyond words where one can, momentarily, establish contact and through it, become changed. My analysis is from this changed position: What I offer is a Kierkegaard inspired analysis of Roy's and my own revelatory experiences from a position of faith in Ancestral presence and agency.

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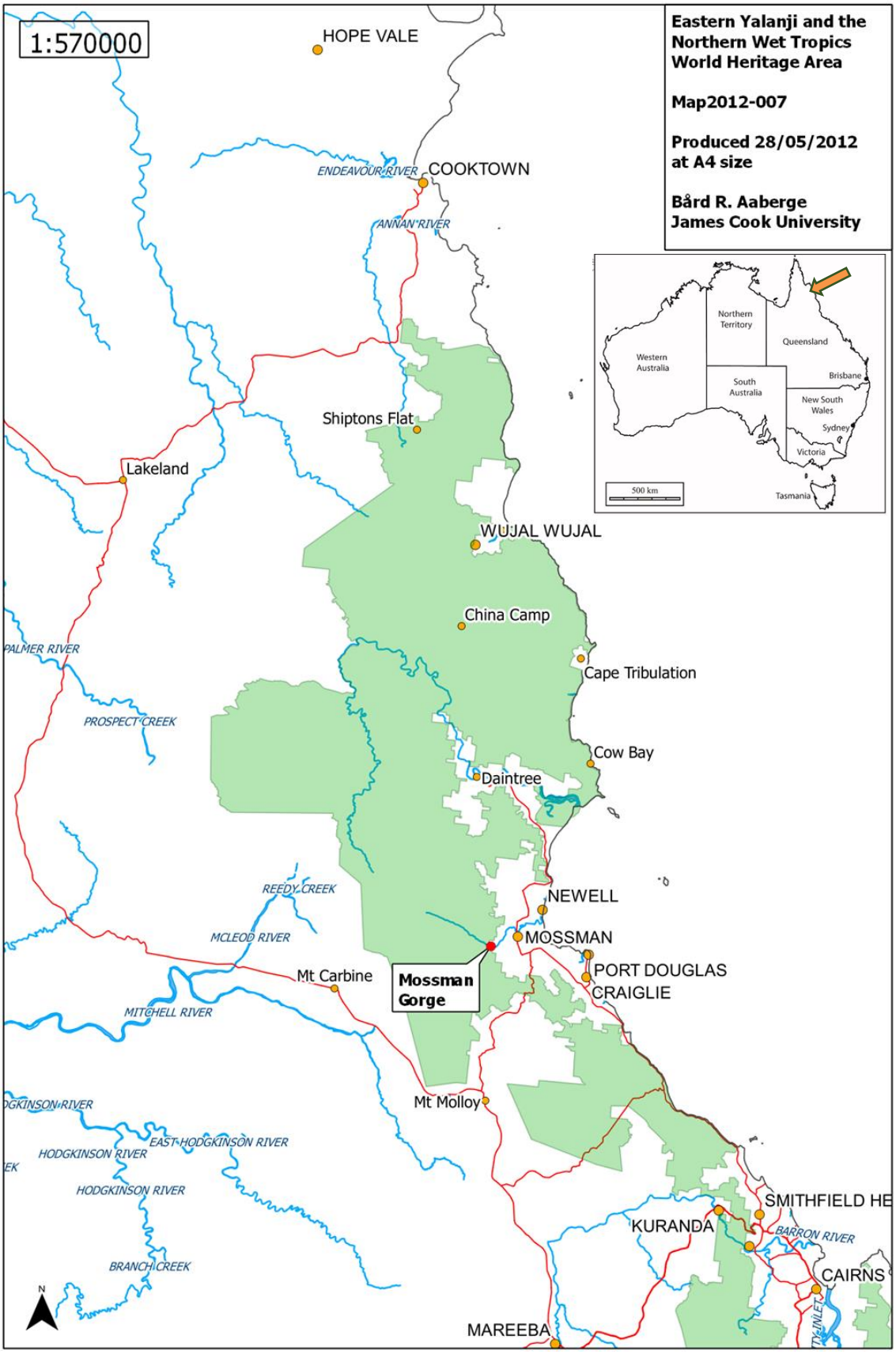
Map of Area



1 Introduction

1.1 Preface – The Genesis and Purpose of the Thesis

Three people and our interlinking relationships provide the foundations of this thesis. First, and foremost, Kuku Yalanji elder Roy Gibson, my friend, my teacher and my brother. My writing is inspired by Roy's acts, words and astounding achievements who himself finds inspiration in Ancestral dreams and Dreamings. Second, it is written by me, but only after relating in earnest to what Roy has told me and by appropriating existential aspects of what he has shown me. Thus, my own experience of relating to his Ancestors became another significant source informing this thesis. Third, after I went through a personal transformation in the field, and subsequently abandoning anthropology for some years, the writings of Søren Kierkegaard served to re-ignite my enthusiasm for writing by inspiring me to recast ethnography as an existential task. The title "Becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestors" captures this triangulation between Roy, myself and Kierkegaard in our relations to something Ancestral that is also eternal.

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Two particular dreams serve as wellsprings to the ideas and arguments running through this thesis. The purpose of this thesis, as I see it, is to tell the parallel stories that these two dreams inspired, and to show how the two stories connect.

The first dream was dreamt by my Kuku Yalanji friend Roy Gibson and is about how a rocky outcrop near the northern peak of *Manjal Dimbi*[1] broke off and rolled down the mountain, threatening to crush the Mossman Gorge community which sits at its base. Luckily, the rock stopped short, and instead blocked the road and access to the internationally renowned tourist destination Mossman Gorge National Park. In the dream, when one tourist asked how she now could visit the Gorge, Roy extended his hand and led her around the rock and walked with her up to the national park.

Significantly, the rocky outcrop in Roy's dream was, and is, a well-known story place[2] for the Indigenous Mossman community. It is the geological embodiment of the Dreamtime Ancestor *Kubirri*, who after being a great teacher and protector of the local Yalanji people, metamorphosed into one of Mossman Gorge's most prominent landscape features. This story

[1] Mount Demi on European maps.

[2] "Story place" is the most common idiom among Kuku Yalanji speakers to refer to what is elsewhere in Australia often called "sacred sites", that is, locations that are affiliated with the creative potency of the Ancestors as they brought the land and its features into existence on their travels.

about *Kubirri* has for a long time been well known among local Kuku Yalanji people and serves as a main staple in the interpretive walks Kuku Yalanji guides have been telling tourists from around the world since the community-run "Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime tours" began back in 1986 (which Roy played a major part in establishing and running).

The exact year in which Roy had his dream is not known to me. Years and dates have never been a strongpoint of his, a trait we both share. I would say he first told me about this dream (among many others) after my first fieldwork in 2002 and before I commenced my PhD candidature in 2011. But, as I will try to demonstrate, a linear understanding of time is not easily applied to Dreaming events; not without losing something crucial to it, such as the kind of knowing that only comes with immersion and lived experience.

Today, where in Roy's dream the *Kubirri* rock blocked the cars going up to the national park, there now stands a gate and the $20 million Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre. Opened in June 2012, the centre employs approximately 90 Indigenous people. After years of dedicated work towards his vision, Roy's dream has become a manifest reality, and *Kubirri* had proved his power once again and come to the aid of the Yalanji people: With the new gate and centre in place, the Mossman Gorge community has regained a level of control in their own backyard together with a significant source of income and employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

The second dream that has given significant shape to this thesis was a dream I had during my first fieldwork for my MA research in 2002. The dream demonstrated a Kuku Yalanji traditional treatment for a tropical ailment that I had become afflicted with (in waking life as well as in the dream). In short, I dreamt my own cure, a cure that was known to my Yalanji friends, but not me. This started me down a path where I became *existentially engaged* with Yalanji notions of the Dreaming, rather than following the less radical, more conventional *ethnographically interested* path, which often does not take such dreams with their associated links to the Dreaming seriously in the sense of seeing them as real beyond the dreamer's own mind or as collective representations.

My dream was of a different order than that of Roy's, the most obvious difference being that his had a real impact on the place and the lives of many Mossman people. Yet while my dream's impact was only on me, a non-Aboriginal person not from that Country, it changed me and my relationship with my Yalanji friends; it changed the way I carried out my fieldwork and how I interpreted field events, and ultimately how I am writing this thesis; and it changed how I came to view Roy's dreams, forcefully bringing home to me how much of the Dreaming, the salience even, is lost without a personal engagement with it. The subjective

experience of dreams, by definition, cannot count as objectively observable fact. But something nonetheless had profoundly changed in how I valued and evaluated such experiences, my own and that of others, particularly Roy. Having the experience made it possible for me to relate to Roy and his dreams in a new way. Equally important, my dream and the profound reorientation that it prompted changed how he related to me afterwards. Despite our cultural differences, it put us on par existentially. My dream and my existential turn, my turn to myself and shift to find truth for myself, is what aligned us. Our relationship has since developed a solid foundation based in a shared insight: we both see the subjective experiences of our own and the other's dream as forms of truth.

1.2 Truth?

Such a notion of truth is certainly a departure from an enlightenment derived notion of truth as objective, mind-independent and testable, and perhaps edging itself towards Indigenous notions of truth as the Ancestrally given or revealed.[3]

In part, my PhD project is directly concerned with destabilising the hegemony of scientific thought, understood as systematic and abstract rationality. "Destabilising", though, is not to discard it, but to critically discuss its strengths and limits. My aim is to delineate the limits of objective knowledge (what can be known universally through meticulous measurement and description) while at the same time to not be utterly confined by them. My field experiences include my own dreams alongside other extraordinary encounters that are neither replicable nor testable. I take these as true, and therefore attempt to make my PhD project as more fully true by including these rather than excluding them from my analysis. Such claims to truth are unquestionably subjective, as are my friend Roy's. However, if we never take account of the subjective and experiential aspect of religious/spiritual life, we fail to understand it effectively. My hope then is that this thesis can contribute to wider scholarly moves to enable other ways of knowing to be taken seriously enough to allow them a seat at the table of scholarly dialogue about matters that cannot be exhausted by objective empirical testing and abstract logic alone. Questions regarding the "Dreaming" or the Ancestral order in Indigenous cosmology is, I contend, such a matter.[4]

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[3] My existential approach, however, places me on different route than various decolonial practices and movements (see for instance, Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Nakata, 2007; Smith, 2021). Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that I am inescapably mired in multiple colonial cross currents of the present. My project nonetheless looks at different things and does not take a structural approach, but rather an existential approach to honour Roy's life on different terms.

[4] I will use both "the Dreaming" and "the Ancestral" / "Ancestors" / "*Binga Binga*". My Yalanji friends tend to use the terms "the Dreaming", "the Dreamtime", "*Binga Binga*" and "them old people".

Hence, much of my thesis traverses the paradoxes of knowledge; between objectivity and subjectivity; immanence and transcendence; the material and immaterial, the finite and infinite; the temporal and eternal. And this brings us to the third figure in this thesis, and to the thinking of Søren Kierkegaard, who pondered such tensions a great deal.

In this thesis I wish to draw on an aspect of Kierkegaard's thinking that few other philosophers seem to share, namely his unusual metaphysical position of thinking that there need not be correspondence between thought (concepts) and being: Most philosophers either tend to think there is an absolute, mind-independent truth and correspondingly that there is (or at least can be) a method to know this truth; or, inversely, think that there is no such method and correspondingly no such mind-independent truth or objective reality.[5] Kierkegaard breaks with both these traditions by taking the position that there is an absolute, mind-independent truth, but simultaneously posits that humans can never establish an objective scientific method to understand, as well as adequately account for, such an absolute truth.

While Kierkegaard had God in mind as occupying this absolute position, I have adopted his metaphysical stance by locating the Dreaming, which we cannot know and account for in objectivity, in an absolute (if less transcendent) position. My understanding of Kierkegaard is that there is a metaphysic, a truth, but it cannot be made truthful in abstract objectivity. Following this, *the Dreaming* is in and of itself – it is "eternity uncreated, sprung out of itself" as Strehlow once remarked (cited in Charlesworth, 2005, p. 9) – while *Dreaming stories*, being human interpretations and objectifications, are in themselves not. Dreaming *stories* are Indigenous conceptual accounts of the Dreaming, and thus never absolute in themselves, but always partly contingent on their human mediators. Kierkegaard claimed that Christ, and I claim that Ancestral Dreamings, can only be known truthfully in subjectivity – in the passionate inwardness of faith.

Such a metaphysical positioning of the Dreaming, as fundamentally true (despite the fact that it never can be *objectively* understood and accounted for), has been immensely useful for me in coming to grips with and accounting for both my own experiences, and what I see as Roy's experiences with the Dreaming. This positioning also sits well with Aboriginal statements about the absolute, never changing status of the Dreaming, as well as their reluctance to make absolute claims about their own dreams or visions as Ancestrally given,

[5] An alternative being phenomenology, with its emphasis on embodied experiential truths that positions all empirical knowledge as inherently subjective. Phenomenology has long privileged experiential knowledge, but I bind experience to faith, which marks my work as quite different to Michael Jackson's (2005, 1998; 2017) for example.

but rather be suggestive or hint at such interpretations. It also accounts for how fabrications occur or are judged to have occurred by others, "bullshit stories" as *bama*[6] often refer to them themselves.

In such domains of objective uncertainty, the paradox is, according to Kierkegaard (2009a), that one cannot *abstract* oneself into universal truth, one can only *appropriate* it for oneself, made famous with his statement "subjectivity is truth". By this he did not mean what is commonly meant when we say that "truth is subjective". What he was pointing to is that there are two types of knowing; what he called "objective reflection", which falls under what we may call abstract systematic reasoning broadly, aimed at determining what one's object of study means for all; and "subjective reflection" or "inwardness", whose purpose is to determine what it all means for oneself. The former's ideal being maximum abstraction and objectivity; the latter being an existential reorientation requiring inward passion and faith. Kierkegaard stressed the importance of knowing the limitations to each domain of reflection, while cautioning against any tendency to understand religious and ethical paradoxes objectively or by means of logical abstraction.

In other words, certain foundational questions have no objective answers which can only be known by making what has, post-Kierkegaard, become known as "a leap of faith" (Kierkegaard himself never used this exact phrase), which is what I did back in 2002 when traditional medicine was revealed to me in my dream (it would be a few years later that I first read Kierkegaard however). To be clear, I am not proposing a "leap of faith" as an ethnographic method for which one can train (one cannot plan, or force such things of course), but rather to understand and value my, and perhaps others', existential transformation during fieldwork. Nor do I see the knowledge that my radical form of "participant observation" yielded, as meeting scientific standards for "data collecting" and objective knowledge generation. Yet if you were to ask me, *was my approach useful?* I would reply, without hesitation, *yes!* A more objective or even agnostic approach, which we do need as well as part of ethnographic methods, could not have enabled the same rapport that I enjoyed with Roy and the other men I spent time with. Nor would I have arrived at what I take to be key insights into the role dreams play in his life, had I not decided to believe my own dream's Ancestral association and so recognise the ensuing role such events came to play in my life.

[6] *Bama* is the term Aboriginal people in the rainforest region of Far North Queensland most often use to refer to themselves.

1.3 Truth as Paradox

Throughout my twenty years of intermittent fieldwork with Roy and other Yalanji men, I have been faced with many situations that have confronted my European-trained sense of rationality and logic. Such situations often took the distinctive shape of paradox. Grappling with such paradoxes, which were often amplified by Roy's interpretations, has driven my ethnographic analysis and the writing of this thesis in which I develop an analytical dialogue between Roy's reflections and the existentialist thinking of Søren Kierkegaard.

Paradox has been part of folklore since time immemorial and can be found across the world. One of the oldest recorded paradoxes in Western philosophy is Anaximander's argument that each existing thing does not have an origin. Not irrelevant for this thesis, Anaximander thus escaped the problem of infinite regress by positing that "there is an infinite being that sustains everything else but which is not grounded in any other thing" (Sorensen, 2003, p. 10). Later philosophers utilising paradox in their thinking are too numerous to list, but some of the more well known for their use are Xeno, Parmenides, Socrates, Pascal, Russell and Wittgenstein. Paradoxes, as understood generally in this thesis, are "the result of an encounter with a reality which our concepts are inadequate do deal with" (Evans, 2006, p. 123). When we try to rationally understand such an encounter and put it into words, we end up with self-contradictory statements – a paradox. For instance, the God-man paradox in the Incarnation, what Kierkegaard called "the absolute paradox", is that God became a man who lived and died – an eternal God became a temporal mortal; the creator became the created. But as Kierkegaard scholar Evans (2006) has pointed out, such paradoxes do not mean that the reality we have encountered is itself self-contradictory. Instead, "it means there is a problem with our conceptual equipment" (p. 123).

When it comes to anthropologists writing about paradox, a search on "paradox" within the literature yields thousands of hits. It is also hard to find the ones who might use paradox as a starting point for ethnographic analysis (some exceptions include Martin Holbraad and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro which I will discuss in chapter 4), not to mention as a way to speak about truth, as Kierkegaard did. Indeed, beyond the odd quote or anecdote, Kierkegaard has largely been ignored in the history of anthropology.[7] Recently however, Kierkegaard is having "a moment" in in anthropological writing (see Lambek, 2017; Lucht, 2018), with a number of texts focussing, in various degrees, on paradox through a Kierkegaardian lens (see Suhr, 2019; Tomlinson, 2014; Willerslev, 2013; Willerslev & Suhr, 2018;). I would like to

[7] One of the more elaborate and interesting ones being Yasmine Musharbash's article "Boredom, Time, and Modernity" (2007).

make known that my discovery and use of Kierkegaard ethnographically preceded and developed independently of this literature. When I started writing about paradox and the leap of faith using Kierkegaard for my MA thesis (Aaberge, 2007), only Rappaport (2002) made use of Kierkegaard analytically. My chapter 4 "The Paradox of Truth & Believing the Absurd" was the first chapter I wrote on this thesis, and was presented as a paper with the same title at the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) conference in Bergen, 2012. While an early draft of chapter 5 "Becoming Contemporaneous with the Ancestors: The paradox of eternity in time" was presented as a paper with the same title at the TransOceanik Links Symposium, Cairns in 2013.[8] That said, all the anthropological works on Kierkegaard listed above, except Suhr (2019), are single book chapters or journal articles. To my knowledge, this thesis is the first to use Kierkegaard as an analytical framework in an ethnographic monograph on Aboriginal Dreamings. The only other ethnographic monograph elsewhere that makes extensive use of Kierkegaard, that I am aware of, is Christian Suhr's *Descending with Angels* (2019) which explores Islamic exorcisms and psychiatry in Denmark (the book is accompanied with a feature length ethnographic film with the same title).

As paradoxes and contradictions time and again forced themselves centre stage in my fieldwork, right from my very first fieldwork in 2002, they pressed upon me a need to make choices. Existential choices about truth – seemingly irreconcilable choices whereby my reasoning and my experiences (both those related to me by Roy and my own firsthand experiences) were at odds. I could have bracketed out my private existential conflicts, focussing solely on what Roy and other Yalanji told and showed me in my ethnographic account. Yet, after having experienced things I could not explain away, after having made what I would later, on reading Kierkegaard, describe as a leap to faith, the "bracketing out" approach increasingly felt like a lie. Existential choices and ethnographic ones became hard to divorce. So, I chose to be true to myself and to the world Roy had introduced me into, and for a few years following my first fieldwork, I simply left anthropology. An encounter with Søren Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (2009a) brought me back. It was his way of dealing with paradox that resonated with me. Reading Kierkegaard, I felt that I could begin to

[8] I felt so original and ground-breaking when I discovered the potency of Kierkegaard's "paradox", "the leap" to faith and "repetition" applied to my ethnographic material. I was devastated, even paranoid, when publication after publication outlined serious analysis of those very concepts while seeking to bring "Kierkegaard into ethnography" (Tomlinson's phrase). I regret this response as well as my initial failure to take my supervisor's advice to use this positively in my own project. It was the reaction of a broken ego, and not to mention, not a very Kierkegaardian one.

come to terms with Ancestral encounters described by Roy without losing sight of the existential impact such encounters had on both him and me.

1.4 Some Positioning Statements

The existential anthropology that I pursue here is thus one which the human condition is explored through the lives of concrete human beings, more specifically through my participatory observation and discussions with Roy. My enquiry hones in on the paradoxical, and explores existential aspects of "the Dreaming" (such as encounters with Ancestors in dreams and awake) as a realm of what Kierkegaard called "objective uncertainty" – deeply ethical or religious questions that have no objective answers, only subjective experiences of truth and faith for existing human beings.

My analysis proceeds from a position of faith, which I see as one of my key anthropological contributions, filling a gap left behind by conventionally atheistic and agnostic approaches to Aboriginal Dreamings.[9] I contend that examining Roy's Ancestrally informed dreams and life projects from an analytical position of faith does not violate Roy's ontological truth statements about them, nor explain them away as an epiphenomenon. Nor does it bracket out truth itself in the analysis. Instead, it turns to truth as a kind of experienced, and often passionate, wonder, characteristic of religious or spiritual experiences described in many cultural contexts.

Kierkegaard used a range of shifting concepts throughout his writings, such as: "paradox", "a qualitative leap" (of faith), "subjectivity is truth", "inwardness", "the autopsy of faith", "contemporaneity", "the moment", "repetition", "second immediacy", to name some that I will refer to in this thesis – concepts that all highlight existential aspects of transitions from logical reason to faith. By writing under different pseudonyms, with different (sometimes opposing) points of view, he could abandon the concepts he had built up, and come at similar problems from different angles and fresh concepts in subsequent works. This has sometimes led Kierkegaard to be interpreted as a proto-postmodernist, but this is not to be understood as him taking a relativistic stance on truth. For Kierkegaard there is an absolute

[9] While there are some similarities, note that my analysis from a position of faith is different to Brian Howell's (2007) push for a Christian perspective in terms of standpoint theory. While both of us can be said to take an epistemological standpoint based on faith, my approach is primarily existential, geared towards knowing truth. Howell's perspective is more politically driven to advance the identity, voice and marginalised subject position of Christians as a valuable ethnographic "standpoint" and perspective within academia. Howell argues "that those committed to religious positions should be understood as occupying a subject position analogous to other subject positions which are characterized by moral/ethical commitments, for example, feminism" (Howell, 2007, p. 372).

truth, that of Christ, which can only be effectively grasped in subjectivity. His intention with creating slippery concepts, abandoning them, and speaking through many pseudonyms was as literary ploys devised so that the reader never becomes settled in abstract, "objective reflection" and confined with any one concept, but instead remains alert, open and inwardly active in appropriating for herself a genuine relation to that which these concepts point to, a truth itself beyond conceptual grasp. In this thesis, I do try to somewhat define these concepts and apply them onto my ethnographic material and bring them within a scholarly discussion – but it is important for me to stress that I agree with Kierkegaard as to their value and their limitations.

In this thesis I will use some Yalanji words as well as concepts Roy used in English to explain aspects of his own faith to me, such as "no-time", being "looked after", how a dream "came to me", "letting dreams flow away again", "shock", "*mungka* (hair) standing", etc. It seems to me that Roy too reaches for concepts that never seem to fully convey what it is he wants them too. These dynamics show the age-old philosophical problem between thought and being, demonstrating the imperfect match between the two. I concur with Michael Jackson and Albert Piette (2017) in that "existential anthropology … is a reminder that life is irreducible to the terms with which we seek to grasp it" (p. 9). Concepts, language and knowledge are useful tools for understanding faith, but in the last leg falter to bring us across the finish line to faith itself. Both Roy and Kierkegaard appear to share the view that concepts point to a truth beyond itself, a truth that can only be appropriated in subjectivity and passion, not by abstract and conceptual reasoning. Roy and Kierkegaard both also heavily rely on storytelling to communicate existential meaning. This thesis will also do this, both in that I write in a self-referential narrating style, and by including liberal amounts of transcribed dialogue between Roy and myself. Good storytelling holds the attention of its audience, transports them to places they may not have seen, introduces new ideas or refresh old ones with unexpected turns, but it does not lose touch with what Kierkegaard called persons in the concrete – which means not losing touch with the characters in the story nor the persons making up the audience. One cannot expect a PhD thesis to fulfil this, but I aim to bring the reader back to her existential self, repeatedly and throughout, by pushing paradox to the centre, by use of storytelling, by including sometimes lengthy transcribed interviews, as well as by using concrete examples to elucidate my conceptual analyses. This necessarily turns my project towards an existential anthropology where the starting point for the enquiry is the actual human being. In this thesis I start with Roy, and include myself as I relate myself to what he is telling and showing me.

My argument, in short, is that Roy *is in truth* when making paradoxical truth claims about the Ancestors. This formulation is not an attempt at making clever conceptual claims and arguments for their own sake. As already noted, I argue thus because I have experienced encounters with his Ancestors myself. Truth experienced "in the infinite passion of inwardness" (Kierkegaard, 1992a, p. 204) cannot be conveyed directly from one person to another. It cannot be proved by abstract logic nor tested in an empirically transparent way – and this is not the point of this thesis.[10] But the paradox (that can result in a leap of faith) itself can be described and (partially) analysed. This is what this thesis sets out to do. In theoretical terms I follow Kierkegaard's postulates that 1) paradox is truth: Truth is paradoxical when expressed from an objective, abstract reasoning point of view; 2) Subjectivity is truth: Truth cannot be expressed in abstract consistency – it has to be passionately sought and appropriated in passionate inwardness by oneself for oneself; and finally, to be in truth, in passionate inwardness of faith, requires one to 3) hold on the objective uncertainty of paradox:

> Without risk, no faith. Faith is the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and the objective uncertainty. If I am able to apprehend God objectively, I do not have faith; but because I cannot do this, I must have faith. If I want to keep myself in faith, I must continually see to it that I hold fast the objective uncertainty, see to it that in the objective uncertainty I am "out on 70,000 fathoms of water" and still have faith (Kierkegaard, 1992a, p. 204).

Instead of "ironing out" inconsistent statements, contradictions and paradoxes in search of a logic, a system or a sociocultural whole, this thesis goes into these tensions and contradictions and hold them fast – as I argue that Roy himself does in his faith in Ancestrally given dreams and visions.

1.5 Paradoxes Encountered in Fieldwork and Thesis Outline

It seems befitting then that the thesis title should capture one of the more fundamental paradoxes I encountered. "Becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestors" expresses a temporal contradiction, discussed in chapter 5, which lay at the heart of many anthropological discussions about "the Dreaming". The chapter will highlight my own difficulty in coming to terms with Roy's assertion that in a dream, he was there when a waterhole was first created –

[10] "Proving" any such thing is not only impossible, it is also the opposite of what I am trying to achieve, as this would render truth as experienced into an object for dispassionate abstract reason, and not something that can only be grasped in the passionate inwardness of faith Kierkegaard alludes to.

not symbolically, not as in getting a flashback to an ancient time, not indeed as in a dream as I used to understand it – but actually there, as a contemporary of *Kurriyala*, the Ancestral creator of the waterhole. White women also figure in this creation story, further compacting the temporal paradox in a story in which Roy asserts his co-presence with deceased post-contact white women and *Kurriyala* who created the place. Such a co-presence and contemporaneity between ancient and living beings, between creator and created, between the eternal *Kurriyala* and temporal Roy, presented me with the most challenging paradox I have had to contend with in this work. This paradox does not resolve itself in this chapter's discussion and will be revisited and serve as a generative backstory in other chapters.

Before engaging in this temporal discussion, some steppingstones will be put in place, setting the scene and easing us into the material at hand. Chapter 2 "Fieldwork Beginnings" is mostly descriptive and tells the story of my first fieldwork for my MA thesis back in 2002 up until my present-day work with Roy Gibson. The chapter rounds off with a brief discussion on secularism and the suspension of disbelief to give some theoretical context and sets up discussions in following chapters.

In chapter 3 "Kubirri at the Gate: Ancestral Agency", paradox makes its first, though minor, appearance regarding agency and choice. I analyse Roy's dream about the Ancestor *Kubirri* (summarised above), giving Roy a vision of a gate controlling the traffic going up to Mossman Gorge, and his involvement seeing the vision through to material realisation of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre. I analyse this dream from a position of faith in his story, seeing dreams both as a gift and a task from the Ancestors, and by extension, Ancestral and human agency as mutually supporting. Individual choice is a central tenet in existential philosophy, and may seem at odds with Indigenous emphasis on the Dreaming as "the Law" and a seeming view of life "as a one-possibility thing" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 68). But Kierkegaard did not see choice from a nihilistic backdrop like many other existentialists did. For Kierkegaard, the decisive choice entails making oneself "nothing before God", to surrender oneself to a *greater cause*, in the fundamental sense of the word. The paradox being that to become a true self means to choose to surrender oneself to the will of God. Likewise, Roy insisted that his dream and vision "came to him" and that he is following a path laid down by *Kubirri*. In both cases, human agency is the decisive choice *to follow* what is deemed a more fundamental agency and cause of events. There is a sense in which personal agency is effaced in this process, yet as Jackson and Piette (2017) have pointed out, "to submit to a higher power is not … to forfeit one's own agency but to recover it through a relationship with something beyond oneself" (p. 12).

Chapter 4 “The Paradox of Truth & Believing the Absurd” tells my own story of first-hand encounters with an Ancestral or Dreaming order in the medicine dream summarised above, as well as a *dubu* (ghost, spirit) encounter. The *dubu's* contradictory nature, shifting between material and non-material in its essence, struck me as absurd, something I could not understand. These Ancestral encounters shocked me, and in a passion-driven moment of truth, fuelled by the strength of the absurd, I made a leap into faith: I chose to believe in *dubu* and *Binga Binga*. Since this, my ethnographic interest has been existential, i.e. learning from Roy and other *bama* were driven by an urge to know for myself, before attempting to know what it might mean for others. This personal shift in orientation changed my relation to my closest Yalanji friends; they recognised it in its earnestness, and it brought us closer. Seeing my change, they started opening up about things they had previously withheld.

As time went by, I more and more came to realise that Roy and my other *bama* friends' temporal orientation held a key for fathoming their outlook, and much of my PhD fieldwork has been oriented towards this. The paradox presented by eternal Ancestors' breakthrough in time, i.e., becoming manifest in the temporal existence of their descendants, as well as existing peoples' avowed contemporaneity with Ancestral events in dreams, is discussed in the aforementioned chapter 5 “Becoming Contemporaneous with the Ancestors”.

Another temporal aspect I found intriguing was Roy's future orientation, his apparent “confident uncertainty” which I explore in chapter 6 “Faith and Futurity”. What I mean by Roy's “confident uncertainty” is that he seems sustained with inward confidence in his undertakings while moderated by an outward humility towards the uncertainty of future outcomes. This chapter examines this tension in relation to Roy's faith in the Ancestors and in Christ. Kierkegaard's notion of “defeating futurity” allowing oneself to enter the present more fully, will be introduced and discussed vis-à-vis Roy's orientation towards the future and the present.

A focus on Roy's faith and temporal orientation continues in chapter 7 “Singing out for Darryl”. This chapter will discuss the ebbs and flows of faith, and how Roy manages to remain in or rekindle faith through adversity and loss. This chapter will also talk about world renewal and introduce Kierkegaard's concepts of “repetition” and the “second immediacy” of faith vis-à-vis Roy's efforts to make the Dreaming “come alive again” and his alert openness towards what the new day brings.

The final chapter, titled “In-Conclusion: The Unreasonable Paradox of Truth”, returns to the fundamental paradox that has both fuelled and challenged the very idea of writing of this thesis, namely the pursuit of understanding that which cannot be understood. I follow

Kierkegaard that this is the predicament of existential truth and incorporate some thoughts from Wittgenstein on the matter. Both Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein point out that just because we cannot logically understand something paradoxical does not mean that what it points towards is untrue. I juxtapose Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein's perspective and gestures that such paradoxes point to "something" beyond itself with Roy's confident uncertainty when pursuing his dreams.

1.6 Single Person Ethnography

A focus on single informants is not new in Australian ethnographic literature – Stanner's (2009d) depiction of *Durmugam* comes to mind as a classic example – nor is a focus on individuals on the margins of society such as "clever men" (Elkin, 1994). However, I think it is safe to say that the overall emphasis in the Australian ethnographic literature has historically been on group, rather than individual, relations to Ancestors (and "Country"). Early ethnographies tended to develop sociocentric views of Aboriginal group formations and kinship via "totemic" group affiliations such as "clans" (Durkheim, 1995), or focussing on the residential patterns and economic activity of the "band" or "horde" (Radcliffe-Brown, 1930b). An emphasis on group organisation is no doubt in some respects apt, as this does reflect the communal orientation characteristic of many if not most Indigenous communities. Family is enormously important, any observer cannot fail to see this, but it is not the full picture.

While early anthropologists tended to depict Aboriginal societies as overly "egalitarian" and statuses within them as homogenous, more recent anthropologists have usually given a more nuanced picture. Christopher Anderson (1988) has noted that "all bosses are not created equal", when writing about Kuku Yalanji people near Bloomfield River further north. Anderson describes how despite the formal power and structural dominance ascribed to older men, certain individuals, *majamaja*, had considerably more power than other men within the same age group. Roy can surely be considered a *maja* and has often been referred to by this term by other *bama* in Mossman Gorge. That said, I resist starting with fixed pre-determined terms and titles, and will rather attempt to give the reader a sense of Roy as an actual human being and convey how his standing is significantly based on the flow of events in his life.

More recent ethnographic literature has moved away from sociocentric views to a focus on the *relational* character of Aboriginal societies. Fred Myers has convincingly argued for a view of Pintupi social organisation as an essentially individual-centred relatedness. The Pintupi notion of "one countryman" is a group or a set of social relations whose membership

depends on who you ask, as any Pintupi will have a different set of people in their "one countryman" aggregate. "Pintupi life is highly personalized", Myers (1986) wrote, "they place emphasis on individuals, their autonomy, and their capacity to choose courses of action" (p. 18). In his preface he went as far as to state that "the presence of particular individuals defines Pintupi society itself" (p. 8). He pointed out that his own life has been "deeply affected by their awareness of people as persons", and even quoted Kierkegaard in that he hopes that "their enduring respect for persons in the *concrete*" will be mirrored in his book by his respect for them (p. 8).[11] This is a view and endeavour I wholeheartedly agree with, and I hope I too can convey a similar respect for Roy and other *bama* featuring in this thesis.

By focussing on one single person, Roy, I do not mean to underplay the ways that other people, collectives, traditions, norms, roles and institutions have played in his life. Roy is a Kuku Yalanji elder, living in modern Australia, and there are numerous external forces, social, cultural, religious, secular, that enter his life, his existence. Roy's life, his world, is made up of all these things, shaped by them, yet not utterly determined by them. My aim is to hold fast to Roy *in the concrete*, his actions and reflections, when zooming out and taking stock of his life and what it can teach us about the human condition.

As mentioned, I consider myself an existential anthropologist, but when people ask, I call myself (simply) an anthropologist. One might think that should have me covered, given the lexical meaning of "anthropology", but not so. As noted by Michael Jackson and Albert Piette in their co-edited book *What is Existential Anthropology?* (2017), "existence" is anthropology's "blind spot" (p. 14). Laurent Denizeau (2017), in the same volume, wrote that "human existence can be regarded as the terra incognita of anthropological thought", and pointed out the paradox that "the anthropologist seems to speak more about society and culture in their various forms (social relations, interactions, identities, representations, the imaginary, and so on) than about human existence in itself" (p. 214). I aim to contribute my

[11] Myers' Pintupi persons were given pseudonyms in his book to protect their privacy, as well as and to avoid using names that would become taboo with their deaths. I too did this with Yalanji persons in my MA thesis, as was the norm at the time at the institution I was enrolled with (University of Bergen). Anonymisation has its pros and cons. Protecting one's informants from harm is certainly paramount, and sometimes the best way to do this is by using pseudonyms. On the other hand, anonymisation can also drown out concrete Indigenous voices and rob them of their true authorship. Pseudonyms can in some ways free the ethnographer as it makes it easier to break with Indigenous interpretations, but in other ways real names can increase the reliability of the ethnography as the ethnographer can be held to account. There is no easy one fix for all here, I have tried to strike a balance between anonymisation and giving voice to my participants. This is also made difficult in the case of participants passing away and concern for their descendants' views. Roy explicitly wanted to have his real name in print, as well as his deceased brother Darryl (see chapter 7). Many other persons I have not named, some I have included nicknames known to some of the people I have spent most time with, but not known to a wider community.

part to help remedy that lack. Roy has achieved much in his life, not just for himself, but also for his local community. But rather than analysing his material, social or political achievements themselves, I am interested in how he sees and reflects on these changes and how he orients his life and what this could teach me about life, and indeed my own life. The outside perspective of him as an entrepreneur (see chapter 3) fails to capture his relationship and reliance on his Ancestors in these achievements. I believe Roy's life has something to tell beyond himself, his society, and beyond the usual confines of social anthropology. In its concrete idiosyncrasy his life addresses the human condition in ways that certainly has changed how I see life, and maybe it can do so for others, maybe it will not. Attempting to convey his orientation to life – its past, its present and future – is what I regard as my ethnographic contribution.

This thesis gets up close and personal with Roy and me, as existing human beings telling stories that highlight the paradoxical nature of Ancestors, *dubu*, dreams, Christ and life. While features of Christianity and the Dreaming should, of course, not be conflated, I argue that the transcendence of God (according to Kierkegaard) and the hidden, and self-revealing, nature of the Ancestral (the Dreaming) share one crucial aspect: they are unknowable to anyone but he who exists in subjectivity. This is emphasised by notions common amongst Yalanji such as: it is the lone hunter who gets lured away by *dubu*, the initiate facing the *Binga Binga* alone in the forest at night, it is the sole camper who gets paralysed by *wingil*, and it is the Christian who stands alone before God who is in faith. In this sense, what Kierkegaard considered "real" Christians and what many Yalanji consider "initiated" or "brave" people are those who attain true knowledge through personal experience. While knowledge is shared (to the culturally appropriate aggregate) and its validity dependent on group acknowledgement, existential truth is often sought alone. This principle is in stark contrast to forms of scientific knowledge where what defines knowledge is its objectivity.[12]

And to be clear, what I mean by "objectivity" is a position that can be shared, where others can observe the same as each other, regardless of subjective orientation. Observable empirical evidence and rational logic both can be open to scrutiny in that their truth lies bare

[12] Roy and the Yalanji people I know operate with and within both objective and subjective dimensions of knowing truth. For instance, the fact that Roy's dream resulted in a visible, objective manifestation (the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre), helps validate his dream as true and as Ancestrally given among his peers, and at the same time the dream gives credence to the centre being part of the Dreaming order. Both the subjective and objective aspects are mutually constitutive and increases the probability for other *bama* to consider it as being true or incorporating it as part of their stories.

in that they are “for all to see”. What then of knowledge traditions that emphasise solitude or secrecy as prerequisite for insight? Traditions where sociality, or social company, are understood to hinder revelation of true knowledge? Such knowledge traditions are the inverse of scientific objectivity by seeing truth as idiosyncratic, personally meaningful, and something to align one’s own life to. We cannot expect anyone to understand such knowledge traditions by means of objective abstractions alone; we can only hope to grasp the meaningfulness of solitary experience by becoming existentially engaged in the world presented by our interlocutors and seeing for ourselves.

2 Some Early Stories and Reflections on Fieldwork as Existential Engagement[13]

2.1 Fieldwork Beginnings: Meeting Roy

As mentioned in previous chapter, a few of months into my first fieldwork with Kuku Yalanji people, I had a dream concerning Kuku Yalanji traditional knowledge. This dream had a profound impact on me and altered the trajectory of my fieldwork and continues to shape my research today. Some of the stories that inform this thesis thus began nine years before the PhD scholarship that initiated this thesis. It was January 2002 and the temperature difference between my departing and arriving airports (Oslo and Cairns respectively) was roughly 50 degrees Celsius. I was 27. An MA (Cand. polit.) candidate with the University of Bergen, Norway, and I was getting ready for my first entry into "the field".

About a year earlier, Australian Professor Bruce Kapferer had joined our anthropology department in Bergen. I was already considering doing my fieldwork among Aboriginal Australians and as I had taken an interest in their "Dreaming", one of my lecturers therefore urged me to see Bruce. I remember having some reservations about living in a desert (I somewhat naively pictured that that is where I would have to go if I wanted to learn about traditional knowledge). I had a strong wish to do my fieldwork in a forest, and for this reason I was considering going elsewhere. I finally worked up my nerve to knock on Kapferer's door (in my first attempt, my knuckles never made it to the wood and I made a full retreat). He saw me for about an hour, and had by the end of it utterly inspired me to go to Far North Queensland to live among the Kuku Yalanji people of the Daintree Rainforests, whom he had briefly worked with in the past (Kapferer, 1995).

After a couple of weeks adjusting to life in tropical Cairns and Townsville, I met up with my only contact in Australia, anthropologist Rosita Henry at James Cook University, whom Bruce had also supervised in the past. With Rosita's supervision, I submitted an essay on the ethics of doing fieldwork with Indigenous Australians with JCU and was "ready" to start fieldwork. I moved back to Cairns and nervously rang the *Bamanga Bubu Ngadimungku* CEO, who agreed to meet me for lunch the next day.

At this point in life, I could only be described as initially shy, even by Norwegian standards. Walking up the steep hill and knocking on the BBN office door were among the

[13] In parts, this chapter draws and builds on things from my first fieldwork written about in my MA thesis (Aaberge, 2007), especially section 2.2 "What's in a name?".

hardest things I had done up to that point in my life. Yet, I miraculously got through the door, and managed to direct my tongue in a more or less intelligible manner to account for my intentions. Upon hearing I was interested in learning about bush skills and traditional knowledge, the CEO suggested I meet with the BBN ranger group and tour guides the next day, since they were the ones spending most time in the bush. He then introduced me to one of the rangers, "Surfer", who with few words and a gentle mannerism gave me a casual and lovely tour of Mossman Gorge community.

The following morning the CEO picked me up from the Mossman Exchange Hotel and gave me a lift to the community. At the entry of the community, he pulled up and introduced me, through his half wound down car window, to a group of uniformed Yalanji men (the BBN rangers) who were giving one of the painted community signs a touch up. When hearing my name, one fuzzy haired man said “Board?! [“board” is how my name is pronounced in Norwegian]. Well, we already have Surfer here…”, which gave them all a chuckle. The wise cracker was Roy Gibson. We parked the car and we all gathered by the old BBN tourism shed so I could meet them all.

It turned out that Roy had just had his license suspended for six months and needed a reliable driver to take him to his niece’s camp in Cape Tribulation for the weekend. I fitted his needs perfectly. I soon became his chauffeur, the caretaker of his niece's camp, his drinking brother, his student and his friend. Looking back, our meeting was serendipitously opportune: I had a licence but no car, he had a car but no licence. Roy trusted me with his car more than anyone and would leave it with me in Cape Tribulation even on some days when he would be in Mossman Gorge without me (“less humbug” that way he told me). Furthermore, Roy had time for me, as he was between jobs (his cultural heritage work with the Wet Tropics Management Authority had just ended). This meant that for the next six months he would spend most days of the week with me at the camp in Cape Tribulation, and the rest of the week with his family and working as a tour guide at Mossman Gorge (this changed in the last three months of my stay when he worked five days a week as a tour guide at the Gorge). I would drive him back and forth. Sometimes I would stay at his house at Mossman Gorge community while he was there, but most times I would go back up to Cape Tribulation to camp by myself. As it turned out, the fact that I did spend nights camping alone, became crucial to my field experience, both for my own sense of self, and how Roy and other Yalanji men would see and relate to me. A part of that insecure and shy boy got left behind in that bush camp (which I will return to in chapter 4).

No two days at camp were the same and there was very little overall structure or planned activities. Certain activities, however, created a pattern for our days: Roy (and whoever else had come along to Cape Tribulation) would invariably get up first, stoke the fire which would be smouldering from the night before, and put on the billy. When I got up, Roy and I would do push ups (competing who could do most), unless he would (allegedly) have done them already. We would then walk to a creek about a kilometre away to bathe, scrubbing ourselves clean with Soap Tree leaves which we would gather on the way there. After our bath, we might buy bread or any other essentials we had run out of, at the old Masons' store (which back then operated out of the Masons' house and had groceries behind the counter), before walking back to camp, gathering firewood on the way. Once back we would have breakfast and another cup of tea. Afterwards, we would either work on the block (mainly clearing Guinea grass that was growing well over our heads, while singing tunes from Bee Gees, Creedence or U2), or go for a rainforest or beach walk where Roy would share his knowledge of plants and Country with me. The day would usually end with another visit to a creek to wash off the sweat from an active day and culminate with sitting around the campfire sipping a cold drink which sometimes resulted in a visit to PK's Jungle Village, the local waterhole for locals and backpackers. As Michael Jackson (1998) noted about his own fieldwork with Yalanji people further to the north, working together bonded us.

2.2 What's in a Name?

In those early days, there was a group of maybe fifteen men that took turns jumping in the car with Roy and me to Cape Tribulation (sometimes a second car would join us). I would say that "Torch-slinger" was probably the most frequent camper in my first year, and a story about how he got this nickname might serve as a nice entry into the cheeky, competitive, but ultimately inclusive and good-natured atmosphere that developed among us that first year.

After a few days in camp, we had all run out of cash (the nearest ATM was in Mossman Town back then). We had also run out of Castlemaine's finest XXXX beer the day before, so we had a quiet one with tea and damper, sharing stories around the campfire. Whenever Torch-slinger came up to camp, he would always rearrange our beds. Normally, my foam mattress was lined up on the gravel floor on an old piece of blue tarp next to Roy's old and rusty steel frame bed. But when Torch-slinger came, he would move my mattress further to the side and squeeze his own in between my mattress and Roy's bed. Sleeping in a row like this is common practice among Yalanji men, but Roy and I both knew why Torch-slinger always ended up sleeping in the middle; he was using us as live buffer zones against

dubu – spirits or ghosts of the dead. There was nothing unusual about this fear. I would venture that the fear of *dubu* is widespread (although not evenly proportioned) among the Yalanji people I know. Such fear is more pronounced while camping out bush in general, but I should also add that across the road from our camp is a place called *Dubuji*, so named because of its *dubu* inhabitants (which is also the name national parks put on the boardwalk that runs through it). The close proximity of *Dubuji* to our camp would in no way have eased Torch-slinger's mind.

The night was overcast and dark, and Torch-slinger was nowhere near being able to fall to sleep. No doubt the lack of XXXX did not help matters. He had armed himself against the dark with Roy's heavy-duty Dolphin torch, keeping it within an arm's length of his mattress. After we had all turned in, a melomy (a small rodent) ran across the gravel floor, but it was nowhere near quick enough for Torch-slinger's lightening right arm, with the unsuspecting creature instantly flooded in torchlight. In the hue of the torch beam, I met Roy's half-closed cheeky eyes. We pretended not to have noticed anything but secretly kept watching our friend. Torch-Slinger lay back in his bed, carefully wrapping himself inside a multitude of sheets and blankets. The blankets had hardly settled before a bandicoot poking around outside the shed was floodlit as if it had disturbed the sleep of the sun itself. Roy scratched his belly and the beam swung round to him. We still pretended to be asleep, straining to hold our laughs in. Torch-slinger tentatively lay down again, carefully tucking himself back in, and after a final sweep of his surroundings, he finally turned off the torch. I waited a minute or so, letting the silence sink over our camp again, while I quietly gathered up a handful of gravel from the ground. With a swift and forceful throw, I hurled the gravel across the corrugated tin ceiling of our shed, sending jarring metal soundwaves reverberating throughout the shed and forest. How our friend managed to go from horizontal to vertical in a split second, remains mystery to me, but he was upright instantly. Standing with knees bent and legs wide on top of his bed he was swinging his light-sabre around, frantically scanning the gravel floor. The spotlight travelled along the roof beams and the open shelves for the intruder, which by now, he must have realised, could be no animal, *dubu* or any other intruder. At this point, Roy and I had severe troubles keeping our act together. As the realisation of being duped was dawning on him, Torch-slinger slowly turned his beam on to my long, desperately suppressed, but heaving body next to his bed and let out "You bastard!", and we all burst out laughing. That night, our shed was lit up like a flashing disco, pulsating with every sound reaching our friend's high-strung ears, at least, this was the story we told people at the Gorge. It became a favourite story with a high retelling value, and our friend

was thus known as “Torch-slinger” among our Cape Tribulation crew. He swore he was going to get back at us, but he was laughing too much himself to be able to pull off a stern face. The three of us became something of a trio, and doubtlessly our easy-going mocking relationship tightened our bonds.

As for me, they called me “White Board” in the beginning, which later that year changed to “Black Board” along with statements such as “he’s with us now” or “you’re *bama* now”. I was known by many other nicknames too, depending on who was calling me. Roy liked to call me “Tarzan”, rather sarcastically, as he early picked up on my romantic fetish for bush knowledge and self-reliance. Torch-slinger finally had his revenge by naming me “Pebbles”, after the Flintstones girl, because of my ponytail at the crown of my head. A decade later a similar hairstyle proliferated, known as the “man-bun”, but at the time it was a rather unusual look, so this nickname took hold, and even spread to the some of the white community at Cape Tribulation.

However, at an early stage of my MA fieldwork, the men were talking about giving me a “proper” (Yalanji) name, and before long I was named “Manjal Dimbi” by one of the chief rangers who they introduced me to as simply “Maja” (boss). Manjal Dimbi is the Yalanji name of the mountain called Mount Demi by Europeans, at whose foot the Mossman Gorge community is situated. There is a significant Dreaming story associated with this mountain, and Roy later told me, with unusual sincerity, that he was proud when “Maja” gave me the name and that it was the kind of name fit for a *maja*. This, as a *maja*, was not how my name-giver, or anyone else saw me at the time though. I was young, inexperienced, had little in the way of money or resources, and indeed, little influence over others by *bama* and *waybala* standards alike (cf. Chris Anderson, 2010).[14] That said, I do think though, that they saw me as having some “*maja* qualities” in that I was bright, adept at learning Yalanji knowledge, tall and physically fit, and capable or “brave” for staying in the bush camp by myself.

The more immediate and practical reason I got that name was more mundane, yet typical, for Yalanji naming practices; I was learning some Kuku Yalanji, and I was trying to refer to *Manjal Dimbi* – the mountain – to “Maja”, but I got the word order wrong, rendering

[14] Anderson argues that the Missionaries at Bloomfield had little success converting Yalanji people because of, among other things, their failure to meet the Yalanji standards set for being proper *maja* or "boss": "Their [Yalanji people at Wujal Wujal] assumption was that the missionaries held a role that was structurally equivalent to that of '*majamaja'* [plural form of *maja*] in their own system – key focal individuals with religious knowledge, power and achieved status operating at the node of a social network on a particular area of 'country'" (Chris Anderson, 2010, p. 33).

it *Dimbi Manjal*. This error became the occasion for much laughter and amusement, at my expense of course. *Manjal* means "mountain" in Kuku Yalanji, while *dimbi* according to linguists Hershberger and Hershberger (1986) means "behind the house" (p. 50). But the translation I mostly have been given by Roy and others were "safe place" or "hideout". As "Maja" managed to explain to me with some difficulty amid his chuckling: I was "tall like a mountain" and "hiding away [with *bama*] from other *waybala* [whitefellas]", and excitedly repeated: "that's your name now!". No one, apart from Roy in the private conversation when he told me he was proud of my name, ever brought up the name, nor teased me about my failed attempt to say Manjal Dimbi again. I am not sure why – maybe it was realised soon after I was given the name that it was indeed too grand for me. Having fallen out of use, I doubt anyone remembers this name anymore (most of the men, including he who named me has passed away).[15]

Sometimes "proper names" came about for salient reasons, such as a Dreaming connection, and other times the reasons were mundane or comical reasons (like nicknames). Some of the proper Yalanji names of my friends were for instance, *Kumu* ("mosquito"), *Wawubaja* ("river"), *Bilngkumu* ("saltwater crocodile"), *Warra* ("countryman", so named because he "walked like a cowboy"), *Kabaljuku* ("Leichardt tree", named so by a female elder because he was born under this tree, which he told me was according to tradition). Roy's "proper" name, *Karungarr* ("larrikin" or "dingo"; my spelling – not listed in Hershbergers' dictionary) was given to him by his mother when she noticed that he, from an unusually early age, liked women. Roy told me the story of how he had shamed his mother as a little boy by unseemly staring at a grown woman at the shop. I have often heard Roy introduce himself to tourists as *Karungarr* or Dingo which rarely fails to perk the tourists' interest. Having picked up on this, Roy and some of the other tour-guides would play on their nicknames, integrate them into the narrative of their guided walks, use them as part of jokes etc. Surfer took this a step further by inventing a name when he was interviewed by local or national newspapers. Twice I saw him give journalists the name *Kambi Kari*, which means "naked" (lit. "clothes none"). This was obviously not his name, proper-, nick- or otherwise, it was a joke played on mainstream society's thirst for Aboriginal traditionalism as the hallmark of authenticity (cf. Kapferer, 1995). Surfer's joke aside, I should stress that the play and caricaturing around their

[15] Shortly after rewriting this passage in 2024, I asked Roy on the phone from Norway if he remembered the name I was given, which he did not immediately. After revealing that I was named after a mountain, it came back to him and promptly answered "Manjal Dimbi".

names were seen as an amplification of already established individual characteristics, I believe, and not taken out of thin air.

I have not come across many Yalanji names also being story-place names,[16] but years after I was given *Manjal Dimbi*, my firstborn son was named *Kulungkul* after a story place near *Buru* (China Camp) by one of the custodians there. My son was only 3 or 4 years old at the time, and he walked with us to Kulungkul from Buru for several hours through the bush – a feat that earned him the name. My youngest son was named *Dokul Dandi* by Roy, after seeing him stomp his feet in defiance up at Mossman Gorge when he was a toddler. Dokul Dandi literally means "hard head" and is usually said about someone who is being stubborn. The name really fit in both the metaphorical and literal sense as he was a strong-willed child who would at occasion repeatedly headbutt the ground (earth or concrete made no difference to him) when he threw a fit. He has also always been tough, and his name is used in the family to this day. On occasions when he hits his head by accident we sometimes say, "lucky you are Dokul Dandi".

Giving names and using them are a big part of the sociality I observed among my Yalanji mates. Some names stuck for years, while others fell out of use soon after. In any case, a name, whether a "proper one" or nickname, express the closeness it takes to see another's individual peculiarity. They also tell stories that remind people of the shared histories and experiences that bind them together.

2.3 Finding My Place Within

Naming practises aside, several other factors eased my integration with the aforementioned group of Yalanji men (made up primarily of tour guides and community rangers) during my first fieldwork: Firstly, despite sharing complexion with the people who colonised Australia, I think the fact that I was not from Australia put me in a category that improved our initial

[16] I did, however, come across persons having a story-place name for their name in Central Australia (where such places are referred to as "sacred sites" in English). On one helicopter survey I conducted in the Western Desert, a senior Pintupi man pointed out one such named man who was recently deceased, whose name I knew from the Land Council literature. He pointed to an erect outcrop, bearing the same name, and explicitly told me that the rock is the deceased man. It seems that some of a place's Ancestral potency or essence seems to carry over to the human name bearer progressively in life, and back (cf. Munn, 1970). Rather than interpreting such subject-object transformations as merely symbolic, Fiona Magowan (2001, p. 33) refers to such processes as "a simultaneity of the subsumation of subjects inside objects and objects inside subjects" which minimises the conceptual distance between the human subject and the ancestral object (p. 33). I note Magowan's use of the temporally oriented term "simultaneity" in which temporal distance evoked by terms such as 'past' and 'present' become temporally dissolved in the temporal subsumation of the Ancestral past and human present. In chapter 5, a related dynamic will be explored with Roy's assertion of being contemporaneous with an Ancestral being in dream.

relationship. I presented them with the opportunity to share their ways with someone unfettered by the history of Australian race relations.

Second, although they were accustomed to anthropologists through Native Title work as well as archaeologists through surveying work for the Wet Tropics Management Authority, I have stayed in their life longer than most. I should mention archaeologist Damian Britnell in this regard, who also has long-standing relationships with all the Yalanji rangers and tour guides I worked with, and who also ended up working for them as their Bamanga Bubu Ngadimungku CEO for a number of years. Damian's long-term relation aside, though, they were not used to anthropologists spending months living with them in a bush camp.

Thirdly, I was not, as Roy has put it, "flash". I had a backpack with clothes, a couple of notebooks and a mosquito net when I came (which I never used), and that was pretty much it. No technology (well, actually I lie, I had a cheap battery powered beard trimmer, which disappeared from camp a few weeks in), no laptop, no mobile phone, no fancy camp equipment (I bought an old sleeping bag at the Mossman second-hand store, and a hammock from the Cairns army disposals), and I was more than comfortable sleeping and living within the material conditions of the bush camp. If this seems like a privileged white kid pretending to be poor, it was not. When I travelled to Australia, Norway's equivalent of the Higher Education Loan Program (HELP), "Laanekassen", gave me a normal student stipend and loan as a lump sum intended for six months of university studies (for living costs, not tuition fees). I paid my share and then some for camp provisions, lent/gave out some dollars here and there and contributed towards drinks. I budgeted my student loan so that it stretched ten months instead of the intended six, but beyond that sum there was no more money as I had spent all my savings on eye surgery just before my fieldwork.

Roy's cultural upbringing emphasised an ethic of generosity and sharing as commonly observed throughout Aboriginal Australia (Hiatt, 1982). I also early on observed common strategies among men in the group to counter what Nicolas Petersen (1993) has called "demand sharing" (p. 861), or what *bama* themselves sometimes referred to as "humbugging"; such as alternatively downplaying the amount of, or hiding away, money, alcohol, food or spears. Openly not sharing is considered as a social rejection. I was never good at hiding such things myself, so when Roy asked me if I had more money, I simply told him I did. But we also discussed the need for me to stretch the money if I were to stay the intended length (which he was keen for me to do). One of the underpinnings of Roy and my solid and continued friendship has been his ability to see things from my angle. Not only did Roy understand my financial situation from my perspective, but after my week's budgeted

resources had been drained, he also shielded me when other *bama* or family asked me for money or other goods. Roy also tended to let me take his car back with me to Cape Tribulation when he was working at the community (usually the weekend). There were only a few cars in Mossman Gorge community when I first arrived in 2002,[17] and Roy's blue Daihatsu Rocky was the subject of considerable pressure to provide transportation for kin, friends and others. Leaving the car with me can also be seen as a strategy to save fuel and maintenance costs from demands of sharing.

I never paid Roy or anyone else for "consultations" or their time with me. For one, I could not afford to, but more importantly, this was not how our relationship was framed. I earned my keep in other ways, contributing to the household financially, manual labour (mostly cutting grass), going fishing, as a driver, doing shopping, in short, as an integrated member of Roy's household. The ethnographic "work" was always secondary to the normal household tasks of life. We did not have fixed sessions set aside where I would interview Roy or others. Instead, it was simply participant observation all along, and paying attention when stories relevant to my anthropological project came up as part of life, which was pretty much all the time anyway.

The final point I want to make concerning my structural integration with Roy and his group is linked to the material levelling and equivalence of my position discussed above. Our relationship was not defined as researcher – informant (although that is how it started), nor was it, as some anthropologists have suggested, one where I would somehow be considered by Roy or other Yalanji people as a "boss" because of colonial history. Roy is acutely aware of colonial history – he has felt it personally throughout his life. But he has also remade his life within cultural tourism, a world where his Indigeneity and traditional knowledge conferred from his Ancestors are highly valued. The "world" I lived in during fieldwork were mainly made up of Yalanji people, tourists and locals dependent on the tourist industry. In all these contexts Roy was seen my superior. I know at the same time, however, that he respects me as a person and as an anthropologist who can add my voice to his. Our relationship was more akin to the relationships between teacher (Roy) – student (me), big brother (*yabba)* –

[17] Shortly after, the number of cars rose quickly as a scheme for voluntarily setting aside a percentage of one's pay for useful larger purchases (like cars) became available at the community. This development came in the wake of Noel Pearson's (2000) publication *Our Right to Take Responsibility,* his founding of Cape York Institute as well as the Cape York Partnerships, and the following two year trial of the Family Income Management (FIM) starting in Mossman Gorge and three other Cape York communities in June 2002. I just want to point out that Roy helped me "save" money before "saving" became institutionalised at Mossman Gorge through such schemes.

little brother (*yabbadju*), but ultimately I became known and introduced to the wider Yalanji community as Roy's *jawun* ("friend" or "countryman", cf. Chris Anderson, 2010, p. 33).[18]

When I finished my "fieldwork" I went back to Norway, but only because my visa ran out. I returned to Australia six months later, on a working tourist visa, with a bit of money from saving up painting houses in Norway, and no job to go to. In short, I did not go back to my "privileged" life in Norway after completing my "fieldwork". Instead, I made a life in Australia (at times a rather precarious one, I might add), most of the time having less annual income than Roy (but then again he had more family…). Over the years we have looked after each other, a two-way thing; if he had extra money, he would pay for most on our continued trips to Cape Tribulation, if I had extra, I would. In personal strife or sickness, we have both taken turns and been there for each other. On my part this has certainly not been because of my academic relation to him, but because of my relationship with Roy himself, plain and simple. We are friends, family. In other words, our relationship or "power structure" between us is pretty level, with a tilt towards him, befitting an older brother, who knows and works the world we shared better.

2.4 Return to Norway and, in time, Anthropology (and Kierkegaard)

Since conducting my first fieldwork in 2002, I have moved back to Norway three times. First, unwillingly, when my visiting scholar visa ran out after ten months; second, in 2005-2007, when I no longer could hack the precarity of making a living without permanent residency and proper work rights (my visa only allowed me 3-months' work with any employer); and lastly in 2018, when, after years working part-time contracts as a tutor at James Cook University, I was offered a full time permanent position as a lecturer in my Norwegian hometown. The initial shifts of "home" were radical, "living in different worlds" as the cliché has it.[19]

After having my life changed by a revelatory dream and a *dubu* encounter during my first fieldwork, my first returns to Norway left me feeling out of place in what I saw as a disenchanted and measured society directed by secularism. Living with Roy and other Yalanji mates, I had come to appreciate our sharing of personal dreams, deciphering Ancestral clues

[18] Anderson (2010) also wrote that *jawun* was the term always used to refer to Jesus, and added that "it has generally been used for Europeans who came, developed a long-term relationship with the area and people and who were interested in or sympathetic to the local Aboriginal culture" (p. 33).

[19] Subsequent moves between the countries have progressively been less radical, in part because in Australia each move brought me further away from Yalanji country, ending up in the city of Cairns, while moves to Norway went in opposite direction: from the city of Bergen to ultimately building my little home in rural Western Norway, at my ancestors' mountain farm Aaberge.

and existential thoughts and questions. This, I felt (somewhat unfairly), was social suicide back in Bergen. This cultural secularism had its academic counterpart in anthropology, where, I felt, secularism reigned supreme. It seemed to me at the time, that there was no way that I could write within the confines of anthropology and at the same time write an honest account of my transformative field experiences. So, I simply left anthropology for three years. There were many reasons why I returned to anthropology and Norway, such as life circumstances and a supervisor who never gave up on me. But if I am to single out one thing that inspired me to think I could write a truthful ethnographic account of my experiences in the field, both for my MA and PhD, it has been the writings of Søren Kierkegaard.

In 2005 I had a part time job at a University of Bergen library while trying to restart my MA thesis I had turned away from three years earlier. During a quiet night shift, a customer returned a copy of Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (2009a). Intrigued by the title, I leafed through some random pages and landed on a section he wrote about paradox and his notion of "subjectivity is truth". I was instantly grabbed – his words took hold of me; I recognised their truth in me; I felt kinship. Although I did not understand half of it, I knew that I had found a companion to my ethnographic endeavour of doing justice to my experiences in the field living with Roy. Quite in line with Kierkegaard's own philosophy, I was drawn, or "seduced" to use his own term, to Kierkegaard's thinking via how his writing resonated within me. I wrote a section on Kierkegaard's notions of paradox and truth in my MA thesis, and although it was undeveloped, it gave me the confidence to include my personal experiences of encounters with *dubu* in dream and awake.

For a long time, I remained private and guarded of my fieldwork experiences and non-secular views to non-Indigenous people, especially academics. Today I am less so, but I have continued to feel constrained by a longstanding secular undercurrent within anthropology: the notion that the ethnographer's own faith or beliefs have no place in the ethnographic text (cf. Larsen, 2014). Well, I am here to argue that it does.

Part of this argument emerged in response to comments on my initial fieldwork outlined in my Master's thesis. There was criticism of my argument that while the Dreaming is not observable or testable by objective measures, it does not necessarily follow that it cannot be real. I argued that the Dreaming is better understood if it is experienced and represented as real. In this PhD thesis I want to expand on this argument. This involves a rejection of intellectual traditions like constructivism that denies the Dreaming any reality outside the minds of its believers. Such a constructivist claim itself is a belief, as is any claim about the reality of the Dreaming. We can neither prove nor disprove the Dreaming by any

objective measure. But what we can say, is that any religious or spiritual outlook is an object of faith – because it falls within what Kierkegaard called the objectively uncertain.

By deploying Kierkegaard's notion of objective uncertainty, I want to challenge a prevailing scholarly view on Aboriginal Dreaming stories that treats such stories as a cultural construction of reality, and in its more extreme version, that the "Dreamtime", unlike science, is *purely* a construction of the mind and has no reality outside it. In other words, not seeing the Dreamtime as a cultural interpretation of reality, but plain and simple as a mistake, a delusion. It is rare that any anthropologist would state it thus publicly, but that does not mean that this is not what many anthropologists think, and thus can indirectly shape their research (which I will explore in the next chapter). I am not thereby arguing that Dreaming stories are *not* a cultural construction, clearly they are, like any human created abstract system. It is the inference that the Dreaming (or any other religious orientation) is a delusion that I wish to challenge. To presume that the Dreaming is a delusion is scientific overreach. My argument is not anti-science, anti-realism nor anti-objectivity. Rather, it is against the view that science can answer *all* questions, in particular questions concerning objective uncertainties – such as, is there an origin of life? Is there life after death? Is there meaning in life? These are questions of faith – which anthropologists report their field participants' views on, but typically "bracket out" their own views on. In the next chapter I will explore this problem further in cases with this kind of bracketing in their analyses of the Dreaming and posit my own analysis from a position of faith. Shortly, I shall set up this pending discussion by looking at bracketing and the so-called suspension of disbelief more generally, but first I must finish my account of my passage back into research.

After finishing my MA dissertation in 2007, I again returned to Australia. I was now living near Cairns, but kept making regular visits to Cape Tribulation with Roy. My MA supervisor had asked me to write a paper based on my thesis, deepening my argument I had started with Kierkegaard. I made a start, but the money I had saved up while in Norway ran out too soon and I had to attend to those bills again (my girlfriend also had three dependent children we supported). However, by this time, I had received temporary Australian residency (with no work restrictions) and an MA degree in Anthropology, and for a year I worked as a bartender and tutored anthropology at James Cook University before I eventually I got work as an anthropologist with the Central Land Council documenting and protecting sacred sites in Central Australia. Over the next two years I worked mostly in the Western Desert with *Pintupi* and *Luritja* people, but also with *Warlpiri*, *Pitjantjatjara* and *Arrernte* people, which gave me a great comparative background for my own experiences in Far North Queensland

with Roy and his group. After being granted an ARC funded PhD scholarship at James Cook University, I returned to Cairns to commence my PhD in 2011.

Although Roy was busier than before working and planning for the cultural centre, he always managed to find time for us to "go bush". Our time together was now typically weekends, and most of all we kept going back to camp in Cape Tribulation. The nature of my fieldwork continued in our old vein (good times, always), but now I also worked on material culture with him as well as filming him telling his own stories and dreams at locations where they actually took place. This was his initiative, both the filming, and the emphasis on doing it "on Country". Making films was new to me, but I learnt a lot from Daniela Vávrová, a fellow PhD candidate and visual anthropologist. By this time, many other Yalanji men Roy's age that I knew had passed away, and Roy had a new urgency to him in getting his stories documented. The film was finished and distributed to Roy and his family, and we marked the event by having a barbeque and outdoor screening at the camp in Cape Tribulation shortly before I again left for Norway to start a lecturing position in my hometown in February 2018. I did not get to see him again until June 2023, (when we holidayed together for a week and a half, mostly out bush visiting old stomping grounds), the longest we ever had been apart since 2002. We are far apart now. We don't call every month, but when we do we take our time and share our lives (both tears and laughter) with each other. And reminisce. I miss him dearly.

2.5 Radical Doubt and the Suspension of Disbelief

While a child of the Enlightenment, "radical doubt" (as introduced in René Descartes' *Meditations*), has been crucial in Western philosophy by questioning that which we take for granted, a child of the Romantic period, the "willing suspension of disbelief" (coined by poet Samuel Coleridge and later taken up by phenomenology), called for a willingness to go along with alternate depictions of reality. Both these attitudes have, often implicitly, been taken up by anthropologists, and both "children", despite their distinct appearances, are related. As Bruce Kapferer (2001) has demonstrated: "It is the methodological conjunction of these orientations in anthropological practice that decentres certainty and continually opens up possibility in interpretations and understanding" (p. 342). Ideally, according to Kapferer, this conjunction of radical doubt and the suspension of disbelief is open so as to "challenge even rationality and reason as a necessary method for engaging with the possibilities of being human" (p. 344), which I aim to do in this thesis. At the same time, Kapferer cautions against exchanging rationalism for mysticism, which he adds is how some anthropologists seem to practice suspension of disbelief.

My response to Kapferer's caution is that I hold rationalism and faith apart. I may have been said to have had a mystical experience, which I analyse from a point of view of faith. My experience of faith may be deemed as "mystical", but my analysis of it is transparent (demonstrated in the next two chapters). As I will show throughout this thesis, I am very clear that rationality and faith are two ways of knowing suited for two different domains (and here I am following Kierkegaard); where the former is for what can be known objectively and the latter what only can be known in subjectivity. Trying to use objective reflection and reason to know God, the Ancestors, the Afterlife, etc. (religious or deeply ethical questions) is futile (not to mention reductive); while using subjectivity or faith to know that which can be known objectively is religious fanaticism. As long as I hold these two apart and am transparent on my premises for my analysis (that of faith), the analysis itself is rational, reasonable, open for discussion. I am not saying I am agnostic or relativistic about it either, I am not – I have felt the truth of them to my bones. But this I cannot prove empirically or rationally – such truth remains, properly so, in the realm of faith.

More generally however, I agree with Kapferer. "The suspension of disbelief" has undoubtedly been an asset to anthropological understanding and was a crucial orientational first step in my own fieldwork. But such a suspension is a liminal phase which cannot be sustained in any real existential sense for longer than moments when faced with paradoxical alterity, which inevitably arises when anthropologists reason about other people's faith or spiritual commitments.

2.6 An Existential Approach to Fieldwork

My main argument for adopting an existential orientation in fieldwork is methodological and ethical: To be *real* with your interlocutors in the field. If that means telling your interlocutors you do not believe in their stories, that is fine. At least they know where you stand and can adjust themselves and their stories accordingly. Either way, it is my conviction that this will yield truer relations and ethnographies. My secondary push for an existential approach is that it can stimulate a reflexive form of writing. This is what works for me. That said, my propensity to be self-centred in ethnographic accounts, is what I have received most criticism for, so bear with me. My existentialist approach, I hope, has a story to tell that is relevant beyond my own and my friend Roy's lives.

I will discuss my existential stories in chapter 4, but I will introduce one crucial point here: My strongest supporter for including my own dreams and Ancestral encounters in my anthropological writings is Roy. He is aware that my existential approach to the Dreaming is

not always received well in the academic community. He has enough first-hand experience with scientists (both natural and social) and students through his work to know that they are highly interested in his traditional, particularly his botanical, knowledge, but only so far as it can be scientifically proven. For instance, trying to explain that the art of making fire was not discovered by trial and error but by knowledge given from the Ancestor *Dimur* to a Yalanji hunter in a dream,[20] may cause some fascination, but is usually not regarded by scientists as the *real* reason. The fact that I, a white researcher, received traditional knowledge in a dream, and believed it to be Ancestrally given, is for him (and me) of the utmost importance. It proved to him that *waybala* (whitefella) academics can change their epistemological orientation. To not share my own dreams in the academic community, would be seen by Roy as cowardice, and he has let this be known to me, if less bluntly.

This is also one reason I took up anthropology again, and I would argue, in line and continuous with the spirit of the anthropological project started by founding fathers such as Malinowski[21] and Evans-Pritchard, with a serious commitment to participant observation, but one that extends participation to include an existential orientation and realignment. As Tim Ingold (2011b) has pointed out regarding the co-dependency of observation and participation: all knowledge depends on "a close coupling, in perception and action, between the observer and those aspects of the world that are the focus of attention" (p. 75). What Roy has taught me was not only how to interpret signs from the Ancestors in dreams, unusual animal behaviour, faces in burning coal, or tree branches falling on a windless day, but by his own example showing me how to align my life to these. This means to not simply understand the principles of how Roy and others decipher meaning and put this to practice, but also appropriating this approach into my life. With dreams then, for instance, I did not only try to figure out how Roy sees and understand dreams, but I tried to scrutinise my own dreams to figure out if and how they could afford my own life direction. "Knowing must be reconnected with being, epistemology with ontology, thought with life", to echo Ingold (2011b, p. 75).

A recurring theme in Kierkegaard's *The Postscript* is that with objective reflection, the emphasis is on *what*, while in subjective reflection, "inwardness", the emphasis is on *how*: "The *how* of the truth is precisely the truth" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 217). I wonder if Evans-Pritchard ever read Kierkegaard. Such words seem to sum up his ethnographic development

[20] See chapter 3 for more about the story about *Dimur* and fire making.
[21] It should be noted that "immersive fieldwork" for prolonged periods, as well as ethnographic monographs coming out of such fieldwork, predates Malinowski (see for instance, Rosa & Vermeulen, 2022).

from a structural-functional rationalist in his Azande study to his work on the Nuer after having converted to Catholicism.[22] His last paragraph in *Nuer Religion* reads:

> Though prayer and sacrifice are exterior actions, Nuer religion is ultimately an interior state. This state is externalized in rites which we can observe, but their meaning depends finally on an awareness of God and that men are dependent on him and must be resigned to his will. At this point the theologian takes over from the anthropologist. (Evans-Pritchard, 1956, p. 322)

In Australia, Tony Swain has pointed out that, "Stanner held in common with Lévi-Strauss, Elkin and Eliade the premise that Aboriginal religion can best be understood "internally", interpreted in the terms of its meaning without reducing it to a social epiphenomenon" (cited in Keen, 2005, p. 62). The "Dreamstories" in this thesis are all characterised by being intensely true for the dreamer. This is really their defining feature; a dream is true in proportion to its individual impact and its capacity for transformation both on the individual, and sometimes by extension on a group level.

In regard to modes of knowing and epistemology, the Dene Tha (Canada) notion of "true knowledge" resonates with how Roy talks about Dreaming knowledge and how it can come to a person in dreams. Jean Guy Goulet writes that,

> A person who has undergone what Euro-North Americans would consider a religious or mystical experience is described not as a believer but as someone who "knows." This formulation is an expression of the Dene belief that all true knowledge – both knowledge that Euro-North Americans would consider mundane and that which they would consider religious – is derived directly from personal experience. (Goulet, 1998, p. xxix)

I also find this to bear semblance with Kuku Yalanji notions of what it means to be knowledgeable. The Dreaming can be learnt about through listening to Dreaming stories, songs and dance, but it cannot be thus *known* in its profundity; it must be lived and experienced. A knowledgeable elder is not one who merely has factual information and knows a lot of stories; his knowledge must have personal, experiential content and he must embody the Dreaming existentially. Although in many regions of Australia, there is a distinct age based hierarchy of access to religious knowledge through a senior to junior revelatory system (Morton, 1987; Munn, 1970), an Ancestral encounter or experience only ever occurs

[22] For a historical account of this development, see Larsen (2014).

to an existing person. One Yalanji elder up in *Buru* (China Camp), now deceased, remarked to me about his 20-year-old grandson's talent as a dancer, that "you can see the Ancestors come out in him when he dance". Typically, kids take part in corroboree from an early age, experiencing and re-enacting the Dreaming in a very engaging and subjective way. Truth is not simply established by recounting stories of "the [Aboriginal] Law" – it is experienced and lived. Dance and other public expressions of the Dreaming have been ethnographically researched in detail over the years. It would be a mistake, however, to deduce that the position and strength of Dreaming knowledge only mirrors and rests on the structural authority of the elders. Equally important, Dreaming knowledge finds its truth and strength in those people's subjective experiences and immersion. To be knowledgeable is to be experienced, and to be experienced means personally having experienced the truth in one's knowledge.

Central to Yolngu notions of "becoming knowledgeable" (*marnggithirri*), is according to Franca Tamisari (1998), "seeing for oneself" (p. 252), a notion strikingly similar to Kierkegaard's (2009b) notion of truth and what he called, the "autopsy of faith" (p. 138). This may sound jarring to contemporary ears, but to be clear, Kierkegaard was not referring to post-mortem examinations of corpses. In Kierkegaard's use, the autopsy of faith means precisely to *see for oneself*, but this entails to see "with the eyes of faith" (see Stokes, 2010, p. 301). Such vision or "visibility", Tamisari continues, following Merleau-Ponty, is not limited to what can be "seen out there", but includes that "which is perceived in visions, dreams and movement, as well as through sound, smell and touch" (Tamisari, 1998, p. 252).

What I have been accentuating is the ethnographer's own experience as the grounds to truth. Without having profound experience for ourselves, we can only come to an abstract and objective, hence reductive, understanding of the Dreaming and the position it has in the existential universe of our collaborators. Yalanji learn by observation, listening, play, and personal experience in which dreams, visions and spirit encounters are part. If I was to learn what they have learnt, it was obvious for me to follow suit. My approach here is similar to Goulet's adoption of Dene epistemology as part of his ethnographic method. Goulet (1998) argued the Dene were, "firm in their conviction that individuals, including ethnographers, who have not directly experienced the reality of revelation or instruction through dreams and visions do not and cannot understand a crucial dimension of the Dene knowledge system" (p. xxix). Similar understandings underpin Yalanji notions of their knowledge, which is also a reason why Roy and I thought it important I include my own dream in this thesis. I have written this thesis with the belief that Roy thinks I have something to add, which is my story, which he sees as complementing his story. It makes sense to him that our stories sit side by

side and that I explain my own experiences and truth-seeking that has resulted from our friendship.

2.7 Enchanted Ethnography in a Secular Age

In *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor challenged the "widespread understanding of secularity as the inevitable by-product of modernization" (Taylor, 2010, p. 301). In the book he introduces "secularism's" many meanings by noting that in secular societies you can "engage fully in politics without ever encountering God". This image expresses the first of several senses of secularism that commonly comes to mind; that public spaces have allegedly been "emptied of God, or of any reference to ultimate reality" (Taylor, 2007, p. 2). In other words, this meaning of "secularism" denotes religion's institutional withdrawal from public life. The second meaning of secularity that Taylor (2007) points out, refers to "the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church" (p. 2).[23] Taylor's third, and related, sense of secularism focuses on the changing "conditions of belief" with "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others" (p. 3). Whereas Taylor's first two meanings of secularity have been extensively discussed in what he calls mainstream secularisation theory, it is with his emphasis on secularity in the third sense that Taylor breaks from mainstream secularisation theorising. The changing conditions of belief concern the alternative ways one can live one's moral or spiritual life, broadly speaking, and more specifically "what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever" (Taylor, 2007, p. 5). Common for both the believer and the unbeliever, as Taylor has it, is that they orient their lives toward places of "fullness":

> We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper, more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. (Taylor, 2007, p. 5)

[23] Make a note, however, of Rodney Needham's warning against uncritical use of the term "belief". Needham pointed out that collective ideas and individual inner states need not be aligned and that one should avoid depriving "belief" of its appropriate individual and psychic connotation: "There is no point, that is, in speaking of collective representations, or dogma which are true of a culture as a whole, as 'belief' if it is not implied that the individual human beings who compose the social aggregate in question actually and severally believe them. Something that is believed by nobody is not a belief" (Needham, 1972, p. 6). Secularism is also a collective idea, and one should in a similar manner also be careful when using aggregate cultural labels of non-belief such as "atheist", "humanist" or "agnostic".

According to Taylor (2007), the difference for an unbeliever and a believer is the perceived source of such fullness; as coming from within or from without, respectively: “For believers, often or typically, the sense is that fullness comes to them; that it is something they receive; moreover, receive in something like a personal relation, from another being capable of love and giving” (p. 8). This comes close to how Roy talks about his dreams containing Ancestral knowledge as “coming to him” or being “given” to him by his Ancestors, or himself “being looked after”, which I will discuss in the next chapter on Ancestral agency.

For the unbeliever, the condition is quite another; the power to reach fullness is within. Taylor (2007) describes different variants of this, such as the naturalistic variant of the power of reason in which “we often find an admiration for the power of cool, disengaged reason, capable of contemplating the world and human life without illusion, and of acting lucidly for the best interest of human flourishing” (p. 9). In this “self-sufficient power of reason” one can become empowered by our human greatness; it can serve as its own place of fullness and as a condition we aspire towards. But, as Taylor points out, guided by reason alone, and if it recognises no limits, we can be led to human and ecological destruction. Another variant of unbelief seeks the source power in nature and/or within human nature, but these sources of power are nonetheless seen as immanent.

In other words, the change in the conditions of belief that comes with secularity, the shift in “background”, is evident in the distinctions “the immanent and the transcendent”, “the natural and the supernatural”, where unbelievers “deny the second term in each pair” (Taylor, 2007, pp. 13-14). Taylor notes however, that “human flourishing” is considered good by believers and unbelievers alike. But for Christianity, and for Roy, pursuing human flourishing is not the sole or supreme goal. For the unbeliever, on the other hand, human flourishing (and nothing beyond it) has become the goal itself. This development, Taylor argues, has become the default condition in Western countries. As he puts it: “A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable” (Taylor, 2007, p. 19).

So, what are the conditions of belief for Roy? Is such an exclusive or self-sufficient humanism “an imaginable life for masses of people” (Taylor, 2007, p. 20) in his milieux? This is difficult to answer. Roy’s world is cross-fertilised with ideas of Ancestral tradition, Christianity, other religions, secularism as well as some New Age ideas from the hippies that reside in the region. All these orientations are “on his radar”. As such, he is aware of them and knows unbelieving non-Indigenous people who lead their lives oriented after an exclusive humanism (i.e. accepting no goals beyond human flourishing). He may have reflected on what it would be like for those people, but I think he does not consider this as a viable orientation

for himself. My best guess is that this is the case for the majority of *bama* living at Mossman Gorge.

Talk of *dubu* (ghosts), for instance, is frequently heard at night in Yalanji households or around the campfire. In my experience, secularist ideas have no real ontological foothold among the Yalanji people I have spent most time with, but play a decisive part in their acute awareness of the presiding presence it takes in the greater Australian society they have to operate within.[24] This might lead some to think with Max Weber that for Yalanji people "the world remains a great enchanted garden" (Weber, 1993, p. 270), but this kind of phrasing places their views along a unidirectional timeline whose arrow of "progress" points towards secularisation. Indigenous Australians were also once thought of as a race destined to die out, so called "doomed race theories" (McGregor, 1997), but clearly they were mistaken. No doubt secularism has and will continue to affect the lives of Yalanji people, just like racism has and will. But I am not convinced secularism will be a straightforward nor inevitable outcome for Yalanji people.[25]

In 2011, a special issue of *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, was dedicated to discussing Taylor's analysis of secularism in his third, experiential sense. What attracted the contributors about Taylor's take on secularity and his emphasis on the "whole context of understanding", was the way "people deal with existential questions: how they actually *experience* belief in a world of religious and moral pluralism" (Baldacchino & Kahn, 2011, p. 3). This existential focus of the experience of belief is central to my own work, both in terms of Roy's beliefs but also my own. Baldacchino and Kahn do not shy away from dealing with belief and experience, nor do they reduce their scope by discussing religion only as a form of practice, as often has been the case in ethnographic studies of religiosity. The authors underline the need to understand religion through the "social practices that constitutes it" (p. 3), but not to the extent where it neglects the significant dimension in our research subjects religious lives, namely what it "is like for them to be 'religious' as it were", an experience "more or less alien to us as observers of, and even participants in, their practices" (Baldacchino & Kahn, 2011, p. 3).

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[24] See for instance Magowan and Schwartz who point out (relying on the Australian Bureau of Statistics) that there has been a rising number of Australians who affiliate with no religion, alongside a steady decrease in Christian affiliation in the last four decades preceding their publication (Magowan & Schwarz, 2016, p. 8).

[25] In other words, I align with Taylor's general criticism of mainstream secularisation theories. Note however, that Taylor has been criticised for neglecting "the way in which Western understandings of religion were informed through the precolonial and the colonial encounter with other parts of the world", something he himself acknowledges (Taylor, 2010, p. 301).

The social sciences have sought to understand religious life through the "objective" and rational lens of secularism for a long time. One point that drives this thesis is that something crucial when gaining knowledge of religious life is lost when anthropologists disengage their own subjectivity in relation to understanding religious questions. To borrow from Taylor's (2007) vocabulary of selfhood: Can the "buffered" social scientist truly comprehend a world populated with spirits, moral forces and purposeful causal powers of the "porous" selves of religious people? Does it matter, for instance, as Max Weber noted about himself in a letter to Ferdinand Tönnies, that he was "absolutely unmusical in matters religious"? (cited in Koshul, 2006, p. 490).[26] Now, I am not claiming that the religiously unmusical anthropologist cannot make great contributions to the study of religion, but rather to point out that their works are unlikely to induce goose bumps in their more porous listeners. This is not a trifling remark; "*mungka* [hair] standing" is, if you are "grown up" Yalanji way, a marker of Ancestral presence and truth. In my view, as ethnographers, we ought to take this to heart, and not always reduce truth to mean objective and observable facts when our informants clearly have a more encompassing orientation of what it means to *be in truth*.

Some may think I am focusing too much on the individual "talents" of the anthropologist here and will want to interject that we are scientists primarily, not artists; our methods are what ensures the validity and worth of our research, not our personal quirks. In turning to methods then, can methodological atheism (Berger, 1967) or indeed methodological agnosticism, tell us what it means to live a life where the Ancestors communicate to you through dreams? My answer is "not really". As I will try to demonstrate in the next chapter, one cannot adequately understand a revelatory epistemology, such as that of receiving traditional knowledge through dreams, with an understanding that denies such principles of knowledge production. You may account for it, but not truly understand it. To effectively know it, one must open oneself to something beyond the world of immanence, to become more "porous" or to let down one's rational guard, if you will.

By adding my partially un-buffered voice to that of Roy's more successfully porous one, some may discredit my academic integrity. I ask those who do not approve of my choice of letting myself become enchanted by Aboriginal cosmology, to humour me. If nothing else, my transformation can be studied alongside the religious conviction of any other person. As long as I am transparent about my own existential orientation and the premises of my analysis

[26] However, as Victor Turner later commented, Weber rather unjustifiably applied such religious unmusicality to himself, at least compared to Turner's own generation of social scientists (Turner, 1969, p. 6).

(from the position of faith), I cannot see why this should not be a contribution to anthropology by sketching out an existential account of faith.

What turned me away from anthropology in 2002 was what also brought me back: A perceived incommensurability between my faith in Ancestral dreams and anthropology. The rest of this thesis is fuelled by my attempt to rise to that challenge.

3 Kubirri at the Gate: Ancestral Agency

My intent with this chapter is to clarify what I mean by "Ancestral agency" while situating my project within the existing literature on Australian Aboriginal Dreamings. Some might question the usefulness of analysing early, in some ways "debunked" ethnographic literature, but I find these illuminating as they in some ways are more "honest" about their views on the Dreaming and role of dreams than much of the later more "agnostic" ethnographies. The form of Ancestral agency that will be examined in this chapter is evident in a view which Roy and many other Indigenous Australians share; that special dreams are seen as *gifts* from the Ancestors. As such, I understand "Ancestral agency" narrowly here, i.e., as changes instigated by an Ancestor's intervention in people's dreams or visions. Analytically, I contrast this with human agency, which is evidenced in the view that Ancestral dreams come with a *task* for people to "follow" the dreams, to "hold on to" them, "keep them strong", "make them come alive again" etc. My contention is that much of the literature on Australian Dreamings, despite aims to treat Aboriginal religions in their own right or terms and avowals to take the Dreaming "seriously",[27] either dismiss or omit Indigenous notions of truth regarding the Dreaming altogether, or end up with a two-tiered approach describing "their beliefs" seriously on one hand, and comment on their mistaken view of reality on the other. I find these approaches unsatisfying for my own project to understand how dreams link Ancestral and human agencies.

I will begin the chapter by detailing Roy Gibson's dream about *Kubirri* and analyse this and the events that followed through a bi-focal lens of Ancestral and human agency. I analytically distinguish these two inter-acting (ideally co-working) agencies, based on distinctions that Roy makes in referring to some of his dreams as both a gift from the Ancestors and as a task given to him to carry out.

[27] This theme will be revisited in chapter 4.

3.1 The "Spectacular Reality" of Roy Gibson's Dream

Figure 2
Roy in front of one of the shuttlebuses going up to the national park, 17.12.2017

Photo by Bård R. Aaberge

With the Northern Territory *Little Children are Sacred* report, the subsequent roll out of Liberal Prime Minister John Howard's NT Intervention (*the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill* 2007) and suspension of the *Racial Discrimination Act* (1975); as well as Peter Sutton's article, and later book, *The Politics of Suffering* (2009, 2001), debates concerning Indigenous self-determination, inequality and disadvantage raged among policymakers and anthropologists alike in the decade following the millennial turn. Differences of opinion in these matters were often marked by those emphasising poverty/disadvantage versus those emphasising cultural difference/autonomy. The distinction was furthered by the tendency of economists aligning themselves to the former position and anthropologists to the second (cf. Austin-Broos, 2011).[28] Altman and Sanders (1991), for example, were early to point out the value-problem in that statistical socio-economic equality

[28] For a general debate on social justice seen as redistributive and/or as recognition of difference see Fraser and Honneth (2003).

was not easily compatible with cultural difference, noting that "the pursuit of statistical equality is, we believe, both inappropriate and likely to fail" (p. 1).

In the midst of all this, Labour Prime Minister Kevin Rudd gave his 2008 National Apology for the forced removal of Indigenous children, and the Labour government soon after launched their new policy of "Closing the Gap" (i.e., the "gap" between mainstream and Indigenous Australians), focussing on life expectancy, health and, among other things, employment.

While my research interest is not in Indigenous policy, I do find it interesting that what is presented in various media as a story of successful Indigenous entrepreneurship and advancement in Indigenous employment, the story of Roy's dream to which this chapter is devoted, is at the same time a story deeply rooted in both traditional knowledge and a distinctive Indigenous epistemology. It is noteworthy that it is "cultural difference", mainly in terms of Roy's distinctive orientation towards his Ancestors and the Dreaming, that has given the necessary impetus and drive to see through a modern community development project funded with the aim of increasing the rates of local Indigenous employment. This aspect though, as we shall see, has often been overlooked or missed in mainstream accounts of the significant growth and expansion of cultural tourism happening at Mossman Gorge.

On page 3 in *Closing the Gap: Prime Minister's Report 2013*, the heading reads "Roy's Mossman Gorge dream – a tourism reality" (see Figure 3). Underneath, a case study highlights an Indigenous success story, and we learn that:

> For more than 20 years, Kuku Yalanji Elder Roy Gibson has had a dream for his land and his people.
>
> When the new $20 million Mossman Gorge Centre, an Indigenous eco-tourism business in the World Heritage listed Daintree National Park, opened with 90 per cent Indigenous staffing in June 2012, Roy's dream became a reality (Government, 2013, p. 3)

Figure 3
Roy's Mossman Gorge dream in the Prime Minister's Report 2013

Likewise, on 8/8/2012, after the opening of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, the Cairns Post reported that:

> THE indigenous community in Mossman yesterday celebrated a 20-year dream becoming reality with the official opening of the $20 million Mossman Gorge Centre.[29]

A couple of months later, the Cairns Post echoed themselves with the title "Indigenous venture a dream come true" under which they reported that

> A 20-YEAR dream to create employment for the Mossman indigenous community has been recognised at the 14th annual Tropical North Queensland Tourism Awards.
>
> Roy Gibson worked with his employer, the Murday cane farm family at Mossman, to create the Mossman Gorge Centre which opened earlier this year and employs 60 indigenous people (Dalton, 2012).

I have lost count how many awards the Mossman Gorge community have received over the years (many of them, however, for the community run company Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours, est. 1986, which was the precursor to the centre) but they certainly took home the prestigious 2014, 2016 and 2018 Qantas Award for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Tourism in the Queensland Tourism Awards. Three years after the opening, on 27 November 2015, when the Mossman Gorge Centre was awarded silver in the Cultural Award (competing with mainstream, non-indigenous companies) in the 2015 Queensland Tourism Awards, Indigenous.gov wrote that

> Since opening in 2012, the Mossman Gorge Centre has welcomed over 750,000 locals and tourists alike to the eco-tourism facility set amongst the beautiful World Heritage listed Daintree National Park.

[29] Indigenous Land Corporation, https://www.ilc.gov.au/IndigenousLandCorporation/media/Items/Content/Media/Media%20Coverage/Gorge_opening_red_letter_day_-_Cairns_Post_p10.pdf – accessed 5/5/2016

> It was a dream brought to life by local Indigenous Elder, Roy Gibson who worked with the Indigenous Land Corporation subsidiary Voyages Indigenous Tourism Australia and the Australian Government to build the impressive $20m facility.[30]

Roy Gibson's impressive initiative and work did not go unnoticed by the Cairns Regional Council either. Mossman Gorge is part of the neighbouring and smaller Douglas Shire (est. 1903) to the north of Cairns. However, Douglas Shire was amalgamated with Cairns Shire in 2008, a rather unpopular decision locally, leading to the Queensland Minister for Local Government (the Hon. David Crisafulli – MP) granting the former Douglas Shire electors a de-amalgamation poll. On 9 March 2013 the poll was held, and a majority of electors (57.61%) voted in favour of de-amalgamation.[31] However short-lived, this meant that the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre came under the Cairns Regional Council jurisdiction, a so-called "supershire", when it opened in 2012. The press release further reads:

> Mr Gibson – a member of the Mossman Gorge Kuku Yalanji community – had a vision more than 30 years ago to create a platform from which to showcase the unique and beautiful Mossman Gorge area.
>
> ...
>
> Many years and accolades later, Mr Gibson set about bringing his original vision to fruition and inspired the establishment of the Mossman Gorge Centre, which opened its doors last year.
>
> Cr Manning said the passion and dedication shown by Mr Gibson to achieve an end result that was beneficial for both his community and the broader regional economy was deserving of recognition.

Figure 4
Roy Gibson on the night of his Citizen of the Year Award

Photo by Bård R. Aaberge

[30] https://www.indigenous.gov.au/news-and-media/stories/dream-continues-inspire – accessed 12.02.2019
[31] For more details, visit Douglas Shire's de-amalgamation information page: https://douglas.qld.gov.au/de-amalgamation-information/

> "Mr Gibson worked with his community, the Indigenous Land Corporation and the State Government to develop his concept into a spectacular reality," Cr Manning said.[32]

In many ways, understanding the ways dreams, or as the mayor put it, how Roy "developed his concept into a spectacular reality", is what this thesis is about. The first order in that task, however, is to scrutinise more closely over what is meant by "dream" by Roy and his interlocutors. As we see in these various media accounts above, the terms "dream" and "vision" are used metaphorically, as is common in English; deploying the word "dream" in a way that can be more precisely understood as "imagining a desired future" or simply, as a synonym for "a wish".

What most journalists and non-Yalanji people tend to miss though, is that Roy's statements regarding his dream are altogether more literal. The idea of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre (initially known as "the Gateway") "came to him", as Roy puts it, in a nocturnal dream. As I will demonstrate, Roy sees his dream as no creation of his own imagination, but rather as a *gift* from the Ancestors.

Before we get into the debates concerning the role of Ancestors in dreams and the Dreaming, however, let us look more closely at Roy's dream and what the mayor aptly described as its "spectacular reality".

3.2 *Kubirri* at the Gate

Mossman Gorge community is beautifully situated on the high banks of the Mossman River. From the community, with the river at one's back, one looks straight up on the prominent mountain *Manjal Dimbi* (Mount Demi). *Manjal Dimbi* carries a lot of significance for the people who live at its base. The mountain has two peaks, the southern peak being slightly higher than the northern peak. The humanoid looking outcrop protruding out from the rainforest backdrop on the northern peak is *Kubirri. Kubirri* is a pivotal Ancestor who taught the *bama* which plant foods were edible and which were toxic. He also urged the people and the animals to follow him up *Manjal Dimbi* to find refuge from a threat. The animals followed but the people did not. The metamorphism of *Kubirri* and the animals into rocky outcrops in the northern and southern peaks respectively can be seen against the otherwise lush rainforest foliage draping *Manjal Dimbi*. The story of *Kubirri* can be heard in full detail at the Mossman

[32] http://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/media-archive/home/media-releases/archive/aus-day-awards2 – accessed 5/5/2016.

Gorge guided walks[33] and is also documented, and reinterpreted through a Christian lens (*Kubirri* is for example called the Good Shepherd) in the publication *Jakalbaku* (Field, Kulka, McNamara, & Fischer, 1987).

The following transcript is an abridged and edited version of Roy's narration of the aforementioned dream and is based on a video recording I did at Mossman Gorge, 1st December 2013. Although we have talked about this dream in great detail, I have not been able to determine how long ago Roy had this dream which according to media accounts above was 20-30 years prior to the opening of the centre. What I do know is that he had the dream in his old house, which he did not live in when I first met him in 2002. Nor am I sure when I heard Roy share this dream with me for the first time, but it was a few years prior to the recording date.

> Roy: O.K. just tell them about many years ago I had a dream aye?
>
> Bård: Yeah.
>
> Roy: O.K. What I gonna tell you about now is my dream and the vision I had for long a time. When you have a dream it's very hard to talk to your friends and tell your friends about what the dream's all about, and how it's gonna come to reality.
>
> I come home [to my old house] one day. I was tired, and I went straight to my bed and just had a sleep. And then suddenly I was in this dream. Can you see this picture I got here? [pointing to his Dreamtime Walks badge of *Manjal Dimbi* on his old tour guide uniform] You gonna see a picture of the Shepherd Rock [*Kubirri*] that's look right above our, our community. And the rock up on the top there is called the Shepherd Rock, that's what Europeans call it. But to us it's *Manjal Dimbi* and it is *Kubirri*.

[33] Roy has asked me to save the details of this particular story for those who come on their walks.

Figure 5
Roy telling his Kubirri Dreamstory. Dubuji, Cape Tribulation

Photo by Bård R. Aaberge

But, in my dream that big rock roll down from the top of the hill,... I can hear this tumbling coming down, shaking the grounds, and rolled straight in the middle of the road... that's the main road that goes to the car park up in the Mossman National Park road. And actually in my dream, I ran [out] and sorta was frightened, I run through the back door, and then I looked outside [from] my back yard, and then I really looked upon mountain up there and I said "Oh my God!" [in shock that *Kubirri* rock was not to be seen on the mountain]. I ran out... and on this road then... a big rock [*Kubirri*] actually was standing in the middle of the road.

But actually, I was leaning on this big rock you know? And suddenly, I'm touching on the side, then, it's like I was above that mountain you know, feeling that mountain [gesturing touching motions with his hands]. But it was like – it's a dream see? I stood [on the road] for a little while, and I looked in front of me... [and] there was this woman coming towards me. A woman with blonde hair. And walks up to me and say, "Excuse me sir?", you know, ask me in a kind way. I said "Yes?" – "I wanna go to the Mossman Gorge". And I stood and looked at her and I said, "Oh well I'm sorry you cannot go to Mossman Gorge". And she said, "Why is that?" And I said, "Because this rock is on the road, you can't go any further. The only way you [can] go through here, [is] to come with me, I'll have to take

> you through." Then she just stood there and looked at me hard. While she was standing there looking at me hard, I looked at the back of her shoulder, and there was... all this light shining at the back, glittering. Then I wonder why those lights were glittering, but it was actually the car park... in front of me.
>
> And suddenly, I just jumped out of my bed and... really thought it was real [after waking up]. I walked through my house and open the back door, then I look outside and wondered if that rock is still there or if he... is it still there, is it on the road? Then I looked above in the mountain, and I looked "ahh" [sigh of relief] I seen that *Manjal Dimbi* is still up there smiling at me. And I said to myself, "Oh my God! The rocks are still there, ahh."
>
> But in my dream, like it wasn't there, it roll down in the middle of the road and stopped cars coming past... And that was the dream I had. And now come to reality, as you see the Gateway down there, that's the dream, I guess that's the rock. So that's what it's all about, having a dream. People never believe in what a dream is all about, until it's come reality, until it's come true. Well, if you dream a lot, your dream will come true. Just take it as it comes to you, and believe in it, and one day it'll be in front of your face, smiling at you, and it's there forever. Thank you, *yalada*!

Summing up the events in Roy's dream, *Kubirri* rock breaks off from *Manjal Dimbi* and rolls down the mountain, threatening to crush Mossman Gorge community. Fortunately, the rolling rock stops short of the community and instead blocks the road, stopping all the traffic of tourists going past Mossman Gorge community to Mossman Gorge National Park further along the road.

What marks this dream from most other of Roy's dreams is precisely its eventual ensuing *spectacular reality*: The manifestation of a 20 million dollar cultural centre and a gate controlling the traffic where *Kubirri* rock had hit the road in Roy's dream. The dream also makes visible a distant past as much as anticipated future, as *Kubirri* can be considered an Arch-Ancestor from the deep past, rather than a recently deceased Ancestor.

This story raises many interesting questions, but crucially, it raises two sets of questions that are at the heart of this thesis: The first is questions of agency, which will be the main focus of this chapter, and secondly, it raises questions of time, which I will comment on, but deal with more fully in chapters 5 and 6. Central to these questions are the relationships between individual dreams and what has been called "the Dreaming" or the "Dreamtime" (I

shall discuss these contested terms below), and by extension the relationship between the Ancestors and their live descendants.

For clarity, I shall distinguish dreams in which Ancestors reveal knowledge to an individual dreamer as "Dreamstories", as opposed to "Dreaming stories" that have become established over time with intergenerational longevity. In this chapter I will examine how Roy's *Kubirri* at the Gate Dreamstory links to the Dreaming and Dreaming stories, and juxtapose these with existing and relevant ethnographic commentaries on the subject.

While Dreaming stories often explain how features in the natural landscape came to be as they are now through actions of the Ancestors (see for instance Munn, 1970), Roy's Dreamstory foreshadows a future transformation of the Mossman Gorge cultural landscape. The spectacular manifestation of the centre urges the question, to whom we should attribute the creation of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre? It forces the question of agency. It is not difficult for anyone to understand that Roy's dream had an influence on the creation of the centre. Nor is it hard to recognise that its spectacular reality has been contingent on Roy's actions. But whose *idea* was the centre? Who brought it into being? Who was the "first mover"? Whose efforts realised its reality? Roy's? Other people? The Ancestors? And what role did Yalanji culture play? What about Indigenous as well as mainstream organisations and institutions? To varying degrees, all these factors played a part in the creation of the centre. I have yet to find an ethnographic analysis concerning the Dreaming that includes all these factors, especially the role played by Ancestors, satisfactorily. What follows is my attempt to do so, by including Ancestral agency in my analysis of Roy's dreams.

It is a near impossible task to keep a stringent conceptual analysis going when considering all the forces at play here. In trying to wrangle the Dreaming into a stable, non-circular, consistent, conceptual model, one is bound to fail. Thus, I have sought to focus on and sketch out what I see as a missing piece in the picture that has often been drawn by ethnographies in the past – the concept of Ancestral agency.

How Ancestral agency comes forth or is activated or re-enacted by humans in ritual, such as in dance and song, has been written extensively about by many anthropologists (see for example, Morphy, 1991; Tamisari, 1998). What is special about Roy's *Kubirri* at the Gate Dreamstory is that the Ancestral agency is not confined to typical religious expressions such as dance, song and art. It blurs a sacred-profane distinction in that Ancestral agency plays out in the otherwise secular world of community development.

Ancestral agency can of course be understood broadly as all, or any, creative or proactive acts of the Ancestors, who themselves originally were men and women; such as,

shaping and naming the landscape around them, or turning into animals or natural features and phenomena embodying their essential power (Munn, 1970). This aspect of the Dreaming is undoubtedly a salient feature and has been written about extensively over the years in ethnographic works. In this thesis I will narrow the focus to what I denote as "Ancestral agency": the contemporary, more indirect role played by Ancestors in dreams and visions of living descendants, which through the recipients' interpretations and actions lead to change, material or immaterial, in their world.

3.3 Dreams, Ancestors and Agency in Early Ethnographies

For all their obvious shortcomings and problematic views on non-Europeans, the early ethnographers of Aboriginal Australians (who might be generalised into the category of social evolutionists) did put due emphasis on the role of dreams in their study of Australian "totemism" or "animism" (they tended not classify it as a fully developed "religion"). Likewise, they also afforded Indigenous Australians agency in their analysis. I find it notable that Edward Burnett Tylor (1837–1917) gave dreams a prominent place in his account of the conception of animism. In fact, so central were dreams to Tylor's precept of animism as the essence and origin of religion, that it has been referred to as the "dream theory" (cf. Larsen, 2014, p. 23).

A vital question, or "biological problem", giving rise to animistic (and later religious) thinking, according to Tylor (2008) was: "what are those human shapes which appear in dreams and visions?"[34] Dreams, Tylor (2008) continued, probably gave "ancient savage philosophers" the idea "that every man has two things belonging to him, namely, a life and a phantom" (p. 27). This idea, Tylor argued, was the first step towards developing a notion of a soul, or "shade".[35] One example he used to illustrate this, was how, in dreams, the dreamer appears to be somewhere else than his or her sleeping body.

In isolation, this conception seems to correspond rather well with Yalanji notions of how one's *wawu* leaves one's body when one dreams. While surveying for artefacts near a women's story place somewhere in the Greater Daintree (he does not wish to have the actual

[34] He wrote that there were *two* questions giving rise to animism, the other one being: "what is it that makes the difference between a living body and a dead one; what causes waking, sleep, trance, disease, death?" (Tylor, 2008, p. 27).

[35] Tylor wrote: "The ghost or phantasm seen by the dreamer or the visionary is an unsubstantial form, like a shadow or reflexion, and thus the familiar term of the shade come in to express the soul" " (Tylor, 2008, p. 27, emphasis in original). Tylor remarks that the Tasmanian word for shadow and spirit is the same. The Kuku Yalanji word for shadow is *ngurma*. The Hershbergers' list shadow, picture, statue, movie, cards, reflection in a mirror or smooth water for *ngurma*, but not soul or spirit. (Hershberger & Hershberger, 1986, p. 139).

location in writing), Roy and other Kuku Yalanji rangers camped at a friend's shed about 100 metres from a waterhole:

> Roy: I was sleeping in that shed, and that's the [clicks his fingers] dream I never forget that I actually just – that dream came to me.
>
> Bård: Mhm.
>
> R: And took me out of my bed, out of my swag, and put me over here, I don't know how it, what happened, but he put me there.
>
> …
>
> B: So, in your dream, then, you take your body with you? Or leave him behind sleeping, or?
>
> R: Leave him behind. I'm somewhere in here, I'm just, I'm something else, I'm just...
>
> B: *Wawu*?
>
> R: *Wawu*! Just as something like a spirit just watching these things. And out of my dream.
>
> B: And you'd never been here before?
>
> R: I'd never been here before.
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: You know?
>
> B: So this – the first time you were here were in your dream then?
>
> R: Yeah, first time! that's the first time. But I knew that, I knew that was a story place for the women
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: I didn't wanna go there because I respected that.

It may be pertinent to point out that when Roy is dreaming he is not only "something else", "just like a spirit", as Europeans may understand this term. He is also "I'm like I am, who I am now", but he has "moved place" from where he is sleeping, and is "actually here" at

the site of the dream. The next day, they survey the banks along this creek and Roy is dumbfounded as he realises it is the same place from his dream. He then told me, and showed me, how when he looked up from the waterhole at that position, the creek's shape, its bending, matched the body of the snake in the dream.[36] According to Fred Myers (1986), the common Pintupi (Western Desert, Central Australia) view of what happens in dreams, is also that the dreamer's spirit (*kurrunpa*) travels apart from the body and observes what is not ordinarily within the field of sensory perception. This appears to be what Roy was telling me happened to him in his dream.

Another explanation Tylor gave for the development of notions of a soul and afterlife, is reports of dead people appearing in dreams, and the "natives'" view of certain such appearances as actual visits. Note however, that *Kubirri* in Roy's story above is better conceived as an Arch-Ancestor than a recently deceased Ancestor. A better example of the latter is when Roy finally was visited in dream by his deceased brother Darryl (ten years after his passing – see chapter 7).

So, both the importance of dreams, as well as the role of Ancestors in them, were stressed by Tylor. The problem, as I see it (aside from his debunked universal evolutionary scheme), is that he did not take "the native's point of view" on dreams and Ancestors seriously. Instead, he took their view as both mistaken and inferior to his own social-Darwinist understanding of them. More specifically, Tylor's dream theory rested on the assumption that "primitive minds" were incapable of distinguishing the subjective from the objective, and thus failed to see dreams as "subjective processes of the mind" and falsely objectified them as the voice of a god or spirit (Tylor, cited in Larsen, 2014, p. 24). Here, Aboriginal belief in an Ancestral agency (e.g., in an Ancestor's presence or influence in either dreams or the world) is in error, i.e., an error of confusing the objective and the subjective; mixing up objective reality with the (mistakenly imagined) Ancestral manifestations in the world and in dreams.

I will propose in this chapter, and the rest of the thesis, that we can best understand concepts such as Ancestral agency as outside the scope of objectivity. There is in my view no way of arriving at an objective answer to questions over the truth of causal statements concerning the agency of dreams, Ancestral persons, and their powers. Knowledge about Ancestors and the Dreaming is shared of course, but the truth in the stories must be experienced by an existing subject. I want to argue for shifting our understanding of truth as

[36] The temporality of this story will be discussed in chapter 5.

properly belonging to subjectivity when regarding deeply ethical or religious questions, rather than sidestepping, relativising or pluralising it. This will be dealt with more fully in chapter 4 where I will return to this issue of the objective and subjective and Kierkegaard's take on their respective limits.

Tylor's main successor Sir James Frazer (1854–1941) continued the social evolutionary paradigm as well as the position that Australian Aboriginal people had magic, not religion. Frazer's direct influence on Australian ethnography is visible in the works of Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen. According to John Mulvaney, Spencer adopted an evolutionist logic and terminology from Frazer that excluded "creative" religious actions, and was convinced by Frazier to designate "Arunta totemism" as magical rather than religious (Charlesworth, 2005, p. 6; see also Mulvaney's chapter in same volume).

Frazer stated that Australian Aboriginal people thought they could influence their fellows or natural events with magic, and not by praying or sacrificing to a god or higher power. Thus, as Ian Keen (2008) has pointed out, Frazer distinguished magic from religion on the basis of agency: Whereas religious rituals appeal to the agency of gods, magicians themselves take the role as agents, manipulating supernatural forces without reference to a god or gods. While the discussion concerning whether Australians had "religion", "magic" or both, is not in itself productive for my purposes, the analyses of agency therein are.

The question of where people deem creative power to reside, the first mover, is central to Frazer's (1990) distinction between magic and religion, and how he conceived the former to transition into the latter: "the recognition of man's powerlessness to influence the course of nature on a grand scale must have been gradual" (p. 58). Thus, the emergence of religion, Frazer continued, would begin as "a slight and partial acknowledgement of powers superior to man", which, "tends with the growth of knowledge to deepen into a confession of man's entire and absolute dependence on the divine" (pp. 58-59).

The following story is a transcript of a videorecording I did with Roy 1st November 2012 while we GPS-tracked the old Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Walks tracks to document its historical use. I include the story in full as it contains elements that can lead into a more nuanced discussion on agency, the first mover, creative power, and where traditional knowledge comes from, etc.

3.4 Oldman Boyd's Forest Dragon/Strangler Fig Dream

[Walking on the old rainforest track behind the old tourism shed]

Roy: We're going to that significant place here, you know where the strangler fig are.

Bård: Oh yeah?

[Walking]

R: Try look for dragon, aye? Forest Boyd Dragon.

B: Yeah. Haven't seen one of them in a long time actually.

[Discussing the track and plants while walking]

R: Strangler fig now

[While we are approaching a huge strangler fig tree, Roy "sings out to the *Binga Binga*", i.e. he talks in Yalanji language to the Ancestors, announcing our arrival. He also tidies up the place, clearing debris and rocks around the tree while talking to the *Binga Binga* (Ancestors). This may be part of showing respect, or it could simply be an old habit of clearing this area for tourists' sake].

B: What can you tell us about the strangler?

R: Well, strangler figs is one that useful place for our *bama*, is a lookout, a lookout place for our people, or even a place for camping, even a place for initiation, for young boys to bring them here and keep them overnight. And to make sure that they feel the spirit of the old people, or the old Ancestors. And this part of Country to make 'em – to understand this is, this is your next job to actually look out for your people, and look after the environment of this Country, and to train people about story places, where they are, and give them all the stories – that's what it's all about, and keepin' your culture strong you know?

B: So that was part of the initiation?_

R: Yeah, that's the part of the initiation yeah.

B: So were taken here and leave them here aye?

R: Yep

B: And tie them up or? [something I had heard mentioned once by another *bama* man]

R: No leave them as it is. Leave them out here.

B: And they stay here_

R: Well they stay here, to prove themselves that they gonna be the boss, *maja*.

B: So the scared one might run away, but the ones_

R: But the ones_

B: (( ))[37] They stay?

R: Yeah. Yep, and it's scary, yeah.

B: Yeah. Do they sleep here, in the middle here or? [there is a large hollow in the trunk]

R: Yeah in the middle, sleep here, or even on the side. Doesn't matter which way, (( ))

B: And is that – which kind of – like you say this initiation, what kind of *dubu* would be_

R: Well, it'd be a good *dubu*, be the old, old spirit of this place. Because you know, I believe in this one here because I had a dream about this fella.

B: This same tree one?

R: Yeah we'll go closer to it too.

B: Can you tell us about that one or?

R: Yep [walks up to tree, sits down on one of its large buttress roots]. Yeah, to tell you about this tree – I mean I don't know how people feel about it but I think some people have some, you know, they feel frightened from it, dunno why? But to me, I had a dream about it. I don't know if I told you the dream, aye?

B: Depends, I can think of one dream you had about, about a strangler.

[37] "(( ))" – This designates that I could not decipher what was said. If I make a guess at it, the guessed word or words will appear within the double parentheses.

R: Well this one here, sleeping at home there then I was, I was right here now [pointing to the hollow base of the tree], standing up, looking into here, at the back of me was this oldfella with the long hair, and then standing up, naked aye? Naked. It's so strong, and you know, fit. Couldn't see his face but, you know and he was saying to me, reaching out his arm, saying "Come!" You know. And I looked at him, and then I sorta reached out my arm and looked at him, and we was just about to get each other by the arm and sort of talk and sort of grab each other. But suddenly, my brother woke me up from my bed.

B: Who that?

R: Eddie. Eddie woke me up and said "Ay, get up!" And my dream just vanished away. Vanished away because – I got upset, because, I said "You know what, I'm at this old man, from this tree, wanted to take me inside and show me what's inside this tree". What's a life is all about with this tree but it didn't come around to it. So it's just the vanish I got, and then I was really upset about it, so hopefully one day I have a dream again, and hopefully it comes to me and tell me what's the really meaning about this tree, what is the life and story about it, that's the one I really wanna find about. But to me, I feel that he is still here, there he is a still – strong old man, and I think he is here looking at us and listening to us, because he's a strong old man, he got long hair and he got no trousers on, he is standing up, he just got a bit of strings on him, you know, just strong! And nearly camouflaged, the same colour with the – like a dot painting on him. Just wanna be camouflaged. Man, I can still picture him! Yeah, so, he's, he here somewhere. [Laughing] Ah true aye! I never forget that. I'll get him one day, he'll come and see me one day.

B: So what, what do you think he might have told you? Have you got any guess at it or?

R: I don't know_

B: Something that is important obviously?

R: Something that is important really, because, you know something really important that nobody never actually, actually, what's the word? Actually never felt something like that, you know what I mean? I mean, why would I felt something like that? Why would he come to my dream like that you know? That's the question I would like to ask- answer him, why would he want me to be in that dream with him. And I never finished that dream, you know. There is something

there that he, I don't know, he wanted to take me away somewhere, but I don't know what. So, you know at the back of him there where light shining.

B: What kind of light?

R: Just bright, like a big sun at the back of him.

B: Like one, one big ball?

R: One big light, one big light, but (( )) his figure it was, I couldn't see his face because the light were too bright you know, what I mean? So I could see the front of him, so I could see him, but I couldn't see his face, because he was right behind the sun, or something, some light. But that hair was so long, unreal!

B: What would you call this man? Would he be a *binga binga*, or would he be a *dubu* or what?

R: He would be some sort of a, some sort of a boss, of this tree and of this rainforest. So powerful of something here. He gotta be something that, that he overrule this place, that he take care of this place. You know. And he doesn't look wild, he look, he look nice and calm, nice and... something that, he wants to fix something.

B: So he was strong but he wasn't threatening?

R: No, he wasn't threatening, he was an old man that wanted me to know something, he wanted to give me something to share with somebody, I don't know, I don't really know about it, you know.

B: And you came so close_

R: I come so close! To touch, I wanted to touch him. And he just – when my brother just touched me "Get up!" And I got really angry.

B: Did you try to go back to sleep?

R: I tried to go back to sleep [laughing] trying to say, say "Come! Come! Come back to me now *garrayi gurra, garrayi gurra naygundu*!" I'm saying that in my own mind, but never came back. So he probably saying "Next time". So when I look at this tree he's still here. Yeah [getting up]. That's him up here, look! [Pointing up the tree] See that elbow up there? That *marra* [hand]? Right in the ((end back)) side?

B: Ah yeah I do too! Up on that vine there.

R: Yeah yeah. And now do you see that spear? That's his spear.

B: *Kalka*.

R: *Kalka*. See that?

B: That little skinny one?

R: Yeah.

B: I do see that actually, let's see if I can zoom in on it.

R: He is leaning on it, see?

B: Yeah. There's the elbow [zooming in].

R: Yeah that's him.

B: And there is the *kalka*, the spear [zooming].

R: That's how strong he is, see? And he's here today, still is. See that now? [Laughing] He is not showing his face aye?

B: No, still not!

R: He's still not showing his face to me, see that [laughing]?

Far out! Strong aye?

B: Yeah.

R: See how strength that thing is [flexing his arm mimicking the pose of the arm in the tree].

B: Thanks for showing me that.

R: Nah, he's here!

B: Rustling in the leaves [wind blowing].

R: Yeah, I was here, look! [Moving] I was here somewhere, right here, looking, looking at him right here, and he was right here, with that sun here now, see that sun?

B: Yeah.

R: ((Stand up)) here. He was up here somewhere, standing up tall [pointing]. And I couldn't see his face. Yeah.

B: I've just got another question for you. Like, you know, this dream, you know, this dream is, real, special.

R: Yeah.

B: How can you tell that kind of dream from just any – you know, sometimes we dream funny things, how can you tell this dream, from sort of, normal, sort of not important dreams? How can you tell the important dreams from the other ones? That's the question.

R: Well, to tell you the important dream – because I asked him. I came up in the afternoon, and I said to him in my own language, I said "Ok *yundu ulman*, *yundu wanjubu*? (( )) *garrayinga naygundu*" I said that. "Come out and show yourself to me, I wanna see who – I wanna know who you are" and I walked away. I said [talks more in language] So when I said that word, in my own language, "I wanna see him, I wanna know who you are, what you are".

B: So this is, after you had the dream_

R: Yeah. After I went home, I went home, I went down the graveyard and had a swim [a place where he often goes, also talking with his deceased kin], then I sang out to them old *binga binga* "See youse all" and then I – when I came home, I just went to bed, and bang! He appeared in my dream [pointing to the tree]. Yeah, so. That's how I got to, connection to him, by ask him in language.

B: Ok, so let me get this straight, you came here and then you, first, you asked him here,

R: Yeah.

B: And then after he came to you in the dream.

R: He came after, then, yeah. So I wanted to know who he is, I wanted to believe who he is.

B: Yeah, had you noticed that elbow when you came up here before your dream?

R: Yeah I know he was here all the time.

B: Cause you'd been picking it from the signs like the elbow and the *kalka*?

R: Yeah, and the little arms the kids pick out, the little arms here [pointing]. Yeah

B: And you're happy for this video to be shared?

R: Yeah, I'd be happy to (( )) put that on, yeah.

I don't know, I just know, this oldfella, he's still here. Because, yeah.

B: Well, he can have some rest now from all them people coming here all the time aye? [Tourists]

R: Yeah.

B: Only you here now

R: Ah? [Roy seems lost in memories].

B: He'd been used to so many people coming through here.

R: Yeah, true, this oldfella.

B: And now it's all quiet again.

R: Yeah. One thing about it, I brought them kids up here, young kids, young, all the grannies, the young children. When we were sittin' down here, I tell them about that story now,

B: Yeah.

R: You know what happen up the top here? A branch fell down [imitates crash]

B: Oh wow.

R: In the still day. A big branch fell down.

B: No wind? [this co-occurrence is sometimes a marker or clue that an Ancestor is present]

R: No wind. You know what happen? A bird sang out really loud [imitates bird], a catbird sang really loud and made all them kids jump out of that – their seats.

B: Yeah, I bet.

R: And they reckon, "Ahhh!" And I said, "Don't be frighten, this oldfella is still around", "We go now" they reckon, and I said, "Nah, you can't be frighten" I said,

this oldfella looking at the frightened one, he'll take him away, that's what happen, believe it or not yeah.

B: I believe you.

R: And when I told with the young girls here, all them young *jalbu jalbus*, I said "See this old fella? He turned into a Forest Boyd Dragon, that's really him".

B: True?

R: Yeah. I said, "Which any of youse young girls here, that he wants to come and take, he'll appear with you" and you know what happen? There were them high school girls, there were *waybala*, and ours, from our schools. All lining up here [pointing] and right up here. The lizard ran from up there [pointing], the lizard ran,

B: The Boyd Dragon?

R: Yep, the Boyd Dragon ran over aye? And stood right beside me.

B: Was he sort of running on two feet like they sometimes do with the hands out?

R: Yeah, stood on two feet here, and he started looking at each one of those girls from that end to this end here [pointing]. And every girl ducked their head and said "Not me! Not me!" They got scared of it.

B: Yeah.

R: And I had that teacher taking a video shot at it, but it didn't [snaps his finger] appear with the video. [Smiling]

B: So he filmed it but it wasn't there?

R: It wasn't there [laughing]. And so I (( )) can't believe. And I wanted that to show, what is this fella all about, why is this old man so strong? And is still so strong in here, this old *dubu*, spirit, ((good guy)). You know, he might have just said, "Nah, I don't want them fella to – I don't want that, to show".

B: Have you got a name for him?

R: Ah, I just call him *maja*, *ulman*, *maja* that's all.

B: Yeah. *Maja*, *ulman* [boss, oldman].

R: Yeah. [talks to the fig tree:] Yalada ulman? Binga binga? [more in Yalanji language]. I just said "Give us a yell! We're gonna go" [speaks more in language].

B: Did you put in a word for me as well there, did you?

R: Yep. I just tell him ((he is my)) brother, *neigu jawun, neigu* brother. Don't make him bad, don't take him – give him any badness or something, and he's mine, he is with me then, and I hope will see you again.

I tell you, you come alone here, oh, boy, it's good. I like to be here.

B: Mhm, I can feel that. It's so still here.

R: Yeah, so still aye?

Figure 6
Yalada Ulman? Binga Binga? Roy saying goodbye to the Ancestor metamorphosed into the strangler fig tree

Photo by Bård R. Aaberge

[walking back]

B: That Boyd's Dragon, he, that connected to the strangler fig then?

R: Yeah connected to the strangler fig, and connected to that old man story.

B: *Yo*.

R: He's that old man they reckon.

B: Them old people told you any stories about strangler figs?

R: Yeah, that's the one now ((called)) *dubu*, called *dubu*.

B: They told you any story about the Boyd Dragon too?

R: Yeah that Boyd Dragon is that old man, they go on the tree and, like a, he's, he hides, and hides where nobody can't see him, he's like, act himself as invisible, but he's camouflaged to any trees that he jumps on, that he, that's how he, might as well say that's his, what is it? That's who he turn into this old *dubu dubu* see? So they, you know, I think they're trying to capture him, but he was too clever, then suddenly, they, then he turn himself into that Dragon then, and that's why nobody can't catch him. They know he is the one can, he can find any *jalbu* that he loved to have, so you gotta watch out for him, yeah.

B: So you gotta be careful with them *jalbu jalbu*?

R: With the single ones.

B: Single ones aye?

R: Yep.

In Roy's story we see him variously refer to the Ancestor in his dream/strangler fig as "*ulman*" (oldman), "old *dubu dubu"* (generic term for spirits, ghosts of the dead and non-human beings), and "*Binga Binga*". In English, *Binga Binga* (meaning "white" inferring "white hair", an elder), is often called "them old people". *Binga Binga* is used to refer to the living and most elder males (J. C. Anderson, 1984; Hershberger & Hershberger, 1986), but also recent Ancestors, passed away kin, who may linger in their Country (*bubu)* (Aaberge, 2007). This became evident to me early in my MA fieldwork, when my friends "sang out" to the *Binga Binga* (the Ancestors) to introduce my presence to them when I moved into the bush camp that was to become my home for the next nine months.

Interestingly, Roy tells us that a schoolteacher video-recorded a Boyd's forest dragon running up to Roy while he was telling the schoolchildren about how this "Ulman" transformed himself into this animal, but that the forest dragon did not show in the video. By including this story Roy emphasizes one of the key characteristics of this Ancestor, as a master of camouflage. I also believe Roy wants to challenge us with this story of the failed video recording, by pointing to something that cannot be seen. With it, he is pressing the question and asking us not only if we can believe that an Ancestor can manifest itself in an

animal, but also that it can make itself, in animal form, invisible to the video recording of it. Roy seems aware of the paradox this may entail for non-Indigenous people and because of this, pushes it and offers it to us point blank. In his writing about Danish neo-orthodox Muslims and perceived failures to capture *jinn* (invisible spirit) possession convincingly in visual media, Christian Suhr (2015) points out that such failed images flow with ambiguity, and that this "is the curse of the failed image, but also its attraction and marvel, since the failure creates an ideal condition for leaps of faith, submission, and surrendering of the self to the unknown" (p. 108). I think this is exactly what Roy is edging us towards. By adding this story, he is challenging us to believe, in spite of negative visual proof. In doing so, I suggest, Roy is pushing what Suhr (2019) calls a "negative epistemology" in which visual representations are valued "not from the adequacy of their correspondence to perceived reality, but rather from the ways in which they fail to exemplify that which they appear to depict" (p. xii).

The liminal character of *Binga Binga* blurs the distinction between the living and dead and highlights the spiritual continuity and connection between living humans, deceased kin and the archetypal Ancestors of the Dreamtime. Comparatively, in relation to this, Nancy Munn (1970) has noted how senior elders sometimes take on some of the power and agency of Ancestors in Central Australia.

Roy tells us that this Ancestor is a *maja* (boss, master), which I take to mean he is not primarily associated together with recently deceased kin, but rather as an originator, an Arch-Ancestor, a "prime mover" that helped create the world as it is today either physically by imprinting it, externalising a physical feature or metamorphosing into Country (Munn, 1970), or, by revealing life-dependent knowledge or "the Law" that the descendants live by, as *Kubirri* also did.

Not only did the *Binga Binga* in Roy's Dreamstory metamorphose into this large strangler fig tree; towards the end of the story we learn that this Ancestor-man also turned into the Boyd's forest dragon which further bolsters this interpretation, as this is a common feature in Dreaming stories in many parts of Australia, where all creatures were originally human before turning into different animals, serving as the archetype of its present day species. The

fact that Roy was looking for this lizard in the landscape on our way to the strangler fig tree, also shows that this Ancestor, the strangler fig, and the forest dragon are linked.[38]

Roy sees the Ancestor's presence in his dream as an actual visit. The Ancestor being in his dream is a result of the Ancestor's will and intent and is not as a production of Roy's consciousness. Likewise, I think Roy sees the Ancestor as the *creative agent* in this dream, based on statements he makes such as "why would he come to my dream like that?", "he wants to fix something" and that the *Binga Binga* wanted to "give me something to share with somebody". Only, in this dream, the creation, the knowledge, the Dreaming story itself is missing due to Roy's abrupt awakening. The gift of Ancestral knowledge was never passed on, and as a result Roy can only share surrounding knowledge connected to this story, like how the man was painted up with dots, and that he was connected with the tree. If Roy did not awake, he thinks the story about the strangler fig tree, the oldman and the Boyd's forest dragon, would have been revealed to him. It seems clear that Roy thought the interrupted story to be of the Ancestor's creation, and not of his own making.

However, one of the main reasons to include this story here, is that the story also, explicitly, points to Roy's role in the bringing about of this dream: *Roy asked for it*.

When I asked Roy how you can tell important dreams (those coming with a gift of Ancestral knowledge) from ordinary, non-important dreams, Roy plainly answers that he asked the Ancestor to come to him in his dream. He visited the strangler fig in the afternoon, asked the Ancestor to "come out and show yourself to me", and that "I wanna know who you are". This really highlights Roy's will and intent here; he is not a passive recipient, but actively appealing for the Ancestor's visitation in dream. He is consciously, actively and sincerely seeking the knowledge. He re-emphasises his intent for an Ancestral visit by singing out to deceased relatives at the Mossman Gorge graveyard later in the afternoon. In this case (although not in all dreams), Roy is clearly the initiator of this Ancestral transaction. In this sense, he is the first mover in (the attempt of) bringing about Ancestral knowledge. At the same time, it all hinges on an Ancestral response, an answer to Roy's call, as the Ancestor is the creative agent, even if he is not the initial mover.

[38] One can speculate if this story concerns traditional initiation among the Yalanji, since the strangler fig tree is associated with initiation. Roy has also told me about his own initiation at Buru (China Camp – where Roy has kinship ties through his mother). When he was young, old men he was with, purposely left him behind sleeping in the area near *Kija*, the Roaring Meg Falls (a very important Yalanji story place, see McConnel (1931)). When he woke up he was cold and it was dark. He had to make his way to where the men were camped through the dark bush. All along the way there were *Binga Binga* stalking and harassing him, throwing sticks and rocks at him etc., but they were invisible and he could not see any of them. The Boyd's Forest Dragon is a good metaphor for this, as they themselves are masters of camouflage, and making themselves invisible, as Roy stresses above.

As we have learnt, Roy walked home and went to bed that night "and bang! He appeared in my dream [pointing to the tree]. Yeah, so. That's how I got to, connection to him, by ask him in language". What I want to draw attention to with this Dreamstory is that we need to take both human and Ancestral agency into account as a relational dynamic which can entail both a self-initiating appearance by an Ancestor or an appearance in response to human invocation (though never reliably, as if summonable); this creative potential for Ancestral manifestation and communication can reside in material spaces (Roy sought out the Ancestor's engagement by visiting and talking to him at a specific location, the strangler fig) as well as appear via the medium of an actual dream. But importantly, this agency is relational. As this Dreamstory illustrates, Ancestral agency does not exclude human agency, nor does human agency exclude Ancestral agency. In fact, they are mutually reliant for the production and reproduction of Ancestral knowledge.

While Frazer drew attention to the importance of agency in understanding (the difference between) magic and religion, I diverge from his view in that he saw them as flawed understandings of reality. The "mistake" and "fatal flaw" of magic, Frazer contended, lies not in its principal assumption of a natural law governing the causality of events, but the "total misconception" of the nature of the laws that governs such sequences. Religion, on the other hand, wrote Frazer (1990), is "a belief in powers higher than man and an attempt to propitiate or please them" (p. 50). These powers are "believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life" (p. 50). Looking at Roy's Dreamstory from this angle, although not a neat fit, Roy's orientation towards his Ancestors is more on the side of religion and not magic by Frazer's standards, as I am quite certain that Roy sees himself as inferior in creative power compared to his Ancestors. The creative power of the forest dragon Ancestor is appealed to – Roy literally asked for his favour. On the other hand, if one looks at how Roy would do a "smoking down" ritual, for himself, me, or tourists before going on a bushwalk, he is taking more direct control himself – which would fall under Frazer's understanding of magic. As stated previously, the labels "magic" or "religion" are not what is important here[39], but I do think it is worth bringing forth the various roles that Roy and his Ancestors take on and the types of agency that play a part in these stories.

Thankfully, later scholars of Australian Aboriginal religion debunked both Tylor and Frazer's views on the basis of their overarching evolutionary framework. Regrettably though, these tended to focus less on the human and Ancestral agents and the Aboriginal "beliefs"

[39] According to Tony Swain, Frazer recognised the religious character of Aboriginal magic later in his career (see Keen, 2008, p. 128).

themselves. Instead, Aboriginal religion increasingly became treated as a social epiphenomenon, and with it, the whole debate of human vs. Ancestral agency, central to Tylor and Frazer's analyses, as well as notions of "truth" in relation to religion, recede to the background. At least the secular bias in Tylor and Frazer's accounts of Aboriginal religion were up front and evident. In more recent accounts, this bias becomes increasingly convoluted and hidden in ethnographic accounts, yet still active in its taken-for-granted form (i.e., "bracketing" which will be discussed later in this chapter).

Leading up to this move away from the truth/untruth of religion, it is useful to briefly mention Emile Durkheim's influential book *Elementary forms of Religious Life* (first published in French in 1912), which uses Australian "totemism" as a key empirical example in his functionalist model of the origin and development of religion. As with the evolutionists, Durkheim was also preoccupied with the "origin" of religion, but instead of analysing religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" (Tylor, 2008), Durkheim shifted the focus from belief and agents (human or ancestral) to the social function and aggregate of religion.[40] In Durkheim the transcendental operator is "society", not the individual or the sum of their actions.

Durkheim's thinking on Aboriginal totemism influenced both Lévi-Strauss' structuralism and Radcliffe-Brown's structural functionalism. Lévi-Strauss turned functionalist theory on its head by focussing how the mind structures the world: "natural species are chosen [as totems] not because they are 'good to eat' but because they are 'good to think'" (Lévi-Strauss, 1964, p. 89); while Radcliffe-Brown followed Durkheim more closely, focussing on social organisation, and saw totemism as "a general name given to a number of diverse institutions which all have, or seem to have, something in common" (Radcliffe-Brown, cited in Stanner, 1984, p. 157).

The renown of these scholars hardly needs explaining, and Australian Aboriginal Dreamings (or "totemism") was a topic of focal interest for intellectuals worldwide. What

[40] Durkheim once wrote that "... for it is an eternal truth that outside us there exists something greater than us, with which we enter into communion" (Durkheim, 1912, p. 257; cited in Appelrouth & Edles, 2016, p. 123). While one cannot accuse Durkheim for building his social theories around notions of human agency, make no mistake, it is not the Ancestors or any transcendental religious entity he refers to as something greater than us and with which we commune. Instead, it is society as a *sui generis* reality, a reality that is unique to itself and irreducible to its comprising parts. In other words, a new reality fuelled by individual minds that nonetheless exceeds the sum of its human actors' combined efforts. Thus, famously, Durkheim saw religion as society's worship of itself. What he meant by this was that he saw religion as a natural expression of society, as a symbolic manifestation of a "society's moment of reflecting on its own transcendent power" (Lambek, 2008, p. 35). Durkheim also shifted the focus away from totemism as a belief or experience and rather focussed on its functions in providing social cohesion among its members and as a collective consciousness providing solidarity to social groupings.

these scholars all held in common was the view the Aboriginal totemism was an epiphenomenon, a by-product or function of Indigenous minds or social dynamics.

3.5 "The Dreaming" and "The Dreamtime" as Concepts and Their Links to Dreams

Unlike other early scholars who treated Australian religions as epiphenomena, Strehlow and Stanner recognised the centrality of the Dreaming in Aboriginal lives and treated it more in its own right. T.G.H. Strehlow was among the early advocates categorising the Dreaming as a "religion" (as was Stanner). Basing his work on Arrernte people in Central Australia, Strehlow described the Dreaming as "eternity uncreated, sprung out of itself" (cited in Charlesworth, 2005, p. 9). W.E.H. Stanner famously characterised it as the "everywhen" (2009b, p. 58). Both, then, have tried to capture a temporal tension that non-Aboriginal people seem to experience when introduced to Aboriginal Dreamings. A tension between the Dreaming as a "founding drama" when the world was created (Stanner, 1984) as well as something that is ever ongoing, eternal or beyond time altogether. Sometimes the Dreaming is seen as linked with peoples' dreams, sometimes not. As John Morton wrote,

> as we delve deeper into the complex associations of 'the Dreaming' it begins to appear as something much, much more than dreaming (i.e. in the ordinary sense). It is, in effect, a First Cause, a synthetic principle to which all minor causes are subordinate. While manifested through the material world, it is not in itself a material entity. (cited in Charlesworth, 2005, p. 9)

"The Dreaming" is a much debated and contested concept in the anthropological literature, and is seen by many as a composite concept that can signify a number of related themes in Aboriginal life (see for example Myers, 1986; Stanner, 2009b). "The Dreaming" can refer to a number of things, such as: an Ancestor or totemic-ancestor (McConnel, 1931; Radcliffe-Brown, 1930a; Strehlow, 1965); one's moiety, clan or personal totem ('my Dreaming') (Stanner, 2009b); a sacred site or story place connected with the actions of particular Ancestors (Stanner, 2009b); the paths these Ancestors travelled (sometimes called Dreaming tracks or Songlines); the "Law" or prescriptive structures and social norms (J. C. Anderson, 1984; Morton, 1987; Spencer, 1896; Stanner, 2009b); and the time, era or creative epoch when the Ancestors shaped the earth, initially called by Frank Gillen the "dream times" (Spencer, 1896), or more commonly, "the Dreamtime" (Stanner, 2009b, 1984) or the "eternal dreamtime" (Elkin, 1994, p. 4). While different from Western notions of a Golden Age or a Garden of Eden, the Dreamtime has nonetheless been seen as "an Age of Heroes, when the

ancestors did marvellous things that men can no longer do" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 58). However, this time is still part of the present. Again, as Stanner (2009b) put it, "One cannot 'fix' The Dreaming in time: it was, and is, everywhen" (p. 58).

Whereas the links between Roy's actual dream foreshadowing the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre and "the Dreaming" and the Ancestors, were lost on his interviewers, such links have long been debated in the Australian anthropological literature. The debate I refer to concerns whether a link exists between dreams, of the literal kind, and "the Dreaming", as referring to creative events and stories associated with Aboriginal Ancestors.

The English terms "the Dreaming" and the "Dreamtime" were conceived, and spread fast, in the ethnographic literature disseminated throughout the world. Although some Indigenous groups in some parts of the country resisted these terms,[41] these English terms have also been appropriated by Aboriginal people over large parts of Australia. This appropriation need not be seen as a passive defeat to colonial discourse, but also as a result of opportune code-switching as these terms also provided Indigenous Australians with convenient short-hand concepts to orient whitefellas in their world without risk of exposing secret knowledge. Despite not agreeing with his overall argument, I do agree with Patrick Wolfe (1991) in that (in some cases) "rather than a way of talking about the sacred, the Dreaming provided a way of not talking about it" (p. 218). I would also add that the "Dreamtime" also has an allure for tourists, which has not gone unnoticed by Indigenous tourist operators, such as the community-run precursor to the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, "The Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours".

Spencer and Gillen appear to have been the first to use the English gloss the "dream times" to translate the Aranda-speaking people's *alcheringa* or *altjiranga*, which they used to describe the period when the Ancestor spirits shaped the physical world and at the same time laid down the "Law" or way of life to be followed by Aboriginal groups. The Aranda[42] phrase, *altjiranga ngambakala* has connotations of "having originated out of one's own eternity", "immortal", "uncreated", and it is this which is essential to the concept of "the Dreaming". At the same time, *altjira rama* means "to see or dream eternal things", or "to see with eternal vision" (Strehlow, 1971, cited in Charlesworth, 1984, p. 9).

[41] For instance, Jennifer Deger has pointed out that not all Yolngu people in Arnhem Land have taken to these terms. Deger has suggested (pers. comment) that those Yolngu who do not like the seeming reduction to "dream", perhaps do so as dreams are not taken seriously by most white people.

[42] Later linguistic spelling conventions seem to favour "Arrernte" over "Aranda" or "Arunta".

I am unaware of any linguistic link between the Dreaming and dreams in Kuku Yalanji. The Yalanji word for the Dreaming, or "Dreamtime" as it has been most often translated to me, is *Ngujakura*. The Hershbergers have translated the noun "*ngujakura*" in their Kuku Yalanji dictionary as "Aboriginal law, the dreamtime stories, anything to do with the dreamtime" (Hershberger & Hershberger, 1986). *Ngujakura* is also the word which Rosemary Hill in co-authorship with Yalanji elders (2004) described as "the dreaming which is also still now" (p. 51). The Yalanji word for dream is "*bijarr*" (noun), while "*bijarril*" (verb) is according to the Hershbergers "to dream". Nested within English sentences, Roy sometimes deploys the word *bijarr* when referring to his dreams.

The question concerning the aptness of the anthropological coinage of the "Dream-times" (Spencer & Gillen, 1899) or "The Dreaming" (Elkin, 1933; Stanner, 2009b) and its diffusion across the continent and into common discourse, has in other words a long and hotly debated history (Green, 2012; Morphy, 1996; Wolfe, 1991). It is not within the scope of this chapter to go into detail in this debate, but I do concur with Morphy and Green in that the Aboriginal appropriation of the term "the Dreaming" is not by chance. Let me briefly explain why.

Although I cannot speak more than some sentences in Kuku Yalanji, I think that local languages can inform us greatly on these and other significant matters regarding Indigenous ways of knowing. However, the debates regarding the conceptual aptness of "the Dreamtime" and "the Dreaming" too often become a debate in linguistics which sometimes loses sight of two simple (but important) questions: Are individual dreams connected to the Dreaming? And by extension, are Ancestors seen as playing a role in dreams? My answer, which should be evident by now, and that of many other ethnographers before me (some central publications are Glaskin, 2005, 2010, 2011; Poirier, 2005; Munn, 1970; Myers, 1986), is yes to both questions.

3.6 Dreams as a Gift and Task – Ancestral and Human Agency

Ancestral agency in dreams is evidenced in one Yalanji Dreaming story itself, in which emphasis is placed on the roles that Ancestors, dreams, art, and dreamers all play in the generation, transmission and continuation of traditional knowledge, in this case the art of making fire. It is a Yalanji Dreaming story about fire-making connected to the mountain

known as *Manjal Jimalji* (Devil's Thumb),[43] given to Dennis Field by respected and knowledgeable elders George Kulka, Eileen McNamara and Dick Fischer, published in 1987:

> *Dimur* [an Ancestral being] was concerned because the people had no fire nor did they know how to make fire. He watched and one day when a young hunter was high on the mountains he noticed smoke coming from a cave at the base of a large rock. The hunter was curious and went closer, entered into the cave and sat beside the fire.
>
> He started to feel sleepy and lay down unaware it was really *Dimur* standing nearby singing him to sleep. Soon he was in a sound sleep and while he was asleep, spirit *Dimur* put into his head how to make fire with fire sticks and where to find fire sticks.
>
> When the hunter awoke he found a set of fire sticks there beside him and immediately knew what they were and how to use them. He took charcoal from the fire and drew on the cave's wall all the spirit had taught him so that the people would never forget how to make fire. (Field et al., 1987)

This type of story on how Yalanji was taught by an Ancestral being of the Dreaming is common among the Kuku Yalanji.[44] What makes Dimur's fire story significant for my argument, however, is that the story itself reveals the original epistemology behind the traditional knowledge of making fire. The art of making fire was revealed by an Ancestral being to humans or proto-humans (the hunter) via the hunter's nocturnal dream – that is, the role of dreams in the transmission of Ancestral knowledge is made explicit in the story itself. This story foregrounds both the pivotal role dreams can play in the production of knowledge *and* the Ancestors' role as the creative agents of that knowledge. Similarly, Nancy Munn (1970) found in Warlpiri thought that "the ancestor first dreams his objectifications while sleeping in camp". In effect, Munn continues, the Ancestor "visualizes his travels – the

[43] Dennis Field has added to the recorded story that *Jimilili* is that little lizard with the red belly, and that he wore his hands out using the firesticks (pers. comm., 21.06.2023). Linguists H.D & R. Hershberger (1998) noted that *jimalili* (mountain lizard) taught people how to use the firesticks. Queensland Protector of Aborigines W. E. Roth reported that the 'Koko-yellanji' on the Bloomfield River called firesticks *thci-mal* (1986), which corresponds well with *jimal* as recorded by the Hershbergers. *Dimur* may of course be the Ancestor's name, who may have been a lizard-ancestor-man, but I have not had this confirmed either by fluent Yalanji speakers or in the ethnographic/linguistic record. Similarly, the name for the firemakers that were made in the Herbert River Area were documented as 'Tikovinna' by the collector, JA Boyd, which Rosita Henry was told by Elder Russell Butler, is actually the name for the ancestral being *Jigubina* (see Henry, 2016).

[44] Another well-known story, already mentioned, is how *Kubirri* taught the Yalanji people which fruits, nuts, seeds, berries, and animals to eat, at what time to get them, and how to prepare them. A proportion of the vegetable foods in the traditional Yalanji diet are toxic (esp. cycads) and have to be thoroughly processed before consumption.

country, the songs and everything he makes – inside his head before they are externalized" (p. 145).

According to anthropologist Marc Stevenson (1996, p. 287), traditional knowledge is the intellectual product of countless generations of direct observation and experience handed down through oral tradition. The role of oral transmission of knowledge is a common feature of "traditional knowledge" definitions, as is the role of practice, such as in dance, song and art, and how people learn through doing and re-enactment. The role of reappropriated archival material and cultural revival of traditional knowledge should also be added to the contemporary context.[45]

The fire story about *Dimur* details the role of cave painting in transmission of traditional knowledge. The hunter "took charcoal from the fire and drew on the cave's wall all the spirit had taught him so that the people would never forget how to make fire". Yalanji people also clearly acknowledge the importance of storytelling, song, dance, art and language in keeping their "culture strong" and "passing on" their traditional knowledge to younger generations. The issue, then, is not that Roy or other Yalanji people lack "Western" notions of knowledge transmission in their epistemology, or that they see these at odds with their own. Rather, it is non-Indigenous people's crucial omission or denial of certain knowledge transmissions, Ancestral in origin, in their theorising of Indigenous traditional knowledge. Some ethnographic forays aside (such as proponents of the "ontological turn"), the overall secular nature of Western epistemologies tends to exclude Ancestral agency in their theorising about knowledge and truth.[46]

The knowledge in Roy's *Kubirri* at the Gate dream is not strictly "traditional". But what I want to bring to the fore here is that neither was the knowledge in the story about *Dimur*. How to make fire using firesticks is *now* traditional knowledge, after it has been passed on and honed intergenerationally for perhaps thousands of years. The art of making fire was at the outset Dimur's knowledge, and it was him who brought it into existence through entering the dream of the hunter. At the point of the dream, the knowledge had yet to be practiced by any living Yalanji. It was thus *Ancestral knowledge*, that only in time became traditional knowledge. The prime mover, the creative agent, who "put into [the hunter's] head how to make fire with fire sticks and where to find fire sticks" was the Ancestor *Dimur*. Roy does not use the terms "Ancestral knowledge". He, along with many other Indigenous people,

[45] I have written about how Roy has drawn inspiration in his art from Yalanji shield designs stored at museums elsewhere (see Aaberge et al., 2014).
[46] See chapter 4.

especially rangers and tour guides, have appropriated the term "traditional knowledge". But Roy includes Ancestral agency in his understanding of traditional knowledge production and transmission.

This means that Ancestral knowledge enters into the world of humans through the agency of the Ancestors. What is being passed on is not always pre-confirmed knowledge, but, as in Roy's *Kubirri* at the Gate dream, a vision to be interpreted and made manifest in the present by the dream-recipient. Other times the dream or vision can be more self-explanatory, or simply a demonstration of bush skills, such as Dimur's story, or bush medicine, such as my own dream detailed in chapter 4. My fieldwork suggests that Ancestral knowledge is a defining feature of what Roy and other Yalanji men I know understand as traditional knowledge, and is defined by its origin in the Ancestors, who enter into existential transactions with their living human descendants. Yet, Ancestors are not the only agents in this knowledge production. As the story of *Dimur* and Roy's Dreamstory about *Kubirri* at the gate both demonstrate: the Ancestors are reliant upon willing and worthy recipients.[47] This epistemological orientation is echoed in stories told to me by Roy. Roy has repeatedly emphasised that "special dreams" which are Ancestral in their origin, such as the Kubirri at the Gate Dreamstory, "came" or are "given" to him as *gifts* from the Ancestors.

While Stevenson's definition of traditional knowledge implies it is human in origin, in my experience, Yalanji people typically see orally transmitted traditional knowledge as a product originally arising from Ancestor to human transactions (revelations), transactions that continue in the present with what may appear as "new" or "rediscovered" knowledge. Agency is in other words relational; it is a process that involves engagement with others, a coming together of various human and more-than-human subjects, forces and intentionalities.

However, agency should not only be understood as based only on where the creative power, or the prime mover, is to be found. As Emirbayer and Mische (1998) have pointed out, agency can also be seen as involving different temporal orientations:

> a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its habitual aspect), but also oriented toward the future (as a capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a capacity to contextualize past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment). (p. 963)

[47] See chapter 6 on Faith and Futurity about how Binga Binga "judge" if they are going to give someone a dream or not.

It is evident that Roy's actions in dreaming, interpreting, envisioning and bringing about the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre are informed by Kuku Yalanji traditions concerning Ancestral engagement and Dreaming, as well as European traditions. It is also clear that Roy must have imagined the alternative possibilities that these, at times synchronous, other times competing, traditions could have yielded. Imagination is a crucial component in human efforts, and I recall Roy telling me how he was imagining his people dressed in uniform, working at the centre, as well as envisioning planting out endemic rainforest trees around the centre. As this exemplifies, Roy also had his own visions for the future that go beyond the content of his Ancestrally informed dream. His own active cultivation of the given vision thus forms an integral part of the envisioning process that gave shape to the original dream's future manifestation of the centre.

Analysing the temporal orientation in Ancestral agency in this creative process is, however, harder than in its human counterpart. Although Ancestral and human agencies are relational, and Ancestral-human relations are not wholly separate but, in a number of ways, merged (as the word *Binga Binga* shows by referring both to Ancestors and living elders), their manifest creativity nonetheless come from different planes of temporal being. As Stanner and Strehlow have indicated, the Dreaming and the Ancestors are in a sense outside or beyond time. Also, as we shall see in chapter 5 on temporality, Roy told me I "have to take time out of it" to understand his *Kurriyala* dream, where Roy is shocked to be eye to eye with the Rainbow Serpent, witnessing the creation story of a nearby waterhole.

Dreamstories such as Kubirri at the Gate bring the temporalities of humans in contact with the non-linear and all-encompassing "no-time" of the Dreaming. As I will argue in chapter 5 on temporality, Roy becomes contemporaneous with his Ancestors in these dreams, and they with him. Considering that Ancestral and human agency originate from different temporalities, this appears from an outside view as a paradox, but in their creative blend of the Dreamstory and its realisation, Ancestors and humans take on aspects of each other's natures and temporalities.

It is interesting that Roy says "my dream *and the vision* I had" (my emphasis). This, I think, refers partially, to the fact that his dream about *Kubirri* gave him a vision of something yet to come; a reality revealed in dream, that from a linear-temporal outlook, is already there, but which has not come to be or to exist within the bounds of temporal existence. There is a sense of abiding inevitability here, as with many other things often referred to in English as the "Law" throughout Aboriginal Australia. And as pointed out above, special dreams, like

this one, Roy repeatedly emphasises that they either "came" or are "given" to him; a *gift* from the Ancestors.

Yet, this abiding sense of the dream and its temporal manifestation hinges on the dreamer's decision and ability to "follow" the dream – to act on it, or not. Which brings us to the second point I wish to argue, namely that Roy was given this dream by his Ancestors as a *task* set out for him to help bring to manifest existence. I think the fact he referred to this as a dream *and the vision* underscores this point. Through various endeavours, such as setting up the first Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours in 1986, through to the building of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, Roy has become familiar with business proposal requirements such as "vision statements" (he once showed me one such proposal with that wording as one of the key headings). By adding "vision", I argue, Roy invokes both the vision itself, the dream imagery, *as well as* the need for acting on that vision to see it through to manifestation – the "how it's gonna come to reality" as he puts it.

If *task* conjures Protestant-like associations of heavy moral burdens, I want to point out that Roy seems to take on such tasks with a wonderfully contagious lightness,[48] perhaps an enlivened blessedness, if we are to stay with Christian idiom, in reconciling his individual purpose with Ancestral providence. This is not to say he takes his task lightly, nor that the actuality of carrying out the task is straightforward or easy, but rather that he does not get weighed down with the *prospect* of taking it on. I think part of this has to do with Roy's own sense of "being looked after" as he puts it (see also Stanner, 1984, p. 148),[49] or being part of something greater than himself, as well as something to do with his temporal outlook.

Another theme in the *Kubirri* at the Gate Dreamstory is that Roy had to guide the lady up to the national park. This guiding role has two present manifestations: A shuttle bus service taking people from the Gateway car park to the national park and back, and for those customers wanting, the full Yalanji guided walking tour up there. The "glittering lights shining" behind the lady (which he on other occasions has explicitly described as a white lady), Roy has at another time pointed out is the sun's reflections on the cars at the new car park by the cultural centre.

[48] This attitude of taking on big tasks with lightness "one step at a time" and "steady, steady", is something I admire with Roy. For more on this, see chapter 6 on faith and futurity.

[49] Stanner notes that a belief in guardian-spirits, either Ancestral or self-subsistent beings, who 'look after' living men, is reported from several parts of Indigenous Australia (1984, p. 148). More on this in chapter 6, where I discuss Roy's "confident uncertainty".

I think it is insufficient to refer to this dream as a gift or premonition only. Such an account fails to consider all the choices and work involved in the intervening years between Roy had the dream until the gateway and the cultural centre was built.

The first thing Roy did after having his dream, he told me, was to see the last elder of his generation living at Mossman Gorge. Oldfella told him it was an important dream and encouraged Roy to follow it through. No doubt, having Oldfella confirm his dream and intentions would have increased his dream's public legitimacy as well.

When Roy's dream and idea for a gateway started to become known to people in the Mossman *bama* community, there were some *bama* that ridiculed Roy and his dream and vision for the future. When the centre was being planned, I remember he told me how he once walked past a particular *bama*, who lived outside the Gorge, standing with a group of people on the Mossman Gorge Road. This person had shouted, "Hey Roy, why don't you cut down this palm tree here, to stop them tourist coming past", to which they all had been roaring with laughter. Roy told me that made him bitter at the time and that he was thrilled now that the building was finally coming up. He had after all these years finally, and undeniably, "shut him up".

There have been many trials, meetings and setbacks between dream and fruition, and not to mention, countless people involved. As the main research interests that structured my time with Roy lay with "traditional" knowledge and the Dreaming, not community politics, I do not have enough insight to describe the process in detail. What I did have a keen interest in and good insight into was Roy's own accounts and his role. Two people that Roy often brought up as key in this process, without whom it would have been hard for him to go on, are Damian Britnell and Barry Murday.

To help realise his dream, Roy enlisted the help of archaeologist Damian Britnell, whom he had gotten to know well as a community ranger through surveying work in the region. Damian had, over the years, done a lot of heritage survey work with the Kuku Yalanji community and the wider region (Britnell, 2000) and ended up serving as the CEO of Bamanga Bubu Ngadimungku Inc. (the Mossman Gorge Community Council) from 2004 until 2011. Together, Roy and Damian approached cane farmer and landowner of the area where the Gateway was to be built, Barry Murday.

Roy has had a longstanding and good relationship with Barry Murday and his family. When Roy was kicked out of school, he took up sugar cane cutting for him. He must have done a good job, as when the other cutters left when the season ended, Roy was asked to stay on working with him during the off-seasons as a tractor driver.

Much is owed to Roy's personal relationship with the Murday family that they were able to buy the land (Roy was also central in brokering the deal of acquiring land from Barry Murday for the Lower Mossman Gorge community some years earlier). I observed the importance of this relationship directly on one occasion. Roy and I had returned to Mossman from a field trip to Cape Tribulation and were having a "cold one" (beer) under the shade of the mango trees just below the train track crossing and the present-day cultural centre. Barry Murday pulled up in his truck, wound down his window, and started "running Roy down", characteristic of their usual joking relationship banter. This time, however, he went on to change his tone into a more serious one. This was shortly after Roy had presented him with his ideas to build the Gateway. Murday said, "OK Roy, you can have the land – on the condition that you are in charge. I want to be dealing with you if we're going ahead with this". There were also numerous meetings with the Indigenous Land Corporation (ILC) to finance the project in which Roy was a central broker. It is worth noting that the human agency involved in getting the centre realised is thus intercultural and not limited to proponents of Yalanji culture only.

To sum up, and in hindsight, the task of seeing the dream through was long and fraught. Roy had to keep the dream he had been gifted fresh in his mind for many years, going through all the necessary steps on the way.

3.7 The Dreaming and Revelatory Dreams

As we have touched on above, many Aboriginal Australians have pointed out to scholars that Ancestral beings, spirits of the dead or other spirit beings may reveal knowledge to the living in dreams, sometimes remarking that this knowledge is not *new*, but has always been there and has rather been unveiled or, in the case of prior knowledge loss, rediscovered (Dussart, 2000, p. 147; Glaskin, 2005, p. 299; Maddock, 1984, p. 101; Myers, 1986, p. 51; Poirier, 2005, pp. 4-5). For instance, Kenneth Maddock (1984) has written about how ordinary men cannot experience or communicate with extraordinary beings of power in ordinary ways; "Powers are experienced extraordinarily or known through their signs" (p. 99). He notes that direct communication can only happen when men are severed from ordinary experience by their psychic states, "like dreams or trances" (p. 87). Maddock furthermore writes of a power entity intervention, "as when one [power entity] appears to a man in a dream and communicates a new song or a rite" (p. 101).

Although the connections between the Dreaming and dreams have been discussed since the beginning of Australian ethnography, I now want to acknowledge more

contemporary ethnographic literature that made me appreciate the finer details and workings of dreams. For instance, Sylvie Poirer (2005, 2003) and Katie Glaskin (2005, 2010, 2011) have both made great contributions with their analyses of dreams and reinstating them as central to understanding Indigenous Australian religion.

But in particular I want to mention Fred Myers' *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self* (1986), which has greatly advanced my thinking on Aboriginal Dreaming, both when I worked, mostly in the Western Desert, as work area clearance anthropologist for the Central Land Council in 2009–2011, as well as a productive comparative asset when returning to work on my PhD with Kuku Yalanji people in 2011. I keep returning to Myers' book and find continued stimulus and inspiration for my own writing in it. And as it is with most works that inspire over time, there are also things that have become clarified for me when I find myself diverging from its perspective.

As we saw with the Arrernte word *alcheringa*, the Pintupi word for "the Dreaming" and for actual dreams is the same: *tjukurrpa*. According to Myers (1986), Pintupi distinguish clearly between dreams and the Dreaming, yet there are certain cultural understandings that underlie both. Both are connected, "presumably" Myers continues, by their "joint reference to situations of non-ordinary reality" (p. 51). Part of what I like about Myers is that he is not afraid to put Pintupi notions of the dream, self, soul, in short, religious experience and belief back into his central analysis. These themes were present in Tylor and Frazer's emphasis too, but Myers does this without any evolutionary interpretive backdrop. Myers furthermore includes the Pintupi emphasis on the active role of the Ancestors in revealing ceremonial knowledge to people in dreams:

> Sometimes individuals are believed to come into contact with the ancestral figures of The Dreaming, who may give them special knowledge, usually of songs and ceremonies. These experiences are considered to be revelations of matters people did not know of before. What one sees is believed to have always existed. (p. 51)

As is typically done in phenomenological approaches, Myers attempts to "bracket out" his own views, by taking a seemingly neutral, agnostic stance in his analysis, and by referring to what his informants "believe", thus leaving out his own judgement. But as we shall see in the next quote, where I diverge from Myers comes into starker relief, is in our understanding of agency:

> The Dreaming... provides a moral authority lying outside the individual will and outside human creation... *although the Dreaming as an ordering of the cosmos is*

> *presumably a product of historical events, such an origin is denied*. These human creations are objectified – thrust out – into principles or precedents for the immediate world...Consequently, current action is not understood as the result of human alliances, creations, and choices, but is seen as imposed by an embracing, cosmic order. (Myers, 1986, p. 69; emphasis added)

Here Myers' previous agnosticism is rapidly tilting towards analytical atheism. If Pintupi "deny" the historical origins of the Dreaming, he is no longer bracketing out his own views, but inserting them. The reader will infer that the reported Pintupi belief in Ancestral agency in dreams is in error. This divergence between European and Aboriginal "worldviews" are made even more explicit in terms of agency by Robert Tonkinson in his study of the Mardu (Western Desert, Western Australia):

> the Europeans represented a scale of difference so drastic and unassimilable that the Mardu were moved to consign them to a completely separate category, one that lay beyond the bounds of the Dreaming. It is highly likely that *the strong denial of human agency* at the heart of the Mardu worldview was responsible for their reaction. (Tonkinson, 2007, p. 43; emphasis added)

I should note, I do not think Myers (nor Tonkinson) are exceptional in this regard, but rather as representing typical anthropological views of their times. I respectfully reiterate that my preoccupation with Myers is motivated thus precisely because he has described links between dreams and the Dreaming so well. Much of the anthropological literature regarding the Dreaming, either fail to account for Ancestral agency at all, or if it is included, it only serves a representational function. Either way, such accounts fail to afford the Ancestors any actual agency in the ethnographic analysis, despite the ontological status they clearly have for people like Roy.

If we now return to Roy and his dream about *Kubirri* at the gate, we can state the following: What cannot be *objectively* established, is a connection beyond human agency between Roy's dream and the manifestation of the centre – any evaluation of the truth in Roy's account of his Ancestrally informed dream being the creative source of the centre, boils down to whether one believes in an Ancestral connection or not. The question of whether one should take an atheistic, agnostic stance towards this, or instead, rather believe in Roy's testimony (and epistemology), is a determining decision that will shape and drive the entire following analysis. The first two approaches are amply covered in the anthropological

literature on the Dreaming. In my approach, I wish to let my thesis reflect an analytical position of faith in Roy's account and in Ancestral agency.

By taking this position as my starting point, "Ancestral agency" serves as an analytical concept that focusses on, and affirms, dreams as *gifts* from Ancestral beings, while human agency points to *tasks* for people to act on, follow or carry out Ancestral knowledge.

3.8 Truth in Faith

Why is it important that I take an *analytical* position of faith in my study of Ancestral agency? There are two reasons. Firstly, as someone who also takes an *existential* position of faith in the Ancestral agency in Roy's dreams, this is but the natural analytical extension of a more foundational orientation and commitment to Kierkegaard's seemingly paradoxical statement "subjectivity is truth" (which will be discussed in chapter 4). Taking a different analytical stance, such as an agnostic stance, would go against my integrity as a whole person, as an anthropologist, a friend, a brother, and as a fellow knower – someone who has experienced Ancestrally informed dreams myself.

Furthermore, there is little doubt that replacing positivistic accounts of Indigenous religions with phenomenological "bracketing", or other ways to suspend one's disbelief, has been a stock change for the better. Shifting the focus back to Aboriginal belief and experience, and the role of dreams, has also been enriching the ethnography on the Dreaming. See for instance Glaskin's (2005) insightful analysis of Ancestral revelation:

> More significant than the question of whether Elle's dream ultimately produced an innovation in practice is how she and other Bardi understand dreams and the innovative potential of ancestral revelation within them. This could be described as 'a tradition of innovation', in which innovations derived from dreams are understood to have the imprimatur of an external authority – the spirits of the deceased or other spirit beings – and are considered to be pre-existing and revealed rather than 'new'.

Like Myers and many others, Glaskin takes an agnostic analytical position, pointing out that what is important is not whether the revelations are *actually* "new" or "pre-existing", but whether or not the anthropologist understands Bardi views accurately.

So, why can I not simply take an agnostic stance analytically (while being in faith privately)? Aside from my "integrity" already mentioned, and for the sake of transparency, I think an analytical position of faith (when paired with actual or existential faith) can come to

other insights, other ways of seeing matters, other notions of truth even. From a position of faith, I do not see a contradiction between new and pre-existing knowledge in revelatory dreams. I see a different temporal orientation (see chapter 5) and a shift towards a different understanding of truth (see chapter 4).

Which brings me to my second point. I am not convinced we are doing anyone, neither ourselves as ethnographers, nor those with whom we study, any favours by shifting our focus from truth to representation any longer. Somehow, we have come to a place where "taking Aboriginal religion seriously" means accurate representation, a description on their "own terms". Naturally, accurate description matters to me and to Roy as well, but Roy cares less about representational form, and more about the inherent nature of his stories being taken seriously, by which I mean them being taken in the spirit they were received by Roy and thence given: as true.

It is hard to explain the difference between analytical agnosticism and analytical faith. In writing, they may look nearly the same, as an analytical position of faith must also use phrases like "they believe" etc. Yet, there is something, quite subtle, that often irks me when reading agnostic accounts (I suspect this is more so when the writer is a private atheist than a true agnostic). I think it can be quite unintentional, even subconscious, coming from the analytical agnostic, but there can be a certain epistemological arrogance in phenomenological bracketing: Analytical agnosticism plays to the (publicly silenced, yet de facto) ruling side or worldview among anthropologists – Atheism. Let me explain.

Writing that it is not important whether Roy is right in his religious beliefs or not, is precisely *not* taking him and his beliefs seriously. In effect, it is a negation of what he really wants to convey – that an Ancestor gave him the idea of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre – no matter how accurately his views are outwardly represented. In this sense, analytical agnosticism cannot represent Roys views accurately, because Roy's view is not agnostic. Here the sceptic may interject that I have just shown that Roy was tentative or "uncertain" in his *expressions* regarding his vision, seeks opinions of others as steps towards verification, etc. Well, if he was certain, then it would not be *faith*. Without risk, without doubt, there cannot be faith. While Roy may not have certainty (which relates to objective and outward measures) acting on his dream, he may still have certitude (which relates to inward conviction and faith). What I am trying to say is that I believe Roy always saw his dream as Ancestrally given, but convincing others of his subjective truth is not a given, and thus he proceeded cautiously and tentatively.

This brings us to another ethnographic pickle: How can one tell Ancestrally given Dreamstories from what my Yalanji friends call "bullshit stories" – made up (by human agents alone) stories? And the short answer is that one cannot ever come to objective, positive certainty of this, because there is no one size fits all, universal answer to such a question (which is also why I call it an analytical position of faith). But there are ways to discern more trustworthy storytellers from less reliable ones, there are outer Ancestral signs one can interpret, there can be inward sensation of truth when told the story, there are personal motives of the dreamer one can judge and assess, which is of course what other Indigenous people do when they hear about someone's Dreamstory. If they can judge better for worse, so can ethnographers.

A dream is at the outset something utterly personal and subjective. An Ancestral dream, like *Kubirri* at the Gate, also needs interpretation, and if a dream is to change the lives of others, needs social acknowledgement and validation.

Roy's statement earlier that "when you have a dream is very hard to talk to your friends and *tell your friends about, what is the dream's all about*, and how it's gonna come to reality" (my emphasis), may point to a temporal tension – that Roy is aware of the paradox it may conjure for outsiders. However, over the years I have several times heard him express a similar reluctance to share Ancestral encounters, in dream or awake, straight after the event.[50] Sometimes Roy has shared his dream with me soon after awakening, as part of the process of remembering the events in it. But most of these dreams are seen by Roy as less important than dreams that have an Ancestral protagonist in it. It is rare to hear Roy state explicitly what an Ancestral message or task ahead may entail, and especially so straight after the dream encounter.

As Fred Myers noted among the Pintupi, such interpretations, if they are spoken at all, are framed as suggestions and vague possibilities expressed as a "puzzled curiosity" rather than as explicit statements (Myers, 1986, p. 52). This is also evident in Roy's suggestive interpretation regarding the gate at the Mossman Gorge Centre – "I guess that's the rock". Despite his suggestive delivery, it is obvious that this is his main interpretation of the dream; the rolled down rock prefigures the now very physical reality of a gate and cultural centre controlling the traffic going past Mossman Gorge. Significantly, it was the very rock, the rock *Kubirri* metamorphosed into, the protector of the *bama*, which broke free of the mountain and rolled down, blocking the cars going up to the national park. Roy did not share his

[50] Such 'hedging' will be further discussed further in chapter 6 when I discuss Roy's "confident uncertainty".

interpretation or elicitation of an Ancestral message until he either felt more confident about the Ancestral message (such as after interpreting it thoroughly and discussing it with other elders), or after steps were taken along a revealed path to make the dream "come [closer] to reality".

As Myers pointed out, the significance or validation of dreams is a result of negotiation. Roy seeking Oldfella's advice on his *Kubirri* dream could also be interpreted in this light. As with Myers, Glaskin has noted that,

> As with other ceremonial revelations, the processes by which the newly revealed *ilma* come to be accepted within the wider community involve some negotiation and agreement among senior ritual figures. (Glaskin, 2010, p. 252)

Myers (1986) notes that if a dream event and its interpretation does not eventuate, they tend to be forgotten. If, on the other hand, things transpire in such a way as to confirm a dream interpretation, such a dream may gain in importance in retrospect (Myers, 1986, p. 52). While I agree with Myers' observation, I would, from an analytical point of faith, turn Myers' implicit logic around: The fact that Roy progressively succeeded in his tasks to bring his dream closer to reality, are all evidence that his Dreamstory *was* Ancestral in origin and that he is "being looked after" by his Ancestors. In the end, it is hard for *bama* and *waybala* alike to ignore the evidence of a 20 million dollar Indigenous cultural centre.

3.9 Conclusion

In this chapter I have problematised prior ethnographic approaches to the links between dreams and Ancestral agency as well as shown the limits of more recent approaches to Ancestral agency. I also have sought to open up the possibility that a greater acceptance of truth and faith in Ancestral agency can generate different insights into our understanding of Indigenous experiences of dreams and Ancestral agency. Faith and truth will be explored further in the next chapter.

I have also introduced time as a crucial dimension to understand the difference between human and Ancestral agency and how linear historical time is transcended in Ancestral dreams and their realisation. This dynamic will be further explored in chapter 5 "Becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestors". Although the analysis of Roy's dreams I present is based on a situated practice in time and space, with its own complex history entailing Ancestral, Christian and secular traditions, it is not my intent to detail and discuss

this history. What I see as a more interesting topic to explore is the nature of temporality Roy demonstrates when talking about his dreams, and what I can learn from him.

As Roy has demonstrated; and as candidly evidenced in the *Dimur*'s fire story and in comparative anthropological literature from elsewhere in Australia, the Ancestors revealed their knowledge to their descendants through dreams or signs, who in turn keep the knowledge alive through ritual re-enactment, storytelling, song, painting, and the continued use of the practical skills the knowledge enabled. Or they didn't. It is, as Myers has pointed out for the Pintupi, an ontology of relatedness.

As this thesis explores, Roy's relationality is not limited to the living, but includes Ancestral beings. These are mutually dependent. If this relationship withers, it affects the living and dead. Dreams are a potent medium where Ancestors and living descendants meet. Dreams also bring together two agencies: Ancestral and human. The aspects of dreams that are seen as a gift, correspond with Ancestral agency, while the parts of a dream that involves a task, depend on human agency. Human agency lies in interpretation, dissemination and reproduction of Ancestral dreams (or not). Human agency also lies in one's ability and willingness as a manifester, to make the stories from the Ancestors "come alive again" as Roy has put it. As Roy's statement implies, Ancestral knowledge can be lost, but it can be reappropriated through dreams and shared. The vital point then, is the Ancestral-human relation, more than the knowledge itself, for keeping the Dreaming alive.

What I have also tried to indicate in this chapter is how an analytical position of faith is different from phenomenological bracketing: analytical faith makes truth personal – a commitment. This point will be developed further in the next and following chapters. By adopting both human and Ancestral agency in my analysis of Roy's Dreamstories, and by staying true and committed to transformative experiences instigated by my own dreams during fieldwork, I hope to do Roy and his Ancestors' visions and work ontological justice.

4 The Paradox of Truth & Believing the Absurd: A Kierkegaardian Approach to Alterity and Aboriginal Dreamings[51]

4.1 Prelude

During the early days of my first fieldwork (for my MA in 2002), while camped in Cape Tribulation with a group of Yalanji men, I was inflicted with a tropical boil, a painful infection on my upper inner thigh best described as an internal pimple the size of a golf ball. During that time, traditional knowledge and medicine were something I was trying to learn about, but so far, the men had evaded or diverted most enquiries on the topic. Getting a physical ailment, along with being geographically cut off from immediate mainstream health services, changed this and gave me a firsthand experience of being treated with traditional medicine.

First, the men took me along for a walkabout to harvest the necessary ingredients. The men were soon thrilled as early on we came across three beautiful stands of *durral* trees (used for spears). Walking was rather painful as the boil was unfavourably located near my groin. This, of course, caused teasing laughter from the men – speculations and questions themed around the reasons why I had grown an extra *konol* (testicle). Pain and mocking, notwithstanding, I was enthusiastic coming along and felt I was making a breakthrough with the men in getting them to indulge me with traditional knowledge. Upon our return to camp, I was treated by *maja*, the chief BBN ranger, and Roy who crushed up two types of leaves (which I was told not to name in my writings). They then brewed this up into a concoction, put a rag in, and handed me the steaming hot poultice that was put directly on my boil "to soften him up" and ease the process of it bursting. This process was repeated many times a day, for maybe a couple of days.

The night the boil was to burst, I went into a fever, and I had an unusually vivid and lifelike dream: I was standing on the banks of one of our regular morning bath streams that runs through the lush rainforest in Cape Tribulation. I was stark naked (without any feeling of shame), cognisant that I had the boil on my thigh. I waded into the crystal-clear creek, taking in the serenity of the landscape. When I was at the middle of the creek, chest-high in water, I

[51] In parts, this chapter draws and builds on experiences and findings from my first fieldwork written about in my MA thesis (Aaberge, 2007). In particular I rely on two stories here, my medicine dream recounted in 4.1 "Prelude" and dubu encounter in 4.7 "The Test".

lifted my arms out of the water, raising them out perpendicularly from my body. I stood perfectly still in this position, as if I was inviting the small jungle perch, that I saw at a distance around me, to come closer. The fish seemed tentative but curious, and the braver ones came right up to me before retreating. Finally, one of them darted in and took a bite of my boil. One by one, the little fish found their courage and started feeding off my boil. Although I would not call it a piranha-like feeding frenzy, there was rapid mass activity around an area a man usually keeps very guarded. All the while I stood still in silence, still hands out, letting them feed off my infected flesh as if this were perfectly normal.

I woke up, realising that the boil had burst, puss oozing out of what looked like a miniature volcano crater, and saw *maja* sitting next to my bed. I shared the peculiar dream with him, who reacted by calling out and waving to the other men to come. He asked me to repeat the dream, and the story invited the full attention of the men who expressed bewilderment while *maja* emphatically told me, "this is what we were going to do today!". As it turned out, this was their next step in my traditional health treatment, of which they had not yet informed me. I was bewildered too, as I had never heard of this Yalanji health treatment, or of any such phenomenon. Soon after, I walked in pain with the help of the men to the creek, and once in, sure enough, the fish came and ate the excess matter of the burst boil, as they had in my dream. The recovery was quick and significant; I even broke into a jog on the way back to show off to the chuckling men. The whole incident had me overwhelmed with wonder.

The waking realisation of the truth in my dream pushed me off my epistemological footing. I started to wonder in earnest if what the Yalanji men had said, that Ancestral beings had "shown me" traditional knowledge in dream, was true. My reasoning objected, but in a state of passionate wonder, I chose to let go of my reasoning and to go with the Yalanji men's interpretation, which from a more objective and detached point of view of mine had seemed absurd.

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What are anthropologists who have faced such experiences of "alterity", or otherwise are faced with aporias in the field, to do with them? Should they be included in our ethnographies? If so, how and to what end? In what ways can such "alter" experiences be said to be "true"? These are guiding questions that this chapter deals with. I start this chapter by reviewing some efforts to take paradoxical alterity seriously (particularly the ontological turn), their conception of truth, before juxtaposing these with my own Kierkegaardian approach to these matters.

In 1846, Søren Kierkegaard (2000) paradoxically stated that "subjectivity is truth" (p. 207). In this chapter I attempt to come to grips with Kierkegaard's notion of truth, which cannot easily be reduced to universal, relative or multiple theories truths. Nor can it be reduced to representational theories of truth or those non-representational theories of truth purportedly beyond representation via an ontology of concept-thing identity (Holbraad, 2012a). I will argue that knowing radical otherness or paradoxical alterity (in my case existential aspects of "the Dreaming") is possible with a subjective and existential approach that Kierkegaard termed "inderlighed", a passionate and heartfelt inwardness, culminating with a leap into faith. As such, my use of Kierkegaard in this chapter concerns the ontological world of the anthropologist, in his endeavour to know the ontological alterity of others.

Kierkegaard's position regarding truth concerns specifically the paradox that God came into existence as a specific human being at a particular point in time. His position is that God-in-time is real, but that there is no method of obtaining *certain* knowledge, or rational proof, of this reality. Instead, this is an object of faith. And faith is defined precisely by an individual's subjective and inwardly passionate relation to an *objective uncertainty*, that is, "instances where there is no way of getting an objective answer to the question you are asking" (Solomon, 2000a).

Relevant to my endeavour in this chapter is the article "Is there a place for faith in anthropology? Religion, reason, and the ethnographer's divine revelation" by Rane Willerslev and Christian Suhr (2018). In the article, Willerslev and Suhr propose a view of anthropological knowledge as "ultimately rooted in divinity", treating the "divine," "divinity," "God", as "active agents in the production of anthropological knowledge" (p. 74). My medicine dream just accounted for, and my analysis of Ancestral agency from a position of faith in my previous chapter, sit rather well with such notions, as do coming explorations of Roy's faith in his Ancestors and God in chapter 6 "Faith & Futurity: Roy's Confident Uncertainty".

The bulk of this thesis chapter was written a few years before the Willerslev and Suhr article was published.[52] My overall argument then, and now, is as I see it quite similar to theirs, especially their point of letting paradox remain unresolved in the ethnographic analysis. In some ways, their article leaves little new for me to say on Kierkegaard's potential contribution to anthropology with his notions on paradox and the leap to faith. Kierkegaard

[52] An earlier version of this chapter was presented as a paper with the same title at the European Society for Oceanists (ESfO) conference in Bergen, 2012, reworked and submitted to the journal HAU which received an editorial rejection in 2014.

stressed that one cannot have faith without doubt. I agree with Willerslev and Suhr who emphasise the significant role doubt plays in its tension with faith, and the way it opens up for new insights. In comparing my own approach with Willerslev and Suhr's, however, I may be more preoccupied with aspects of faith itself than with doubt, which will become more evident in the remaining chapters. That said, Kierkegaard's preoccupation with paradox is something we equally seem to find inspiration in.

Paradox is the tense site of conjunction between understanding and faith, between objectivity and subjectivity. Paradox rationally "offends" – or, paradox ignites the passion that sparks wonder into one's life. Paradox beckons one to choose. I chose passion, wonder and faith. This chapter is an exploration of the implications of such a choice.

4.2 Taking Alterity Seriously – Situating My Approach vis-à-vis the "Ontological Turn" Debate on Truth, Reality and Knowledge

Mysterious or inexplicable reports from the "field", such as my medicine dream above, are not new in anthropology. One famous, early example is the bright mysterious light seen by E. Evans-Pritchard travelling behind his hut while living with the Azande in the late 1920s (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 11). The light he saw was viewed by the Azande as witchcraft. If anthropologists tended to reserve self-experienced unexplainable stories to more informal gatherings between closer colleagues in the past, these are increasingly becoming part of the ethnographical analysis themselves (Martin, 2023; Willerslev & Suhr, 2018;). A definite milestone in "serious" anthropological studies of alterity was made with Evans-Pritchard's (1976) study of Azande witchcraft, demonstrating the rationality behind witchcraft as a logical, but closed, system. However, no matter how culturally relative or symbolically important religious otherness was later represented, one can still often sense that crucial afterthought of Evans-Pritchard's no longer uttered: "witches, as the Azande conceive them, clearly cannot exist" (Evans-Pritchard, 1976, p. 11; cf. Winch, 1964, p. 307). "The ontological turn"[53] debates have made this afterthought explicit again, highlighting what the fundamental problem it, and its "classical solution", contain for anthropology. The classical solution, according to Martin Holbraad and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, rests on the assumption that "if natives are to be taken seriously when they say or do things that the

[53] As noted by Scott, the rising anthropological interest in ontology does not present us with a unified movement, but rather an emergence of "unintegrated rubrics" such as, "phenomenological anthropology, the new animism, the study of personhood and sociality, post-humanism, perspectival anthropology, and the 'ontological turn'" (Scott, 2013, p. 859).

anthropologist finds unreasonable, this must be in spite of what they say or do" (Holbraad, 2012a, p. 82).

One way to treat ontological difference or alterity "more seriously" and on its own terms is Viveiros de Castro's (2011) call for ontological self-determination, as part of his move to a "permanent decolonisation of thought" (p. 128). Another is Martin Holbraad's (2012a, 2012b) development of Viveiros de Castro's "perspectivism" into a recursive anthropology with its redefinition of truth as "motile", or in motion . Of particular interest to me is Holbraad's treatment of paradox, or more specifically what he calls (drawing on Plato's Socrates) *aporias*. Aporia, as Holbraad (2012b, p. 246) understands it, is the predicament of alterity, pointing to both "the feeling of puzzlement" as well as the sense of "being at a loss" and the "poverty of thought" that strikes when we are confronted with something incomprehensible. I find both the notion of ontological self-determination and the centrality of aporias to be akin to the starting points for my own analysis: my analysis from a position of faith (as detailed in the previous chapter) as akin to ontological self-determination; and my focus on paradox (in this chapter and others) as akin to Holbraad's emphasis on aporia. I see both tacks as having contributed to treating alterity more seriously in our discipline.

Holbraad's basic claim is that alterity, or what makes other people "other", is a result of the fact that they cannot be represented. Alterity is "the challenge to which representation cannot rise":

> it is just when we are unable even to describe (let alone interpret, explain, translate, or analyze) aspects of people's lives that they become other to us. Things that are also people, people that are also gods, gods that are also wafers, twins that are also birds: these are the kinds of contradictory descriptions in which attempts to make sense of others by representing them may land us. The problem of alterity, then, is just the problem of nonsense: when even your best attempt to make sense of people's lives by representing them in terms you understand fails, you know you have hit upon it. (Holbraad, 2012b, p. xvi)

What has come to be known as the "perspectival multi-naturalism" of Viveiros de Castro and Holbraad works on the premise that "alter" native concepts and truth claims are manifestations of "the altered *realities or natures* that people inhabit" (Bråten, 2022, p. 203). To simplify the multi-naturalist perspective, the alterity anthropologists are confronted with is not a result of difference in culture but, rather, a different nature or reality that the other people inhabit.

Predictably, Holbraad and Viveiros de Castro's non-representationalist analyses have received criticism. One strain of criticism points out multi-naturalism's (over)emphasis on radical difference at the expense of commonalities, and instead advocates crafting ethnography from "a world that is multiple, entangled, yet shared" (Vigh & Sausdal, 2014, p. 68; see also Pina-Cabral, 2014). Another, from David Graeber (2015) and Eldar Bråten (2016, 2022) for instance, takes issue with Holbraad's notion of truth from a perspective of critical realism. Contrary to Holbraad's own claims, Bråten argues that Holbraad projects a relativistic view of truth, despite Holbraad's commitment to take his informants' insistence (that the Oracle of Ifa is indubitable, absolute and non-relativistic) seriously. Similarly, Martin Palecek (2022, p. 167) claims that the ontologists, in their effort to avoid representation on the one hand and cultural relativism on the other, thus propose an even stronger version of relativism (see also Vigh & Sausdal, 2014). Any impression we might get that Holbraad treats truth as a singularity, Bråten states, stems from his focus on one truth-practice (that of Ifa practitioners):

> Taking a realist viewpoint, I argue that Holbraad's analysis does not deal with questions about truth at all, that is with truth as such, the ontology of truth—but with one particular epistemological truth claim. Only a meta-theory that resolves epistemic incompatibilities could convince us of the opposite; that the study contributes to our exploration of ontology. (Bråten, 2016, p. 286)

Referencing Roy Bhaskar, Bråten's critical realist perspective on truth, on the other hand, posits an "objectivist ontology", premised on "the classical perspective of one nature and many human intakes, and thus to a representational logic" in which "paradoxes are resolvable in that *all human knowledge is inherently fallible*" (Bråten, 2016, p. 287; emphasis in original). My cursory understanding of Bhaskar's critical realism (based on Bråten, 2022; and Graeber, 2015) is that it combines a realist ontology (positing a mind-independent reality) with theoretical/epistemological relativism (we can never have complete knowledge of that mind-independent reality).

The one thing Bråten and Viveiros de Castro seem to agree on is that "these two cosmological outlooks [Western multiculturalism and Amerindian multinaturalism] are mutually incompatible" (Viveiros de Castro, 2014, cited in Bråten, 2022, p. 217). According to Bråten, the theoretical premises and logical principles that perspectival multi-naturalism and realism build on are so divergent that they cannot be bridged (Bråten, 2022, p. 216).

The reason I have picked out Viveiros de Castro and Holbraad's perspectival multi-naturalist and then Graeber and Bråten's critical realist perspectives here, is that they are emblematic of two seemingly incommensurable perspectives on the nature of alterity. My project has certain similarities to both perspectives, and yet decisively breaks from both. What I propose is not a synthesis but a different approach, with different premises, that both perspectives nonetheless can possibly share *some* common ground with – an approach that both treats paradox seriously and remains "wonder-open" (Scott, 2013) while holding objectivity and subjectivity, and thus ontology and epistemology, separate. Although philosophical metaphysics is by no means central to my own approach, I suggest it may be helpful to stay a little while longer with the debate between the critical realist and multi-naturalist perspectives, in order to better situate my Kierkegaardian approach among existing perspectives.

Like Bråten, David Graeber (2015) relies on Roy Bhaskar's critical realism in his critique of the ontological turn (most notably Viveiros de Castro and Holbraad). Graeber points out, though, that both Bhaskar and Viveiros de Castro have observed and lamented the turn away in philosophy (since Descartes) from questions of ontology towards questions of epistemology. Bhaskar, however, adds that this shift has entailed a conflation of the two – or as Bråten (2022) has put it (regarding the multi-naturalists), that "the ontological" has been "subordinated under epistemology" (p. 201). The ontological turn, like most post-Cartesian philosophy, writes Graeber (2015), rests on an "epistemic fallacy" in that the question "does the world exist" has become indistinguishable from the question "how can I prove the world exists?" (p. 24). Implied in this conflation, says Graeber (2015), is the false premise that "if a world did exist, it would therefore be possible to have absolute or comprehensive knowledge of it" (p. 24). A better premise, and on this point I agree with the critical realist perspective, is that reality transcends human grasp in that there is always a "surplus of existence relative to human comprehension" (Bråten, 2022, pp. 201-202).[54] Graeber sides with the critical realist argument that most contemporary philosophical perspectives are variations of the epistemic fallacy. For example, he writes,

> both Positivists and Poststructuralists tend to agree that if there were a real world independent of the subject, it should be possible (at least in principle) for the

[54] Bråten uses the Covid-19 virus as such an example of such surplus; in that it caused disease before any human knew about it (what weakens the usefulness of this analogy for my present discussion, is that viruses – unlike witchcraft, Ancestral agents or oracular verdicts – are objectively knowable, understandable and verifiable, at least from a Western ontological perspective).

> subject to have absolute and comprehensive knowledge of it. Positivists argue that such knowledge is possible; Poststructuralists, in most cases at least, argue that since such knowledge is impossible, one must conclude there is no independent reality at all. (Graeber, 2015, p. 24)

So how does this relate to my Kierkegaardian approach? Although Kierkegaard was more occupied with ethics and religion than with epistemology (Piety, 2010, p. 2), my claim is that a Kierkegaardian approach can avoid Bhaskar's epistemic fallacy (conflating ontology with epistemology) without sacrificing faith and wonder. With his rejection of classical foundationalist epistemologies[55] and his use of literary techniques such as authoring under multiple pseudonyms (which he sometimes had arguing with each other), Kierkegaard has indeed been seen by some as a precursor of relativism while others have called him a "proto-postmodernist."[56] For instance, in the Palgrave *Key Concepts in Philosophy*, it is stated that Kierkegaard "went as far as rejecting the notion of objective truth in favour of subjective, personal truth" (McQueen & McQueen, 2010, p. 117). This view would certainly put Kierkegaard at odds with the objectivist ontology of critical realism, but this representation of Kierkegaard is clearly misleading. He did not have sympathy for "anti-realism" (Evans, 1995), nor did he reject the objectivity of natural sciences.[57] Rather, he saw the rationality exemplified during the Enlightenment, what he called "objective reflection", as "fine for mathematics and science (for stars, flora and fauna), even for history" (Rapport, 2002, p. 170), but unfit for unearthing truth of ethical and religious dimensions in human existence. Such truth necessarily appears absurd or paradoxical from the point of view of detached rationality, which is why ethico-religious knowing necessitates a leap to faith.

Recent philosophical works have, in fact, highlighted Kierkegaard's less well-known realist views (Evans, 2006; Piety, 2010). Stephen Evans (2006) has noted that Kierkegaard "seems postmodern in his account of knowledge, yet modern or really pre-modern in his understanding of truth" (p. 42).[58] In an uncanny similarity to Bhaskar's caution against epistemic fallacy (demonstrated in the quote by Graeber above), Evans explains

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[55] Evans defines foundationalism as "the epistemological theory that knowledge can be developed with absolute certainty from absolutely certain bases" (Evans, 1999, p. 264).

[56] The view of Kierkegaard as a proto-postmodernist has been promoted by philosophers such as John Caputo and Merold Westphal (Evans, 1999, p. 264).

[57] The realist claim is that truth is "objective,' somehow independent of human beings, or put differently, a mind-independent reality" (Evans, 2006, pp. 8, 30).

[58] Piety supports Evans' view, adding that Kierkegaard's view of knowledge is 'postmodern in its nonreductionist account of the complexities of human knowing' (Piety, 2010, p. 4) (see also Evans, 1995, 2006).

Kierkegaard's "puzzling" position by pointing out that Kierkegaard rejects an often unnoticed premise common to both the classical foundationalist and the antirealist postmodernist:

> Both agree that *if* there is to be knowledge of objective reality, there must be some method of obtaining certain knowledge about that reality. The classical foundationalist, from Descartes through Husserl, concludes that since there is objective knowledge there must be such a method. The antirealist concludes that since there is no such method there is no knowledge of objective reality. (Evans, 2006, p. 43)

Kierkegaard, as mentioned in the introductory chapter, broke with both these traditions by positing an absolute truth, a mind-independent reality (of God), which human beings can come in temporal contact with, in subjectivity and faith, yet never come to an absolute and certain knowledge of in objectivity. This sits rather well with how my Yalanji friends talk about the Dreaming: as an absolute foundational reality and truth, which is also knowable in encounters or contact with Ancestral beings in dream or awake. In stating their own experiential knowledge connected to the Dreaming in public, however, they are less absolute. Instead, when talking about their own personal encounters and dreams among peers, *the knowledge they draw from these* are hinted at, cautiously suggested, interpreted, compared and negotiated (as discussed in previous chapter), captured in the idiom "might be something" (see for instance Povinelli, 1993).

I shall not delve much deeper into the multi-naturalist/realist arguments. However, before I propose my own take on how to engage with paradoxical alterity vis-à-vis Holbraad more specifically, let me point out that ontological self-determination is a conducive starting point for taking alterity seriously. For my purposes, it contains a better methodological *principle* than the representationalist go-to agnostic principle of "suspension of disbelief" (see for instance Kapferer, 2001) which I have argued is more often than not atheistic in effect (see previous chapter on Ancestral agency).

I also want to point out that when it comes to the fundamental question of multi-naturalism versus. mono-naturalism (with many cultural representations), I cannot land on an answer. Whether what I experienced in the field was another reality, separate from the one I grew up in, or the same nature, experienced differently, I cannot decide. It is true that I have not had such intense, transformative, extraordinary experiences outside Kuku Yalanji Country. Yet, this could imply both positions: 1) My being there exposed me to a different nature and reality (multi-naturalism), or 2) Being immersed in Yalanji sociality and culture

conditioned me to seeing other, previously obscured, sides of one reality. What I want to drive home, is that the answer to this question does not really matter to me, nor to my fieldwork collaborators I dare say. What matters is the nature of truth I was subjected to while living with my Yalanji friends, not the metaphysics or logics behind it, which is why I offer my analysis from a position of faith.[59] I contend that the anthropologist's personal faith or lack of it is what gives the significant shape to what he or she means by "taking religion seriously", and how differing ontological and epistemological positions correspond to different notions of truth.

Instead of landing on a multi-naturalist or mono-naturalist perspective then, my approach follows Kierkegaard's "pluralist epistemology" (Piety, 2010) in which knowledge is divided into two basic sorts: objective knowledge and subjective knowledge. Piety summarises this nicely:

> Knowledge is objective if it is not essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as is the case, for example, with knowledge in the natural sciences, or with any sort of knowledge that is purely descriptive. Knowledge is subjective if it is essentially related to the existence of the individual knower as is the case, for example, with ethical and religious knowledge, or with any sort of knowledge that has a prescriptive dimension. (Piety, 2010, p. 3)

What is important concerning this epistemological dualism is that one type of knowing does not travel well into the opposite dimension of knowledge: Just as it is unproductive to apply one's faith (subjective knowledge) to understand that which can already be objectively known (rationally and empirically) – an example would be religious fanaticism – it is equally unfruitful to use objective rationality or empirical testing to answer questions which will remain uncertain objectively, such as questions of a deeply ethical or religious nature. In short, I hold reason and faith apart epistemologically, as two distinct ways of knowing for two different dimensions of life: that which can be known in objectivity (by reason and empirically), and that which can only be known in subjectivity (in the inwardness of faith). My claim is that questions that there can be no objective answer to, such as paradoxical or existential aspects of the Dreaming, can only be known truthfully in subjectivity. So, while I agree with the critical realist stance of keeping the nature of being (ontology) and knowledge of that being (epistemology) separate, I do not preclude faith as a way to truth. By taking such

[59] Not to be confused with Christian stand-point theory, analogues to other subject positions "outside androcentric, enlightenment modernity (e.g. feminism)" (see Howell, 2007, p. 371).

an existential and faithful approach to Roy's dreams and deeds, I can align my ethnography into what I take to be a *truer* expression of his life and his orientation in it. However, any objective expression of truth experienced in subjectivity will according to Kierkegaard necessarily take the shape of a paradox.

Holbraad suggests we actively seek out paradox and aporias in the field, which is fine if we confine our engagement with these to purely intellectual and abstract exercises. However, I am somewhat uncertain about the merits of actively seeking out the truth of a paradox when our engagement is existential. One cannot will oneself into having an Ancestral dream. I did not seek these out, they "came to me" as encounters while in the field, and I think these things are better left to themselves to emerge, or not. What I suggest is attending to the paradox *for oneself*, cultivating a curiosity and openness, and to engage existentially with dreams or other forms of encounters, if they come. That said, while Bråten laments the multi-naturalists' privileging of "alterities" in ethnographic analysis, I argue that it is precisely in the domains of *objective uncertainty* – such as the paradoxical, radical alterities, aporias – that ethnography has, and continues to promise, its true contribution among the increasingly cross-cutting disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities (see also Kapferer, 2001).

Doubt, as Bråten has pointed out, is ruled out in Holbraad's recursive analysis of Ifá as "indubitable". Existential uncertainty and doubt, as Willerslev and Suhr (2018, p. 74) have emphasised, are essential if one is to open oneself up to new knowledge. Doubt is not only part of the scientific method since Descartes, it is also part of existential faith, and I argue for holding objectivity and subjectivity, reason and faith, in tension, rather than resolving the paradox rationally (see also Willerslev & Suhr, 2018, p. 74). Thus, another decisive break I make from both Bråten's critical realism and Holbraad's recursive analysis is with their approach towards paradoxical alterity as something to (ultimately) be objectively or rationally *resolved*. Instead, I suggest with Kierkegaard, holding the paradoxical tension in its true nature, that is, in passionate faith (which doubt amplifies). As Willerslev and Suhr (2018) have argued, taking Holbraad's aporias seriously should instead "demand we accept the paradox, rather than attempt to resolve it through multiontological explanations" (p. 73).

4.3 Reconceptualising Truth? Existential Realignment Precedes Reconceptualisation

Where I also differ from Holbraad is in the overwhelming analytical weight that he affords to *concepts* themselves – equating them to things (see also Henare, Holbraad, & Wastell, 2007), and in their capacity to render ontological truth objective in conceptual analyses of the paradoxical. My claim is that any conceptual analysis, including my own, of for instance the

Aboriginal Dreaming, Dreamings, the Ancestors, the Dreamtime, the Law, totemism, religion, however it may be termed, is bound to be "flat" by comparison, and a reduction of the real thing itself. The way I see it, representations is what we inevitably end up with in ethnography; but I nonetheless see it as my task to give paradoxical truth a representation worthy of itself, and not to explain it away as an epiphenomenon. To bring this back to Holbraad's claim that alterity is "the challenge to which representation cannot rise" (Holbraad, 2012b, p. xvi), my response is that *paradox* is the only *objective* representation religious alterity can truthfully take.

I will say that Holbraad's recursive conceptual analysis of truth proved so thought-provoking and convincing to me that I found myself lost in pure thought, which is, ultimately, my critique of it. Holbraad's central argument is that alterity proper must be understood in ontological rather than epistemological terms. His concern is with "what exists rather than what can be known"; "worlds" rather than "worldviews" (Holbraad, 2009, p. 81). In other words, when informants make claims such as "the oracle of Ifá is infallible" (Holbraad, 2012a, p. 86), or when, as in my case, people insist on the existence of *dubu* (spirits or ghosts),[60] the anthropologist ought to treat these as true statements about a true nature. Starting with Cuban Ifá practitioners' truth claims as the premise for his recursive analysis, Holbraad aims to arrive at an analytical reconceptualisation of what can count as truth in order to match the ontology of his informants' statements. Holbraad guides us through this path of reconceptualisation, which he calls an "ontographic" approach, "dedicated to mapping the ontological premises of native discourse through the production of concepts which, while not the native concepts themselves, comprise their close equivalents" (Holbraad, 2012a, p. 81). In other words, rather than reinterpreting and remoulding troublesome native concepts into an established anthropological theoretical framework founded on a Western ontology of Cartesian dualism, recursive analysis uses native concepts and truth statements to shape anthropological theory and concepts. I too use concepts and truth statements from Roy to engage with anthropological theory. A crucial difference, though, is that I leave paradox unresolved in my text, so as to better preserve the unexplainable ways truth has operated in Roy's life and my own.

While I agree with Holbraad's methodological starting point, paradox, and with his aim of arriving at analytical concepts mirroring those of our informants, I propose an

[60] *Dubu* is simply translated as "ghost" in Oates & Oates, while Hershberger & Hershberger (1964) gives *dubu* two uses: 1) "generic term for spirit", and 2) "the spirit of a dead person". In my experience *dubu* is used in both ways as noted by the Hershbergers.

alternative path in-between his conceptual start and end points. As an inverted parallel of Holbraad's path of *conceptual* transformation, my path was one of *existential* transformation; a transformation that not merely readjusted me intellectually by realigning my concepts with those of my informants, but rather realigning my being, my existence, and *thus* my conception of truth. My path was my very own existential engagement with paradoxes through doubt and leaps of faith that led to personal transformations that my subsequent anthropological conceptualisations aimed to approximate. As such, it is not conceptual analysis itself I reproach, but conceptual analysis that is formulated on the basis of concepts or informants' truth claims alone, without the analyst's actual existential engagement with what those concepts point to.[61] This corresponds with Kierkegaard's position that the question of God cannot be "a purely speculative question; it cannot be divorced from the question of *how I* relate to God" (Evans, 2006, p. 10; my emphasis).

4.4 Wonder-open Ethnography

Generally, I see myself as more aligned with the ontologist camp in what I am ultimately working towards – an openness to wonder (see Scott, 2013) and the paradoxical as a source of inspiration in ethnography (see also Willerslev & Suhr, 2018). Following Plato and Aristotle, Kierkegaard saw wonder as the passion of the philosopher, "that passion with which philosophy begins" (Kierkegaard, cited in Holmer, 2012, p. 184). However, the tendency is that the philosopher soon "neutralizes his wonder in ideal knowledge" (Martin Buber, cited in Scott, 2013, p. 861). As pointed out by Michael Scott, it has been argued that while "science (or philosophy more broadly) seeks to displace wonder with knowledge, religion keeps wonder alive" (Scott, 2013, p. 860). This "wonder-based distinction" between religion and science, Scott continues, has been projected further by the ontological proponents in anthropology – both in their critique of a Western ontology (in place of, and including, science) as that which "shuts down wonder" with its Cartesian or Kantian dualism; and by instilling terms (in place of religion) that "keeps wonder open", such as animism, relationalism or non-dualism (Scott, 2013, p. 860).

I adopt Scott's insightful wonder-based distinction as a useful concept in treating alterity more seriously. I back Scott's call for opening up for more relational accounts of religion, rather than operating with an essentialist definition of it (2013, p. 867). Furthermore, Scott may be right that non-dualistic, ontological approaches can be said to remain more

[61] Kierkegaard called himself a "dialectician", what we nowadays would call a conceptual analyst (Evans, 1999, p. 2).

wonder-*open* in their theorising. I wonder, however, what may happen to the actual "wonder" or the mystery of the alterity in the process of theorising? I am not convinced that a creation of a "post-Cartesian religion-science" to help "re-rationalize efforts to do and teach the anthropology of religion" (Scott, 2013, p. 868) by non-dualistic, ontological approaches (Scott lists Holbraad as one of them), would be successful in keeping that wonder *alive*. My claim is that paradox is what keeps wonder alive; by both defining paradox as the limit of reason and as what invites an existential leap of faith.[62]

To exemplify this, I will aim to show how Holbraad's non-dualistic account of Ifá divination can be seen to effect "wondercide" (Scott, 2013, p. 863), while a Kierkegaardian approach, which adheres to an epistemological objectivity-subjectivity dualism, can be said to keep wonder alive. This is not to say that Holbraad's thinking does not cause me to wonder, but the wonder is with his recursive analytical accomplishment rather than with Ifá divination itself. But more important is this: the more I grasp of Holbraad's reconceptualisation of truth (as motile), and the more I "approximate an understanding of native concepts and the strange statements that define them" (Holbraad, 2012a, p. 85); the less strange and more reasonable the statements seem, indeed the less absurd they appear. This, of course, is the intention of Holbraad, and I do not in fact have issues with approximation per se, as my own work also includes approximations, and it is hard to envision anthropology without them. Nonetheless, I see it as pertinent to remind the reader about what has happened to wonder, and to the one doing the wondering, while alterity is conceptually ontographed; it seems to me that they are both "vanishing," stranding us with passionless knowledge without a knower (cf. Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 204).

To be clear, it is not my wish to replace Holbraad's ontographic approach with an existential or Kierkegaardian approach, but to put them in dialogue. They might make strangely good bedfellows given that they both take *being* as fundamental. Consider this irony: the recursive ontographic approach, which presumes non-dualism, ends up with a conceptual analysis of pure thought with an air of objectivity, but devoid of existing, conflicted and doubtful individuals (see also Bråten, 2016). While a Kierkegaardian approach, which presumes an epistemological subjectivity-objectivity distinction, ends up with a notion of truth anchored in subjectivity and being (or, rather, becoming). While the former appears ontological in its approach, it is arguably epistemological in effect (the transformation is

[62] Although the exact phrase 'leap of faith' was not used by Kierkegaard himself, it has been widely attributed to him. A leap of faith, or a leap *to* faith, is central in Kierkegaard's thinking, and I will continue to use the phrase to refer to this part of his thinking.

conceptual and can be shared as knowledge). Inversely, the latter can seem epistemological in approach yet ontological in effect (the transformation is uniquely subjective and existential). My approach falls within the latter. My medicine dream changed me as a human being, my knowing, my thinking about the Ancestral specifically and my existential outlook on life generally. Moreover, it changed the way I related to Roy and other Yalanji people. My ethnographic queries concerning their dreams and the Dreaming became *earnest*. That is, they came from a heartfelt curiosity spurred from my intimate wonder at my own Ancestral dream.

Therefore, what I seek is an existential anthropology which begins with and never loses touch with the *knower*, who, no matter how we write and situate ourselves, is the ethnographer and anthropologist. It is to seek truth, not primarily in the intersubjective and social, nor in abstract conceptual logic, but in *inwardness*[63]; an earnest and passionate immersion in subjective contemplation of the seemingly absurd or paradoxical that emerges within the intersubjective space in the field situation. It is to sincerely reflect on what it means to exist in another world *for oneself*, before one presumes what it means to exist for others. This is to take one's informants ontological truth claims seriously, this is methodological integrity, and this is to remember "that it was an existing spirit who asked about truth" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 201).

4.5 "Subjectivity is Truth" – Appropriating Truth in Inwardness

> In ancient times there were only a few individuals who knew the truth; now everyone knows it, but inwardness has an inverse relation to it. (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 206)

One of Kierkegaard's central discontents was that moderns, in all their knowledge, had forgotten what it is to exist (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 203), and he took it upon himself to "remind" people that it is always an existing individual that asks about truth. He was disconcerted with "the present age", an age of reason, utterly lacking in passion, and commented that even a person that commits suicide does it out of over-reflection, not of despair (Solomon, 2000b). Kierkegaard's mission was to redefine what it means to be a Christian, or more precisely what it means to become one, by reinstating faith as its absolute

[63] Alastair Hannay has commented that the Danish term "'Inderlighed' refers to an inner warmth, sincerity, seriousness and wholeheartedness in one's concern for what matters, a 'heartfeltness' not applied to something but which comes from within" (Hannay, 2009, p. xxxix).

prerequisite. One could not abstract oneself into faith; faith was the direct opposite of objective reasoning and could only be achieved in subjectivity.

> The more objective the world and the subjectivities become, the more difficult it is with the religious categories, just because they belong within subjectivity, which is why wanting to be world-historical, scientific, objective in relation to the religious is well-nigh an excess of irreligion. (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 56)

The point Kierkegaard makes is that if the religious category of faith is a matter of scientific knowledge, then we would not need faith (cf. Marino, 2011). Having faith was to believe, fervently, in one's heart, to the point one experiences what Kierkegaard called "fear and trembling" (cf. Solomon, 2000b). It was an emotional relationship, it was not simply a set of beliefs, nor was it about social or cultural membership. Cultivating a proper relationship to God was something one did solo and inwardly. It did not even have to show outwardly. Faith was for Kierkegaard a passionate and personal commitment, and he distinguished faith from general belief in that faith was only possible as the result of an experience of personal transformation (Piety, 2010, p. 170).

By stating "subjectivity is truth" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 207), Kierkegaard did not mean that "truth is subjective" or that there are no objective and general truths, nor did he reject objective knowledge such as the laws of physics.[64] What the statement points to, I believe, is what he called "the Socratic secret" – that "the movement is inwards, that the truth is the subject's transformation in himself" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 33).

Appropriation (in subjectivity) and approximation (in objectivity) distinguish two pathways to knowing. For Kierkegaard, only appropriation can achieve truth in religious-existential questions, leading to his statement "subjectivity is truth," which he defined as "an objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 207). Approximation was a word Kierkegaard primarily used to express the limits of objective reasoning and its inadequate representation of the ethico-religious: "even with the most stupendous learning and perseverance, and with the heads of all critics placed on a single neck, one never gets further than an approximation" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 22). This does not mean that there is no truth to approximate. Instead, his claim was that no existing individual could approximate oneself into faith, nor achieve certainty in religious questions by means of objective reflection:

[64] Rather, Kierkegaard's intention was to expose the impossibility of absolute and presuppositionless knowledge (Piety, 2010, p. 4).

> So, we have a man who wants to have faith; so let the comedy begin. He wants faith but also a safeguard by way of objective deliberation and approximating. What happens? With the assistance of approximating, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable; it becomes more probable; perhaps it becomes extremely and exceedingly probable. He is now all set to believe it, and he will go so far as to say of himself that his belief is not like that of cobblers and tailors and of simple folk but only after long deliberation. Now he is all set to believe it, but then what! It is just that now it is impossible to believe. The all-but-probable, the probable, the extremely and exceedingly probable, this is something he can all but know, or as good as know, or know extremely and exceedingly, but to have faith in it, that he cannot do, for it is the absurd that is the object of faith and the only thing that permits of faith. (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 177)

This quote highlights the futility of conceptual approximation of paradoxical religiousness and instantiates a leap to faith as the only way to truth. A leap is a choice of either/or; there can be no half-leap, thus no approximation of faith. Like Kierkegaard, Holbraad also distinguishes between appropriation and approximation. In order to avoid the accusation of Ifá practitioners' truth-claims as being "absurd" (2012a, p. 81), Holbraad proposes that we change our assumptions and conceptions about truth to imitate that of our informants:

> To be sure, the promise here is not that of appropriating the native concepts themselves, but rather one of arriving at our own approximate equivalents – a truth-functional imitation of sorts. (Holbraad, 2012a, pp. 85-86)

I propose the opposite (as Kierkegaard did). And I suggest that what Holbraad terms approximation closes wonder by both its abstract disregard for the existing individual (doing the wondering), as well as with his effort towards rationalising out the absurd in our conceptualisations. This also aligns with Willerslev and Suhr's (2018) response to Scott's suggestion to generate new concepts (rather than applying inadequate ones) to resolve the aporia and logical contradictions of alterity. They write: "In this 'openness' toward new conceptual thinking, Scott locates a religious gesture. However, in our view, something is lost in this insistence on resolving alterity through the creation of alternative rationalities, rather than embracing alterity as such" (Willerslev & Suhr, 2018, p. 72). I argue that to keep wonder open, one must resist a purely conceptual approximation of alterity and instead hold fast to the uncertainty it objectively demonstrates. It is precisely the uncertainty that "intensifies the infinite passion of inwardness, and truth is precisely the daring venture of choosing the objective uncertainty with the passion of the infinite" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 207). Objective

uncertainty can take the shape of the absurd, and the tension its paradoxical nature creates is what fills the existing individual with passion and wonder.

4.6 The Paradox of Truth

Kierkegaard had little regard for absolute and exhaustive systems or models where life, existence and the universe were all neatly laid out with logical consistency. It was not the hard scientists he had in mind, but rather scholars of philosophy of the day.[65] As we know, the ideal of conceptualising an absolute system was thoroughly challenged after Kierkegaard's time, but "inconsistency" is a term still very much used to discredit in anthropological parlance, as is the ruling law of non-contradiction (Willerslev, 2007, p. 12; see also Scott, 2013, p. 863).

Instead of seeing paradoxical religious doctrines (displaying inconsistent rationales) as flaws to be reconceptualised until they demonstrate neither contradiction nor ambiguity, Kierkegaard viewed paradox with favour and as a gateway to truth. Paradox is what rouses the individual into passion; a passion that either (a) rationally "offends" and leads to rejection, or (b) inspires wonder and opens for existential transformation and appropriation with a leap to faith. In the latter case, paradox serves as a prerequisite of authentic living, becoming a "self", an "existing spirit" or a "true Christian".

The Christian doctrines, Kierkegaard argued, make no sense. They embody paradoxes that are "offensive" to reason. Absolute paradox, according to Kierkegaard, marks both the goal and the limit of reason: "The ultimate goal of thought, which thought is passionately seeking, is itself a paradox – namely, the concept of 'that which cannot be thought'", which Kierkegaard designated as the "unknown" and also "just as a name" as "the God" (Kierkegaard, cited in Evans, 1999, p. 223). Note that "the God" Kierkegaard here talks about is *God in time*.[66] For him, the incarnation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is the absolute paradox – that "the god, the eternal, has come about at a definite moment in time as a particular human being" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 485), i.e., the vexing question of how an eternal and infinite God could come into existence in a temporal and finite human body. In Christian theology, this is known as *kenosis* ("emptying"). By becoming Jesus, God emptied himself of his divine nature and became a mere mortal. Kierkegaard further states that this paradox is "the

[65] In particular, Kierkegaard critiqued "speculative thinking" as epitomised in Hegelian idealism.
[66] This is the God that belongs to "religiousness B" (transcendental, Christian God). The eternal God of "religiousness A" (God as seen from a perspective of immanence) is (adequately) knowable through recollection as a particular historical entity.

historical reality which can only have become historical in opposition to its own nature" (cited in Evans, 1999, p. 213; cf. Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 485). Interestingly, Kierkegaard thought that this paradoxical nature had application beyond Christianity: "the paradox always arises," he wrote in his journal, "by the joining of existing and eternal truths" (cited in Piety, 2010, p. 172).

I find this to resonate with my experience of Aboriginal Dreamings[67] and Ancestral beings in their seemingly paradoxical nature of embodying incompatible temporalities. For example, the temporality of Ancestral agency (for instance their creation of landscape as well as "The Law"), being both once-and-for-all established and simultaneously ongoing (as exemplified in "changing" or "rediscovered" Dreaming stories), does pose a considerable paradox for the unfamiliar ethnographer.[68] For me personally, however, aspects concerning the paradoxical nature of *dubu* with their immaterial-material transformations appeared immediately most "offensive". Both these Kuku Yalanji examples of paradox correspond to the Christian Incarnation transcending the eternal (and immaterial) – temporal (and material) oppositions.

[67] The debate on the aptness of the anthropologically coined term "the Dreaming" has already been discussed in chapter 3 and I will not go into that debate again, but note that it is not one "Dreaming" but many distinct ones across each "Country". As stated in chapter 3, I support Morphy and Green in that the Aboriginal appropriation of the term "the Dreaming" is not by chance. I am unaware of any linguistic link in Kuku Yalanji, but their appropriation of the English term "Dreaming" seems very motivated by a perceived link between their "Dreaming stories", when the Ancestors "dreamt up" and created the world, and dreams of people living today, when Ancestors bestow certain individuals with such Dreaming stories (cf. Glaskin, 2005).

[68] See chapters 5 and 6 where I will explore the temporality of the Dreaming through a Kierkegaardian approach to temporality in more detail.

4.7 The Test[69]

Figure 7
The shed in Cape Tribulation

Photo by Bård R. Aaberge, shot facing north, 2002

One night in 2002, while I was doing my first fieldwork with the Kuku Yalanji, I was staying by myself in a Yalanji camp in Cape Tribulation. It was an overcast, pitch-black night and I was getting ready for bed – a foam mattress laid atop a worn, doubled up, blue tarp on the gravel floor inside an open shed.

During the few months I had been camping there, I had become accustomed to the various sounds one hears at night in the rainforest. Rather than being startled by the sounds of animal life after dark, their presence had become nice company and part of what I considered as my new home. This night, for some reason however, I was not at ease on my own. Nonetheless, I was not so worried that I troubled myself with starting a fire when I had come home; but I do remember having to pull myself together when I hesitated in blowing out the candle. So, there I lay, listening to the music of cicadas and the odd bandicoot scurrying around in the leaf litter, when I was alerted by a sound of something significantly larger in the bush approaching the northern entrance of the shed. It should be noted that this end of the

[69] Like my medicine dream in this chapter's prelude, this story draws on an experience and material from my MA project (Aaberge, 2007).

shed was effectively blocked with undergrowth, notably, chaotic tangles of the spike and hook lined lawyer vine (*Calamus muelleri*), commonly referred to as "wait-a-while", and also a huge stinging tree (*Dendrocnide moroides*) in front of this side's opening of the shed.

The noise drew closer and whatever produced it, effortlessly came through the entangled mishmash of barbed canes, tendrils and stinging leaves, and stepped onto the gravel floor inside the shed. Already scared stiff at this incredible feat, I realised with horror that it was the sound of a man walking barefoot – and no man or woman could come through there with such ease, even in broad daylight. I say the sound of a man because despite the botanical blockade there was a steadiness in his stride. A continuous walk, step followed by step, with a fixed target in mind, and not the walking-pausing-running-pausing-looking-for-food-movement of an animal. His target was me. He walked straight to my mattress and stopped just before stepping on my left arm, which was resting on the ground by my hip. There it stood for probably fifteen seconds. I could not tell really, it felt like an eternity as I was now paralysed with fear. I mean that literally: from the moment he stepped inside my shed I wanted to run away, but I could not move a single limb. After pausing, it turned, and started walking, unbearably slow, up along my torso, toeing my left arm, towards where my upward-facing, frozen stiff, head was. It stopped again, inches from the crown of my head. I heard the gravel next to my ears squeeze further into the ground as the intruder slowly pivoted (I presume to face my head), and I had this overwhelming feeling that it was bending down over my face (everything was black and I had no way of seeing anything).

At this point, I felt certain I was about to meet my end. The intensifying sensation of dread that had been building up in me peaked as the intruder slowly, but firmly, tapped me twice on the forehead. Two taps, right between my eyes, with, what felt like, two fingers. It felt like a human's touch – but more cold. I managed to snap my head out of its frozen position, wrestling off some of the grip the fear had on me, and I remember letting go of it all, with the thought, "ok, I'm going to die... it is alright…I'm not afraid anymore". While this might sound like resignation, it was experienced as an empowering act of taking on a newfound and larger sense of self-autonomy. A sudden feeling of peacefulness ran through me, replacing the fear's grip on my body, and I was ready to leave my known life behind. As the release flowed through me, however, the intruder turned (I could hear the feet turning in the gravel again) and simply walked away. The sound of his steps faded out as it exited down our dirt driveway towards the Cape Tribulation road and *Dubuji* (Yalanji place-name, meaning "place of spirits"). To date, this is the single most terrifying experience I have ever had.

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I later shared my story with some Yalanji men, who all treated it with utmost seriousness. The discussions took the form of a deductive enquiry into what kind of being it was. A few different antagonists were suggested – the consensus being that this was *dubu*, a spirit or ghost. All interpretations also led to the point that this was a "test", the *dubu* had come to "check me out". This was very plausible to them as I was new, a stranger to the Country and its Ancestral residents.

Ironically, I was not scared to camp in the shed alone after this. Something had changed in me. I had gone through it. I knew what it was like and that I could bear it. I had learnt that fear, the fear of death, could be overcome with acceptance, an acceptance that came with a peacefulness and a sense of belonging to something beyond and grander than temporal life. In short, I felt I had passed the test. That *dubu* never came back.

Since this, taking my informants' truth-claims about *dubu* seriously has not been a problem. My problems have been, firstly, coming to *terms* with my transformative experiences for myself (conceptualising them), and secondly, relaying these experiences to an anthropological audience. Kierkegaard has come to my aid in both these undertakings. The former concerns understanding alterity through Kierkegaard's notions of inwardness, paradox and the leap of faith. For the second problem, Kierkegaard developed a literary technique he called "indirect communication" which I will comment on briefly towards the end of this chapter.

The story above is hardly "indirect communication", it is rather intentionally direct. I hasten to state, however, that my story is not an attempt at proving the existence of *dubu*. On the contrary, it was aimed to jar you, my reader, out of an abstract thinking about alterity, and into existentially relating to alter aspects that otherwise can only appear as absurd from an abstract and rational point of view. It was an attempt at engaging *your* subjectivity, invoking your passion. If successful, that passion translated into either "offence" or "wonder", so that my further analysis has your existential attention to draw on.

The *dubu* inside my shed was both immaterial, in proceeding through the lawyer vine tangles, and material, by touching my forehead. *Dubu* are eternal and infinite in the sense that they are beyond death or finitude. Yet occasionally they can take on material and finite form observable to our senses. This transformative nature seemed absurd to me, and it is precisely this absurdity that makes them so terrifying; this paradoxical nature which involves "the contradiction that something essentially eternal has despite its essential nature become temporal, without ceasing to be what it is" (Evans, 1999, p. 213). Tim Ingold (2011a) has

observed in Medieval Christian monasticism, Australian Aboriginal religion, Kandinski spiritualism and Ching Hao's aesthetic painting that "the mental and the material, or the terrain of the imagination and the physical environment, run into each other to the extent of being barely distinguishable" (p. 198). In all these cases, Ingold continues, the two terrains have no ontological barriers between them. Quite in line with Kierkegaardian thinking on paradox, Ingold (2011a) writes that "such free passage is an offense to modern thought, which insists that what it calls 'figments' of the imagination can have no truck with the world of corporeal existence" (p. 198).

Transformative occurrences such as these can jolt us out of the padded lull of accustomed life and bring us face to face with our own corporal demise as well as hint towards post-corporal existence. They present us with a challenge to confront religious alterity existentially, and to find truth for ourselves. In short, they can open one up to wonder, and sustain it, if it is held in the passion of inwardness.

4.8 The Inwardness of Faith

As I hope to have demonstrated, to have a subjective experience of being in truth is thus qualitatively different from establishing truth in abstract objectivity. Kierkegaard explains and clarifies this divergence between subjective and objective reflection by describing the process of subjective reflection into *inwardness*:

> At its highest, inwardness in an existing subject is passion; truth as a paradox corresponds to passion, and that truth becomes a paradox is grounded precisely in its relation to an existing subject. In this way the one corresponds to the other. In forgetting that one is an existing subject, one loses passion, and in return, truth does not become a paradox; but the knowing subject shifts from being human to being a fantastical something, and truth becomes a fantastical object for its knowing. (Kierkegaard, 2000, pp. 205-206)

In my opinion, this paradox, the paradox of truth itself, captures a central problem for outsiders in grasping the centrality of the Dreaming in the lived lives of many Yalanji people, perhaps even the problem of paradoxical alterity in general. By relying solely on detached observations, interpretations, logical explanations or indeed conceptual analysis, the existential relation between the knower (the anthropologist) and what they seek to know (alterity, the Dreaming) is never established. Passion, and thus truth, are not felt as we are relating to the Dreaming impersonally and objectively; the I-knower is lost in objective

abstraction and the approximated knowledge of the Dreaming (as opposed to an appropriation of it in inwardness) remains lifeless and, in a Kierkegaardian sense, non-essential or non-existent; "All essential knowing pertains to existence, or only the knowing whose relation to existence is essential is essential knowing" (Kierkegaard, 1992a, p. 197). For Kierkegaard, only knowledge that has a *knower* is essential knowledge. With this emphasis on "essential knowing", Kierkegaard orients our thinking away from "speculative thought, away from the system" (Kierkegaard, 1992b, p. x).

Holbraad's ontographic truth is established in the conceptual alignment between one way of being in thought with another way of being in thought, that is, between analytical thought and thought expressed in native truth claims. It seems to me that Holbraad fails to engage alterity with the key modality of ontology in his approach – which is "way of being", or in existence, for himself. In Kierkegaardian terms, Holbraad's ontographic approach is thinking without a thinker. The argument that follows is that the transformation required to truly understand paradoxical alterity cannot be purely conceptual, but rather, conceptual realignment should coincide with the anthropologist's own existential transformation. As Kierkegaard wrote, "[i]f a person does not become what he understands, then he does not understand it" (Kierkegaard, cited in Piety, 2010, p. 173), or expressed inversely, "[k]nowing the truth follows of itself from being the truth" (Kierkegaard, cited in Piety, 2010, p. 172). What should start to emerge by now, is that unlike having objective truth, Kierkegaard's statement that "subjectivity is truth" points to truth as a way of being, a way of becoming.

As my *dubu* encounter reveals, my relation to the Dreaming had become existential. The ontological status of *dubu* was not established by way of abstract conceptual analysis, objective approximation or rational logics. Instead, the existence of *dubu* was ultimately established *in existence* – when I met one. My encounters with *dubu* and Ancestral beings both in dream and awake could be terribly frightening, but also immensely enriching and life-jolting.

My argument is that such encounters cannot be existentially transformative without cultivating a proper relation, in inwardness, to the Dreaming. Even so, there are no guarantees that inwardness and a qualitative leap will lead to transformation and faith (then it would not be faith). What is certain, though, is that without choosing to become existentially subjective in one's mode of relation, there will be no existential relation and no essential knowing by Kierkegaard's standards. All one can do is to choose to cultivate one's innermost being, an "inward deepening of the self", to open for a proper relation to the religious alterity in question to occur – the rest is up to God in Kierkegaard's case, Kuku Yalanji Ancestral beings

in mine. According to my friend Roy, the Ancestors "will judge you" and decide if they will give you help or direction in dreams or when awake. Thus, truth is a state of becoming that one can only enter by cultivating a proper relation towards the paradoxical alterity and existentially aligning oneself with it. The existential transformation is itself a momentary state of becoming truth, rather than a truth one grasps intellectually. Note that neither Kierkegaard nor I see a leap of faith as *one* leap that forever changes the leaper. A leap into faith is a temporary state of becoming which has to be re-enacted through a process Kierkegaard called "repetition".[70]

Rather than simple inward directedness, the Danish term "inderlighed" (inwardness) is associated with a heartfelt passion and sincerity, a self-centeredness while relating to a transcendent alterity in earnestness is perhaps closer as far as directional orientation goes. I was overcome with an inmost awe during my Ancestral encounters – of being in the presence of greatness, of being part of something larger. There is also a sense of inner silence that goes with this inwardness; a stilling of rational thought while opening up for passion and wonder towards the unknown.[71]

These moments of transformation enchanted my life with existential meaning and direction, or, how my friend Roy understands his encounters with his Ancestors, as "being looked after" (see also Stanner, 1984, p. 148). To follow the direction given by one's Ancestors in dream or awake, is to "follow one's Dreaming". The Ancestral encounters gave me direction, but I could never have objective certainty in my interpretation of them. Thus, I lived passionately, as my decisions in life were always choices of consequence, the stakes being of existential proportions.

As I said, these moments of transformation and becoming were temporary. I did not stay in a state of constant transformation. For that, the pull of objective reflection is too strong, and when I inevitably abstractly reflected on my experience and tried to conceptualise it, I was no longer in it, as "[e]xistence…is a difficult category to deal with; for if I think it, I abrogate it, and then I do not think it" (Kierkegaard, cited in Weston, 1994, p. ix). After these transformative moments had washed over me, however, they nonetheless leaked into my daily life by fostering a state of openness and wonder towards the small things in life, like unusual

[70] Kierkegaard saw "repetition" as the new (Christian) category challenging the Greek category of "recollection" and the Hegelian category of "mediation" as the royal roads to insight. Temporal aspects of "Repetition" and "recollection" will be discussed further in chapter 7.

[71] Living with people who have a greater propensity of sharing company in silence during work, fishing or around the campfire at night, as well as living in a camp without electricity was conducive to cultivating such inwardness. Also their keen observation of, and pointing out, unusual animal behaviour was often followed by contemplation in silence.

animal behaviour, which commonly invites contemplation and interpretation of Ancestral messages among the Yalanji I know.

However, as implied by Kierkegaard, truth can be temporarily known through a passionately subjective and existential approach, but will not lend itself, in its existential immediacy, to the bounded world of objective rationality and neat analytical conceptualisation. Hence, "when subjectivity, inwardness, is truth, then truth, objectively defined, is a paradox" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 207). In other words, existential truth concerning the Dreaming can only be temporarily experienced in a state of inwardness: "Only momentarily can a particular individual, existing, be in unity of the infinite and the finite that transcends existing. This instant is the moment of passion" (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 204). If we seek it, we must participate existentially in the field; our quest for knowing must begin with knowing for ourselves, instead of only interpreting what informants tell us paired with our critical observation of events.

4.9 The Leap to Faith – As a Radical Ethnographic Method?

If it is not already clear, I am not proposing Kierkegaard's leap of faith as a method in ethnographic fieldwork. Faith is not something one can plan, control, let alone develop a methodology upon (again, then it would not require faith). One cannot simply will oneself into faith, as faith always involves a relation to something external to the self that ultimately grants faith, or not. What I am suggesting is merely to cultivate an openness and earnest curiosity towards the paradoxical and the unknown, as stated above. The usefulness of Kierkegaard's thinking on the leap of faith and paradox is in its recursive analytical potential for ethnographers who have gone through deeply transformative experiences while on fieldwork. It provides an analytical framework for understanding alternative ways of conceiving truth, especially in opening up to what he meant with his statement "subjectivity is truth".

That said, Kierkegaard's leap of faith is marked by making a choice of either/or, and in an act of existential self-determination to make a qualitative leap to faith in the face of the absurd. While Kierkegaard had the Christian faith and the God-man paradox in mind, I think this thinking opens up for an existential approach to religious life and paradoxical alterity more generally which ethnographers can gain from. In religious spheres, or domains of objective uncertainty, I contend, we might learn more if we sometimes participated more radically, got more personal and got more real about the depth of our commitment in such participation.

A Kierkegaardian approach goes further than a suspension of disbelief; one must take the world presented by one's informants seriously enough to imagine it as true, and thus wonder what such a life could be like existentially. This *can* climax with a qualitative leap in which truth is known through its existential transformation of the leaper. If we want to know that truth, we must in other words change. Or rather, we know truth through it changing our existence. Existential appropriation is in this sense both a prerequisite and result of faith. What comes before the other is a chicken and egg paradox.

Engaging with paradoxes and the absurd invokes passion precisely because they cannot simply be accepted. The greater the paradox, the greater the risk. The greater the risk, the greater the passion, and the greater the leap. In the "inward deepening of the self, there is a sense in which the paradox itself, the doctrines, becomes secondary, a trigger for the passionate commitment Kierkegaard talks about" (Solomon, 2000b). As Suhr (2019) has pointed out, doubt is faith's facilitating obstacle, "a kind of fuel that makes the leap into faith more difficult and threatening, yet infinitely more rewarding" (p. 109).

I stress the capacity to change. To be blunt, if anthropologists return from the field existentially unchanged, that is, without experiencing any form of *personal* transformation, I doubt how truthfully they can write about the religious reality of others. One might question the merit of going on, let alone writing about, such a personal quest, when engaged in a vocational pursuit of understanding other people. Kierkegaard would say that the only essentially meaningful insights relating to humankind are gained through subjective experience of a life-changing character. I argue that subjective engagement with the ethico-religious world presented by others, paradoxically can help in approximating such otherness. But this statement demands further clarification of the terms "approximation" and "appropriation".

4.10 Approximating Alterity via Appropriation

Kierkegaard's use of the term approximation primarily, but not exclusively, refers to an activity done in an abstract objective realm of pure thought (objective reflection), whereas appropriation generally entails existential subjective reflection in inwardness. Both terms are useful for me in my project, but appropriation is primary. "Appropriation" can be described as sincerely imagining and passionately relating to the ontological alterity for oneself in inwardness, culminating with an existentially transformative leap to faith. My appropriated point of view is of course not identical with any native person's point of view, nor is it a general or ideal native point of view; it remains my own, but it (and I) have changed in the

process. The subjective, existential change is the guiding standard of appropriation, and by extension, ethnographic approximation.

For Kierkegaard, appropriation is the paradoxical inwardness of being in faith (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 514). Having faith is defined not by the "'what' of Christianity but by the 'how' of the Christian," Kierkegaard wrote; moreover, "this 'how' can go with only one thing, the absolute paradox" (p. 514). For me, this meant realigning myself to a reality in which Ancestral beings came and continue to come into temporal and finite existence. This involved an expansion of my existential horizon and outlook, which meant relating my own sense of self, my existence, to finite beings that can also be infinite, and later on, to something Ancestral which can simultaneously be contemporary (which will be discussed in the next chapter).

What I appropriated was faith – a subjective mode of orientation towards existence, an outlook grounded in inwardness, if you will. This came about as an existential transformation following encounters with Ancestral beings awake and in dream. The significance of such contact is always subjective, and the questions that arose from my Ancestral relation were prescriptive. The task thus becomes to align one's life with what is appropriated, that is, how to live truly in accordance with what one appropriated; truth becomes "to follow one's Dreaming".

Thus, my claim is that appropriation of paradoxical alterity is possible, and that it furthermore can yield a unique insight into how individuals may experience truth, that our subsequent anthropological conceptualisations and knowledge can draw on and approximate. This way of conceptualising and approximating alterity produces a knowledge that is nonetheless a finite reduction of the potentially transcendent or eternal truth it stems from (the Dreaming, God), and is thus (only) an approximation of that truth. Hence, any knowledge, including subjective knowledge, is an approximation according to Kierkegaard (Piety, 2010, p. 171). And as far as his texts can be treated as a body of knowledge, albeit ambiguous due to his literary style of "indirect communication", they are nonetheless verbal expressions of his conceptualisations, and can thus be seen as his own approximations of truth in language, a truth that is itself beyond language.

At this point, it may be useful to note a contrast with Holbraad's ontographic approach in which his conceptual approximations mirror the *already* abstract, finite and temporal reality of other (native) concepts. Where he approximates the alterity of an Ifá perspective by relating his concepts to the native concepts that define that conceptual otherness, I approximate (as in "approach") Yalanji alterity by relating my subjective existence, and

subsequently my concepts, to the alterity of the Dreaming. Put differently, it is not a Yalanji concept in itself I am relating myself to, but what they point to. The alterity I relate myself to is not their *perspective* of their world but existentially to that world itself, which is what faith necessitates. Although this may start with their perspectives as rendered in ontological truth claims, the relation I seek to establish is beyond the finite nature of concepts and knowledge. It is a uniquely subjective, inward and existential relation to the Dreaming and its associated beings in a concrete way. For instance, when I was sometimes walking by myself in the bush, the presence of *dubu* was felt so strongly that I found myself adopting the practice of "singing out" to the Ancestors to both announce my presence to them and to ask them to look after me. What I appropriated was not an abstract perspective that could be conceptually mapped out ethnographically. What I appropriated was a way of existing within a world where the alterity of the Dreaming can be momentarily glimpsed and aligned to, such as following a medical treatment given to me by Yalanji Ancestors in a dream. While Holbraad's conceptual approach may be seen as a mere one step removed from my existential approach, it is substantially different from an existential approach to approximation:

> If being... is understood as... empirical being, then the truth is changed into something to be achieved, and everything put into process, because the empirical object is not finished, and the existing knowing spirit is himself in process, and thus the truth is an approximation. (Kierkegaard, cited in Evans, 1999, p. 118)

For Kierkegaard, as we see in this quote, there is also a sense in which even truth in subjectivity is an approximation ("tilnærmelse").[72] Given that truth in subjectivity is a way of existing, an individual's life "expresses the truth approximately in the striving for it," a truth epitomised in the life of Christ (Kierkegaard, cited in Piety, 2010, p. 103). Despite an individual's potential success in aligning his existence with such an eternal truth, this is a momentary transformation that cannot be sustained, only repeated. According to Kierkegaard, an existing individual's life *as a whole* can do no more than approximate the truth of Christ, whose life alone expresses truth in an absolute sense. To approximate ethical or religious truth in this way is to "approach" it, as in to "come closer to" it (Piety, 2010, p. 103). It is in this sense of "nearing" truth that I claim a subjective and existential approach can approximate a

[72] As remarked by Piety, although 'approximation' is a standard translation of 'tilnærmelse,' it can also be translated as 'approaching,' as in 'getting closer to' or I would add 'nearing,' which seems a better translation in this context. This distinction is lost in translation of Kierkegaard as he used 'tilnærmelse' in talking about approximation in this sense, and 'approximation' in the objective reflective sense (Piety, 2010, p. 103).

native point of view (for instance to "follow one's Dreaming") in a way that conceptual approximation cannot.

Despite my critique of Holbraad's conceptual approximation of ontological alterity, it is important to stress that I am not implying that there is no truth to approximate, nor am I saying that Holbraad's ontographic approach does not approximate that truth in a formal analytical sense. Ontographic truth is a conceptual (or analytic) truth, a truth that I would say, following Evans (1999), "depends merely on the ideal relations between concepts" (p. 118). The relation between conceptual thought and being (ontological alterity) is an ideal or abstract relationship, and being must thus be understood as "ideal being", or "being in thought", rather than actual, or empirical, being in itself. One can of course have analytical truth since abstract thought can correspond with abstract being. But since thought and being in such cases refer to the same thing – abstract being in thought (and I include ontographic analysis in this category) – the definition of truth given is really a tautology (Evans, 1999, p. 119).

4.11 Expressing Truth

> Objective thinking is wholly indifferent to subjectivity, and by the same token to inwardness and appropriation. Its mode of communication is therefore direct. It goes without saying that it need not be easy on that account. But it is direct, it lacks the deviousness and art of double reflection; it does not have that god-fearing and humane solicitude in imparting something of itself that belongs to subjective thinking. It can be understood directly and rattled off by rote. (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 64)

The challenge with existential ethnographic writing is getting from the truth in subjectivity to an objective expression, or representation, that does not obliterate that truth. And indeed, I do not presume to be able to achieve this. What I have achieved however, was a personal transformation recognisable enough for my Yalanji collaborators to start them calling me "one of them"[73] – an experience my writing inevitably will draw on to find its footing. An example most people can relate to: It is hard to do justice to love in writing, yet it does not mean that it is not real or does not exist. One who has known love has better hope of giving love an expression worthy of it.

[73] My male Yalanji friends started saying things like "you are part of us now", and "you're bama now", after my *dubu* encounters.

Kierkegaard's method of conveying insights of subjective appropriation was what he called "indirect communication". For this he used multiple pseudonyms, contrasting works, contrasting sections within works, all of which leave the reader confused and disoriented. In the appendix of *The Postscript* (2009a), Kierkegaard even declared that not a single word in his pseudonymous works was his own. Hamilton has argued that the logic of Kierkegaard's work forces him to say this; "he must try to remain forever beyond anything he says, but can only use words to move towards that beyond" (Hamilton, 1998, p. 70). All these ploys were intended to

> sever the reliance of the reader on the authority of the author and on the received wisdom of the community. The reader was to be forced to take individual responsibility for knowing who s/he is and for knowing where s/he stands on the existential, ethical and religious issues raised in the texts. (McDonald, 2009)

Similarly, Kierkegaard brings the paradoxical and the absurd to the fore, forcing the reader to relate to them existentially.

His style is saturated with irony and humour, shifts between the analytic and the poetic, and he makes good use of storytelling. Apart from the use of paradox, storytelling is to me the most interesting tool in Kierkegaard's repertoire of indirect communication. It has universal appeal, it is certainly an important aspect in the lives of the Kuku Yalanji, and with the emergence of narrative ethnography in the nineties (Tedlock, 1991), it has even established its own space in anthropology. Storytelling is furthermore well suited for existential anthropology (cf. Jackson, 2005). Stories can engage the subjectivity of the reader in the act of interpreting them; "to put oneself into a story by thinking it through is simultaneously to begin to take the... significance of the story – its essential human truth – into one's individual existence" (Howland, 2007, p. 181).

I suggest including personal stories, including those relating to existential transformation and extraordinary experiences, in the ethnographic text. Importantly, one should include personal encounters with the absurd and the offensive in such accounts while resisting the temptation to resolve their contradictory nature. Instead, the paradoxical should be put centre stage so the reader has a chance to confront her own existential self on the matter.

Having an experiential-existential base for our knowing, we can turn to ethnography with a greater hope of success in expression. Just as the influential Aboriginal elder's religious authority rests with both objective knowledge handed down the generations, and

subjective experience through personal and existential engagement with the Dreaming, the ethnographer finds her words sustained by both her objective observations and her personal experience of the truth to which she refers.

The greatest importance when writing existentially is, I think, to relate inwardly to what and how one writes. One must continuously ask: do these words resonate with the subjective experience they aim to describe, or as Kierkegaard might say: are the words true *in* me? As it is with knowing truth in inwardness, this should be a passionate relationship and not forced into a logical or rational one, although the words should be checked against these as well.

> Ethically-religiously, the emphasis is again on: *how.* But this is not to be understood as manner, modulation of voice, oral delivery, etc., but it is to be understood as the relation of the existing person, in his very existence, to what is said. (Kierkegaard, 2000, p. 206)

In other words, if the objective text resonates with the subjective experience for the author, a partial connection, a glimpse of subjective truth, may be made for the reader. If it was not so, Kierkegaard's writing itself would have no purchase on me, and I would not be writing this text.[74]

Where do these implications leave the ethnographic analysis? As long as one remains faithful to one's subjectivity in writing and remembers the limitations of treating the religious or truth in objectivity, I have no issues with including conceptual analysis, nor did Kierkegaard. Knowledge of being is different from being in itself, and such knowledge is thus a representation of a way of being in thought (cf. Piety, 2010, p. 172). In writing about truth, I inevitably abstract it, and truth is no longer my subjectivity or my becoming itself. Truth has become "fixed" and transformed into propositional knowledge – as conceptualisations and expressions of truth as experienced, which, in its end product, lends itself to objective reflection. My hope is that by detailing my existential transformation leading to this, an existential trace to my experience of truth can be made.

Unlike Kierkegaard, I do not use multiple pseudonyms, nor am I a poet. Although I find his style inspiring and his delivery powerful, it is his thoughts on the paradoxical nature

[74] In comparison to this, Peter Hervik sees resonance as a non-verbal means to reach beyond words, which he refers to Unni Wikan who has written that resonance demands "a willingness to engage with another world, life, or idea; an ability to use one's experience... to try to grasp, or convey, meanings that reside neither in words, 'facts', nor text but are evoked in the meeting of one experiencing subject with another or with a text" (Wikan 1992, cited in Hervik, 1994, p. 84).

of truth, subjectivity, inwardness, and the leap that I find most useful for coming to better terms with paradoxical alterity. I see Western and Yalanji experiences of life in some respects as fundamentally different; their epistemologies and knowledge traditions, who knows, maybe even their ontologies, are in important respects incommensurable. Yet, I continue to pursue the project of modern anthropology understood as a quest for a "native point of view". Although we are almost hopelessly limited in this by our cultural upbringing and language, we all can experience a different life, and are imaginative towards each other (cf. Hastrup & Hervik, 1994), and importantly, we all have the capacity to change. Although this does not assure the attainment of the native's point of view, not by a long shot, I think there is room for approximation (understood as in "nearing") towards one another and thus hope for anthropology's future. Despite all the obvious limitations given by my cultural otherness, and the fact that I remain a novice in his world, I am convinced I approximated Roy's views of the world in some little yet significant way, otherwise inaccessible through more abstract or conceptual methods commonly applied in the ethnographic process.

4.12 Conclusion

I see several contributions from Kierkegaard as relevant to the ontological turn and alterity debates. Firstly, he allows for diverging epistemological orientations without abandoning a notion of truth as well as wonder. Secondly, he commits to the paradox of truth and holds on to paradox instead of resolving it. Thirdly, he suggests a subjective and existential approach to truth in realms of "objective uncertainty" or paradoxical alterity, which, finally, leaves an opening for a leap to faith for ethnographers in their pursuit of knowing ethico-religious otherness. This calls for an engagement with one's informants that is characterised by sincerity and passion and a genuine wish to experience something other.

By conceptually mirroring native truth claims, which themselves have already been conceptually fixed, Holbraad can indeed achieve formal certainty (or analytical truth) insofar his and their concepts actually match. However, such statements relate to being; they are ontological statements, as Holbraad himself points out. The intention of such native truth claims is neither to achieve analytical correspondence nor merely to offer us ontological description. Rather, the intent of such statements is to change individual lives; they are existentially prescriptive, and truth thus becomes a matter of certitude in subjectivity rather than certainty objectively. My suggestion is to approach such statements accordingly – that is, existentially before conceptually. Following Kierkegaard, this means an individual relation to

alterity in passionate inwardness and faith, to which conceptual approximation of a Holbraadian kind is wholly indifferent.

A Kierkegaardian approach suggests that if we want to know what the Dreaming can mean for a Yalanji person, one has to take the reported experiential aspect of the Dreaming seriously enough to experiment with one's own epistemological or ontological foundations. The "suspension of disbelief" or "ontological self-determination" are both good principles and necessary first steps. However, unless we make a "leap of faith" into the world presented to us, we can never have a personal transformative experience that can enrich our own lives with a changed sense of reality – one that I have argued can approximate a "native point of view". This way of approximating alterity differs from conceptual approximation in that the resultant knowledge has been related to existentially and experientially. Having a revelatory dream and encountering spirits transformed me existentially – a transformation my Yalanji friends recognised as becoming one of them. Such existential approximation can draw nearer to local knowing in a way conceptual approximation never can. That is, through existential transformation and *contact* with ontological alterity, one can come closer to that truth by realigning one's life to it. Kierkegaard's thinking about subjectivity, truth and paradox has enabled me to make sense of such experiences of ontological alterity in a way that seems relevant beyond my subjective experience, one being that objective reflection and conceptual abstraction often obstruct us from existentially relating to and experiencing alterity for ourselves.

What Kierkegaard did, among other things, was (not without irony) to give a conceptual analysis of how a purely conceptual analysis prevents the seeker of truth from being touched and changed by truth. I point out that there is no way of finding out if there is any truth in what I have been arguing from a position of "pure thought". Although my approach to truth must invariably start with appropriating (paradoxical) concepts, as well as returning to concepts in my approximation, my task as an existing individual is, following Kierkegaard, to establish contact with a truth which itself is beyond language and concepts. As an ethnographer, it is my hope that some of the existential impact my Ancestral encounters had on me, as well as my existential transformation, has seeped through in this otherwise conceptual and analytical text, and that I have avoided the predicament of the philosopher who "neutralizes his wonder in ideal knowledge" (Martin Buber, cited in Scott, 2013, p. 861).

Another Kierkegaardian message the ontological-minded anthropologist ought to consider, especially if advocating "ontological self-determination" (Viveiros de Castro, Pedersen, & Holbraad, 2014), is that there comes a point when there is no neutral analytical

position, no true suspension of disbelief, no agnostic position to assume when relating to objective uncertainty. It is a situation of either/or, a "bifurcation in the road", where we must choose between understanding and faith. What Kierkegaard reminds those who think themselves on the fence of agnostic understanding, is that to *understand* paradoxical religiousness is to revoke it (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 477n). But why, then, write at all, or attempt understanding anything religious? Because, as Kierkegaard (2009a) says, the believer makes "as much use of the understanding as is needed to become aware of the incomprehensible, and then relates to this, believing against the understanding" (p. 476).

A proper relation to paradoxical alterity cannot be established abstractly or conceptually but by engaging with its seemingly absurd nature in one's own life. This means to risk exposing oneself to a fuller range of human sensibilities as part of what we do as anthropologists, from immersion in passionate wonder to "fear and trembling" of that unknown we ultimately cannot fully comprehend. In the next chapter, we shall see how I failed in exactly this when I tried to come to grips with what I saw as temporal paradoxes in Roy's stories.

5 Becoming Contemporaneous with the Ancestors: The Paradox of Eternity in Time

This chapter will discuss what I have come to understand Roy means when he says “there is no time in it” when referring to a Dreamstory (which connects with an established Dreaming story) in which a “Big Kurriyala” creates a waterhole. I will try to account for my difficulties in understanding Roy’s temporality in regard to this dream, my initial lack of “coevalness” with him (Fabian, 2014), and how I later came to understand Roy as “becoming contemporaneous” (Kierkegaard, 2009b) with the main protagonist in the story, an Ancestral Rainbow Snake.

Having faith in someone else’s Ancestral dream (in this case Roy’s Rainbow Serpent dream) is not the same as having faith in one’s own (as was the case in my own medicine dream discussed in the previous chapter). Roy telling me his dream will necessarily be less of an immediate impact on me than that of my own dream, and the challenge to have faith in another’s dream is of a different, more indirect, order. Such a notion of faith may seem to run counter to my argument of faith as truth in subjectivity and inwardness given in the previous chapter, but this is not necessarily so. I will argue that Kierkegaard’s enigmatic concept “contemporaneity” can provide us with meaningful clues to how Roy may have oriented himself in his Ancestral encounter, as well as how I might gain faith, at second hand, through his dream account.

In ethnographic analyses of Dreaming stories, attention has often been turned to questions of historicity and the historical accuracy of Dreaming story events. Some of these stories have their wellspring from individual dreams, where an Ancestor reveals knowledge to the dreamer. As mentioned in chapter 3, I distinguish the latter kind as “Dreamstories”, as opposed to “Dreaming stories” (which I take to be stories with intergenerational longevity, although the difference between the two is not categorical and they will often blur into each other in reality). However, from my sense of Roy’s engagement with his Ancestors, both in dreams and awake, as well as my own experiences of such encounters, analysing Dreamstories historically often fails to do justice to the intensifying sense of being alive and the overwhelming meaningfulness of such encounters. The individual impact or existential significance of Ancestral encounters is routinely overlooked in favour of the Ancestral narrative itself and its abstract logic (or alleged lack thereof).

What I wish to do is turn the attention back to the subjective impact of Ancestral encounters, and how these can afford truth, meaning and guidance in life, because that is certainly how Roy himself engages with these experiences. This is not to downplay temporal contradictions in these narratives by looking the other way. Rather, I follow Kierkegaard by putting temporal paradox centre stage; instead of treating paradoxes as something to be logically puzzled out until the elements in the narrative are logically consistent. As discussed in the previous chapter, paradox can enable the perplexed in becoming existentially and passionately involved in life instead of rationally and abstractly disconnected from it.

As I will recount, I have myself an ongoing struggle to do justice to my own dream experiences when putting them into words. When *explaining* Ancestral encounters I end up with contradictory elements – paradoxes that I cannot resolve logically and conceptually. Very often these contradictions are temporal contradictions as we shall see below with my own failure to understand Roy's temporality in his *Kurriyala* dream as a result of my propensity to get bogged down in what I perceived as chronological conflicts.

5.1 Big Kurriyala Dream

This section will address my difficulty in coming to terms with Roy's temporal orientation when post-contact elements of colonisation manifest in his narrative of Dreamtime events. As my ethnographic example, I will discuss a particular dream recounted by Roy. I have heard Roy recount this dream on numerous occasions, the first time was in 2002 during my first fieldwork. I have removed names of the place and associated people to keep the location and identity of this women's story place hidden to the readers. I am especially careful here because, as Roy has pointed out, "it should have been someone else who got the dream" (i.e. a female traditional owner). Roy's motivation in sharing the dream with me in the context of this research arises from his expressed interest in non-Yalanji people respecting story places such as this women's place and following the wishes of the sites' Indigenous custodians.[75] The following transcript is based on a videorecording I did of Roy in February 2013 sharing his Dreamstory next to the same waterhole that featured in his dream. The video recordings were Roy's initiative, as part of documenting several of his Dreamstories in a DVD to share with his family.

[75] This waterhole has been used by white locals and has been "a hidden gem" for backpackers and tourists for many years. Since video-recording this story in 10.2.2013, Roy has informed me that the site has finally been blocked off for the public and that authorities (presumably the Douglas Shire) have finally put up a sign restricting access to the site.

I had a dream about this special place here, many years ago, when I was doing a cultural survey. I was camping up there [pointing], about 100 meters away from here, and it was the first time I came here for long time, when I first did that survey.

What I did is actually – me and my cousin [name removed], we actually sleeping up there in the camp place up there, belongs to [names person]'s place, and then we're making the fire and then we slept and the next day we gotta do a survey, a cultural survey, and what happened, I had a dream.

I had a dream that I actually was in the dream, I was totally naked. Then I was walking in my dream, I was find myself on the edge of that bank [pointing]. Over where the Cycad tree, is right down below it there I was standing up somewhere there, in my dreams. O.K.?

And then, when I was standing up over there, and I was looking into that water [pointing to the big pool], into this water where the sun's shining in, I was looking to the water there, and then I seen a big ripple, and I thought it was rain, and the ripple was fell down three times, a beautiful ripple [created when drops of water] fell down three times like a rainbow colour. Then it vanished, in that centre of that water, O.K.?

I looked around and there was no rain. Then when I look above, above where the sun is and above where the tree is over there, then I saw a big snake, a big huge – a big huge snake, let's say it's like a serpent snake, and actually, it was right in front where – where the tree were, big as that tree, and then he was spewing something in the water, but I actually looked at the snake and suddenly I seen a woman come out of that snake mouth. It spewed out that woman slowly, and then this woman came out of that snake mouth, actually had a long blonde hair, a naked girl came out right in that centre of that pool there, that's where that snake spewed the women into the water.

And then suddenly, I didn't move at all, then I looked at the snake again, and that snake spewed out another blonde *waybala jalbu*, a white lady, naked coming out of the mouth of that snake, and went straight into that water. As I look into that water I couldn't see a body, I couldn't see any of those two girls, those ladies, all I can see – the women actually were part of the special waterholes here. And then, another lady came out of it. A black hair woman. She came out, a thin piece, went

in with the head in first and the arms out, and then suddenly when she touched the water, and they vanished into the water.

And now still today, I am here to tell you the story because – I looked in that water when I was standing on that bank, I didn't see any woman in that water, but then I realise this is a special place, but that actually special place was woman's waterhole, a woman's special place, I don't know what happened to these women, but the snake actually did something, and swallowed them, and spewed them out into this water here.

And now, today, (( )) I never realised, [back in his dream again] I am still trying to figure out where are those women now. But then, when I looked at the women in the waterhole, couldn't see any of them, but what I see – and I look above then I see the big snake, a big huge snake, actually, we looked eye to eye. I couldn't look at him, he was too strong and powerful. And he asked me in my language, he said "*Wanyu?*" mean to say, "what you want?" And I jumped out of my swag [bedroll]. And then I thought he was right in front of me, next to me in my swag. Then I didn't go to sleep until the morning breaks.

And then, the next morning come up I came down to walk along, to walk along the edge, back to the same place I was standing, and then I realised when I stood up there, and said to my cousin [name removed], I said "Hey! This is where I had my dream last night, and all them *Jalbu jalbu* women were in that waterhole here." And I said "Nothing in there" but I said "Can you look at the creek, what it looks like?" So, the creek was look – the creek actually shaped like a snake. And so, this is a special place for the women, women's waterhole.

I don't know why it came to me, but there was something special that came to me that I don't know how and why, but that's my story about this special place and the dream I had that I wanted to share with youse all.

And now today, people are coming out swimming in this special waterhole, we don't know how to stop them, we don't know how to deal with these people. But I think, one day, some day, we will deal with them soon or later, down the track. O.K. Thank youse, *yalada*!

Summing up, the story describes how a *big Kurriyala*, a "Rainbow Snake",[76] spews three women (at least two of them white) into a waterhole somewhere in the Greater Daintree region. As the women touch the surface of the water, they transform into the waterhole itself. According to Roy, this event is what created the waterhole, i.e., it is a creation story. When asked about why he thinks the women were white, his interpretation was that they were strangers to this place who may have transgressed Yalanji Law, and when prompted directly, affirmed they might have been tourists. As Fred Myers (1986) also has noted about the Pintupi, I find that it is rare for Roy to make assertive statements regarding dreams and Ancestral involvement in the lives of the living. His comments tend to be suggestive rather than definitive (see also chapter 3).

I reiterate that all place names and descriptive features of the place have been omitted to avoid the story contributing to becoming a contestation of traditional and/or gender-based ownership. To be clear, the analysis I wish to pursue here does not concern land ownership issues, but temporal implications coming from the narrative itself as well as Roy's and my own reflections around it. As Roy has pointed out to me many times, it should have been someone else having this dream. For Roy, the message of the story indicates that non-Yalanji people should have more respect for this story place. White people and outsiders should respect this special waterhole by simply staying away (or otherwise seek permission from a traditional owner), and men should respect that it is a women's place. The message in the story also confers spiritual concern, as the place is (or at least was) a favourite swimming hole for white locals and backpackers. As Roy points out, the white women in the story "did something wrong" (although it is unclear *what*, based on his dream alone[77]) and died as a consequence. He insists that there is "something here that you gotta be careful of, there's something that actually haven't started yet". As such, this Dreamstory has past, present and future orientations which raises questions about the chronology of events and thus usefully sets the scene for a discussion regarding temporal paradoxes and epistemological challenges.

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[76] According to the Hershbergers, *yarru* is the Yalanji term for the "rainbow snake (mythical serpent)" (1986, p. 159), but I have not heard this term being used. *Kurriyala* is the term used for what is commonly called "carpet -" or "scrub pythons" (Hershberger & Hershberger, 1986, p. 97), whose appearance presumably resembles the mythological Rainbow Serpent most closely. A Rainbow Serpent is thus often described as an abnormally big *Kurriyala*.

[77] When I asked Roy about this, he replied that this was something he was wondering about too. It had not featured in his dream, which shows the women for the first time when they are spewed out. It is nonetheless clear to him, as was also in accordance with what a senior and knowledgeable Yalanji woman (now deceased) had told him, that they had done something wrong. During speculation as to how and why the women were swallowed by the *Kurriyala* in the first place, he suggested that they may have been lost or otherwise gone to a place they should not have.

5.2 Historicity, Categorical Imperialism and Allochronism

Note that there are crucial differences between individual dreams or Dreamstories, such as those of Roy's detailed in this thesis, and the genre of socially established, handed down over the generations Dreaming stories. I know Roy's Dreamstories, as do his family and other people close to him, and some have spread further, but these stories are "fresh" in the scheme of things. As discussed in chapter 3 on Ancestral agency, Roy is suggestive and tentative in his dream interpretations, and as we also saw with the *Kubirri* at the Gate dream, their meanings are discussed with other knowledgeable elders. I personally see and analyse Roy's Dreamstories as Ancestrally given – but if and how other people will view these stories in the future, I do not know and cannot predict (nor would this change how I see them i.e., as true). As such, in the context of this thesis, Roy's Dreamstories present useful snapshots of the process involved in the temporalisation of the Ancestral, even as they are yet to achieve enduring public validation and abiding status as a Dreaming story.

That said, Aboriginal creation stories including post-colonial elements such as white women in Roy's Dreamstory are nothing new in Australian ethnographic accounts of Dreaming stories. Other more well-known and established Australian Aboriginal Dreaming narratives incorporate post-colonial elements (Sansom, 2001) or include key historical figures of European descent such as Captain James Cook (Rose, 1984) and Ned Kelly (Rose, 1994).

Debates concerning Australian Aboriginal temporality, and its historicity in particular, has a long history in the anthropological literature (see Beckett, 1994; Myers, 1986; Rumsey, 1994; Stanner, 2009a). Reports of temporal tensions and contradictions in general have been discussed under the rubrics of Lévi-Strauss' cold versus hot societies, Sahlins' prescriptive versus performative societies, more specific to Indigenous Australians as "continuity and change" (Stanner, 2009a); debates on the degree of historical consciousness, such as myth versus history consciousness (Kolig, 2000); as well as the applicability of linear versus non-linear notions of time among Aboriginal people.

However, as Johannes Fabian (2014) has pointed out, the use of such categories and typologies raises an epistemological question: whether and how Indigenous knowledge is validated or invalidated by the use of such temporal categorisations (p. 25). Using time and temporal devices, such as placing Aboriginal groups along a mythic-history conscious continuum, *distances* those who are observed (e.g. the "premodern", "traditional", "stone-age" etc., "Others") from the time of the (e.g. "modern") observer (p. 25). The temporal distancing produces, globally, what Fabian calls the "denial of coevalness", by which he

means “a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse” (Fabian, 2014, p. 31). Categorisations of others does not necessarily need a temporal label to effect temporal distancing, Fabian adds. This is obvious with words such as “savage” (a term often attached to Aboriginal Australians in early ethnographies) which nonetheless placed “savages” in a time prior (and below developmentally) to “civilised” people of the west.

Avoiding past tense in ethnographic descriptions, such as the use of “the ethnographic present” is not necessarily any better according to Fabian. Although the present is the proper tense to report findings such as counts and correlations, he writes, categorical assertions made in present tense, such as “the X are matrilineal” both unduly generalises, and “‘freezes’ a society at the time of observation” (Fabian, 2014, pp. 80-81). This “petrified relation” between observer and observed, removes “the Other” from the present of the ethnographer (Fabian, 2014, p. 143), from the flow of time and history, and denies them the human propensity to change (Birth, 2008, p. 4). Fabian called this prevalent anthropological discourse of temporal distancing “allochronism”, putting together *allo-,* meaning “other”, together with *chrono,* meaning “time”.

Two ways to counter allochronism are coevalness and use of historicity (coevally, not allochronistically). Following Fabian, coevalness means shared time in two senses which both have to be met; sharing or occupying the same physical time as well as establishing a shared temporal framework. Birth (2008) describes this further:

> Ethnographic coevalness, then, rests on an assumption of not only an intersubjectively shared present, but, by implication, an intersubjectively shared past and future, as well. This does not mean sharing identical pasts and futures, but sharing sufficient common knowledge about the past and future to make communication in the present intelligible. (p. 11)

There are furthermore two relations of coevalness, or shared time, needing to be achieved to avoid allochronism. The first necessary coevalness is the experience of shared intersubjective time between anthropologist and informant, as neatly summed up by Kevin Birth above. This is often presented as a given in anthropology, Fabian notes, because of the discipline’s emphasis on long-term fieldwork. Intersubjective communication often results, not only in coevalness, understood as a shared physical time, but also through shared temporal references about the present and the past that are relevant locally. The second type of coevalness that must be achieved, if one is to avoid allochronism, is in the actual reporting of

the first type, i.e., in ethnographic writing. This, according to Fabian (2014), proved much harder and is where anthropologists usually fail, since anthropological writing had already become "suffused with the strategies and devices of an allochronic discourse" (p. 148).

Fabian's critique of anthropology's Eurocentric allochronic discourse was undoubtedly needed and timely at the time of its publication (1983). Some may say that anthropology has since outgrown this critique, but the discourse persists outside anthropology, as evidenced in statements like "oldest living culture on earth" by progressive white professionals working in the Indigenous industry (Kowal, 2015), as well as by Indigenous people themselves, Yalanji people included.

While temporal distancing categories may have waned from anthropological discourse, this does not mean that "Indigenous" epistemologies are taken more seriously (as in *true*) than before. Some questions remain, such as where does this leave "cultural difference"? And where does this put me as an anthropologist wanting to write about Roy's *Big Kurriyala* Dreamstory? Why do I think it is important to include this story? Frankly, because it does highlight a cultural difference in temporal orientation. The story brings out a difference between Roy's and my own temporality, which I find worthwhile to pursue. Roy has no problem navigating my temporality, or "modernity". He may have less emphasis on the clock, but he understands mainstream Australian temporality well enough to operate in it successfully. It was I who at the outset was at a cross-cultural disadvantage; Roy can take part in my temporality as well as another, more Ancestrally oriented, temporality. But I try, sincerely, to partake in his other temporal point of view. My position is, as I will try to show in this chapter, that I (we) have something important to learn from Roy's temporal outlook: that truth is not always found in objective consistency and chronology, but sometimes in moments of passionate inwardness and in sensations of a *fullness of time*; moments where one becomes contemporaneous with temporally distant events.

By focussing on what is shared, coeval, there is a danger that one can be prone to miss underlying difference (shortly we shall see how I do just that in my discussion with Roy following his narration of his *Big Kurriyala* Dreamstory). Kevin Birth calls this "homochronism", which while invoked to create coevalness, often tends to impose the more dominant temporality on both the ethnographer and her informants. As Birth pointedly puts it, whereas allochronism placed its subjects outside the dominant flow of time, homochronism puts them inside it, denying them their own unique temporalities.

Birth uses the Australian concept of the Dreaming, quoting Stanner's (2009b) view of the Dreaming as being outside of time, as "everywhen", to exemplify the ethnographic

difficulty of reconciling its cultural specificity, or ontological alterity, with the "pancultural emphasis on change" in ethnographies following Fabian's publication (pp. 13-14). Homochronism conceals such problems by generating a sense of a shared, general history, that privileges change over continuity. I concur with Birth (2008) that "post-Enlightenment rationalism severs time from eternity and precludes cultural ontologies that do not do the same" (p. 16). Birth further comments that homochronism, like anachronism, "reflects the dominant teleology of the intellectual climate out of which it emerged: a fear of concepts of time that emphasize endurance, if not eternity, coupled with a desire to document change" (p. 18).

In an earlier era of ethnography, Stanner (2009b) noted Aboriginal peoples' emphasis on the changeless character of the Dreaming, and the social reproduction it enabled, as a system founded on the principles of preservation and balance. The logos, the "abidingness" of the Dreaming, he remarked, is "equilibrium ennobled" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 72). The value placed on continuity by Aboriginal people, he wrote, has generated a people "ahistorical in mood, outlook, and life" (p. 70). One redeeming factor is that in his Boyer lectures Stanner advocated for an "appreciation for difference" and thus remedied some of the effects of the "temporal distancing" his approach may have entailed.[78] It is of course easy to criticise Stanner today for his allochronic discourse, but we should also be cogent, as Birth reminds us, that we are no less trapped in the intellectual climate of the day than was Stanner and other ethnographers.

By introducing this chapter with Roy's own narrative in my ethnographic text, as became more common in the wake of Fabian's original publication in 1983 (along with other critical works on representation (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Said, 1979)), I to a degree preempt some of Fabian's critique. But it is not necessarily in my ethnographic writing and reporting that I fail to achieve coevalness with Roy, but rather in the intersubjective field situation itself. I will now try to use my follow up discussion with Roy on his *Big Kurriyala* Dreamstory, to demonstrate how my engagement with Roy and his story can be considered as failing to achieve coevalness with Roy, but *not* as allochronistic in its intent.

[78] And we cannot forget that Stanner was among the first Australian ethnographers who took Aboriginal religion seriously. It shines through in his writing that he held it and Aboriginal "high culture" in the highest regard on more than a professional level.

5.3 *Wanyu*? Lost in Contradiction

In April 2013, Roy and I returned to the site of the *Big Kurriyala* story with visual anthropologist and fellow PhD student Daniela Vávrová to record the story again. During an interim video editing session, Roy had not been happy with the weather and lighting of the first take and wanted to redo it.[79] After Roy had finished retelling the *Big Kurriyala* story, I followed up with some questions:

> Bård: So, when that snake spew out the women,
>
> Roy: Aha
>
> B: They turned into this water?
>
> R: They turned into this water!
>
> B: Hmm, and I'm just curious, like I'm trying to understand, what would this place be before that, is there a before? Can we talk about a before?
>
> R: There was a before, yes there is. Well this was a women's story places, that women uses all the time. And to us, we weren't allowed to come here. Like I'm only come here to tell the story.

As soon as I introduce the temporal category of a "before" the women turned into the water, a temporal contradiction arises as this event itself is what created the place. A notion of the site's existence before it was created is somewhat absurd as there can be no meaningful "before" the beginning of the place. However, if one looks more closely at Roy's response, his "before" refers to "before" the moment he had his dream and his retelling of it, a near past when women of his time were already using this place. Roy told me that he told this story to a Yalanji woman, whom I knew to be a senior and very knowledgeable elder of the generation before Roy, who confirmed Roy's dream as consistent with the story of the place.

In trying to answer my questions on that day, Roy began speaking in terms of respect for story places, but I persisted in getting to the bottom of the temporality of the dream narrative:

[79] In the end we excluded all the footage from this site after a female custodian pointed out to us that we should not show photos or videos from the site to the outside world.

R: So they got – they [the white women] disrespected something. And then, this big *yarrabah*, big snake, actually said "I'm taking you [the women] down there. I'm gonna lead you into the water, I'm gonna leave you there"

B: Yo.

R: "And that's where your soul gonna be". And that's where it is.

B: I'm just trying to understand the kind of... time? Of that story? You know what I'm saying? Do you – you had the dream,

R: Yeah?

B: And then – When you had the dream, were you seeing into something that already happened a long time ago? That happened there? Or is it happening all the time, or? Because you said it, that they're here forever right? Like forever – I'm just trying to understand the time, eh, to myself...

R: Aha? [Pause] Well a question that I would like – a question to me is like – why come to me to – why that dream actually, why this dream came to me.

B: Yeah.

Clearly, Roy does not want to engage me in this objective temporal discussion. Instead, he disregards my question and turns my attention to the subjective and existential matter of "why this dream came to *me* [him]",[80] which is the proper mode of engagement with the Ancestral as opposed to an objective and abstract relation, which I and other academics routinely situate ourselves within. Roy's response is in clear parallel with Kierkegaard's tack of engaging his readers to relate to the absolute paradox in passion as existing individuals rather than as disengaged objective observers. As shown below, Roy states that the snake's regurgitation of the women is what created the water hole, and despite Roy's hitherto attempts to engage me existentially, I eagerly try to pin it in the temporal term "Dreamtime":

B: I'm just trying to figure out what does it all mean, you know?

R: Yeah I'm trying to think that too. But those three girls did something wrong, and then that snake spewed them out, just spewed them out you know?

[80] As discussed in chapter 3, using this idiom of "come to me" about dreams signifies that the dream story is special (and not arbitrary like ordinary dreams) and, significantly, that the dream is not from the mind of the dreamer, but originating from an external agent such as an Ancestral being.

B: And became this place?

R: Yeah. Unless, this was a name – this must be the dream, of the women. Women used – this must, how I see it, this is what created the women place.

B: That's the first time – that's what made it?

R: That's what made it. That's what I'm thinking that.

B: Hmmm. So like a, Dreaming story, like a Dream-time story

R: A Dreaming story, a ((big)) time.

B: This happened in the Dreamtime?

R: Yeah. This was happening in Dreamtime, what to us is *Ngadimungku*, and, that was the snake, meant to put these girls in here, to say "you stay here now, you protect this place, this is your women place". But you know, they, but they died, you know? They're like a dead body coming out it. And so, it's, you know, it's good and bad to it.

Only in retrospect would I grasp that the moment Roy is in his dream *is* the moment the waterhole is created, and that this moment itself cannot be pinned on a chronological timeline. On that day Roy helpfully offered more detail with his dream encounter with the *Big Kurriyala* (Rainbow Serpent) who addresses him directly in language: "*wanyu*?!", (what?!), and yet again (cringe!) I turn the conversation back to what in my mind remains an unresolved inconsistency in temporal chronology of when this event takes place:

B: Yeah. So when you in that dream, see what I'm – This is something I'm very interested at the moment...

R: Hmmm

B: in my life too, is time. How to, like –I'm wondering you know, do we understand time the right way? You know we go by the clock and all that

R: Hmmm

B: and sometimes that seems funny. And we talk about these kind of special things yeah, experiences, It seems like time is different.

R: Yeah!

B: It's not like clock time?

R: No!

B: And I'm trying to understand what it – what is it? that's different. Like, how do we understand this? Like how can, how can you make me see, make me understand...

R: Well it's like...

B: When you go, dreaming, where – when are you – when are you when you go dreaming?

R: I'm like I am, who I am now.

B: Yeah, you're – yeah?

R: I am a person now,

B: Yeah

R: When I'm dreaming.

B: Yo

R: Okay?

B: Yo

R: I'm just, I'm just out of my bed,

B: Yeah

R: Or my swag

B: Yeah, so you are the same person?

R: I'm the same person, right?!

B: Mhm

R: And I'm looking at the same ((thing)) – I'm looking at the real things.

B: You've moved place?

R: I've moved place

B: But you're actually here [at the waterhole]?

R: I'm actually here!

B: Yeah

R: That's right!

B: And when is this? Did you travel in time? Or is it the same time?

R: Ahh, just...[pause]

B: Hard to explain?

R: Hard to explain the time!

B: Yeah

R: There's no time in it

B: There's no time?!

R: There's no time in it. It's just closing your eyes, you're there! It's just...

B: I remember one anthropologist, he called, called Dreaming the everywhen. Not like – instead of like everywhere, he called it the everywhen.

R: Everywhen...

B: Everywhen. I don't know if that...

R: Everywhen. [Roy splashes his face with water from a pond]

B: Yeah. It's like, time is, it's all time you know, it's the beginning of the time it's the end of time it's now, it all comes together in one sort of thing, it's every, every time. And this is what I'm trying to understand, like in the dream, we just gotta take time out of it, is it? or?

R: Yeah, I think you take the time out of it. It's, it's...

B: It's before everything, it's after everything, and it's now, it's everything in a way? Or it's, just not there? It's a hard question...

R: Nah, nah, I can't...

B: Maybe impossible to answer?

R: Yeah I can't, I can't...

B: Maybe you can only experience it, maybe impossible to...

R: I can't. I mean, that height, that's how tall that snake were, you know? I can't...

B: Yeah

R: And I was, you know I – I remember making a fire, making my swag

B: Mhm

R: "Goodnight now, I'm gonna go sleep" you know? When I close my eyes, bang, I'm gone, I'm standing up here [pointing at the bank of the waterhole].

B: Mhm

R: *Kambi karri* [naked], nothing. You know?

By this stage Roy has become mildly impatient, splashing his face with water, while dealing with my persistence in temporal questioning and abstract thinking, instead of coming on board with him, instead of taking up his awe (pointing to the bush outlining the enormous size of the *Kurriyala* I think is an attempt at this, as well as pointing out he is naked, which I take to signify the story is Ancestral, before people started clothing themselves), and so failing to become absorbed, transported, and touched by the story as he was and still is. Instead, I remain hopelessly stuck in the abstract objectivity of understanding the chronology of events accurately. Whereas Roy in retelling, and to a degree reliving, his dream, is where I ought to be at this point: in subjective immersion, *in* the story, in awe, with "*mungka* standing" (goose bumps) to echo Roy; in awed passion and "inwardness" to echo Kierkegaard. I fail because my mind is occupied struggling with placing "the moment" on a causal timeline, instead of being transported by the moment, which itself is beyond chronological time: There is, as Roy puts it, "no time in it".

So why do I insist on talking about time when Roy discards it as irrelevant to the story, and scholars such as Tony Swain (1993) regards it as only marginally important compared to the predominance of spatiality in Aboriginal orientations?

I do so, first of all, because I find it hard to begin talking about what Roy refers to as "no-time" and Kierkegaard as the "eternal" if we do not establish what we mean by time or temporality first. Secondly, and more importantly, I firmly think that it makes sense to discuss Aboriginal temporality precisely because of the entrenched position our own temporality has

in academic thinking, as I hope my own embarrassing exposé above can shed light on. If I am right in that most Western anthropologists, despite our cultural relativist upbringing, habitually think in terms of chronological time when Aboriginal people talk about their "new" (or newly/re-discovered) Dreamings in more or less abiding terms, it makes sense to address this issue if non-indigenous anthropologists are to proceed beyond our own implicit and unexamined sense of temporality.

I am sure that some will be struck at my naiveté, asking the questions I did, after ten years of knowing Roy and many other Aboriginal people in Far North Queensland, as well as two years working as an anthropologist in Central Australia (mainly in the Western Desert, for the Central Land Council). I believe I have an answer for that. Had I been epistemologically agnostic, it would have been easy to avoid asking stupid questions and simply record what "Roy believes" and report that to him "there is no time" in the Dreaming. Instead, I was taking Roy seriously. I was existentially invested and engaged in the dialogue. I was *not* culturally relative, nor was I "suspending disbelief" – which really is to be divested of oneself in the dialogue − I was already in faith and I was trying to find truth, truth for myself. Despite my hopeless attempts of coevalness in this dialogue, where I am at a loss and revert trying to fit his Dreamstory within a Western temporal understanding, there is an important aspect that makes my endeavour different from the type of allochronism criticised by Fabian – I shared epistemology with Roy. Although not identical, I had already incorporated Ancestrally revealed dreams into my epistemology – I had faith that Ancestors can reveal knowledge in dreams.

Being in faith has not been easy I will say. It is a commitment to be repeatedly renewed (sometimes I have strayed for long periods), and there always seem to be things I thought I knew, but didn't. I had heard this story many times, but I had not engaged existentially with the temporality in it. Perhaps after my personal transformation during my first MA fieldwork, and subsequent epistemological reorientation, I had become slack, thinking I was coeval with Roy already. But during our discussion, I became fully aware I was not.

So, again, the reason for me to include this account is to show how hard it was, and sometimes still is, to understand Roy's Dreamstory temporality (not his daily temporality – on which basis he has little problem understanding my temporality). While I could understand his revelatory epistemology by appropriating my own version of it, I had troubles understanding his Dreamstory temporality. The fact that this became so evident with this

Dreamstory, reveals that I never had comprehended the temporality in the other Dreamstories either, my own included.

Bear in mind that I already was in faith of Ancestral revelation in Roy's dreams. In that interview I am sincerely trying to understand him, to be coeval with him. The trigger, the paradox that I could not move beyond, was what appeared to me as backwards movements in time. The obvious part of this is the white tourists being there in a creation story, but that was not really what I had trouble moving beyond. This I could understand as a new shade (literally and metaphorically) of an Ancestral story revealed for present/future Ancestral purposes, preserving an overall movement of time flowing forward.

What threw me about Roy's narrative, was Roy being at the site, interacting with the Rainbow Serpent, at the time of creation (hence my question "did you travel in time?"). And, that he was not merely a spectator to the creation's scene, this too I could have fathomed. But the Rainbow Serpent noticed Roy, looked him in the eye and challenged him. Roy was not a spectator, he was "actually there" on par with the snake and the women. My mind objected to this image where the flow of time was reversed, and threw me out of, not faith really, but being coeval with the time Roy was presenting me.

When Roy talks about the Dreaming and his own dreams in a sense of "no-time", it certainly appears that he is not merely a dreaming observer to a Dreaming story of the past. Roy stresses his co-presence and contemporaneity with the Rainbow Serpent, answering my question of *when he is* in his dream of this creation event with "I'm like I am, who I am now" (while talking with me). He continues by reiterating he is "the same person", "looking at the real things". While dreaming, he is actually there, interacting with the main protagonist, the *Big Kurriyala*, the creator, who towards the end of his dream becomes aware of Roy's presence. He is challenged by the snake who asks Roy "wanyu!?" (what!?), upon which he wakes up with a shock in his swag. Roy's stated contemporaneity with an entity, viewed from a chronological point of view, of a past event, creation itself, as well as the presence of white women in this creation story posed a temporal question to which I, at the time, could not find a satisfactory answer. Roy directs my attention to the story, the *Big Kurriyala* and the place itself, but I persist, with questions, such as, did he travel through time in his dream, finally asking "when is this? Did you travel in time? Or is it the same time?". To which he, somewhat frustrated with my persistence and failure to come on board replies "hard to explain the time, there's no time, there's no time in it. You just close your eyes and you're there".

5.4 "There is No Time in it"

While at the Laura Aboriginal Dance Festival in 2014, one of Roy's "cousin-brothers", Roy and I were around the latter two's campfire sharing significant dreams we have had as well as waking encounters with *dubu* (spirits or ghosts). It had been ten years since I had seen Roy's cousin, and nearly as long since Roy had seen him, and all of us had gone through major life changes since our last union. I was telling Roy's cousin how I found it difficult to explain the aspect of *time* in the Dreaming to academics, and how I was going to give a presentation on the topic. I asked him how he would explain it to outsiders. He said, "first of all, you must forget all you know now". He then proceeded to tell a story where he and an elder had the same dream – i.e., they were both in each other's dream – which was later mutually confirmed by a later waking discussion between the two (see also Poirier, 2003; Glaskin, 2005).[81] He told his story with compelling passion and made Roy and I get goose bumps, but our talk had slipped from the abstract and objective vantage point of discussing time, to sharing personally significant and subjective experiences. Roy brought the object of time back into our talk about Dreaming experiences by saying that "you can't add time into it, there is no time in it"; reiterating his point raised during our *Kurriyala* talk above. But this time, interestingly, he said you cannot *add* time into it, thus stressing that time is a human construct and projection that does not properly belong in the Dreaming.

What I think Roy means by time in this context is what I would understand as linear and chronological time. In his *Kurriyala* dream, the temporal contradiction is that he was at the waterhole in the time of its creation and at "the same time" sleeping next to what was created "long ago", in the Dreamtime, *Ngadimungku*. The fact that Roy points out that you cannot add time into the Kurriyala Dreamstory shows that he is acutely aware and conscious of both chronological time and a non-temporality or "moment" that transcends time in Dreamstories.

5.5 The Paradox of Time and the Temporalisation of the Eternal

What I propose is that the temporal paradoxes that arise when trying to understand Ancestral encounters from an objective and abstract vantage point have a parallel to what Kierkegaard called the absolute paradox.

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[81] Poirier (2003) reports that among among *Kukatja* people of the Western Desert, it was "not uncommon for two individuals to say that they shared the same dream" (p. 113). Glaskin (2005) likewise writes that *Bardi* people of the Northwest Kimberley area refer to occasional dreams in which "the revelation of new *ilma* [a public genre of ceremonial songs, dances, and designs] by the deceased is said to occur to two or more people at the same time" (p. 305).

The absolute paradox refers to the biblical event of the Incarnation or the God-man itself: The paradox that an *eternal* God at a certain point *in time* was born, lived and died – that is, he embodied a temporal existence contradicting his otherwise eternal essence. As Robert Wyllie puts it, "Christ represents the temporalization of the eternal" (2014).

One could argue that many Dreaming stories from Aboriginal Australia invert this; that the Ancestors rather represent an "eternalisation" of the temporal by transforming from a temporal existence of sorts, living among men and women in the creative era as men and women, before changing into more or less abiding features of landscape, as well as into the animals that now inhabit the earth (they are thus also the Ancestors of the animals as well as people).

In this creative era, though, the Ancestors certainly did spectacular things ordinary men and women cannot do. Although the Ancestors, when operating within the creative era, can be considered as existing as part of creation, they were their own creators. Like Christ, the Ancestors embody an ambiguous junction of the temporal and eternal, as well as between finite existence and the infinite or eternal.

An important aspect here is that the Ancestors were not immortal *within* this self-created plane of existence. As documented locally by Ursula McConnel in *A Moon Legend from Bloomfield River, North Queensland* (1931), archetypal Ancestors could be killed off by other Ancestors or other men, usually leaving some kind of mark or essence behind as they exited their Ancestral humanoid form (imprinting); turned into animals or landscape features (transformation); or otherwise pulled objects out of their own bodies (externalisation) before transforming themselves (cf. Munn, 1970). The main Ancestor in McConnel's account, *Kija* (the Moon) was killed several times and repeatedly resurrected, which of course has a parallel in the resurrection of Christ (a parallel that was not lost on the Oldfella living up at *Buru* (China Camp) from whom I initially learnt the *Kija* story in 2002).

Although *Kija's* story, strictly speaking, cannot count as a definite parallel to Christ's incarnation, one could argue that Ancestors such as *Kija*, like Christ, embodied a temporal existence contradicting their otherwise eternal nature; they both represent contradictory ontologies as simultaneously being creators and created. In Kierkegaardian terminology this is an absolute ontological division that God as Christ nonetheless crossed: "God does not think, he creates; God does not exist, he is eternal. Human beings think and exist, and existence separates thought and being" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 278). Archetypal Ancestors, such as Roy's *Big Kurriyala* who created creeks and waterholes, embody a similar temporal contradiction by being at the same time the creator and the created (or "existing" to stick with

Kierkegaard's terminology). As such, both Jesus of Nazareth and Arch-Ancestors embody the eternal who despite themselves have come into temporal existence at definite moments in time (cf. Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 485).

Before Kierkegaard had fully formulated the notion of the "Absolute paradox", he talked about "the pivotal concept in Christianity". This concept, "that which made all things new, is the fullness of time, but the fullness of time is the moment as the eternal, and yet this eternal is also the future and past" (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 90). This reminds me of how Roy talks about receiving and sharing his Ancestral dreams, making them "come alive again". This Kierkegaard quote is also strangely echoed in Nancy Munn (1992) when she writes "Another kind of temporalization is then formed in which present activities become 'charged' with the ancestral past, and the ancestral past with the present" (p. 114). The "temporalization" Munn refers to is the temporal awareness a desert Aboriginal Australian may inhabit while encountering "a landscape invested with remembered ancestral events" (p. 114). This landscape is of course itself temporalisations of the eternal Dreaming.

While Kierkegaard is brought into an awareness in which the temporal and the eternal converge (the moment – "øieblikket") by contemplating the Biblical event of God's incarnation as Jesus, it seems such a "moment" is spatially triggered for the desert Australian according to Munn. I would like to add that in my experience with Yalanji people, that it need not only be a triggered memory of passed-down lore triggered by a physical feature in the landscape. A similar co-charging of the Ancestral past (and the eternal) and the present is evident in Roy's dream, even in his retelling of his dream, as his goose-bumps attest to – a moment I understand Roy to experience as a "fullness of time", where the eternal Dreaming is also the future and past, which Roy's *Kubirri* at the gate Dreamstory is another good example of.

5.6 Contemporaneity

Coeval denotes, according to Fabian (2014), "a common, active 'occupation', or sharing, of time", as well as meaning "of same age, duration or epoch" (p. 31). Coeval thus encapsulate the meanings of both the two closely related concepts *synchronous/simultaneous* (events occurring at the same physical time) and *contemporaneous* (asserting co-occurrence in what Fabian calls typological time, e.g. "stone-age") (p. 31).

I have found it useful to employ Fabian's concepts "coevalness" and "allochronism" in this chapter. My use of "contemporary" takes a distinctly different meaning than that of

Fabian's though, but then again, he was not discussing coevalness with Rainbow Serpents at the time of creation.

The title, *Becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestors*, refers in the first instance to how Roy becomes "meaningfully co-present with temporally distant events" (Stokes, 2010, p. 297) in Ancestral dreams and in his waking realisation of them. According to Roy, while dreaming, he was, as discussed above, there at the creation event "as I am now".

In the second instance, the title refers to my attempt to do the same, that is, to become coeval with Roy in his atemporal orientation to Ancestral dreams and the Dreaming. As evidenced in my discussion with Roy above, this has been one of the most challenging aspects of my ethnographic endeavours. For a long time, I have not been able to transcend my own Western temporal orientation, and it took a Western, and fellow Scandinavian, thinker to help me along. Which brings me to what the title of this thesis is a reference to, namely Kierkegaard's (1991) notion of faith – as becoming contemporaneous with Christ. I dare say, being raised secularly in Norway, Kierkegaard's atemporal orientation to faith provided me with another alterity, but one that takes its departure from a "modern" Scandinavian, temporal framework in which I share. One that started with the premise that contemporaneity with temporally ancient events is a paradox. At the end of it, I have come to see, in my own way, how Roy could truthfully claim contemporaneity and co-presence with the Rainbow Serpent at the site and time of creation.

I want to start by putting forward the *initial* observation that Roy, like Kierkegaard "seems to endorse an impossible model of direct, historically unconditioned engagement with the past" (Stokes, 2010, p. 297), with in Kierkegaard's case, achieving contemporaneity with the putatively historical event of the Incarnation of Christ.

Just how can we fathom such a notion of contemporaneity, or "samtidighed", which in Danish literally means "sharing the same time"? And how can Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity help me in coming to grips with Roy's statement of co-presence with an Ancestral being at the beginning of time?

First of all, Kierkegaard distinguished historical contemporaneity (those living at the same time as Christ) from genuine contemporaneity (those having an experience of being in the presence of Christ, the God-man). He pointed out that a person who lived at the same time as Christ, and had the occasion to see him in the flesh, by no means guaranteed genuine contemporaneity with Christ. Indeed, there was nothing visible in Christ's earthly nature to suggest he was anything but a temporal and ordinary man. Kierkegaard therefore stressed that

those living at the time of Christ had no advantage over present-day Christians in establishing genuine contemporaneity with Christ.

For my purposes, this understanding not only offers an opening for Roy becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestors, but for me as well, experiencing his story second hand. In my own Ancestral encounters described in the previous chapter, I overcame the paradoxes the encounters offered me and made a leap to faith. But these experiences, at least my *dubu* encounter, were immediate, first-hand encounters. But should this really matter? According to Kierkegaard, it should not.

When discussing "immediate contemporaneousness" in *Philosophical Crumbs,* Kierkegaard (2009b) writes that,

> it may become the occasion for the contemporary, as one who is in error, to receive the condition for understanding the truth from the god and thus to see his magnificence with the eyes of faith. Yes, blessed is such a contemporary! But such a contemporary is not an eyewitness (in an immediate sense), but as a believer is contemporary in the autopsy of faith. But in this autopsy, all non-contemporaries (in the immediate sense) are again, contemporary. (p. 138)

And indeed, it was not until I made a leap and believed that the being in my shed was an Ancestral being, and not a man or animal, that it can be said that I had "the autopsy of faith", which (as I noted in chapter 2) means to *see for oneself*, "with the eyes of faith". The issue of becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestral is thus an issue of faith, to see with the eyes of faith, and thence become present to its presence here and now.

As Roy told me (18 December, 2015), "the *dubu dubu*, the spirits, they are there, that you and I can't see, the *wawu* all there". But when you walk "on Country" and speak with them in language and ask them in earnest, Roy says, the Ancestors can come to you in dream. An Ancestral encounter awake or in dream changes you, and their presence no longer confines itself to a mythical past but becomes something to marvel at in their continued presence *for you*. This view is in line with Kierkegaard's (1991) proposed ahistorical engagement with Christ:

> It is indeed eighteen hundred years since Jesus Christ walked here on earth, but this is certainly not an event just like other events, which once they are over pass into history and then, as the distant past, pass into oblivion. No, his presence here on earth never becomes a thing of the past. … But as long as there is a believer, this person … must be just as contemporary with Christ's presence as his

> contemporaries were. This contemporaneity is the condition of faith, and, more sharply defined, it is faith.

According to Kierkegaard scholar Joshua Cockayne (2017), those who lived in the time of Christ "had Christ's historical contemporaneity as an occasion for genuine contemporaneity" (p. 45) while the present day Christian "has the occasion in the report of the contemporary generation" (Kierkegaard, PF 104; cited in Cockayne, 2017, p. 45). Therefore, as Cockayne (2017) has it, "historical reports make possible genuine contemporaneity for present-day believers, yet not because the individual believes what is written, but rather, because these reports provide an occasion for experiencing Christ in a personally transformative manner" (p. 45). By the same token, Roy's dream account about the Ancestral *Kurriyala* has offered an occasion for me to experience ancient beings by relating myself, in inwardness and passion, to an Ancestor who transcends time. And this is key – it requires that the engagement is passionately personal and transformative to the point that "there is no time in it" as Roy says. As we saw above, my engagement with his *Kurriyala* story remained intellectual and historical, which is why I failed to become coeval with Roy in his story. What I have come to realise is that my own encounters with Ancestral beings were no less paradoxical in temporal terms, but the overwhelming presence they asserted over my life completely blew any temporal matters out of sight for me, which is how I imagine it was for Roy encountering the *Big Kurriyala* as well.

A common utterance Roy makes while talking about Ancestrally given dreams is "why did the dream come to *me*?". The meaning of the dream is always a meaning intended for him – of relevance to *his* life (as my medicine dream was intended for me). Roy's self-referential orientation is what I missed when I viewed Roy's *Kurriyala* dream objectively, despite his numerous attempts to turn my attention to it. As Kierkegaard scholar Paul Stokes (2010) has pointed out, what seems an historically unconditioned engagement with the past is instead "a highly specific, self-referential mode of cognition which allows the contemplator to become meaningfully co-present with temporally distant events" (p. 297).[82] One may want to object against positing a dreaming experience as "contemplation". To this objection I would argue that the dream experience carries over into waking awareness and contemplation which

[82] Stokes, however, is critical of interpretations of Kierkegaard's "contemporaneity" as a mystical or extramundane religious experience, however. Instead he argues that contemporaneity with Christ is a mode of cognition where the contemporary is imaginatively engaged with God on the visual level, "a mimetic recreation of the experience of being in the physical presence of the god" (Stokes, 2010, p. 303). This, according to Joshua Cockayne, overlooks the believer's "experience of Christ as a living person" and ignores Kierkegaard's discussion of contemporaneity and the presence of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist in his book *Practice in Christianity* (Cockayne, 2017, p. 50). I tend to side with Cockayne on this point.

is when the true salience and real personal impact of such dreams are realised. As such, Roy's contemporaneity with Ancestral beings incorporates the actual dream and its moment of waking realisation. For a religious person, past events, be it an Ancestor creating a specific waterhole or God being born in Bethlehem, can according to Kierkegaard (1991) become part of a shared actuality, but the past cannot become "actual" unless a key qualification is met:

> The qualification that is lacking – which is the qualification of truth (as inwardness) and of all religiousness is – **for you**. The past is not actuality – for me. Only the contemporary is actuality for me. That with which you are living simultaneously is actuality – for you. Thus every human being is able to become contemporary only with the time in which he is living – and then with one more, with Christ's life upon earth, for Christ's life upon earth, the sacred history, stands alone by itself, outside history. (p. 64, emphasis in original).

Or as Roy said about his *Kurriyala* Dreamstory, "there is no time in it", and instead turns his attention to why the dream came to him what it all means for him. History can tell us about the past, but Christ's life on earth is not, in the sense of the contemporaneity described by Kierkegaard above, a past. In relation to the absolute paradox (the God-man) there is only one time – the present – as well as only one situation;

> the situation of contemporaneity; the three, the seven, the fifteen, the seventeen, the eighteen hundred years make no difference at all; they do not change him, but neither do they reveal who he was, for who he is is revealed only to faith. (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 63)

The relation between an individual and Christ, and between Roy and an Ancestor, is therefore not a question of historicity – whether the individual has accurate historical beliefs about Christ or the Ancestors informed by firsthand experience or subsequent testimony – but instead a relation of contemporaneity, in which the individual relates himself personally to Christ or an Ancestor (Cockayne, 2017, pp. 43-44). Historical Christianity is therefore "nonsense" because any believer or "true Christian" in any century since, is contemporary with Christ, whose "life on earth accompanies the human race and accompanies each particular generation as the eternal history; his life on earth has the eternal contemporaneity" (Kierkegaard, 1991, p. 64). Similarly, trying to understand Roy's Dreamstories historically (as I attempted to do initially with Roy's *Big Kurriyala* Dreamstory), as I eventually realised, is nonsense.

In view of this, I have come to see how Roy's statement that "there is no time" in the Dreaming is truthful and meaningful; how Ancestral agency and events can be "outside history"; how Roy can become co-present with an Arch-Ancestor at the moment of a waterhole's creation; and by extension, how the Ancestors can come alive to me by the truth they afford *my* life, as they did in my revelatory medicine dream – by becoming meaningful contemporaries in the moment, experienced as beyond time, or alternatively, as the fullness of time.

5.7 Conclusion

My endeavour to become coeval with Roy when telling his Dreamstory is different to the way I came to appropriate my own revelatory dreams as part of my epistemological reorientation described in the previous chapter *The Paradox of Truth*. The latter was prompted by my medicine dream and *dubu* encounter, followed by a "leap of faith" and personal transformation. My path towards coevalness with Roy in this chapter is less existentially immediate, as I had to relate to Roy's Dreamstory of him interacting with the *Big Kurriyala*, instead of having an immediately direct relation to the Ancestral myself. Where my epistemological reorientation in the Paradox chapter was passionate and visceral, my temporal reorientation in this one could by comparison be seen as relational and cerebral. One could even argue that my Kierkegaardian arguments, such as "subjectivity is truth", in the Paradox chapter negates my approach in this one. But as Kierkegaard pointed out, the immediacy of first-hand or historical contemporaneity is not a necessity for faith and genuine contemporaneity to occur.

In this chapter it is evident how my reasoning mind blocked me from becoming absorbed in Roy's account of his Dreamstory. At the time I could not get past the paradox his story presented me with – the temporality of it. Despite Roy's efforts to direct me into a passionate engagement with his account and stressing that "there is no time in it", I fail to shed my temporal frame of referencing so entrenched in my entire orientation to life. I could not share in Roy's moment of transcending time; this qualitative different and decisive moment "filled with eternity" (Kierkegaard, 2009b, p. 95) that transcends the succession of other passing moments. I have come to appreciate this as what Kierkegaard called "the moment that abides" and "the atom of eternity" which "transcends the temporal succession not by abandoning it but by gathering it up in such a way that one is returned to it with a deeper sense of its significance" (Colton, 2013, pp. 171-172). This is what Roy in the moment of realisation does, and in a renewed and Ancestrally charged present, he is recognising his

"place in a larger narrative, though not one of [his] own devising" (Colton, 2013, p. 178). Contemplating Roy's account from this angle I have come to realise that Roy's avowed contemporaneity with *Big Kurriyala* is no different than that of my own Ancestral encounters – as moments that transcend time by something Ancestral and eternal becoming present and actual for me.

As far as I am concerned, the faith that I discuss in my Paradox of truth chapter is fuelled by certitude, whereas what I am discussing in this chapter is sustained by conviction, based on my own faith and also that Roy tells a truthful story. Because of my experience of *dubu* and my medicine dream, I later could find meaning in these through Kierkegaard's notion of contemporaneity. Thus, despite their differences, my position of faith is what both chapters have in common. Because of my commitment to existential truth as my primary motivation for learning from Roy, I was able to keep my faith in Roy's Dreamstory despite being thrown out of subjectivity and inwardness when confronted with what struck me as a temporal paradox in Roy's *Big Kurriyala* dream. In the next chapter we shall return to Roy's faith and his future orientations, as well as how Roy manages to stay in faith, or rekindle it when all seems lost.

During a discussion with my supervisors, Jennifer Deger aptly remarked that dreams serve as an ongoing source for an enlivened present and added that dreams can be a good space to experience irresolvable paradox without being troubled by it. Perhaps it is an outsider, an academic like me, who becomes troubled by dream-truths being claimed as foundational to understanding key epistemological orientations to knowledge, authority and Ancestral revelation. However, instead of attempting to *resolve* the paradoxical inherent in such narratives, I have in the process of writing this chapter used the passion it stirred in contemplating Roy's temporal outlook by relating myself to it. More pointedly, in persistently imagining Roy's avowed contemporaneity with *Kurriyala* as true, I draw on my own experience of gaining faith through my medicine dream realisation described in the previous chapter. To repeat Kierkegaard: "Only momentarily can a particular individual, existing, be in unity of the infinite and the finite that transcends existing. This instant is the moment of passion" (Kierkegaard, 1992a, p. 197). This moment, I argue, is Roy's moment of realisation, of truth, goosebumps and all, of becoming contemporaneous with his Ancestors.

6 Faith and Futurity: Roy's Confident Uncertainty

We have seen how Roy was contemporaneous with *Kurriyala* at the original creation of a waterhole. What about his orientation to the future? This topic incites a return to the topic of faith. Faith is, as previously discussed, different from belief. Faith is explicitly personal, existentially invested and more future oriented.

This chapter will explore observations regarding what may seem as a tension in Roy's existential outlook, namely between on one hand what Stanner called "religious confidence" and on the other hand what Myers (1986) has referred to as a "tentative ambiguity" expressed by Pintupi persons regarding the negotiable truth value of dreams and omens captured in common phrases such as "I saw something" (Myers, 1986, p. 51) or "might be something" (Povinelli, 1993).

Throughout this chapter WEH Stanner will be referenced and quoted frequently. This is due in part to the fact that he was among a few early ethnographers to take Aboriginal religion seriously and not treat it as a mere epiphenomenon. In part it is his humanist approach that agrees with me, and in part it is because he has been a longstanding influential and eloquent voice on the topic of Aboriginal Dreaming and temporality, what he called "the everywhen" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 58). His anthropological writing spanned from the nineteen thirties up until the early seventies and should be read according to the backdrop of his times.

At times Stanner made sweeping generalisations about "Aboriginal people", sometimes setting them up as the near antithesis of Western people – a contrast that would be distinctly out of place in contemporary ethnography. For instance, he wrote of "the blackfellow" that "unlike us, he seems to see 'life' as a one-possibility thing" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 68) and that his "mood [of assent], and the outlook beneath it, make him hopelessly out of place in a world in which the Renaissance has triumphed only to be perverted, and in which the products of secular humanism, rationalism, and science challenge their own hopes, indeed, their beginnings" (p. 67). As we see here, his formulations can come across as a reaction to Western ideas, elevating Aboriginal "high culture", which he feared was being corrupted by Western influences. Roy grew up in a world where a great deal of traditional knowledge and Dreaming stories was lost, and aspects of the Western lifestyle had taken a firmer hold than in the lives Stanner depicts. But in my view, Roy's stories, his dreams, and his life, rival those of Stanner's (2009d) informant *Durmugam* in their existential impact. In my view Roy's achievements are not lesser, but all the greater, given the maelstrom of life-moods and life-worlds thrust at him through which he had to navigate throughout his life.

Authenticity, as I figure the term in this thesis, is not clinging on to petrified notions of tradition, but being in a living relation with them. Roy does this. Instead of only tracing the present back to the old, it is to make the old anew – "to make them (the Ancestors, Dreaming stories) come alive again" as he puts it himself.

Stanner furthermore wrote of Aboriginal people as ahistorical and as having no problem with the future. Some will perhaps see such claims as nonsense. Still, as much as his vision of Aboriginal people clash with my more current observations of Roy's outlook as containing multiple temporal orientations (Indigenous, Western, traditional, modern, Christian, Ancestral) without being wrenched apart, I am not ready to let go of some of Stanner's insights. In tandem with Roy reaching back to his own traditions and reviving aspects that give meaning and fullness to his life, I reach back to Stanner, to cherry-pick what I find to resonate, and that which reanimates my own ethnographic findings.

As much as I am inspired by the writings of Stanner, Roy's own life leads me to take a position against his claim that "no true juncture of the Christian and the Aboriginal mind can [...] be possible". In attempting to posit such a juncture, by bringing statements of my friend Roy in dialogue with those of Kierkegaard, I am not arguing for – or otherwise imposing – an ontological sameness on these two figures, not by far. Instead, I argue analytically for a *juncture* between otherwise different paths (and ontologies); that of Kierkegaard's rather unique existential Christian philosophy and Roy's lived life and reflections relating to his Ancestors and Christ. Two paths that share certain key elements, such as following a path set out by the Ancestors or Christ – Beings who are beyond ordinary day-to-day temporal existence, who nonetheless meaningfully enters it for the existing individual.

6.1 Missions and Reserves

Roy grew up with his mother, Eva Gibson, and his siblings in Mossman Gorge Reserve. Roy's oldest siblings, Cynthia and Johnny, were to another father and had the surname of Roberts. Eddie, Roy, Rex and Darryl took the surname Gibson from their father, whom Roy has rarely spoken of, other than mentioning that he had ties to Shipton Flats and other areas further north. Eva had family connections to *Buru* (China Camp) and lived for a time, I believe, in Daintree.

Roy does not remember when, and for how long, but at some point in his early childhood, Eva and her Gibson sons were taken away to Palm Island Aboriginal Reserve.[83]

[83] Palm Island was a large and punitive Aboriginal Reserve from 1918 until it was closed in 1975 as the assimilation era came to an end.

When I asked him why they were taken, he pointed out that they were fair in skin. The assimilation policies in Australia included systematic forced removal and placements of Indigenous children. What has become known as "the stolen generations" were brought into the public eye with the *Bringing Them Home* report (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997) which identified systematic racial discrimination through the targeting of children of mixed descent (see also Haebich, 2015). While at Palm Island, they were forced to speak English, but Eva taught her children about Kuku Yalanji language and culture at night. Eva had a strong influence on Roy, and he always talks about her with great affection. When they returned to Mossman Gorge, people whom he had no recollection of came and "hugged him up". He has especially mentioned his older brother Johnny Roberts taking on a strong mentoring role, teaching him bush skills, about rainforest plants and usage, taking him hunting, etc. when Roy came back.

Roy told me his mother was a "church lady", and that "she never missed that church. Every Sunday, she get herself dressed up and go to church and come back. And … We go hunting, trying to get something we could have for dinner for her". So, Roy did not accompany his mother to church. He and his brothers tended to prefer hunting. His youngest brother, Darryl, on the other hand, did take up a Christian path in life:

> R: When he [Darryl] became pastor, and then, he came to be a new person, a young guy that, that breaks him out from … from what he was doing I guess. He wanted to be somebody. He wanted to be a pastor.
>
> B: And you and Darryl were different at that point?
>
> R: We were totally different!
>
> B: Mhm.
>
> R: He knew I drink a lot. I was … I was more in my world, and he was in his own world. But we love each other. (recorded 18.12.2015)

Despite Roy and Darryl's differences, Roy did attend Sunday school, and as we shall see, Christianity has played an important role in his life. Let us explore the religious milieu he grew up in a bit further.

Mossman Gorge Aboriginal Reserve was gazetted on 64 acres of land in 1916 (Guy, 1999). From ca. 1930 the mission was managed by Pentecostal missionary Isabella Hetherington and her companion Ethel Vale. Hetherington became recognised as an

Assembly of God missionary in 1933, and a small school and church were built. She managed the mission until her death in 1946, after which Ethel Vale took over (Chant, 2005).

The Daintree Mission was gazetted as Aboriginal Reserve on 120 acres on the Daintree River in 1926. In 1935 a Seventh Day Adventist Mission was set up by Bailey's Creek with the purchase of the Almason Estate, only to be taken over by Pastor William Arehurst of the Assemblies of God Church in 1940. The Assemblies of God Mission in Daintree closed in 1962 and the Daintree Mission families were transferred to the Mossman Gorge Mission (Guy, 1999).

In 1973, the last Assembly of God missionary left the Mossman Gorge Mission, and the mission was handed over to the Australian Inland Mission. The Church of Christ missionaries were replaced by the Brethren in the late 1970s, who themselves left at the end of 1995, leaving only itinerant missionaries (Guy, 1999, p. 175). In the early 1990s, however, Bruce Kapferer (1995, p. 71) noted that the Lutheran, Seventh Day Adventist and Jehovah's Witness churches were strong in Mossman.

Further north, a government settlement for Kuku Yalanji people was gazetted on the Bloomfield River as early as in 1885 (J. C. Anderson, 1984, p. 26) and in 1887 Lutheran missionaries from Germany arrived to evangelise the people. The mission near Wujalwujal Falls (an important story place) was abandoned and closed permanently in 1902, on recommendation of the Aboriginal Protector Dr. W. E. Roth (Chris Anderson, 2010, p. 42). Two more Lutheran missionary efforts were made in Bloomfield; in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the 1970s and 1980s, with different emphases and outcomes. Despite these efforts, Anderson (2010) concluded they resulted in "virtually no success in turning Kuku-Yalanji people into ardent, church-going Christians: not one evangelist or local pastor was produced; there was no discernible long-term spiritual or similar impact" (pp. 34-35).

While I have not gone into detailed historical and archival research on the mission impact among Mossman and Daintree Yalanji people like Anderson has done with Yalanji people to the north, some surface observations and comparisons can be made. One is denominational: Bloomfield missionaries were Lutheran Protestant, while the Mossman Gorge and Daintree missions were largely Assemblies of God (a Pentecostal denomination of the Protestant church) with an input of Seventh Day Adventist (an entrepreneurial Evangelical Protestant denomination). Both missions share the commonality of being within the broad spectrum of Protestantism, in which a more directly personal relationship with God via belief in Jesus of the Gospel is a cornerstone in conversion and salvation. However, evangelisation of non-Christian people involves mediators – missionaries – and, as we shall see, another

difference between the Mossman/Daintree and Bloomfield Missions may be seen in this relationship.

According to Chris Anderson (2010, p. 33), the first missionaries at Bloomfield left after fifteen years, in 1902, without having converted a single soul. Anderson has argued that the missionaries failed to live up to the expectation and role local Yalanji ascribed to "majamaja", i.e., key elders who had attained the status of religious knowledge and power operating over a particular area or "Country". In certain respects, missionaries seemingly met the role as bosses (*majamaja*) who could provide for the people, such as intermediaries in conflicts between Yalanji people, as distributors of food (especially meat, flour, tea, sugar, potatoes and tobacco) and material goods (such as farm tools, pipes, knives and blankets), and as caretakers of the elderly, ill and young. Anderson (2010) concludes however, that from the point of view of the Yalanji, they were unable to establish what they deemed as proper "boss" relationships with the missionaries (p. 45). Firstly, the missionaries actively opposed salient features of Kuku Yalanji culture, in preaching against multiple marriage, "walkabouts", childcare practices, "witchcraft" and their reliance on bush foods. Secondly, the missionaries maintained personal separation from the Yalanji people. Anderson notes that the missionaries' attitudes toward Yalanji culture, such as assumptions of superiority and refusal to use local language, contributed to the mission's failure. Anderson's historical research and field-based concept analysis suggest that for the Yalanji, the missionaries may have been considered *majamaja* (bosses) but not *jawun* (countrymen, friends).

Note that Isabella Hetherington established her mission in Mossman Gorge around 30 years after the Lutheran missionaries left the Bloomfield mission. She also seemed to have less financial and material means than her northern counterparts, although Eileen McNamara remembers that she did bring medicines and things for their babies and children (Field et al., 1987). It nevertheless appears as if Hetherington filled many of the *majamaja* roles listed by Chris Anderson above, including the role as an intermediary in conflicts: "On occasion, she intervened to prevent spear fights between the men" (Chant, 2005). This is also reported by Eileen McNamara, who said that "she would run right out to the middle of the fight area and stop them. No one game to throw spear when she out there" (Field et al., 1987). It also seems certain that there was less personal separation between her and Yalanji people than there had been between the Lutheran missionaries and Yalanji people in Bloomfield to the north. According to Barry Chant (2005), Hetherington and Vale

> lived in a humpy and undertook the heavy manual work of clearing dense scrub, planting gardens and establishing a school. Hetherington was often without funds, but carried out ministerial duties including conducting funerals, tending the sick and washing the feet of her Aboriginal charges.

This may suggest there was not only less personal separation between early missionaries and *bama* in Mossman, but also less assumptions of superiority than to the north. I also think that her material levelling with the Gorge people, living in a "humpy" (small grass shelter used traditionally), would have decreased the degree of personal separation. Chant (2005) also notes that "from 1933 she seems to have received a pension."

Chant (2005) further notes that "When the government policy of removing children with a non-Aboriginal father from their families accelerated in the 1930s, Hetherington opposed the practice, although not publicly." It seems to me that Hetherington would have been a good candidate for the Yalanji categorisation "jawun" (friend), and that her personal qualities may have made Yalanji more positively inclined to receive her missionary messages than that of the early missionaries in Bloomfield.

Now that some historical context to mission efforts as well as the nature of the missionaries' personality and sociability has been stressed, I would like to turn to Roy's own relationship with the church and God.

6.2 Roy's Relationship with Christ

When we first met, Roy did not strike me as a Christian. Nor for that matter, did he strike me as someone especially aspiring to unravel the mysteries of *Ngadimungku*, or what is more commonly dubbed "the Dreamtime" by himself and others. What I did pick up early on were his political ambitions – for himself as well as his fellow community residents. But as most anthropologists soon realise, things are usually more complex than what they first seem, and over the years I have come to realise that these three aspects all play significant parts in Roy's outlook as one integrated whole; a meaningful interplay between his given *and* chosen life. Viewing Roy's religiosity as merely politically motivated, or inversely, his political aspirations as solely Christian or Ancestrally motivated, strips away the existential weight Roy affords his encounters with the Ancestors and relationship with Christ, as well as the integrity of his worldly achievements. Mutual care, between Roy, his Ancestor and Christ, or "looking after" as Roy puts it himself, better describes these relationships.

For as long as I have known Roy, I have never seen him involved with or attending the church, excepting funerals. He sometimes refers to those going to church as "churchies"

whom he would, without derision or prejudice, distinguish himself from. Nor did he talk much about Christ during my first few years with him. This changed sometime after I started my PhD in 2011. It was on the 7th April 2013 that it became clear to me that Christ was, in fact, a significant figure in Roy's life. The occasion was when Roy, his brother and another *bama* mate of ours came to visit me for the weekend and to look at the first cut on one of the videos we had filmed (my friend and visual anthropologist Daniela Vávrová was also there). On this night, and certainly this was the first time I had witnessed anything of this sort, Roy publicly declared his belief in Christ to us.

At first I interpreted this event as constituting a radical shift in faith, referring to it as Roy's Christian "conversion" to my supervisors. But, on later reflection I realise that the term "conversion" is not apt, if we take conversion to mean leaving behind non-Christian beliefs when embracing the new.

Some time prior to this, Roy had had a heart attack, he nearly died. He was sent to Cairns Base Hospital where I visited him regularly. It was a shock to me to see this strong man reduced to someone barely being able to walk, needing help with everything. He later told me he had prayed to the Lord while in hospital, and that he had felt his presence. Having been granted a second chance of life, he was committed to regaining his strength: he changed his diet, quit alcohol and did exercises every day, and within a few months was back to his former robust self. My initial interpretation of events was that when faced with his own death Roy had turned to God in an act of desperation; and when he did not die, he had the Lord to thank for it. I no longer see this event in such simple explanatory terms, however. Clearly, Roy's hospitalisation and recovery was truly transformative for him and a key event that brought him closer to Christ. But what I later came to understand is that Christ was not an absent figure in his life prior to his hospitalisation, Christ had been there all along, I just had not seen it. I am afraid my desire and fascination for all things traditional, partly blinded me to his prior, if rather muted (in the context of our relationship), relation to Christ.

During an audio-recorded talk around the campfire at the camp in Cape Tribulation as late as 26th February 2016, I asked him if his brother Darryl's Christianity and involvement with the Church ever had come between them. He did not answer my question. Instead, he told me a story about butterflies.

> B: But, I mean, when I first met you, you didn't talk about the Lord much at all.
>
> R: Mhm

B: And, and whereas now in the later years, you talked more about (()) – I mean it has changed a little bit for you hasn't it? I mean, you have never been a church person, have you?

R: I never been a church person.

B: No. Like, someone like Darryl, your brother right,

R: Mhm

B: He was a church person, did that ever come between you? In a way? I mean, I know it didn't come between you in a real – I mean you were still brothers and you loved each other, but you know, you know what I'm getting at?

R: I think – You know that story I told you about the butterfly?

B: Mhm, I nearly forgot about that, yeah, but down the river right?

R: Down the river!

B: Can you remind me of that story?

R: Okay! Because – Mum went to church a lot. Okay?

B: Mhm

R: Mum went to church a lot. I was sick as a dog, I must have lost a lot of – I was thin as anything. Thin.

B: You were a youngfella at this point?

R: Yeah I was young, must have been about nine, nine or ten years old, ten, eleven.

…

R: And, I think she was cooking some damper or something, for me. Then I said to mum, "Mum, I want to go the river, I'm sick". She said, "No, you can't go nowhere, you lay down". "Ahm, Mum, I wanna get better". And so, mum went somewhere, did something, I think. I'm sick, I'm walking down that, I picture myself walking down that hill, down to the river where we swim all the time. Then I'm sitting on the rock. Then I said something, I think "Lord help me!" – said something. Then I just lay back. When I lay down, nah, before I lay back, I sat down, and I can see this one butterfly coming first.

B: Which kind of butterfly was it?

R: Pure white. Yellowish bright.

B: Mhm.

R: One coming. I was sitting down there. I drink the water. Suddenly – I look up the skies, then I suddenly, this one butterfly coming up that, just come out of the blue. One! Then suddenly, all amongst me. All around me in my bodies.

B: Many of them?

R: Mhm. Gees, hundred of them. I can't, I never count them, I just, they just tickling me. Just like that [Roy demonstrating with his fingers, Bård laughs].

…

R: All over my *walu* [face], on my *jiba* [stomach, lit. guts], and I'm laying down, I was like, I was, I couldn't move, because, I was, I didn't know what to do. I was just looking at them, all over my *walu*, you know?

B: Mhm

R: Then I, next minute I look around I reckon – let's say give me five minutes, not even five, three or four minutes. And then they all just go like that – you know where they flew down to? Down the river.

…

R: And then, I drink that water, I went swimming then. I never believe I came out of there strong. Cross my heart.

B: Yeah.

R: I walk up there happy, and mum looked at me like she seen a – "You all right my boy?" I said, "Yeah. I'm, I can go school tomorrow". She just, she grabbed me, hugged me then. "Ah, *nyulu* [he, she, it] must've been come, aye?" Say, prayed to the Lord, she prayed for me see?

B: Yeah.

R: And so, I don't know, you know?

B: Yeah, yeah.

> R: And that was – And I said, "Mum, I been see all the butterfly (()) come round me". And she just stopped. "*ngaya nyuluguda, majagudabe*" [I think this means something like "that was him, the Lord"], and kissed me crying. Yeah. Unreal! aye? [laughing]
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: I never forget that! Tsk tsk. Gees wiz. A hundred butterflies around my body!

With his butterfly-story, Roy subtly and kindly let me understand that I had constructed this division between his brother and himself, and more pointedly, between his Ancestors and Christ, a division that reflected my thinking, not his. What Roy is reminding me with this story is that Christ had been in his life since he was a kid. Although he says he does not know if it was his mother's prayer that had been heard[84] (this is typical of his and other Yalanji people's suggestive rather than absolute assertiveness when it comes to matters of the untestable, such as the Lord's intervention or Ancestral agency), the fact that he tells me this story reveals that he had a relationship to Christ already as a youngster. Despite his hedging, it is plain to me that he believed it was the Lord who healed him.

His story also reveals the very Ancestor-like way the Lord operates in this event. Unusual animal behaviour like that of the butterflies is typically interpreted as a sign of Ancestral agency, but this time it is, predominantly at least, seen as an act of the Lord. This is attested to by his overt explanation "she prayed for me, see?", but also in his description of the butterflies I think; "Pure white. Yellowish bright", as Roy has at other times interpreted white, golden light in the rainforest to me as a sign of the Lord's presence among the rainforest Ancestors.

At another time Roy talked about his early engagement with Christian religion:

> B: So how did it come about? Like Jesus came into your life? We've talked about it briefly before, …
>
> R: Like I said to you before, going to Sunday School, going to Sunday school I was,
>
> B: Yeah, the seed was planted back then, or?
>
> R: Yeah. The seed was planted because, well I had to believe in him, the Lord.

[84] For an account of how Yolngu at Galiwin'ku use Christian prayer as a healing strategy (negotiated as a choice of therapy along with biomedicine and traditional practices), see Schwartz (2016).

B: Mhm

R: And I actually got ((attackeded)). True! I cross my heart.

B: You got what sorry, attacked?

R: Attackeded mean to say, what you call the word? You got in touch,

B: With Jesus?

R: Yeah.

B: When you were, already back then?

R: Yeah! youngfellas you know?

B: Yeah.

R: And then there was this, in the church, the old church there, there was a photo of the Lord, you know? And a cross too. And I – you know you pray. You know? The old people used to tell us when they got into the, into church, when you go [leave the church] you pray him in your bed. But then, when they take you out, they go for other thing. So it was more of a, more of a challenge.

B: Christianity?

R: Yeah. (recorded 18.12.2015)

Here we see Roy touch on a number of things, for instance the Christian missionisation at the Gorge and the impact of Sunday school ("I had to believe in him, the Lord"). But what Roy seems to stress is what he gained from this, namely a personal or existential relation to Christ (such as prayer in bed), rather than membership with the Church or the Christian community's services and associated activities (or what Kierkegaard would have understood as a purely social or shallow "Christendom"). I suspect what Roy means by saying that Christianity (or going to church rather) was "more of a challenge", is that his lifestyle was at odds with the Church – he and his mates "go for other things" – such as socialising whilst drinking. The social challenge posed by the Church as well as Roy's existential turn to Christ is also highlighted in conversation earlier that day:

R: I went to Sunday School, and you know when the Pastor sing out to come forward, you'll be forgiven, you know?

B: Mhm

> R: And, I always wanted to go up there and try and forgive myself for who I am, you know? I was just a young guy. And there's something sort of like – but I was hurting, so I was crying, I said, said to myself, "Nah," I look at that cross, was in that front of the church, "nah, he'd be with me. I'll be alright". Then I walk out of there and I just, I feel, not alone, you know?

In short, Roy was not a "churchie". This story shows how he walked away from the institution of the Church, not alone, but with a self-relation to Christ. It seems, however, that this relationship has ebbed and flowed over the course in his life:

> B: So did it – Has there been different phases in your life where you been, where Jesus been stronger in your life? and then he has not, he's been away and then come back, or? Is that how you see it, or?
>
> R: Yeah yeah,
>
> B: Because when I met you did, never, you never ever talked about Jesus.
>
> R: Nah nah, because on that part there – You know I was in Cairns sick as a dog?
>
> B: Yeah, and that's what, what I was getting on to, because I got a feeling that's got something to do with it too, hey? Something happened then,
>
> R: Yeah.

> This brings us up to more recent times, when Roy had a heart attack and internal bleeding in his stomach. He lost consciousness and was rushed to hospital.

> R: I was laying down there one part [at Cairns Base Hospital].
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: I couldn't move my knees and things.
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: And I said to myself, "come on Lord [pause] wherever you are. I want to get out of here. I don't know you, but you know me, please help me". I just went to sleep. And suddenly, things started coming to me. Like, I got stronger somehow, I don't know.

B: Mhm, yeah?

R: But in my own heart, I said to myself, “Okay Lord, wherever you are, I’m here. You can take me” [pause].

B: You were ready to go?

R: Yeah.

B: To die, you mean?

R: Yeah. “((come and)) take me. Or you don’t have to. Your call”. But, I sort of just had faith in that, see? I had faith in that, if I pray, *maja* [boss, here: God, the Lord] will give us a hand. So that was my old life, in that hospital in Cairns, just to pray to him to give me that strength.

B: Mhm

R: And so, I didn’t see him, you know? But my,

B: But you got better?

R: I got better! I mean, I mean it’s like [pause], there’s just something that [pause], I didn’t know what was happening to me, the doctors didn’t know what was happening to me.

B: Yeah, I remember, it was serious.

R: You know? Serious!

B: Yeah.

R: And I keep on saying, “Lord, forgive me what I has done”, I said something. So I couldn’t walk, my knee was had it. And suddenly my results started coming good. (recorded 18.12.2015)

Initially Roy seems to confirm my immediate and rather shallow interpretation of his turn to Christ – that he simply turned to the Lord because he did not want to die: “come on Lord [pause] wherever you are. I want to get out of here. I don’t know you, but you know me, please help me”. However, the picture gets more complex a few sentences further when Roy says “Okay Lord, wherever you are, I’m here. You can take me” and confirms to me that he was ready to die.

He had stopped fighting for his life and surrendered it to the will of God. At this point Roy almost seems paradoxical, one moment asking for his life and in the next readily giving it up, and continues with asking the Lord to make a choice "come and take me. Or you don't have to. Your call".

In this notable parallel to an existential leap to faith as described by Kierkegaard, Roy continues to explain that he "sort of just had faith in that, see? I had faith in that, if I pray, *maja* will give us a hand".[85] In the transcript above we see Roy surrendering his life to the hands of Christ, letting go of it, and his life took on renewed vitality after. He changed his life around – exercising every day, abstaining from alcohol – and each time I saw him he told me he felt stronger. He also came across to me as more vibrant with each visit.

Throughout his life then, Christ and the Ancestors have variously, at key moments, "looked after" him, come to his aid, given him insight, knowledge, and vision, sometimes by him praying or "calling out" for them. The relationships are characterised by a mutual care where gifts imply tasks for Roy to carry out, as discussed in chapter 3 on Ancestral agency. From an existential position, Roy's relation to God and his Ancestors differ, obviously. One significant aspect is that Ancestors can be seen in dream or awake, even communicated directly with, as in Roy's *Kurriyala* dream. As seen in Roy's account of his hospitalisation above, his relation to the Lord is indirect, "I don't know you, but you know me", as well as "I didn't see him", and enacted through prayer and being heard, "I got stronger". In this he also uses the word faith: "I had faith in that, if I pray, *maja* will give us a hand", which also is suggestive of God occupying a less immanent, more transcendent, ontological status than that of his Ancestors.

6.3 "Coming Together as One"

> R: Even though when I go to do the smoking ceremony every morning [the tour guides smoke down all the tourist before taking them on a guided walk in the rainforest], I pray to God. You know I say two words, I chuck that paperbark in, I sing out to them old *Binga Binga*, and I say to the Lord, I say, "Lord, wherever you are up here, looking upon us, take good care of our children, take care of all us". I

[85] From an existential point of view this description seems akin to how Roy and other Yalanji men have described initiation to me, as discussed earlier, by being "brave" in facing one's fears. The idea that facing one's own death brings about personal transformation and growth is a common theme in both Aboriginal initiation and existentialism. In both, there is a surrender involved. During Aboriginal initiation the boy becomes a man typically via a surrender to the ritual leaders and/or his Ancestors while existential thinkers often write of becoming an authentic human being through surrendering to either God, or for atheist existentialists, accepting the objective meaninglessness of existence, and for some, to create individual meaning in life.

> said, “I’m here today, to take on whoever comes through this walk with us. Please take care of all these people (()). And the main thing I want you to take care of is all of us. And, I love you”. You know?
>
> B: Mhm
>
> R: But I talk *Kuku Bama* [in Aboriginal language] see? I always tell to a lot of people, I say to them, “what do you believe in?” (recorded 18.12.2015)

On one of our rainforest hikes further up Mossman Gorge, Roy and I were discussing the Ancestors vis-à-vis Christ. We came to a beautiful small valley-like, less dense patch, and Roy slowed down and went silent. He stopped in the middle of the patch, held his hands out to the sides while he turned in a half-circle to face me, and said that the *Binga Binga* (Ancestors) were all around us. He brought his arms up and out over his head and said the Lord was “on top”, and that they were “coming together as one”, bringing his hands together in a soft clap overhead. He directed my attention to the “golden light”, narrow streams of sunlight, penetrating through the rainforest canopy here and there, giving the lush green understorey a golden shine, and asked if I could appreciate the special stillness and the presence in this place. He told me that he saw the golden light as a sign of God’s presence in the rainforest, amongst the *Binga Binga*.

How does one come to anthropological terms with Roy’s beautiful metaphysical account? Is it a case of syncretism, “in the sense of two cosmologies merging into a single, held verity”? (Sutton, 2010, p. 71). The immediate imagery coming from Roy’s wording “coming together as one” could certainly point to this. But I am not so sure if Roy’s religious outlook is best seen as a solid, consistent amalgam between an Ancestral and Christian order. They sometimes come together, this much is clear, but do they always stay and operate together? In Cairns Hospital, it seemed to be Christianity, and with the *Kubirri* at the Gate dream, the Ancestral domain seemed to dominate. Roy seems untroubled by potential contradictions in holding two distinct cosmologies at hand, in which “adjacency” might serve as a useful concept. While I tend to think that Peter Sutton sometimes takes an overly sociological approach to Indigenous religion, I think he is right to point out that a “dual cosmology” was “a Wik social-psychological principle, not a European-derived one” and that “a dual cosmology was possible for the Wik but not for the European missionaries” (Sutton, 2010, p. 72).

Alternatively, could Roy’s outlook be seen as a particular case of Indigenous conversion to Christianity? As Diane Austin-Broos has indicated, the common usage of the

term "conversion" tends imply "significant rupture or radical change between a present and past described in terms of ritual practice and cosmological belief" (Austin-Broos, Comments to Part 2, in Magowan & Schwarz, 2016, p. 129). In this sense, "conversion" does not seem to capture Roy's religious orientations. However, recent anthropological scholarship on conversion has redefined the term more inclusively. Fiona Magowan and Carolyn Schwarz note that in a more recent anthology on Christianity in Australia and the Pacific that:

> It is now widely recognized that conversion can entail both ruptures and continuities of faith and belief or of the material and social world (see Robbins this volume, 2007). As Diane Austin-Broos (2003, 2) lucidly explains, "To be converted is to reidentify, to learn, reorder, and reorient" but "learning anew proceeds over time and requires a process of integrating knowledge and experience." Thus, scholars no longer think along the dichotomous lines of continuities of "tradition" set against ruptures of belief or personhood that arise from the effects of "modernity." Instead, the interrelationships of these forces are viewed as a more complex "field of mutual influences" (Jebens 2005, xv) or as a dialogical process, whereby "continuity and rupture" are understood as "mutually inclusive" (Austin-Broos 2010, 15). The argument has also been made in these discussions that discontinuity, continuity, and belief cannot be taken as pre-given, analytic categories (see also Schwarz and Dussart 2010a, 10; Austin-Broos this volume). It is only as adherents live out their lives and spiritual journeys that the implications of belief and conversion can be understood. (Magowan & Schwarz, 2016, p. 12)

And indeed, it is through the way that Roy lives out his life – following sometimes parallel, sometimes crossing and sometimes converging paths that his Ancestors and Christ lead him – that we can best understand his faith. As Magowan and Schwarz indicate, pre-given labels, such as conversion or syncretism, can sometimes get in the way of appreciating the complexities and nuanced development of a person's faith. Perhaps "convergence", however, can have some merit in Roy's case above, suggesting a "coming together in spirit, a breathing together in the sense of the Latin *conspirare*, a term [Tony Swain] prefers to the 'un*animated*' terms 'syncretism or 'synthesism'" (Sutton, 2010, p. 77). To me this imagery sits well with Roy's explanation of the golden light from above mingling into the rainforest below as a metaphor for the way that the Lord and the Ancestors "come together as one".

Roy's religious orientation is less concerned with metaphysics or abstract categories, however, and more connected to a lived reality within an encompassing faith. I hope that a

communicative image of Roy's faith will emerge through his own words and my Kierkegaardian considerations concerning faith and futurity.

6.4 Faith, Futurity and Roy's "Confident Uncertainty"

> They [Aboriginal people] lived as though sure of their power, through ritual observance, to sustain their being in a world which, though grounded on mystery, had no real problem of futurity. (Stanner, 1984, p. 145)

> No one can be wholly and indivisibly in the present before he is finished with the future. (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 27)

Temporal outlook, Stanner noted, is arguably one of the aspects that most decisively define Aboriginal otherness for a European (as outlined in my discussion about Roy's *Big Kurriyala* dream in chapter 5). Stanner highlighted what he called Aboriginal peoples' "religious confidence" and explains further that,

> The nomadic life of hunting and foraging must have had its fair share, perhaps more, of vicissitudes. But their religion had a notably strong theurgic component which expressed itself everywhere in the continent, at least, in all the regions about which we have good knowledge, in the conception of a great founding drama. That drama was marked by a climax in which everything – including man, and his whole condition of life – came to be as it is. Form, style, and function became determinate. Consequently, the types of tension between past, present and future that characterize so many systems of religion were entirely absent from theirs. (Stanner, 1984, pp. 145-6)

As Stanner's above quotes illustrate, representing otherness has been, and always is, fraught with the danger of ending up in stereotyping. Temporal othering may also devolve into racist slurs. Carl Lumholtz (1889), for instance, in the earliest known ethnographic account of Aboriginal people living in the North Queensland Wet Tropics (more precisely along the Herbert River), commented on Aboriginal peoples' absence of a sense of futurity: [after a day of hunting and gathering] "All now enjoy a *dolce far niente* [sweetness of doing nothing] after the more or less fatiguing work of the day. There is nothing to tax their brains, and they have no cares. They have no concern about the morrow or for the future in general" (Lumholtz, 1889, p. 210).

Both Stanner's and Lumholtz's accounts of Aboriginal temporality are overly generalising and essentialising, reflecting different views from particular times and politics in

Australia. They both "other" Aboriginal temporality from Western temporality, but unlike Lumholtz, it shines through in Stanner's work that he had high regard for Aboriginal "high culture" and what he saw as the "transcendence of the Dreaming" (see Sutton, 2008, p. 116).[86] Stanner's "othering" must be seen to the backdrop of his government's assimilation policies, of which he was a vocal and influential critic. In his 1968 ABC's Boyer lectures he emphatically drew the Australian public attention to "the great Australian silence" regarding Aboriginal dispossession, argued fiercely against assimilation policies and instead encouraged Australians to nurture "an appreciation of difference" (Stanner, 2009c).[87]

My work with Roy has taken place decades after Stanner's work and reflects a time of ongoing colonial history and shrewd adaptations by Roy and other Yalanji people I know, while maintaining living strands of continuity with an Ancestral past. Roy's work-life, from starting out as a cane-cutter with the land-owning farmer whom he later brokered with for the land where the cultural centre now stands, and his moves to utilise traditional knowledge as a capitalising force in his work as a tour-guide and ranger, are all examples of such savvy adaptations. As seen in previous chapters, Roy has also displayed a range of temporal orientations in his engagements with Ancestors, his own people, government agencies, stakeholders, the press, and outsiders such as myself. In other words, the picture painted by Stanner about Aboriginal notions of futurity as unproblematic, is too clear cut and simple to capture Roy's complex temporal outlook. That said, I do think Stanner was on to something, aspects of which I find traces of in Roy's otherwise multidimensional temporal orientation.

I have often been struck by the ways Roy seems sustained with a certain inward confidence in his endeavours. These, however, are tempered with an outward humility towards the uncertainty of future outcomes – this is what I have come to think of as "a confident uncertainty". Somewhat similarly, Elizabeth Povinelli (1993), in examining human-land-ancestors relations in terms of hunting-gathering activities, has pointed out how *Belyuen* women "carefully tack between seemingly nerveless confidence in the results of their future economic actions [from hunting trips] and mythic encounters, and seemingly cagey *caveats* of all such statements" (p. 684, italics in original). Dreamings are "tricky", Povinelli notes, and, like food bounties, tend to pop up in unexpected places in unpredictable ways. The

[86] According to Sutton, Stanner was cautious of reducing Aboriginal religious mysteries to its sociological causes, which lacked in respect for "some veiled core which lay, and properly so, beyond the reach of anthropology" (Sutton, 2008, p. 123; see also Hinkson, 2008).

[87] The impact of Stanner's Boyer lectures can hardly be overstated. Nugget Coombs told him that in his opinion they "had more influence [on Aboriginal affairs] than any other utterance" in Australian history (Manne, 2009, p. 5).

observation that Belyuen women act confidently but speak conditionally ("might be something", "maybe", "try") is seen by Povinelli as the result of calculating the outcome of various economic, cultural and social acts with possible social sanctions for miscalculations. Such "social dimensions, framed by cultural perceptions of the sentient landscape, account for the conditionality of women's statements about the meanings and results of future-oriented action" (Povinelli, 1993, p. 685).

Most likely, Roy also calculates such economic, social and cultural implications, which contributes to his careful or guarded approach towards making knowledge claims. Fred Myers' (1986) "tentative ambiguity", expressed by Pintupi people regarding the negotiable truth value of dreams and omens captured in the common phrase "I saw something" (p. 51), is also of relevance here for an understanding of Roy's expressed uncertainty in such matters. I will not go into the social dynamics of such hedging statements or knowledge negotiations here, as these have already been discussed in chapter 3: *Kubirri* at the Gate. Social, cultural and economic considerations play an important part in hedging and conditional statements, but it is not the full picture, as I shall try to demonstrate through my observations of Roy and how these relate to thinking of Stanner and Kierkegaard. It should be added that Roy's modest patience may also be tinted by a Christian styled humility as seen in his stories regarding his encounters with the Church and Christianity above.

As noted above, Stanner claimed that "no true juncture of the Christian and the Aboriginal mind can [...] be possible. They face each other at a frontier of the mind and, as far as my experience runs, they go on without a true meeting" (Stanner, 2009a, p. 162). What Stanner is pointing to is a radical (though not absolute) contrast between fundamental structures in Christian and Aboriginal life and thought, evident in the position that sacrifice (in particular God's sacrifice of his son) has in Christian teaching, for which Aboriginal Ancestral narratives have no equivalent. This, he continues, goes a long way in explaining the disinterest many Aboriginal people have shown in "development", as Europeans understand it.

At this point it may be helpful to recall Roy's *Kubirri at the Gate* dream and the subsequent construction of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre. This event clearly marks a juncture in so far as both Roy and local, state, as well as national, authorities' interests converge – the creation of jobs for Indigenous Australians. In the early days of the process, Roy envisioned and eagerly talked about his own people, specifically youth, in uniform working at the centre (see chapter 3). After the centre's completion, he has also stated on several occasions that the centre is for the future generations of his people. Roy has also

highlighted how his wish to help his "grandchildren" motivated him to get out of Cairns Base Hospital and get well:

> R: I said, "I gotta try and make them carry on this, dream that I had [Kubirri at the Gate]". I said, "This is their future not mine". I said, "I gotta break that out of me, I'm gonna make sure it's gonna work". So that was really got me – really grandchildren really put me out of my, out of my soreness.
>
> B: Mhm
>
> R: So they the one who really lift me up out of my [wheel-] chairs and where I was. (recorded 26.02.2016)

In other words, Roy has an expressed interest in "development", even as mainstream Australia understands it. But does this necessarily negate Stanner's observations regarding Aboriginal temporal orientations? Not entirely. Roy's temporal outlook *is* different from a Western-minded developer. Clearly Roy has been motivated in obtaining a more secure economic future for coming generations in his cultural centre aspirations. What is more interesting to examine is his underlying confidence pursuing this by no means easy task. What has been the foundational motivating force sustaining his efforts?

According to Stanner (2009a), Europeans are deeply preoccupied with futurity: "We try to foresee, forestall and control it by every means from astrology and saving to investment and insurance" (p. 162). Despite the stereotyping, I think Stanner's claim largely still rings true for Europeans today, and this is not how Roy engaged his task of manifesting his *Kubirri* at the Gate dream. By contrast, Stanner continues, Aboriginal people are "scarcely concerned with it at all; it is not a problem for them: Their 'future' differentiates itself only as a kind of extended present, whose principle is to be continuously at one with the past" (p. 162). Let's look past Stanner's essentialising generalisations for a moment and see if his claims resonate with some aspects of Roy' future orientations.

In the grammar of the Kuku Yalanji language, the category of tense is formally expressed and distinguished by a binary opposition between past and non-past (Patz, 2002, p. 93). The non-past tense refers to verbal actions and states taking place in present or future times, such as "the thunderstorm comes/will come", as opposed to the past tense reading "a thunderstorm came". In other words, there is no distinction in form between present and

future tense.[88] In this regard, Kuku Yalanji grammar seems to support Stanner's notion of Aboriginal futurity as an extended present.

That said, Roy is bilingual and uses English more than Kuku Yalanji language in his daily life. And as already established, Roy *is* concerned with the future of his people. His concerns need not look further than to the present, however. His concern is to change the present, for a better future for his "grandchildren". Yet, this is not done overnight, and the process of making his *Kubirri* dream "come to reality" required a sustained effort, resilience in the face of adversity, and a lot of work, from him and many others. So, the picture is certainly not as clear-cut as presented by Stanner in Roy's case, but, as I said, and as I will next try to show, I do think there is something to it.

6.5 "Steady, Steady": Defeating Futurity and Staying Present

Roy's task in turning his *Kubirri at the Gate* dream into a "spectacular reality", was undertaken in the same way as I have seen him approaching all work projects: "one step at a time" and "steady, steady". These two sayings make up a bit of a refrain I have heard him say and have also observed in how he carries out his tasks, big and small, the 22 years I have known him. This was his attitude also when I first met him, when we were faced with what to me seemed an enormous task: clearing his family's camp at Cape Tribulation from Guinea grass, that grew well above my head, with a rusty brush hook and a mechanically challenged whipper snipper. His days working were less thwarted by the immensity of work ahead and instead focussed on the little joys of a day's achievement as well as telling stories, jokes, competitions and singing done alongside the work. I never heard him complain about the immensity of pulling a project such as the Gateway together, against all odds really. Instead, I observed how he took great joy in each small and confident step taken towards seeing his dream through. This attitude, I venture, is akin to what Stanner (1984, p. 145) called "religious confidence" and hints at a "no problem of futurity" in which Roy *seems* to almost take on the future as if it was already done with.

According to Stanner (2009b), Aboriginal people valued unchanging continuity in itself, and placed a "metaphysical emphasis on abidingness"[89] (p. 70) and an accompanying "mood of assent" (p. 67):

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[88] In their non-past forms, Kuku Yalanji speakers, if they choose to do so, can nonetheless use explicit future time reference by adding time adverbs, such as "soon" and "next day" (Patz, 2002, p. 93). I give thanks to linguist Kasia Wojtylak for walking me through and discussing Kuku Yalanji tense categories with me.

[89] This point was later picked up and developed by Tony Swain (1993) who argued that a change from an emphasis on spatiality to temporality has occurred in Aboriginal Australia since colonisation.

> Absence of change, which means certainty of expectation, seems to them a good thing in itself. One may say, their Ideal and Real come very close together. The value given to continuity is so high that they are not simply a people 'without history': they are a people who have been able, in some sense, to 'defeat' history, to become a-historical in mood, outlook, and life. (Stanner, 2009b, p. 70)

Given Stanner's claim that Aboriginal peoples' future "differentiates itself only as a kind of extended present, whose principle is to be continuously at one with the past" (2009a, p. 162), and that "the Dreaming is a sort of eschatology, a doctrine of final things which were also the first" (1984, p. 170), they have also "defeated" futurity and its uncertainty by the same token. According to Stanner (2009b), an Aboriginal person is able to "transcend himself" with what he calls "a mood of assent" which is "neither despair nor resignation, optimism nor pessimism, quietism nor indifference" (p. 67). I would tend to chime in with Stanner that *despair* is not a state I can say I observed in Roy. Immediate grief and fear, yes, but not prolonged despair, not as Kierkegaard understood it at least.[90]

I understand Roy's confidence amidst uncertainty as a certain kind of faith. But to be clear, Roy's experience of uncertainty in life is intense. I have a photograph of the Yalanji men I spent most time with during my MA fieldwork, taken on Surfer's and my joint birthday celebration, June 1st, 2002, up at the Cape Tribulation camp. Of the ten Yalanji men depicted there, six are now deceased. I have lost count of the number of funerals I have attended at Mossman Gorge, but they outnumber those I have attended in Norway where I grew up and have lived most of my life. Life is uncertain. Roy knows this, perhaps better than most.

During his heart-attack Roy came face to face with his own death, and he took decisive action in changing his lifestyle for a better future for himself and for coming generations of *bama*. According to Heidegger, human beings are fundamentally oriented towards death (and thus towards the future), which also appears evident in Roy's experiences at Cairns Base Hospital. Following Heidegger, historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is understood as the temporality of human existence – being in time – and arises from Dasein's being-towards-death. But while Heidegger grounds historicity in human beings' relation to death, Kierkegaard grounds temporality in relation to the absolute Other. I think we can see Roy embody both these temporal orientations – towards death/finality at the hospital, and towards

[90] Despair, Kierkegaard thought, was rife in 19th century Denmark and could only be remedied by the possibility of faith (not "Christendom"). A key assumption in Kierkegaard is therefore, according to Pedersen and Liisberg (2018), "the assertion that life would be nothing but despair, were there no eternal consciousness" (p. 4). This view, that Kierkegaard shared in *Fear and Trembling* is important, they continue, for understanding Kierkegaard's notion of futurity and the possibility of hope.

the transcendental or "everlasting" represented in Christ and the Ancestors or the Dreaming. Yet ultimately, at the height of his moment of facing his own death at the hospital, he lets go of control, surrenders his temporal being, and relates himself to Christ.

Despite all the sorrow and grief that seem to accompany Roy and many other Yalanji people's lives, I find an abiding ability to recreate and sustain joy in life with an openness to life and what it brings. Roy's world is a changing world, with its fair share of unpredictability, sorrow and adversity, which also makes his tentative expressions of uncertainty reasonable. What then, constitutes his patient confidence in his future oriented projects? I can find no better word for it than *faith*. His actions are future oriented, but his attention is in the present – with what steps can be done here and now.[91] Although he was involved in the plans and milestones set up by various stakeholders in the building of the cultural centre, and there probably were setbacks or delays in the construction project, I never saw him lose faith in it. Unlike those who would have formulated the project plan and projected timelines, I surmise he would be less worried about setbacks or changed plans, and less needing to take control of specific future outcomes and deadlines.

Roy's confidence, I believe, stems from a knowing that he is following his Dreaming, following the vision and task given to him in his *Kubirri* dream, rather than following human-made projections and plans. Let us not forget that *Kubirri* is one of the most pivotal arch-Ancestors for Mossman *bama*. And a dream entailing *Kubirri* will – no matter how future oriented one interprets it to be – thus entail a temporality that cannot neatly be separated into past, present and future. In an important sense, it is beyond the temporal ("there is no time in it" as Roy said of his *Big Kurriyala* dream). The world changes, but the Dreaming transcends temporality and is as Roy has put it "everlasting". His faith lies beyond the temporal and can thus not be defeated by the vicissitudes of time.

In *The Expectancy of Faith* (1990) Kierkegaard asks how one should meet the future and by what means one might overcome its changing conditions:

> How, then, should we face the future? When the sailor is out on the ocean, when everything is changing all around him, when the waves are born and die, he does not stare down into the waves, because they are changing. He looks up at the stars. Why? Because they are faithful; they have the same location now that they had for

[91] Yasmine Musharbash (2008) has also stressed the Warlpiri value of "being in the present" for people at Yuendumu (p. 11). Likewise, Carolyn Schwarz has also commented on the importance of "immediacy". This is not to say that Yolngu people are not future oriented. She argues it is the elders who are very concerned with future generations. Nonetheless, Schwarz (2016) points out, "people's energies in the day-to-day of the lived world are oriented largely toward events unfolding in the present" (p. 172).

> our ancestors and will have for generations to come. By what means does he conquer the changeable? By the eternal. By the eternal, one can conquer the future, because the eternal is the ground of the future, and therefore through it the future can be fathomed. What, then, is the eternal power in a human being? It is faith. What is the expectancy of faith? Victory – […] an expectancy of the future that expects victory – this has indeed conquered the future. The believer, therefore, is finished with the future before he begins with the present, because what has been conquered can no longer disturb, and this victory can only make someone stronger for the present work. (p. 19)

The victory Kierkegaard refers to is without any representable content, but victory simply as such (Kangas, 2008, p. 394). That is, unlike an expectation of a concrete wish-fulfilment, a faithful follower of Christ puts his trust in an unknown future victory, and is thus "done with the future before he begins on the present". Roy's "victory", in this sense, is not in having a specific centre manifested within a specific time frame. His "expectation of victory" lies in having faith in that his Ancestors gave him the dream for a reason, and that they "will look after him" carrying out the task he has been given. His dream has given him a vision and direction, in which the road is blocked by *Kubirri Rock* and where he guides a white person to the national park. This vision, however, could have been realised in numerous different ways. His faith is in following a path given by his Ancestors. His task can only be achieved by action in the ongoing present, extending itself into the future. Beyond his dream, he need not have a clear picture of that future and does not need to control it. If queried about it, naturally he will be tentative, but that does not negate his faith in what he is doing.

Differences aside, and contrary to Stanner's claim that there can be no juncture between a Christian and Aboriginal mind, both Roy and Kierkegaard, it seems to me, find common ground and existential certitude in the *eternal*, and seem to dwell less in an anticipation of this or that future. Each temporal orientation "defeats futurity" by surrendering control with it, allowing one to enter more fully into the present. Both stress patience, gratitude, and faith as virtues to this end.

6.6 What is Faith?

What does it mean when Roy says he has faith? What is Roy's expectancy of the future? On one level, it is almost as if once Roy has had a dream, he forgets about it. But this is not the case, as I know well; he carries his dreams with him as precious gifts, dreams he occasionally shares with one who is ready to listen. But he *acts* as if they did not happen. No, that's not it

either. Acting sounds too much like a game of self-deceit. Still, somehow he seems to hold on to his dreams without concern whether they will come true or not. No, that does not quite capture it either. He seems to trust they will, and he does not seem burdened with them. Then why act at all if all he needs is trust? If Dreaming stories are absolute and beyond any human impact, why even give Roy a dream about the Gateway? And clearly, Roy thinks he was given the dream for a reason, a task set out for him. And so we could go on and on in a circular discussion about Ancestral versus human agency, the eternal versus the temporal, continuity versus change, fate versus free will, etc. Seeming paradoxes that Roy also recognises, but is somehow less hindered by in his way of life than myself. Or, returning to dream as a gift and dream as a task, which at times contradict each other in temporal terms as a revelation of an unchanging Dreaming and the change that same revelation brings to the already existing Dreaming lore, apparent contradictions that Roy seems to incorporate in his life. Meaning, it seems, matters more. Or, providence, perhaps, overwhelms inconsistency. There is more than one thing reminiscent of Kierkegaard's qualitative leap to faith here, when faced with paradox.

What does it mean to say, “I have faith”? As Kierkegaard (1990) has pointed out, it can all too often be obscure, even to oneself, what one means by this:

> Perhaps I am wrong; maybe I am just creating my own notion of the future; perhaps I am wishing, hoping, longing for something, craving, coveting; perhaps I am sure of the future, and since I do this, it may seem to me that I have faith, although I still do not. (p. 27)

Kierkegaard said that the determining question to ask oneself to find out if one has faith is, “do you expect victory?”

> then every obscurity becomes more difficult, then I perceive that not only the person who expects absolutely nothing does not have faith, but also the person who expects something particular or who bases his expectancy on something particular. And should not this be important, inasmuch as no one can be wholly and indivisibly in the present before he is finished with the future? But one is finished with the future only by conquering it, but this is precisely what faith does, since its expectancy is victory. (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 27)

Roy surely expected something to come from his *Kubirri* at the Gate dream, and as time progressed, I presume he expected a gate to be put across the road. But he also strikes me as someone who did not base his entire expectancy on one particular concrete manifestation

of his dream. I dare suggest that the dream gave him a vision and direction, but that he remained open to how it may materialise. It is also worth noting that some particular manifestations of his dream are interpreted retrospectively, for instance the glittering behind the white lady's shoulder later being interpreted, or rather revealing itself, as the sun's reflection of the cars after the carpark had been built.

Is it rational to have faith when it entails paradox that challenges reason? It naturally depends on what we mean by rational, and it depends on whether one sees the paradox from a position of offence or faith. According to Kierkegaard scholar C. Stephen Evans (2006), the God-man paradox (faith in the Incarnation – that an eternal God became a man who lived and died) is not, following Kierkegaard, a logical contradiction, but rather an *apparent contradiction* – a tension between the paradox and human reason (p. 123). Evans goes on to say that,

> in general the discovery of a paradox is the result of an encounter with a reality which our concepts are inadequate to deal with … When we try to understand it we find ourselves saying self-contradictory things, but this does not mean that the reality we have encountered is itself self-contradictory. It means there is a problem with our conceptual equipment. (p. 123)

According to Kierkegaard, the Incarnation cannot be rationally understood. However, he did think that this claim itself (i.e. that reason has its limits) can be understood rationally (Evans, 2006, p. 126). According to Kierkegaard (2009b), faith is possible when understanding (reason) is faced with the God-man paradox and *yields itself* to it:

> It happens when the understanding and the paradox meet happily in the moment; when the understanding sets itself aside and the paradox gives itself; and this third thing, in which this happens (because it happens neither through the understanding, which is excused, nor through the paradox which offers itself – but *in* something), is the happy passion we will now give a name, even if the name is not really important to us. We will call it: *faith.* (pp. 128-129)

To reiterate: in faith, reason "sets itself aside" and the paradox "offers itself" on the condition it is in a "happy passion". In other words, in faith, the tension between reason and paradox dissolves – are on good terms even – if reason can accept its own limitations (Evans, 2006, p. 126). As Kierkegaard wrote in his journal, "When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd" (cited in Evans, 2006, p. 126).

Turning to Dreamstories, such as Roy's *Big Kurriyala* story (the creation story where the Rainbow Snake spews out three women into a waterhole), how could I come to understand Roy's claim that he was contemporaneous with *Kurriyala*? Kierkegaard argued that historical evidence is insufficient and unnecessary to produce faith. Instead, it is the experience of meeting God which produces the passion of faith. Evans writes that "the person of faith is not someone who tries to make herself believe something she knows is not true, or something she has no reason to think is true [the historicity of the *Kurriyala* story was what I was initially struggling with]. Rather, she is someone who now has good reason to mistrust her earlier ideas about what is true, as a result of an encounter with reality" (Evans, 2006, p. 130). This was exactly what happened to me after that *dubu* came into my shed and patted me on the forehead. As a result of my *dubu* encounter, my understanding set itself aside – my reason yielded itself to the paradoxical idea of a being passing through a physical barrier and then touching me. I cannot explain how this is possible to any scientist, but from *my* point of view of faith, it was no longer against my reason, "for one cannot think that what has actually occurred is impossible" (Evans, 2006, p. 131). Yet, it is also true that most who read this will not believe it occurred, and are likely to think that such paradoxes are formal contradictions. Through my own experience of faith in the face of paradox, paired with faith in my mentor, I could see the truth in Roy's avowed contemporaneity with an Ancestor. But I have no logically consistent conceptual tools, nor objectively available empirical evidence to account for it, other than my own subjective experience of an Ancestral encounter. These experiences have, however, shown me that reason has its limits in questions of objective uncertainty – my own encounters with Ancestral entities gave me faith, a faith I later could relate to Roy's story.

Returning to the futurity in faith, Roy's greatness is not in overcoming the prospect of an enormous task within a certain timeline, it is a different focus and attitude altogether that ensured Roy's achievement. Instead of focussing on what could "be actualised in a given period of chronological time",[92] his outlook seems more akin to "*how* one relates to the possible (regardless of the chronological time available)" (Buben, 2012, p. 67). Part of this *how* is the significance Roy places on the fact that *he* had the dream and revelation, that "he was shown this", "he was given this" or how the dream "came to him". The fact that he was chosen to receive this dream is a point Roy takes seriously – it comes with a sense of

[92] Buben adds to this: "which of course can never be guaranteed, rendering all actualizations merely accidental", which is in contrast to the kairological "moment" of Kierkegaard ("Øieblikket") and Heidegger ("Augenblick") which both focus on how to relate oneself to possibility.

responsibility; and let us not be fooled by Roy's confident attitude, it comes with tests and tribulations. As Roy has put it: "Everybody has a challenge. A challenge to walk through whatever they gotta walk through. And fear, you know? Everybody has that. That we all have".

6.7 Challenged, Tested and Looked After

One of Roy's cousin-brothers once told me that Roy is "brave". Not only in the sense that, as he said, Roy would fight off his bullies when they were young, but also in camping alone out bush (facing *dubu*), as well as for taking on all the challenges of creating cultural tourism up at the Gorge. But with his bravery comes a confidence that he is "looked after".[93] Roy's uncertainty towards what the future brings is coupled together with an existential confidence where he seems at rest within the uncertainty of outward outcomes; a faith in that as a pathfinder and follower he will be supported by some greater power than his own individual self, be it the Ancestors, Christ, or both. Roy explains this in relation to walking what was then a three km dirt road in darkness from Mossman town to the Gorge community:

> R: And that, whatever that behind us is feel with your fear, is actually having a go at you because, it's saying, "oh this guy, this youngfella he got the guts. ((Never thought he)) was that scared". And that, to whoever that is at the back of you actually, say "I wanna meet him again". You know? But in a better way, you know? Because you actually break that barrier, of that, we call it spirits or we call it, you know we call it both ways, *dubu* or spirits. Once you break something, once you break that something, that something that around us that, that actually support you somehow.
>
> B: Mhm
>
> R: That's how I see that. To support you, mean to say, "He's alright! I like him! We'll support him now".
>
> B: Binga Binga?
>
> R: Yeah!

[93] In relation to this Stanner reports that "In several parts of Aboriginal Australia one met the fundamental belief that great guardian-spirits (Baiame, Kunmanggur) existed – whether as ancestral or as self-subsistent beings – to "look after" living men. Elsewhere, lesser spirits did so. The conception thus deepens: man is of value in himself and for others, and *there are spirits who care*. That, by any test, is a religious view of man" (Stanner, 1984, p. 148; emphasis in original).

B: But you gotta face your, challenge first?

R: Eh, you face that challenge in a way, some challenges that you face by walking through the darkness.

B: Mhm. So, in a sense, you gotta be brave, if you wanna be looked after?

R: You gotta be brave. You gotta be brave, to walk through that path without, any weakness I guess. And that braveness that I went through, from Gorge – from town to Mossman Gorge, I walked at the darkest nights,

B: Mhm

R: And I think in my heart, I didn't see nothing, but I felt it.

B: Yeah.

R: I felt that something here but, are they gonna do this to me? Or are they gonna attack me? What's my next step? You know? Who am I gonna hit next? Who I gonna meet next? You know?

B: Yeah?

R: And then, you get immune to that then. You know?

B: Mhm. (recorded 18.12.2015)

Roy is thus saying that when you, in spite of your fear, face *dubu*, you become "immune", and *dubu* and *binga binga* will support you somehow. Roy demonstrates immunity, such existential-religious confidence, when he goes out in the bush and actively sings out to the Ancestors to come to him:

So the way I walk through country, I make sure I sing out and say "O.K., I'm coming in, I'm not a stranger" but then I say to myself in language now, I say "*binga binga garraygurra,* I *bama indu garri. Ngayunda gangalgurra*". I am your son. I'm coming into just to look at the country. I wanna feel it in my own heart. I wanna know what's in here, you know? But you speak language to that too at the same time when you do that later. And then, certainly you'll gonna get that dreams will come. And that's why the elder will sit down, the *dubu dubu*, the spirits, they are there, that you and I can't see, the *wawu* all there. But they gonna judge you if you are the right person to give that, that dream. And if that dream come into you, and they take you away from the dream, that's your dream. And tell that to

> someone, give that to someone and make it, make it alive again. That's what the old people will give it to you for.

Ancestral support can come in many forms, for instance being given knowledge in a dream by the Ancestors as was the case with Roy's *Kubirri* dream. This is not an automatic process. The Ancestors will "pick you out" if you are found to be worthy of such knowledge. However, worth is not the only variable at play here, "the right time" is also of importance. This brings us to a painful event in Roy's life, and when he sang out in vain for his recently deceased brother Darryl to come to him.

7 Singing out for Darryl: Loss and Repetition

This chapter extends the discussion of faith and futurity from the previous chapter. It will focus on temporal orientations towards the past and future, and the differences between those emphasising being and becoming, respectively. As mentioned in chapter 5, the topic of Aboriginal historicity has been much debated in the anthropological literature (see Beckett, 1994; Myers, 1986; Rumsey, 1994; Stanner, 2009a). In this chapter, I will discuss Roy's temporality by comparing some of his experiences with aspects found in Kierkegaard's concept of *repetition*. Needless to say, employing Kierkegaardian categories of thought onto an Indigenous Australian, is from the outset a fraught enterprise. But whereas early depictions of Aboriginal historicity were often placed unfavourably within a Western linear developmental logic, I position Roy's temporal orientation favourably within Kierkegaard's temporal ladder. As with most of my attempts to understand Roy, it arises from an earnest conviction that I have something significant to learn from him, not just academically, but as a way to enrich my own life as well as my understanding of the world. I find that Roy's temporal outlook in life bears certain resemblances to what Kierkegaard called "repetition", which among many things means a temporal orientation of "recollecting forwards", as well as implying a sense of world renewal through patient receptive openness.

One might ask why it is important to bring out yet another slippery and complex concept from the Kierkegaardian catalogue and compare it with Roy's life, instead of making good ethnographic use of Roy's own words and actions. My answer is that I have found Roy's temporal outlook to be as hard to appropriate as Kierkegaard's. But when I started putting them in dialogue in my writing, they gave a resonance that made both perspectives clearer to me. I hope that the reader finds the struggle as rewarding as I have.

7.1 Recollection and "Living Backwards"

According to Kierkegaard there are two possible solutions to the question of temporal orientation: *recollection* and *repetition*. These represent two paradigms of thinking, what Kierkegaard refers to as the "Greek" and "modern" respectively. In recollection, becoming and the new is traced back to *being* and the old, such as in Plato's idealism (being precedes becoming). In repetition, on the other hand, being arises from *becoming* (becoming precedes being). In the following, I wish to explore how these two categories of thought and temporal orientations relate to my ethnographic material, starting with a quick story from my first fieldwork in 2002.

In the Introduction of this thesis I wrote about nicknames and how one of the many nicknames I was given was "Blackboard" (a pun on my name – "Black-Bård"), expressing I was "one of them now". Independent of this, a Yalanji elder from further north came to a similar view, but he elaborated on this notion which was revealing for my understanding of *bama* selfhood and temporal orientation.

Oldfella, who was Roy's classificatory father-in-law, came down every fortnight or so to camp with me at the Cape Tribulation camp.[94] Usually this occurred when Roy was working weekends down at Mossman Gorge. Whether this was coincidental, or an active avoidance based on their in-law relation, I am not sure, probably a bit of both. In any case, Oldfella took an instant liking to me, as did I him. I never saw him in a bad mood. He was one of those people you are instantly happy to see. He was pleased by the fact that I took such an interest in *bama* culture and was especially impressed that I was learning to speak some language. One day when I was making a fire, he exclaimed "*yundu waybala kari, yundu bama*" [You are not whitefella, you are blackfella]. Flattered, as the budding fieldworker I was, I asked him what made him say that. First, he had regarded the way I had built and lit the fire as a distinctly *bama* way of doing it. His second clue was how easily I learnt *Yalanji* words and pointed out I picked up language quicker than some of their own children.

Following this, Oldfella stopped speaking English with me, and switched to his *Kuku Nyungkul* dialect of Kuku Yalanji. Not understanding much of what he was saying I ended up saying "*ngayu binal kari*" [I don't understand/know] all the time. In the end I asked him to switch back to English, to which he replied "You just have to remember [the language]". He repeated this many times – "you have to remember!". I asked him how I could remember, and he said, "go ask that mountain". When I inquired which one, he said, with a big smile "you know!". He followed this up by telling me, "you can go out anywhere there in the scrub [rainforest], you won't get lost".

From his statement of me being *bama*, it is possible to draw several things. Obviously, skin colour was not one of them. The fact that Oldfella called me *bama* could mean that he meant that I was *bama in character*, acting and speaking like them (as English was not my native tongue, I also adopted their distinct style of speaking English). Yet, I was convinced that he was referring to my *wawu* (soul or spiritual identity)[95] as being *bama*, and

[94] This story concerning Oldfella is reproduced and and theoretically reworked from empirical material in my MA thesis (Aaberge, 2007).

[95] The Hersbergers translated wawu as "spirit of a man" or as "breath" (Hershberger & Hershberger, 1986, p. 147). Unfortunately, I did not know this term at this stage, so I could not enquire into this.

furthermore, that my *bama* behaviour (or my proneness to acquiring it) was seen as an outer clue to my "self's essence" rather than a result of mimicry or pretence.[96]

This interpretation is convergent with a *bama* conception of the Dreaming; a sense in which everything already exists in its potentiality, waiting to be disclosed. Maybe Oldfella read me in the same manner as *bama* read Country? – Looking for signs and clues in the outer, physical world for its innate Dreaming. The same logic can be applied to the belief that I already knew the language (I had just forgotten it). It is my understanding that the language was already there, existing since the Dreamtime, the creative era, waiting for me to disclose it. Interestingly, one way of "remembering" was communication with a mountain, demonstrating the interconnectedness between place, the Ancestors and knowledge. Oldfella's last comment saying I would not get lost in the rainforest, I believe, has little to do with what Western people identify as bush navigation skills. I think that what he meant was that I was recognised as one of them, and Ancestors in the bush would "look after" me or guide me.

Following Oldfella's cue, for me to become my real (bama) self, I would have to "remember" – I would have to re-collect, re-member, my self. For a very long time I interpreted Oldfella's explanation to me as a *bama* equivalent to Platonic idealism, or what Kierkegaard called "recollection", tracing the new back to the old, where becoming means tracing oneself back to an original, primordial being. Vital change and novelty, however, within a paradigm of recollection, is not possible, because discovery of something new is interpreted as a revelation of what has been and already is. In my discussion about revelatory dreams in chapter 3, a somewhat similar perspective on "traditional" Aboriginal temporality was presented, where the revealed knowledge is not seen by the dreamer as new, but something that has always existed, that now has been unveiled or rediscovered (Dussart, 2000, p. 147; Glaskin, 2005, p. 299; Maddock, 1984, p. 101; Myers, 1986, p. 51; Poirier, 2005, pp. 4-5).

Despite capturing and explaining salient features of Aboriginal temporality, the problem I have with a recollection perspective, is an image of Roy as purportedly seeing life as fixed, as frozen, as closed to the future, indeed as life-less, or as Stanner put it, a "one-possibility thing". The problem of temporality, according to Kierkegaard, is that of "backwards living". By this he means the conflict between one's understanding self (looking to the past) and one's living self (oriented to the future). In a journal entry from 1843 Kierkegaard wrote:

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[96] Like with the Christian notion of soul, one's *wawu* goes on after death, but one's *wawu* does not go to heaven or an absolute otherworldly realm, instead it remains in or returns to country.

> Philosophy is perfectly right in saying that life must be understood backwards. But then one forgets the other clause – that it must be lived forwards. The more one thinks through this clause, the more one concludes that life in temporality never becomes properly understandable, simply because never at any time does one get perfect repose to take the stance: backwards. (Kierkegaard, cited in Eriksen, 2000, p. 11)

"Living backwards", then, is moving forward towards the future (living) while looking backwards towards the past (to understand it). The problem with this, however, is that meaningful understanding requires us to see life as a whole. To do this we must therefore exclude the possibility of any real change, which can only be done (if we are to make meaningful sense of it) by reducing the future to a mere extension of the past.

This perspective, though, does not account for the uncertainty accompanying Roy's confidence, nor does it adequately explain his open attitude to the "newness" of life that the future brings. Nor am I convinced that the thought paradigm of recollection fully captures Oldfella's thinking nor "traditional" Aboriginal temporality more generally. As Stanner (1984) himself asked: "If the philosophy was one of assent, why the *creative* effort of a new cult?" (p. 153).

Some anthropologists have discussed the role of repetition in Aboriginal societies as an essential mechanism for the creative work of forging relations between past, present and future. Jennifer Deger for instance, wrote that a Yolngu aesthetic of the new "is not only about renewal as replacement, it is about emergence". Co-creative artwork "creates the possibility of shared experiences of becoming-in-relation-to in which Yolngu pasts, presents and futures are encompassed in a galvanizing experience of flash and shimmer" (Deger, 2013, p. 364). Of special interest to my present argument here is the Yolngu term *yuta* (new) and its relation to the Ancestral past. The term *yuta* indicates something new, novel or of the moment in artwork, but its newness is not mere innovation or something cutting edge (like the use of new media technology in art in itself). Instead, *yuta* "indicates a recognition of the work as achieving a meaningful and socially productive interplay between the new and the old" (Deger, 2013, p. 364; see also Gurrumuruwuy et al., 2019). Her collaborative project *Christmas Birrimbirr* with Paul Gurrumuruwuy and others in Miyarrka Media is not *yuta* simply because it makes a connection to the past however:

> It is not *yuta* because it incorporates the new into the old as others have argued (a move that is surely counter to any ontology of the new). It is *yuta* because it hinges

> the old and new together; it makes them resonate in a relationship, making the old new again. (Deger, 2013, p. 365)

This "poetics of mutual enlivening" Deger (2013) writes, is "the jolt of the new; the source of fullness and riches" (p. 368), or to re-invoke Roy: "if that dream come into you … tell that to someone, give that to someone and make it alive again. That's what the old people will give it to you for". It strikes me that the life-affirming richness in these examples cannot be sufficiently grasped within a logic of recollection. Yet, at the same time, Gurrumuruwuy and his wife Fiona Yangathu insist that the *Christmas Birrimbirr* project "has always been there, it just needed to be 'found' and 'made real'" (Deger, 2013, p. 368). How then, can one bring these two apparently distinctive kinds of generative dynamics together in a way that does justice to the project of making new by which the old come "alive again"?

7.2 Repetition & "Recollecting Forwards"

Let us consider Kierkegaard's (deliberately) slippery category of *repetition*. Writing in the wake of Kant's abandonment of metaphysics, Kierkegaard announces repetition as "the new concept" to replace the Greek concept "recollection". But what did he mean when he wrote that, "Repetition is the *interest* of metaphysics, and also the interest upon which metaphysics become stranded"? (Kierkegaard, 2009b, p. 19). Although Kierkegaard spends most of the time in his book titled *Repetition* (2009b) giving examples of people who seek repetition unsuccessfully, we do learn that Job and Abraham of the Bible provide us with cases of "genuine repetition", a theme further developed in his next book *Fear and Trembling* (2006). Our fascination with these biblical stories, where, against all odds, Isaac is returned to Abraham, and the world returned to Job, is a fascination that grows into a metaphysical interest, even metaphysical wonder, which nonetheless offers no metaphysical explanation (Mooney, 2009, p. xv). Repetition thus serves as a quasi-metaphysical term for this interest. As Mooney has exemplified, "Job gets the *wonder* of a world returned, but he does not learn *why* he suffers" (p. xv).

Repetition, in Danish "gjentagelse" (literally, a "re-taking"), is in an important sense *renewed meaning*, gained through the "double movement of faith", which consists of letting go and receiving back.[97] From Kierkegaard's writings one can discern three claims regarding repetition: that it is (1) a type of authentic temporality, (2) consists in a "happy" and genuine

[97] For a more detailed account of the "double movement of faith" via Abraham's pending sacrifice of his son Isaac, see Kierkegaard (2006).

relation to the other, and (3) provides the solution to the ancient conflict between being and becoming[98] (Eriksen, 2000, p. 41). All three will be touched on in this chapter. Aspects of the first claim have been somewhat covered in chapter 5 (but with other terms), in which I considered Roy as "contemporaneous with the Ancestors" in the moment of realising and actualising Ancestral Dreamstories. The second claim has also been implicit in much of the writing covered so far about "subjectivity is truth" and cultivating a "proper relation to the Other", but I will pursue this further by focussing on what Kierkegaard may imply with "genuine repetition" (introduced in the quote below) through Roy's stories. The third claim concerns the potential of "repetition" to replace "recollection" as a temporal orientation in knowing. The difference between these two categories of thought (repetition and recollection), Kierkegaard wrote in the following much quoted passage, is in their temporal direction:

> Repetition and recollection are the same movement, just in opposite directions, because what is recollected has already been and is thus repeated backwards, whereas genuine repetition is recollected forwards. Repetition, if it is possible, thus makes a person happy, while recollection makes him unhappy. (Kierkegaard, 2009b, p. 3)

In his paper "Bringing Kierkegaard into anthropology" (2014), Matt Tomlinson employs Kierkegaard's "repetition" as a category to overcome the divide in the anthropology of Christianity (mostly discussed in a Melanesian context) between those who see the turn to Christianity as a decisive break with, and those who see it as continuous with, pre-Christian orientations. For Tomlinson, "'repetition', or the act of 'recollecting forward' to reshape old things into new ones", affords us with "a model of transformation that depends neither on deep continuity nor on decisive break" (p. 163). He does so by analysing Fijian Methodist

[98] "One cannot step into the same river twice", *Heraclitus of Ephesus* (c. 535 – 475 B.C.) allegedly said. Heraclitus purportedly saw the world as in an eternal state of becoming (universal flux) and saw all change as results from the dynamic and cyclical interplay of opposites. For *Parmenides of Elea* (c. 515 – 450 B.C.) on the other hand, there was "nothing new under the sun". Rather, he saw the world and universe as static and fixed. Even the past, present, and future are fixed according to Parmenides, and any subjective sense or feeling of duration is an illusion. Despite being contemporaries, it is unlikely Heraclitus and Parmenides actually engaged in discussion. Their views were perhaps unduly polarised in Plato's and subsequent philosophical writings, but they nonetheless serve as good analytical points of discussion about time. If the majority of later philosophers sided with Heraclitus, the consensus among physicist today seems much closer to Parmenides' rather counterintuitive view. The universe, or reality if you will, as it is understood by most physicists today, is often dubbed the "block universe", and shares some salient characteristics with Parmenides' vision.

rituals for overcoming curses cast by their non-Christian forebears.[99] Central to Tomlinson's argument is that curses are integral to Fijian Christianity and faith, and must thus be reengaged with and reaffirmed: "Faith in their efficacy needs to be repeated – recollected forward in projects that aim at fulfillment but are never complete" (p. 170). The paradox then, Tomlinson argues, is that ritual attempts to counter curses do not lift them but remake them for the future.

This, and Tomlinson's emphasis on Kierkegaard's notion of "absurdity" as "acceptance of irresolvable paradox", is perfectly in line with Kierkegaard's emphasis on the role of suffering, loss and acceptance in repetition, which also I will discuss shortly in terms of Roy. But as Kierkegaard himself pointed out, and which I will add to our discussion, is Kierkegaard's last statement in his quote above: "genuine repetition … if it is possible … makes a person happy". It is this potential and possibility of "genuine repetition" I wish to pursue by examining aspects of Roy's orientation in life, in his losses and his joys, over the two or so decades I have known him. The ethnographic focus in this chapter is one of personal grievance and great loss for Roy, but it is not without redemption and restorative affirmation. This involves what Kierkegaard regarded as "genuine repetition", a state of "recollecting forward" in which one becomes ready to receive spiritual gifts or Ancestral dreams.

7.3 Singing out for Darryl

Among all his brothers, Darryl held a special place for Roy. He was the youngest, and like Roy himself, he had that certain quality of character that drew you to him; when he spoke you felt compelled to listen. He did not drink, he involved himself actively in the community and with the Church. I only met Darryl a few times, but it seemed to me that for *bama* and whitefellas alike, he carried great promise.

During my first fieldwork in 2002, I had returned to Mossman Gorge from picking up two Norwegian visitors in Cairns. Many people at the Gorge knew me, and normally they would greet me with smiles, waves or if I knew them well, with rude or teasing remarks. However, this day eyes were cast down and a dark cloud seemed to hang over the community.

[99] Curses, Tomlinson (2014) writes, as they are understood in indigenous Fijian ways, are the outcomes of evil or anti-Christian acts committed by ancestors that their descendants can try to negate by ceremonially apologising to present-day church leaders (p. 167). Fijian curses, however, despite descendants' redressive action, do not really go away. For contemporary Fijians, curses represent ruptures in that the ancestors challenged Christianity's authority, while at the same time representing continuity in that past curses affect Fijian's lack of fortune in the present.

As we got out of the car, a Yalanji man I knew approached me discretely from the side while looking down at the ground in front of him, and by then I was sure something was wrong. I turned to him, and he gave me the news that Roy's youngest brother Darryl had died from a heart attack.

While I was trying to process this, he continued to say that they had been unable to reach Roy who had gone up to Cape Tribulation the day before. I was asked if I could bring the news to Roy so he could join his mourning family at the Gorge. I agreed to his request, but the shock of the news stunned me. It was as if another person was agreeing, while I stood beside myself looking from the outside, weak and numb.

We drove north crossing Daintree River on the cable ferry, winding along the roads over the Alexandra Range and back down past Cow Bay when I spotted the old community lorry with Roy coming towards us. But as we were in a hire car, neither Roy nor any of the other men with him saw me waving wildly from the back seat. We turned around and raced after them, blinking our headlights but to no avail. At a narrow, but just long enough, stretch of straight road my Norwegian visitor managed to overtake the truck, and I stuck my head out of the window signalling to pull over. When they spotted me, all their faces lit up with smiles as we had not seen each other for a week, the longest time I spent away from Roy during those ten months. With the foreboding difficulty of my task ahead, I walked up to their truck and took Roy to the side, and with a choking lump in my throat told him what had happened. At first, he did not believe me. Then he seemed to realise the truth of what I was telling him, and his legs gave in and we sat down together while he was shouting out "no, no, no", before he abruptly got up again, regaining his stout self and told me he needed to go to Mossman at once to find out for himself.

Darryl's funeral had a big turnout, both at the Mossman Gorge Church service, and for the corroboree held at the community at night. There was a big bonfire, with Yalanji people, young and old, dancing around it until late. I sat down and watched the corroboree with an Oldfella who explained to me that *kubu* (smoke) from the fire and from the smouldering leaves sometimes brought through the deceased's house was to deter the deceased's *wawu* (spirit or soul) from lingering among his old haunts and kin.

A few weeks later, Roy and I were sitting outside the old tourism shed at the Gorge with a cup of tea when Roy for the first time since the funeral brought up his brother's death. He told me that it had been testing for him receiving wailing kin coming to "shake his hand". I had stayed at home with Roy in Mossman Gorge during this period and had witnessed this myself: an intermittent but non-stop stream of relatives coming to his house to shake his hand

and hug him. Some with tears streaming down their cheeks, others crying loudly, and on a couple of occasions women had thrown themselves on the ground before him sobbing uncontrollably. I had been watching my friend closely, but not once did I see him joining the wailing. He met everyone, shook their hand, hugged them. I could see he was strained to the limit a couple of times, but he never gave in to it, not a single tear traced his taut face. I guess he felt he could allow himself to open up to me, as I was an outsider to his world, and at the same time someone he had come to be close with.

He proceeded to let me in on something that was troubling him. Shortly after his brother's death, he told me, he had gone out into the "scrub" (rainforest) and called out to Darryl. It should be noted that it is a common practice among the Yalanji people I know to "sing out" to the Ancestors and deceased kin when in the scrub; to let them know that you are not a stranger but kin to them, and ask them to leave you in peace and look after you.[100] However, instead of singing out to be left alone, Roy had called out *yundu kaday* (you come to me) to his deceased brother; he wanted to see him, to "talk with him one last time". But his brother had not come to him. Not then, nor later in a dream at night, and it was plain to see that this pained and disappointed Roy.

Ten years later, Roy and I were back sitting outside the same, now disused, tourism shed (operations having been moved to the newly opened cultural centre). We had been filming and I had the camera in my hand when we sat down and Roy fell silent and was trying to recall a dream he had that morning.[101] Realising that what followed would be important, I switched on the camera, and the following is a transcript of our conversation (Roy was "naturalised" to me filming him at this point, and was not bothered at all by it).

> B: Which one [brother]?
>
> R: Darryl. I dunno know what he was saying to me. He was talking to – It's like, [thinking, trying to recall] 'ah' shit! Something he was saying to me, but I can't remember what he said. But he was strong and healthy and, young aye?
>
> …

[100] As evident in the transcript of Roy talking about being challenged and tested by Ancestral beings in chapter 6, this practice of "singing out" is also connected to the fear many bama have when visiting "strange" places; that dubu, the spirits of the dead, will come and torment you, especially if you are alone and it is after dark.
[101] As I have said earlier, Roy does not generally share special dreams immediately (ordinary ones, though, he does). But here he does not seem to make any kind of interpretive statements regarding the Ancestral message of the dream, in which case, special dreams are sometimes shared immediately.

> Very young, yeah yeah. And sorta, saying something to me, happy with me. Just grabbed me and give me a hug. And, and I sorta I got a shock when I seen him. (( )) hey! You're alive! He can just come and grab me, gave me hug, and smiling, yeah just smiling, and you know, beautiful smile of his. Then I wanted to ask him "whatcha – whatcha doing here?" you know, I'm trying to ask him now. But he just kept on smiling at me. Yeah, I wonder why he was smiling at me? Then I looking hard and I reckon, I thought he was right next to me, on the bed you know like? We're standing up and we sorta walked up and I said hey?! I sort of grabbed him, and he hugged me, I thought I had him in my bed really, true, yeah.
>
> B: Where were you? In your dream?
>
> R: In my – in my bed at home. And I got up hey, looked around, nah he is not here. So yeah.
>
> B: But where were you in your dream?
>
> R: We were talking like, somewhere open place, somewhere like this somewhere, somewhere open place, where we can see the rainforest behind us, yeah like a background of a rainforest you know? Background of a rainforest. I think he had a black shirt, he was ((dolled)) up you know, done up, and smiling, man unreal, first time I sorta – and I thought it was real you know.
>
> B: Yeah.
>
> R: That's the first dream I've ever had in my life that he was with me. But smiling in a happy way. And I reckon "what are you doing here? You're gone! You passed away long time" yeah, so yeah that's the dream. Now I wanted more of him, but I got up too quick, I was too excited, yeah. (recorded 25.7.2012)

At this point, our conversation got interrupted by a tour group (an old tour operator insisting on using the old walking track) returning from their guided walk, and Roy had to help cater for them. It seemed clear to me that this dream was significant for Roy. Comments regarding the realistic, or life-like quality of such dreams signifies that this is not an ordinary dream, but one in which *Binga Binga* are involved and "giving" the dream to the dreamer (in this case his deceased brother). He does not specifically say what he has on other occasions often said: "that dream came to me". However, statements such as "I thought it was real" and "I thought I had him in my bed really" and that he got a "shock" all appeal to his dream being Ancestrally given. The dream is also significant to him because it was Darryl, whom he had

so dearly wanted to see again after he passed away, and now ten years later it had finally happened. In the intervening years, Roy had seen many changes happen in his community.

One major change, of course, was the fulfilment of Roy's dream and vision of the Gateway, or what is now called the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, which now controls tourism traffic through their community and delivers jobs to Indigenous people in tour guiding, bus driving, at the art gallery, restaurant, office, garage and hospitality (perhaps this is why Darryl seemed as Roy said "happy with me").

As Roy and I got interrupted by the returning tour group, neither he nor I had time to reflect upon Roy's dream in which Darryl finally, and in Roy's words, for the first time had come to him in dream since he passed away. It was several months later when this dream first resurfaced as a topic of conversation between us. Roy, his brother and a *bama* mate of ours from Cooktown had come down to spend a weekend at my place in Yorkeys Knob. The occasion for this meeting was mainly social, but we had also one thing on the agenda; to watch the first cut of a video we had shot so we could discuss where to take it from there.[102]

In the following transcript you will see how I share my personal reflections on Roy's dream about his brother as well as me asking leading questions of Roy. However, this was not set up as an interview between ethnographer and informant. It was something more involved, as Roy and I have always shared our thoughts and reflections.[103]

The transcript outlines the leading up to my "aha moment" of connecting Roy's recent dream about Darryl with his wish to see him after his passing ten years prior. The occasion for my realisation is Roy talking about how he "lost [his 'Ulman'] dream" (about the Boyd's Forest Dragon Ancestor who metamorphosed in a strangler fig tree discussed in chapter 3). In the dream, the old man was reaching out his hand to Roy, inviting him to take it. The dream

[102] Daniela Vávrová, a fellow PhD anthropology student, also came for the informal viewing and editing session. She suggested she could film (sometimes with the JVC camera, sometimes with her iPhone) our editing discussions to highlight the collaborative aspects of the film as well as it could be used in its own right for the thesis. The transcript below is drawn from Daniela's recording. Despite it being the first time my *bama* friends met Daniela (Roy had met her before), I was surprised how comfortable they were with her there, at times filming or simply joining our casual conversations with seamless switches between the two. I noticed no overt changes in their "self-presentation" from any other usual meet up I would have with them. Note however, that this was not set up as an anthropological interview, it was a casual video editing session with food, wine, sharing of stories and good laughs.

[103] Of course, this may mean my thoughts influence Roy's future representations and understanding. But it also means I am immediately showing him what I really think, as a person and academic, instead of leaving that for publication time. In any case, I think it is safe to say that Roy has influenced me much more than I him. After all, I now believe in *dubu* and that there is more than human agency at play in our lives. Roy has seen me go through these changes, we have talked much about such matters, or any matter that was important in any of our lives. Preceding this talk we had also gone through major family breakups within two weeks of each other, and both sought refuge in the other's company and counsel. So, before you get too hard on me reading this transcript, dear reader, remember Roy and I have a shared history of life changes and friendship, and I think that kind of position also has something to offer to ethnographic understanding.

was interrupted, however, when Roy was woken up just before their hands touched. Roy clearly is of the impression that something big and important was about to be revealed to him, but waking up stopped all that, and left him wanting.

Roy: It's come from the place, and then when I lost my dream...

Bård: Is it the Strangler you're talking about now?

R: Yeah, in the dream that I lost, I'm gonna always call for it. But I will call for it, when the time will come for me, well it's gonna come or something, you know? It won't come into me (( )) when I gonna be greedy enough to say this: "I want this story straight away, I want my dream to come." No! I'm gonna let that flow away until it come back to that same circle as I got it. I'm not gonna ask it anymore. I'm gonna – I'm not gonna say nothing.

B: This reminding me of, you know when your brother passed away, Darryl.

R: Mhm.

B: And I remember you went up in the forest, and you wanted to meet him, you called out for him, and you wanted, you know, to have a final goodbye with him. I remember you telling me this.

R: Mhm.

B: I might have been sitting down at your place there, or something, but it wasn't long after he passed away.

R: Mhm [nodding].

B: But, I remember you being disappointed that he never came to you.

R: Yes [smiling].

B: But now, ten years later, you were telling me again now, he did actually come to you [Roy laughing]. We never talked about this, but it made me, just now hearing you saying that, reminded me of that you know_

R: That's right.

B: He did actually come back to you after the Gateway, you know.

R: That's right.

B: So you put the question out there, with the wish to see him_

R: Yeah.

B: But then he did come, when, I guess, the time was right or?

R: That's right. ((His)) time will come back to see me, just like all them *binga binga* will come back to see you again, it's like the month and the weather, and the time, so, that's why – I am not racing for the, for the dream, it's gonna come and race with you. And gonna come on your right time and say "Let's get together, let's do it, let's win it", that's what's it all about! [Laughing] And like you said, that's true! It's gonna come.

B: Yeah, might not be when you want it, right away, but_

R: No, no, no, not when I want it, but it's gonna come when I'm laying down "Oh God, he's here!" That's true. (Recorded 7.4.2013)

Although it is I who juxtapose Roy's immediate and failed attempt to meet his newly deceased brother with his eventual dream of him ten years later, as well as suggesting a logic of a "right time" distinguishing the two, Roy's own comments also point to this difference. Even before I draw the connection, Roy says that he will always call for an Ancestral encounter or dream, but that they will not come into him when he is "greedy" for them. "No!" he says, "I'm gonna let that flow away until it come back to that same circle as I got it". The art of receiving dreams, it seems, is to not get hungry for more when you do receive a dream, but instead let it flow away. This is in stark contrast to a striving orientation to *achieve*, and a striking resemblance to Kierkegaardian genuine repetition in which one *receives* (see Mooney, 1998). Gratitude, something Roy exudes each time I have seen him receive Ancestral dreams, becomes central because the condition for a repetition lies not in the individual but in the Ancestors and/or God (see Colton, 2013, pp. 80-81).

Roy did not achieve "genuine repetition" when he sang out to Darryl soon after his passing, he was too impatient, or as he puts it too "greedy", for it at the time. It came ten years later, as Kierkegaard (1990) puts it in his rendition of Job, when his "soul was quiet", and the Lord "again came to him and found his mind, like good earth, well cultivated in patience" (pp. 118-119). Or to put it in Roy's words, only when one has stopped racing for the dream will it come and race with you. Not only did he get the joy of seeing his brother again, he had by then also realised his *Kubirri* dream and Yalanji *bama* had gained control of public access to their *bubu* (Country).

Unlike gifts from other people, or social reciprocity more generally, it seems you cannot fake your way into Ancestral gifts of dreams, or indeed the worldly manifestations they may take (such as a twenty million dollar cultural centre). It seems to me that what Roy points to, is cultivating an inward orientation of letting go of worldly outcomes or temporal manifestations, while remaining patiently open and alert to the unexpected gifts Ancestors (or sometimes God) may bestow on you in the present-future.

Kierkegaard wrote in his journal papers that repetition at its highest gives up the idea of self-sufficiency. Genuine repetition, as in Job and Abraham's case, is something received – a renewal of life and world in new and unexpected ways – and is ultimately in the hands of God. This is also in line with what Roy tells us about Ancestral agency in dreams, that the *Binga Binga* will judge you, whether you are the right person to receive a dream from them (see chapter 3). Yet, this "letting go", is not resignation into despair and absconding the agency of self. Kierkegaard also wrote that "repetition is a task for freedom" (cited in Mooney, 1998, p. 294), which can be understood as a task for the becoming self to increase its openness to the *possibility* of repetition. Edward Mooney (1998) suggests that "we may need a stance of receptivity, willingness, rather than the narrow focus of willed achievement" (p. 290).

Roy's life, as I have known it, is a demonstration of this very balance between letting go while remaining open and sustaining receptiveness in the minutiae of life despite loss and adversity. Roy's comments above reveal his existential insight that, firstly, fulfillment (of his desire for the return of the Boyd's Forest Dragon Ancestor) is beyond his control. And secondly, Roy appears mindful of the paradox that it is precisely *this realisation* (the necessity of "letting it flow away again" and that he will not get it back when he is "greedy for it") that *is the condition* for its possible fulfillment – its "repetition in the pregnant sense" to invoke Kierkegaard's words. Recall the relevance of "the expectancy of faith" discussed in the previous chapter, where Roy's faith in the *Kubirri* dream and the Gateway project was analysed as a Kierkegaardian expectancy of faith: not as an expectancy of the dream materialising in a concrete or specific manner, but rather a surrender of control paired with an openness and alertness to how it might come to be. In this way, Roy orientates himself towards receiving the gifts from the Ancestors that are essential to affirming his ongoing participation in an Ancestrally charged dynamic of authority and responsibility that is not his to wilfully control as an individual.

As far as time goes, when then, is the time "right"? When is the dreamer ready to receive his or her Ancestral gift? Roy explicitly said, "not when I want it", indicating that

such intent will in itself prevent it. As Mooney (1998) has pointed out, "sometimes value lost is reacquired precisely when we stop trying to regain it" (p. 290), which I find sits well with what Roy is telling us. According to Roy, the time is right when it comes back to "that same circle as I got it". What he means by this, I believe, is when he would be in an equivalent quality of inwardness and frame of mind as when he had the Strangler Fig dream in the first place, or put differently, when a full circle has been made and things are back to how they were one revolution ago. That is, after letting the dream go, and returning to his state of receiving dream in the first place – a "repetition" – where the end point is the same as the starting point, but different or new because of the interim.

In other words, it is not when the *time* is right, but when one's inward state and temporal orientation are right that is at issue: i.e., a proper relation to the Ancestors and/or Christ. This is a feature in many of Roy's stories we have looked at. When Roy was in Cairns Base Hospital, he surrendered his life to the Lord in faith, he changed his life around and was patient, he came back to health, and back to his life gratefully working at the cultural centre. Upon receiving his dream about *Kubirri* – awed that he was given the dream, in humble confidence and patience carrying out the task of bringing it to life amidst adversity. And finally, his deceased Christian brother Darryl, at last, visiting him in dream, smiling, seemingly happy with him.

Roy's life has not been easy: he was taken away to Palm Island as a child; got kicked out of school in Mossman; grew up with racism, both structural and blatant; raised up in a "poor family" (by which he means his family was not as large nor powerful as others at the Gorge); adversity from other *bama*, both within and without the community; loss of close family and friends – the list could go on and on. Yet he manages to recollect himself, be grateful, and find joy and curiosity with life, his Ancestors and Christ. And his jokes are sure to return before long. A (self-titled) larrikin, to be sure, but following the path laid before him by the Ancestors and Christ faithfully, patiently and in gratitude. The two decades I have known him, his life has, for the most part, been lived recollected and forwards, and following loss, his life and his world have been restored and renewed with meaning and purpose.

7.4 In Between Repetitions – Sustaining Faith and Second Immediacy

Faith in the Ancestors and/or God can entail long stretches of time where they are not present. Their absence is a crucial element for testing or challenging faith and can be all the more defining when they do manifest into presence. This raises an important question regarding the nature of faith in its ebbs and flows.

Looking at my discussion with Roy about his relationship to Christ in the previous chapter, we learnt it had been there all along. However, we also learnt that there have been times Christ had been absent from his mind, and times the Lord's presence had been stronger in Roy's life, such as when he was at Cairns Hospital. If we look at his faith in the *Kubirri* dream and vision, there was adversity, and ridicule from other *bama* along the way. But Roy's faith was not lost, he kept the dream alive within himself and had faith in that he was looked after. What I have been suggesting is that, ultimately, what he had faith in was not a manifestation of a specific, concrete building, or even health recovery when he had his heart attack, but that he was following a path set before him by someone grounded in the eternal – come what may. I have no direct access to Roy's thinking, but it is my impression over the years we have been in each other's lives, that he is adept at expecting faith's victory, as well as not being easily thrown off course by adverse events for particularly long.

Kierkegaard (1990) had things to say about such things, and I quote at length:

> When everything went wrong for you, when everything you had slowly built up vanished instantly into thin air and you laboriously had to begin all over again, when your arm was weak and unsteady, then you held fast to the expectancy of faith – which is victory. Even if you did not tell others, lest they mock you because in all your misery you still expected victory, you nevertheless hid your expectancy in your innermost heart. "The happy days are surely able to embellish my faith," you said; "I adorn it with wreaths of joy – but they cannot demonstrate my faith; the hard times can surely bring tears to my eyes and grief to my mind, but they still cannot rob me of my faith." And even if adversity did not stop, your soul remained gentle. "It is really beautiful," you said, "that God does not want to appear to me in visible things; we are parted only to meet again. I could not wish to remain a child who demands demonstrations, signs and wonderous acts every day. If I went on being a child, I could not love with all my strength and with my whole soul. Now that we are separated; we do not see each other every day, but we meet secretly in the victorious moment of faithful expectancy. (p. 26)

A crucial point to counter adversities as those listed in Kierkegaard's quote above is that a person of faith seeks no assurance or substantiation of her expectancy (seeking assurance is how one commonly goes astray and loses faith). Very few can live up to the examples set by Job and Abraham, including Roy, but Kierkegaard sets them up as ideals for faith, ideals that Roy's life, aware of them or not, at times converges with. It is no easy matter to have faith, says Kierkegaard: Every time one catches oneself not expecting victory, one can

know one does not have faith. Faith is thus something one must come into again and again – something to be repeated, something to be recollected as one looks ahead.

In some ways adversity can fuel faith, it can fill one with passion to push through in spite of mocking comments or derailed undertakings, which presumably also played its part for Roy at times. But what about losing faith to the drudgery and grind of the everyday, to the nihilism of passionless, repetitive boredom? This brings us to my second response to my question that opened this section.

I suggest there is a certain "spill-over" from genuine repetition that works itself into day-to-day life. What I mean by spill-over is an appreciation and gratitude for the little things in life, and an increased ability to find actual joy in the repetitive tasks of daily life, as a lingering vigour following an encounter with Ancestors or Christ.

I have touched on these things already, by pointing out Roy's day to day spirit, "steady, steady", and his joy in completing the steps. Roy has bad days like the rest of us, do not get me wrong. But Roy, as well as many other *bama* I know, have a rare ability to reset and be wholly present in the moment, take it in and bring joy to it.[104] I see him get up at the break of dawn going to work early, making the fire for smoking down the tourists, putting on the billy tea and damper, observing his natural surroundings with keen interest. He does this with quiet attention, and sitting down with a cuppa, taking it all in before the tour groups start to roll in. At camp in Cape Tribulation, I saw the same. Often, by the time I got up, the fire had already settled to a steady glow, Roy sitting with cuppa in hand in quiet patience for me to rise, yet eager for the day and its promise. He would invariably have some kind of cheeky joke about my slow awakening, in which his life was deemed more desirable than mine, but it was more of a caring brother's confirmation of our idiosyncrasies, and part of our ongoing competitiveness. If there is a pattern in Roy's search for meaning, for "clues" in life, it is this, his detailed attention and openness to idiosyncrasy and peculiarities. In our walks, his skill in observance could not be rivalled (oh yes, I tried), no animal, no matter how still and camouflaged, would escape him. "It's easy, they show themselves to me" he would tell me. In the start, I hardly saw anything. My observation skills did improve over time. Once you have seen an animal the first time, such as the camouflaged Boyd's forest dragon, its profile, its stance, become more easily recognisable and discerned, as well as its usual types of hiding

[104] On a different, yet somewhat similar note, Stanner challenged people who took a Hobbesian view of Aboriginal life (as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short") to spend a few nights in an Aboriginal camp and "experience directly the unique joy in life which can be attained by a few people of few wants, an other-worldly cast of mind and a simple scheme of life which so shapes a day that it ends with communal singing and dancing in the firelight" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 70).

places. I would scan for these rigorously, but only once in my life did I spot a dragon before Roy (which I revelled in).

Viewing Roy's ability for spontaneous joy in the little things through a Kierkegaardian lens, one might think that these are instances Kierkegaard considered to be the "aesthete's immediacy", an "initial, premoral and prereligious connection with the world and others" (Mooney, 1998, p. 293) bound to end in "boredom and nihilism" once the novelty wears off. The fact that Roy continues to find joy in the same small things and chores, day after day, year after year, should provide sufficient evidence that this interpretation would not hold. Rather, I argue that it shares certain key features with what Kierkegaard called the "second immediacy" of faith.

Second immediacy is a singularly personal and intensified new way of seeing and relating to the world following repetition. "Second immediacy", in Mooney's (1998) rendition is "a vital connection through which things and persons matter, a connection more adequate to our human and spiritual needs" (p. 293). Roy has been taking tourists on walks, smoking them down, asking the Ancestors and the Lord to look after them, showing them his rainforest, spotting animals hidden among it, describing traditional plant use, demonstrating bush knowledge, telling Dreamtime stories, and sharing his knowledge with visitors from the outside world since the mid-eighties. When I lived in Cape Tribulation and later in the nearby Cow Bay, I got to know many non-Indigenous local and itinerant tourist operators and workers. When they spoke of tourists, it was not always in favourable terms. When Roy takes a group through the forest, he is interested in them and their lives, and he is eager to share his world with them, and make them see their own world ever so slightly differently. I usually asked him, "how was your walk?", and he would reply with gusto "great!" before launching into details of animals they had seen, what the tourists had said, or "I had a couple from Norway today, I told them about you and how you have become part of us, how you have learnt bush skills and traditional knowledge. They couldn't believe it!".[105]

Kierkegaard saw second immediacy as a regaining, or some sort of return to, an openness like that of a child, before distrust enters its life. Yet, as we learnt from Kierkegaard's quote above, "I could not wish to remain a child who demands demonstrations, signs and wondrous acts every day. If I went on being a child, I could not love with all my

[105] I know he's not making these things up to butter me up, as once I stayed a night at a backpacker's hostel in Cairns, I overheard one backpacker telling another about this amazing tour guide at Mossman Gorge called "Dingo": "A Norwegian student had come to learn about his culture, and had ended up living with him in the bush for a year, learning bush skills and Dreamtime stories. Imagine that!" Indeed, imagine that. I am lucky and forever grateful to Roy that I did.

strength and with my whole soul" (Kierkegaard, 1990, p. 26). In *Practice in Christianity* Kierkegaard wrote that "to *be* a child" when one is a child is easy. But to become a child again, and to "become nothing" and selfless is what is "decisive" for appropriating second immediacy (Kierkegaard, cited in Stokes, 2016, p. 149). In *The Lily of the Field and the Bird of the Air* (Kierkegaard, 2016) it is elaborated that this is to "become nothing before God", and that one must "first seek the kingdom of God" ahead of any other worldly pursuit. Stokes (2016) has called this process towards second immediacy a sort of "emptying-out of agency" (p. 153).

Recently, Joel Robbins (2024) noted in an afterword to a collection of articles on transcendence in Islam that all of the papers reframed transcendence as a phenomenon related to human passivity rather than agency. Robbins (2024) argued that "transcendence is distinguished by the passivity that it demands in order to show itself", and that, "Human will must quiet itself, take itself sufficiently out of the center of its own world, if something other than immanence can be recognised as having arrived" (p. 90).

Relinquishing of one's self-agency can be challenging for those raised in a secularised and modern world, where passivity can only be judged as a "diminution of one's rightful power" (Robbins, 2024, p. 91). For instance, Jean-Paul Baldacchino (2019) has noted that kneeling and prostration more generally is particularly hard for archetypal moderns: "Kneeling is a gesture that dramatically subverts the triumph of the naturalist modern secular subject" (p. 364). Based on his fieldwork with Catholic devotees, Baldacchino furthermore suggests that the embodied surrender of the anthropologist is crucial to engage intersubjectively with the ontologically other worlds of our informants. Kneeling as such was not called for in my fieldwork as it was not part of *bama* traditions, but a stilling of one's human will and surrender of control were seen as key qualities in cultivating a proper relation to the Ancestral and for its revelation. Importantly, these are inward and existential forms of surrender, and only minimally visible as outward gestures. Such inner forms of surrender are harder to discern than outward gestures, but on the other hand outward gestures, such as kneeling, can easily conceal a person's true inward orientation.

I cannot claim that Roy ever has fully emptied himself of agency or become perfectly selfless, but there is an undeniable emphasis in his orientation that true and fundamental agency lies with the Ancestors and God, rather than with himself (as discussed in chapter 3).

This orientation is even evident in his day job as a tour guide where spotting wildlife is integral. As we saw above, it was not his active searching that gave results: "it's easy" to spot them he told me, "they show themselves to me". I think "quietly receptive" and

"patiently present" better captures Roy's orientation than "passivity", which might be interpreted as inactivity. Clues to Ancestral agency is what Roy seeks in dreams and in the quietness of nature; it guides him in his observations, approach and conduct. His foremost aim, his "agency" as I imagine he would see it, is to become still enough to recognise and *follow* the tracks left by his Ancestors.

"To become nothing", Kierkegaard (2016) wrote, one must learn to be silent: "In this silence is the beginning, which is *first* to seek God's kingdom" (p. 17). The teachers in this are "the lily of the field" and "the bird of the air". By observing the bird and the lily, by imitating them, we can learn silence, obedience before God, and joy. "The joyful teachers of joy" (Kierkegaard, 2016, p. 74) teach us how to be present to oneself: "The lily and the bird are joy, because by silence and unconditional obedience they are entirely present to themselves in being today" (Kierkegaard, 2016, p. 77). Nature can be brutal, and life precarious, but they manage this quite plainly and simply, Kierkegaard wrote, and "get rid of this tomorrow as if it did not exist" (p. 82).

In the lily and bird discourse, Kierkegaard lets observations of nature point beyond nature, reminiscent of Lévi-Strauss' bricolage (Lévi-Strauss, 2021). I imagine what Kierkegaard tells us would resonate with Roy, both in using animals and their behaviour as clues to the eternal, but also in the role he assigns to silence. I had to learn silence on many levels in my fieldwork. When to be silent on walks, and also to sit in silence with elders such as Oldfella who used to visit me on weekends in Cape Tribulation. A *kukubaka* is one who constantly chatters, and it is no badge of honour in Yalanji idiom.

It is in silence one can become aware of the Ancestors' presence in nature around oneself. One is silent, or speaks in hushed voices, when approaching "story places" or sacred sites. I remember one Yalanji man, who stayed behind alone in our camp one night while we went to the pub. He had the battery radio on full blast and was singing loudly when we arrived back late at night (we were on foot and could hear him from a long way away). Roy explained to me that he did this because he was scared and wanted to "drown out" any *dubu* presences. Roy is silent and patient when he observes his natural surroundings, looking for signs, "letting them show themselves to him". Kierkegaard's notion "second immediacy" has been helpful for me, to tease out what I see as salient aspects of Roy's mode of orientation towards Ancestral clues in nature, his understanding of Ancestral agency, and his ability to be present in the present moment and open towards the future.

7.5 Conclusion

If in *recollection* living is eclipsed by understanding, in *repetition*, the temporal movement is turned facing forwards, and understanding is sublated into living, or "recollecting forwards" as Kierkegaard has it. The endeavour in recollection is tracing the new back to the old (the oldness of the new) – or "incorporating the new into the old" as in Deger's formulation earlier. The task of repetition, however, is that the old becomes new (the newness of the old) (Eriksen, 2000, p. 13) – or indeed as Deger put it, "making the old new again". According to Deger, Yolngu understand repetition as a means of enlivenment, not deathly rote repeating (Gurrumuruwuy et al., 2019). Likewise, genuine repetition does not mean recurrence of the same, but rather "'looping back' whereby the possibilities generated by the past are taken up and actualized in the present" (Browne, 2013, p. 912). It should be clear then, that the term "repetition" is not understood by Kierkegaard in its ordinary sense, as the occurrence of identical moments in sequence – or that something in the world simply recurs. Instead, repetition occurs to the world itself:

> The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been – otherwise it could not be repeated – but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. 149)

So, what does this mean applied to what we have learnt from Roy? One should be rightfully cautious of imposing Western thought categories onto Aboriginal orientations, but here, I find, is one worth considering. If nothing else, Kierkegaard's notion of repetition does not "challenge [Aboriginal people's] own hopes, indeed, their beginnings" (Stanner, 2009b, p. 67). Instead, it offers us a way of thinking that resonates with my observations of Roy's confident/uncertain approach in making Ancestral Dreamings come alive again and his compelling openness to life and what the morrow brings. Within a paradigm of repetition, as presented in Kierkegaard's last line in the quote above, one can say: "Dreamtime events, which have been, now come into existence". In the moment of a Dreamstory realisation, as in the moment of repetition, the past becomes new. For Roy, at the very minimum, *Kubirri* has come alive again as a protector of his people – through a very real cultural centre, gate, and Indigenous jobs. In his moment of realisation, Roy has become contemporaneous with his Ancestors, and the Ancestral has made a breakthrough into the temporal – has become a

presence in the present. Repetition is, as summed up by Kierkegaard scholar Eriksen, “a moment in which *nothing has changed but everything has become new*” (Eriksen, 2000, p. 111). With this lively paradoxical imagery, I can fathom what I initially failed to grasp when Roy told me his *Kurriyala* dream and how he was there, at the time and place when the serpent created the waterhole – equally real, as present, as contemporary – as I am now, pressing each letter that make up these words on my screen.

8 In-Conclusion: The Unreasonable Paradox of Truth

Roy's Ancestral encounters in dream and awake presented me with something inexplicable to my mind. His Dreamstories confronted me with seeming paradox. Living with Roy "on Country", I too experienced similar encounters, first in a dream, then awake. After years of thinking, analysing and writing about these events, they remain inexplicable and paradoxical. My claim is that this, however, does not render them untrue.

To me they are decidedly true, and I changed to realign myself to that truth. Such a change is, according to Kierkegaard, becoming more fully oneself, a self inwardly aligning to truth in subjectivity – temporarily becoming truth. Such moments of transformative faith are transitory, yet lastingly impactful, and can occasion shifts in orientation. Becoming what one already is, is however, not a change, fundamentally speaking. What changed more fundamentally was the meaning of what truth is, for me. Truth (when relating to the paradoxical-religious) has shifted from something that gathers its force from objective measures or internal logic to become something that stuns you out of rational objectivity, trumps it, overwhelms you, and thrusts you into a sharp awareness of partaking in something more vital than before. Unlike claims that "moderns" are becoming more and more "individualistic" in present times; being shocked into full subjectivity was for me simultaneously the humbling sensation of becoming emplaced within a larger and meaningful existence – and becoming alive to it. Truth becomes something passionate, as Roy is in his Ancestral encounters, which he often makes known by adding "it shocked me" with "*mungka* (hair) standing and all". Truth encompasses a relational ontology where Ancestors and descendants are mutually reliant, "looking after" each other. As Roy says, by sharing Dreamstories the Ancestral comes alive again. This sense of truth opens one up to wonder instead of closing one off from it. It changes your view, seeing the old with fresh eyes. Truth is, from this shifted viewpoint, a becoming – a moment of becoming contemporaneous with the Ancestral – a moment that, as Roy puts it, "has no time in it". This shift in viewpoint allowed me to appreciate Roy's seemingly paradoxical truth statements, such as becoming contemporaneous with Ancestors in dream, as true. All this, as I have come to see it, can be captured in Kierkegaard's (2009a) apparently paradoxical statement "subjectivity is truth".

I realise that this thesis might seem like a strange conjunction in our discipline, bringing unique thoughts and experiences drawn from a Kuku Yalanji elder, a Danish Christian philosopher and myself together in an ethnography like this. But this is where I have been led in trying to do my field experiences justice. I find that Kierkegaard's inferred

metaphysical position of positing an absolute truth (of God), that humans can never establish an objective scientific method to understand or adequately account for, sit well with *bama* notions of the Dreaming. By drawing a boundary between two domains of knowing – *in objectivity,* where the objective is a systematic search for truth of what something can mean for all – and *in subjectivity,* where one seeks the truth in what it all means for oneself – Kierkegaard has carved out a philosophy which has room for paradoxical faith, and moreover shields it from scientific overreach into the terrain of objective uncertainty which properly belongs to subjectivity. Paradoxes arise when these two ways of knowing truth are brought together. While both ways of knowing have their respective strengths, weaknesses and applications – only subjectivity, in the inwardness of faith, can bring someone to truth in questions that have no objective answers, such as the Ancestral paradoxes presented in this thesis. Perceiving Roy's truth statements from this angle, does not violate them, "bracket them out" or treat them as social epiphenomena. What it does, though, is take them seriously.

But, by my own standards, I have transgressed. I have crossed the boundaries of objective and subjective knowing by objectifying a metaphysic based on subjectivity. Moreover, I have tried to explain "subjectivity is truth" objectively, instead of sticking to the paradox. I take it back. Consider it withdrawn. More properly I should have confined myself to simply state that, "Paradox is truth". Or if I were to elaborate a little further, without crossing the line: Paradox is the only objective expression truth in subjectivity can take.

8.1 Wrangling Truth into Words, Without Stifling It in the Process

The trouble, as indicated in the paragraph above, is making such a uniquely subjective sense of truth available to others without abrogating it – which cannot be done. I must, therefore, by my own standards, acknowledge the paradox of my entire PhD project. Writing this thesis, attempting to wrangle the Dreaming and experiences of it into text, is in a certain sense an exercise in futility: a task of conceptualising the ineffable, or "thinking the unthinkable" as Kierkegaard would have put it. Yet, such is the paradoxical nature of thinking Kierkegaard says – a drive to understand what one cannot understand.[106]

This position, that one cannot truly grasp the Dreaming conceptually, has been my take on the Dreaming ever since my first fieldwork in 2002. After quitting anthropology, much for this reason, I came back to it due to my MA supervisor's seductive argument that

[106] As an empirical counterpart to this, Marika Moisseeff (2002) has shown how Arrernte people use *tjurunga* (sacred objects) to "represent the unrepresentable" (p. 254) dimension of the Dreaming.

the challenge was all the more reason to do it. My position developed as I became inspired by Kierkegaard.

Kierkegaard was in turn inspired by Socrates' professed ignorance and arguments about knowledge and wisdom more generally.[107] When Socrates' friend Chaerephon told him that the Oracle at Delphi had said that none was wiser than Socrates, he set out to prove Chaerephon wrong. Unsurprisingly, Socrates found people who knew things he did not, especially people with more specific or expert knowledge, such as how to make shoes or sail ships. However, Socrates also observed a tendency in that these experts often thought themselves experts beyond their field of expertise. Upon Socrates' cross-examinations, they soon proved not to have understood what they claimed to have understood in the first place. As Socrates, unlike his interlocutors, from the outset acknowledged not to have the answer to his questions, he could conclude that the Oracle had been right in one sense; he was wiser than the others in that *he did not think he knew what he in fact could not know*. This insight has become known as "socratic ignorance" (or sometimes "socratic wisdom"). Kierkegaard developed this stance by regarding the deeply ethical or religious as the objectively uncertain, and in a Socratic fashion sought to expose (especially Hegelian) philosophers and theologians professing to have objective answers to moral and religious questions, questions of objective uncertainty.

The epistemological questions regarding the origins of Dreaming stories (are they the results of human or Ancestral agencies?), and indeed their respective ontological statuses (by what criterion can they be said to be real) are questions penetrating peoples' existential and religious orientations, and are ultimately questions of objective uncertainty. While Socrates professed ignorance, he nonetheless relentlessly debated such fundamental questions, by confronting his fellow Athenians to become more cognisant of the limits of their knowing; to "know thyself", as the inscription over the entrance to the Oracle of Delphi enjoins. Kierkegaard followed Socrates' example by discussing the limits of what we can know by "objective reflection", but at the same time remained humbly committed to the big questions and what they can mean for any one person personally. While I write about "the Dreaming", or at least, the Ancestral dreams received by my friend Roy, I do so with an awareness of the limits of what I can possibly objectively say about "the Dreaming", and I aspire to remain acutely aware of the limitations in writing about it.

[107] Socrates (469-399 BCE), as portrayed in Plato's dialogues, typically professed ignorance regarding his own capacity to grasp central questions such as "what is virtue" or "piety" when discussing with his interlocutors.

There are thus definite dangers in presenting "glimpses" of truth (in faith) as it is experienced in dreams and waking life as I have done in this thesis. In its represented form, such a glimpse of truth becomes untruth. That is, truth in its objectified, abstract and arrested form cannot convey the moving sense of fullness of coming into the truth that is faith for an existing human being. I have made efforts throughout this thesis to stress this paradox, reiterating that truth in faith is holding on in passion to the uncertainty that the paradox expresses.

Nonetheless, by fixing a subjective experience of the Dreaming in writing, I make it an object – for "all to see" – which I mentioned above is counterproductive to an argument that "subjectivity is truth". For the "offended" reader, the represented glimpses simply confirm the offence and rejection of the paradox. But for the sympathetic reader, such direct communication of a truth experienced in faith can come to represent a glimpse to something "higher" or more profound – producing a growing desire to *understand* what the stories from Roy mean for all, to *understand* Kierkegaard's metaphysic underlying his notion of absolute truth, or to *understand* my own particular take based on the thinking on these two figures in my life – the danger being that the glimpse itself becomes more elevated than the passion of paradoxical faith (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 472). This has a parallel in my problem in trying to *understand* the temporality of Roy's *Big Kurriyala* Dreamstory described in chapter 5.

For me as author, a related danger is a certain meta-vanity: In arguing that the paradox cannot be understood rationally, and by "crucifying understanding", while continuing to use glimpses, moments, experiences of being in truth, in my ethnographic writing, I set myself apart as someone who seemingly nonetheless has *understood*, or worse, having thought to arrive at a "higher" understanding than others. The problem with the "presumptuous reborn" is, Kierkegaard says, that, "after entering the innermost sanctum of inwardness with faith against understanding, he would at the same time to be out in the streets and be matchlessly brilliant"[108] (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 474). I have struggled with such vanity, as when admitting to my ego being crushed when other anthropologists beat me to being the one who brought the thinking of Kierkegaard to bear on anthropology (see footnote 8 in chapter 1). Such vanities concerning the incomprehensibility of the paradox rests on the misunderstanding that one can have "more" or "less", "higher" or "lower", understanding of

[108] Not unlike the man who wanted to have faith but safeguards this by way of objective deliberation and approximation, described in chapter 4, who "will go so far as to say of himself that his belief is not like that of cobblers and tailors and of simple folk but only after long deliberation" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 177).

the incomprehensible. The humbling reminder Kierkegaard (2009a, p. 477) offers is that to understand faith is to revoke it.

8.2 Understanding the Incomprehensibility

So, what then, is the role of understanding and reason when faced with paradoxical alterity? Why all the trouble of writing if I never can come up with something conclusive? Why even attempt to understand something that cannot be understood?

Before this is addressed, it is important to appreciate that, as discussed in chapter 4, neither Kierkegaard nor I are anti-science or anti-realism. Rather, I follow Kierkegaard in pointing out there are limits to what we can objectively know, and at the same time point to the prospect of a truth beyond what we can understand. In this venture, I could, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, also draw on Ludwig Wittgenstein,[109] who, like Kierkegaard, criticised the scientistic propensity of his day to treat natural science as a universal model for all human investigations.[110] Wittgenstein certainly valued logic and rationality, but he did express caution against "the spirit in which science is carried on nowadays"; complaining that this view is incompatible with a sense of wonder:[111] "Man has to awaken to wonder — and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 5).

Regarding the role of reason vis-à-vis paradox, I follow Kierkegaard in that its role is to make "as much use of the understanding as is needed to become aware of the incomprehensible" and then to relate oneself to this, "believing against the understanding" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 476). In the conclusion of *the Tractatus*, Wittgenstein (2001) wrote that "anyone who understands me eventually recognizes [my propositions] as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps – to climb up beyond them. (He must so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it)" (p. 89). For both thinkers, conceptual understanding is useful as a step towards the realisation of understanding's own limits and its urge to go beyond itself.

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[109] Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein has been well documented. Wittgenstein ostensibly requested his sister send him books by Kierkegaard during his deployment in WW1. Wittgenstein has also remarked that "Kierkegaard was by far the most profound thinker of the last century" (cited in, Lippitt & Hutto, 1998, p. 285).

[110] This can be seen in Wittgenstein's criticism of James Frazer's scientistic approach to anthropology in *The Golden Bough* (Wittgenstein, 1993), where he rejects Frazer's attempts at explaining contemporary ceremonies by tracing their *causal origins* to past practices. Frazer's search for the harmony and consistency of general laws across cultures and times, also comes under criticism from Wittgenstein.

[111] This view, and its effects that Michael Scott called "wondercide", was also discussed in chapter 4.

From this angle, it makes sense that Kierkegaard in his book *Repetition* does not give definition to its central concept, repetition, but instead elaborates on failed attempts at it. In the appendix to the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript,* he states in regard to his pseudonymous works, that he as the author has "no opinion about them except as a third party" (Kierkegaard, 2009a, p. 528), leading some interpreters to infer he revoked his own text and that he intended the "absolute paradox" to be nothing more than nonsense.[112] This interpretation misses Kierkegaard's contention that the absolute paradox, that God came into existence in time as a particular human being, is not absurd *per se*, but *appears* as absurd from the viewpoint of objectivity (see also Lippitt & Hutto, 1998, p. 280). According to Lippitt and Hutto (1998), the absolute paradox will always remain a paradox, but

> *in and through* appropriating a theological concept; finding meaning for a concept like the absolute paradox (and the kenotic conception of God which it includes)[113], the believer makes a certain sense of this apparent nonsense. Again, this does not mean that she understands, purely intellectually, something the non-believer does not, but that she discovers a meaning for ideas like revelation and *kenosis in her life.* (p. 286, emphasis in original)

This expresses well my own transition when faced with the apparent paradoxical alterity of the Dreaming and how dreams revealed Ancestral truth and guidance to which I reoriented myself. It also affords a meaningful angle to perceive Roy's insistence that the dream that inspired the creation of the cultural centre "came" and was "given" to him by an Ancestral agent (discussed in chapter 3), (dis)placing his own agency as that of a recipient and follower who remains open, not controlling, to future outcomes (discussed in chapter 6 and 7).

Both Roy and I have shared our privately meaningful dreams to others, which I have pointed out can be counterproductive since they can "lose" their truth and meaning in objectivity. But as Roy has commented, that is why the Ancestor gave it to someone in the first place, to share the dream and make it come alive again. My guess is that Wittgenstein, were he to be in a similar situation, would have been more reluctant to do so. But he too, after carefully establishing the futility of it, gestures to something beyond language:

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[112] For a critique of such a view, see Lippitt and Hutto (1998).

[113] As noted in chapter 4, *kenosis* («emptying») refers to "(in Christianity) the fact of giving up something, especially used to refer to Jesus Christ giving up part of his nature as a god and becoming a human". More generally, "kenosis involves a gradual process of detachment from inessentials: possessions, clothing, material things, affections, family, power" ("Kenosis," 2024). In Roy's case, we can see a similar move in stripping away his own agency in favour of Ancestral agency and relinquishing control in the process of making the Cultural Centre "come to reality" discussed in chapter 3.

> Man feels the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything at all exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is also no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* bound to be mere nonsense. Nevertheless we do run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard too saw that there is this running up against something and he referred to it in a fairly similar way (as running up against paradox). This running up against the limits of language is *ethics*. I think it is definitely important to put an end to all the claptrap about ethics – whether intuitive knowledge exists, whether values exist, whether the good is definable. In ethics we are always making the attempt to say something that cannot be said, something that does not and never will touch the essence of the matter. It is a priori certain that whatever definition of the good that may be given – it will always be merely a misunderstanding to say that the essential thing, that what is really meant, corresponds to what is expressed. … But the inclination, the running up against something, *indicates something.* (Wittgenstein, cited in John, 1988, pp. 498-499, italics in original)

So, what is this "something", which cannot be accounted for adequately in language, that Wittgenstein gestures towards? What we can glean from this quote, is that it is to do with ethics, which ethics nonetheless cannot express, and that he employs "astonishment" at existence as an example of this tension between thought and what cannot be thought. According to Peter C. John (1988), further clues can be found in Wittgenstein's *Lecture on Ethics* where he elaborated on what he means by expressions such as "absolute good" and "ethical value": "In my case," Wittgenstein said, "it always happens that the idea of one particular experience presents itself to me …" and furthermore that, "I believe the best way of describing it is to say that when I have it *I wonder at the existence of the world*" (Wittgenstein, cited in John, 1988, p. 498, italics in original). To me this is a wonderfully subtle and restrained, yet powerful, invocation of how I felt after my medicine dream and *dubu* encounter in the shed. This is certainly also my perception of Roy's attitude following an Ancestral dream, yet he seems better equipped than me at savouring and sustaining these moments long after they occurred (see the "second immediacy" of faith discussed in chapter 7).

Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Roy (as well as many other Indigenous Australians)[114], in various ways and to varying degrees, all seem reluctant to make definite statements about this "something" that they nonetheless see as something absolute and fundamental to life. Instead, they gesture towards it, point to the wonder and passion that it may entail, but in indirect and tentative ways. As Roy told me: "When you have a dream it's very hard to talk to your friends and tell your friends about, what is the dream's all about, and how it's gonna come to reality". What all three share is an epistemological humility while acknowledging the absolute position of wonder in life. In fathoming the futility of giving this "something" an objective representation worthy of itself, they have instead turned their attention to becoming present to it themselves. It seems to me that in different ways all three of them see objective and abstract orientations as a (for Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, a *useful*) hindrance to knowing this "something" truthfully – that it can only be made truthful in subjectivity, in passionate inwardness.

In summing up, according to Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein, understanding, objective reflection, logics or more generally reason, are indeed useful, but only up to a point when trying to grapple with deeply ethical or religious aspects of existence. At that point, at the boundary between truth in objectivity and truth in subjectivity, stands paradox. To proceed one must engage existentially with the paradox (what does it mean for *me*?), which is triggered and amplified by the dialectic vacillations between doubt and belief. For any chance to gain truth in faith one must leap, in passion and wonder, leaving disengaged reason behind at the border. Only then can one hope to know the truth for oneself.

In this thesis I have been less restrained than Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Roy, by objectifying subjective truth in writing. In the past I have also attempted to reason out temporal paradoxes I have encountered in the field. And these days I have more or less slipped back into a lifestyle and orientation which in its day-to-day basis is of a mostly secular nature. In other words, I am a far cry away from living up to the standards of Kierkegaard's "knight of faith", or of Job in his mastery of "repetition", or indeed of Roy's "confident uncertainty" towards his Ancestors and wonder at existence as it presents itself to him day after day. But in focal moments, I have seen the truth in these approaches for myself – truths that have left me forever changed. There is a knowing that comes with this, a knowing that

[114] See for instance reports on *Pintupi* and *Belyuen* people using common phrases such as "I saw something" (Myers, 1986, p. 51) or "might be something" (Povinelli, 1993) discussed in chapters 3, 4 and more specifically in chapter 6.

has brought me closer to Roy and his "world", a knowing that this ethnography rests on and seeks expression through.

8.3 Tribute to Roy

On her deathbed, Roy's mum told him "yundu majamal" – that he would become a *maja*, a leader. He did not believe her at the time, but she was right. Roy is an exceptional human being who has defied the odds and have managed to accomplish more for his community than most would ever dare hope for.

In the ancient Yalanji Dreaming story of *Kubirri,* Yalanji people of the past were taught how to survive traditionally by *Kubirri* instructing them which fruits to eat and how to prepare toxic ones. This story has survived,[115] but countless other Dreaming stories throughout Australia have been lost since the coming of Europeans. Stanner (2009a) once remarked that "The Dreaming and The Market are mutually exclusive" (p. 163). My claim is that Roy's life, his dreams and deeds, shows that they need not be. Firstly, because this old Dreaming story itself became an integral part of the interpretive guided walks that Roy and other tour guides have been sharing with tourists since the mid-eighties, ensuring its continued cultural relevance and supplementary monetary value within the market economy. Although the community-run *Kuku Yalanji Dreamtime Tours* was truly a great tourist venture, it was limited in scope, and the vast majority of tourists bypassed their souvenir shed and guided walk to do their own walk up at the Mossman Gorge National Park. Secondly, and significantly, in Roy's Dreamstory, however, *Kubirri* showed Roy how Yalanji people (and not just a handful of tour-guides) can survive in modern Australia. With Roy's unwavering commitment to follow up on his Ancestrally given dream, and the eventual realisation of the gate controlling the tourist traffic and the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre, a way has been paved for contemporary Yalanji people to make a living: as tour guides, bus drivers, gardeners, handymen, chefs, baristas, waiters, cleaners, receptionists, office workers, managers, artists and craftspeople. This is not a turning away from Ancestral traditions; it sustains it by being relevant, an actuality, for *bama* lives within modernity. This significant job creation, springing out from an Ancestral dream, demonstrates the feasible non-dichotomous nature of the Dreaming and the Market. It transcends the traditional/modern categories all together by making the Ancestral stories and knowledge come alive again.

[115] In part also thanks to Dennis Field recording this story down from Yalanji elders (Field et al., 1987).

Roy's achievements in life, for himself and those around him, are well established. But to me, it is the man – in his way of being, his example – that stands out. For over two decades I have been seeking to see the world as he sees it and to become more like him in my orientation to life. I am not saying that Roy's life is better than mine – his hardships have undoubtedly been harder – but it is "greater" in the sense that his life is more meaningful, to himself and others around him. I feel privileged to have been part of his life and fortunate to come into his life at the opportune moment to witness his passage from a dreamer to a realiser of dreams. I aspire to be more like him; to not get dragged down with the hardships of life, but instead meeting each day by becoming present to it; secure in my past and with open wonder and curiosity to what the day brings.

Although Roy appreciates the acknowledgements he receives from the wider public, he continues to emphasise that the dream that started all this was given to him – gesturing to its Ancestral creative source. These gestures are seldom heard or reproduced in the media or in the accolades from government officials. The subtitle to this thesis reads: "An existential and faithful approach to *the dreams and deeds* of Kuku Yalanji elder Roy Gibson". After the realisation of the Mossman Gorge Cultural Centre in 2012, we have seen how the Mayor of Cairns Regional Council as well as the Prime Minister's office of the Australian Government have acknowledged and celebrated Roy's worldly achievements – his *deeds* (see chapter 3). In 2018, the Prince of Wales, now King Charles III of the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth, visited Mossman Gorge to meet Roy, joining the worldly choir of celebrants. His deeds are thus acknowledged and celebrated at all administrative levels available for someone who calls the high banks of Mossman River his home. It is my wish that my thesis gives his unsung Ancestral dreams and the lead actors therein their due.

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