

The Spirit of Uluru

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1 Introduction

Uluru, or Ayers Rock as it is known to westerners, is a place of deep spiritual and cultural significance to the local aboriginal people, the Anangu. I visited this place in 1998 and 2003. This article is a reflection of what I learned and experienced during these visits. In this article I will try to give an insight in the meaning of Uluru to the Anangu. I hope this page will contribute in a better understanding of this powerful place and Anangu culture in general.

Uluru and Kata Tjuta area part of the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park which lies in the red heart of Australia, about 350 km from Alice Springs. The area is owned by the traditional custodians, the Anangu. About 18 km from Uluru there is the Ayers Rock Resort, which is like a little Disney Land in the desert. It is the only place to stay relatively near the park and caters for all budgets, from campsite to four star hotel. The park is one of the major tourist attractions in Australia. About 300,000 people a year stay in the resort to visit the National Park. The picture below is a view of Uluru from the Imalung lookout point near the campsite.



Figure 1: View from Imalung Lookout

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Throughout this page I have used some Aboriginal words. These words come from Pitjantjara and Yankunytjatjara, dialects of the Western Desert Language spoken in this region. Prior to settlement by the English, there was no lingua franca, no shared language, by means of which a person could make himself or herself understood from one end of the continent to the other. Some authors claim that there were previously around 700 tribes, each having its own distinct dialect or language.

Most of the information presented in these pages comes from brochures available at the cultural centre in the National Park. The cultural centre contains some are some interesting displays on the meaning of Uluru and Anangu culture.

The image below is the 1998 version of the ticket to the National Park. The artwork is from Kunbry Peipei:

“They say that from their home country, all the Liru men came, headed for Mutitjulu. They came to spear Kuniya, all the holes from their spears are there, in the rock. That’s the Kuniya man, speared. This is important law belonging to all Anangu, to all traditional owners. On the ticket, that’s the poor pierced Kuniya man.”



Figure 2: Park entrance ticket by Kunbry Peipei

Visitors are asked not to throw away the ticket because it is significant to the Anangu who have allowed the Tjukurpa to be used in this way. Use of aboriginal symbols by people who are not initiated in Tjukurpa is a serious thing to the Australian aboriginal. Most symbols are considered sacred and can therefore not be reproduced as one likes.

2 Tjukurpa

Tjukurpa is the foundation of Anangu culture. It provides a spiritual basis of Anangu culture, rules for behaviour and knowledge of the environment. It is the law for caring for one another and for the land that supports people’s existence. Tjukurpa refers to the time of creation as well as the present time. Tjukurpa defines the relationship between people, plants, animals and physical features of the land. Knowledge of how

these relationships came to be, what they mean and how they must be maintained, is explained in the Tjukurpa.

Other Aboriginal people use different words for Tjukurpa. Throughout the Great Victoria Desert the term used is djuguba or djugurba; in the Rawlinson Range, duma; in the Balgo area, djumanggani; in the eastern Kimberleys, ngarunnganni and so on. It is usually translated as 'Creative Period', 'Ancestral Times', 'Dreaming', 'Dreamtime', 'Eternal Dreamtime', and so on.

Moon over Uluru Tjukurpa is more than a dream, it permeates the here and now and contains all the wisdom and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, which developed over tens of thousands of years. Dreamtime only refers to the spiritual level of Tjukurpa and the creation myths that are an important part of it. Dreamtime is only a small part of what Tjukurpa is.

Uluru and Kata Tjuta are very important in Tjukurpa. They are visible evidence that the ancestral beings still exist. In the beginning the world was unformed and featureless. Ancestral beings emerged from this emptiness and travelled all over, creating all living things and landmarks in the desert landscape today such as Uluru.

Tjukurpa is always surrounded by secrecy. The stories that are known to us are only the surface of the complex system that is Tjukurpa. Details of these stories are only to be known by initiated men or women. Initiation is a very important part of growing up in Australian aboriginal cultures. Knowledge is only shared with those who are ready. As I am not initiated to Tjukurpa, my story on this website is only my interpretation of what I do know about Anangu culture.

Tjukurpa stories are depicted in the art of the first Australians. They use traditional symbols which can be read in many ways and because of this, even the secret, sacred parts of Tjukurpa can be painted, but remain hidden from the non initiated. The artist, and the ones who are initiated to the story, are the only people who fully understand the meaning of the work.

Anangu teach Tjukurpa to their children and other people through story telling and art. The oldest still surviving examples are the petroglyphs, or rock carvings. Many places around Uluru there are rock paintings. The paintings are very sacred to the Anangu. There used to be a photo of some rock paintings on this page, but I was asked by the people who maintain the park to remove this, because they are considered too sacred to be displayed in this way.

In Aboriginal languages there are no separate words for believing and knowing. In the languages of the western world there is a distinct difference between these two concepts. Religion and science are separated from each other and only what is accepted as scientific is accepted as truth.



Figure 3: Lonely Tree Near Uluru

This has been only the case since the 16th century, the beginning of the age of reason. It was René Descartes who was one of the first to clearly distinguish between knowing and believing. According to Descartes, knowledge can only be produced by using the right method, which according to him is mathematics. The problem with strictly separating knowing and believing is that one will always judge all experiences from one or the other viewpoint. Scientists will dispute all spiritual wisdom because they only look at it from their scientific perspective. Religious people, on the other hand, look at things from a spiritual perspective and sometimes dispute scientific knowledge. Both perspectives are equally valid and there is no gain in prevailing one over the other.

The Anangu people have their own interpretation of the creation of Uluru, distinct from the geological story told by the Minga, the white people. In the mythological story Uluru was formed by two boys piling up mud and so forming the monolith. The geological story does not deviate that much from the mythological story. According to this story Uluru was formed by an ancient alluvial fan of a river, which is also a big pile of mud.

The word myth is used in two contradictory ways. In one sense it refers to a narrative or story, or a series of songs, which is of religious significance. In the other it has the meaning of false belief. In this discussion myth is used in the first sense only, it is believed to be true. Both sides of the creation story are true. The geological story about alluvial fans is true on a material level. The story of the two boys piling up mud is true on a spiritual level. Both are complementary creation myths and both are just as true, whatever true means anyway . . .

3 To climb or not to climb?

Most people who visit Uluru only go there to do ‘the climb’ and look at the spectacular sunsets. But there is much more to Uluru than being the largest monolith in the world. Every precipice, cave, gutter and mark on Uluru commemorates the exploits and adventures of the creatures of the Tjukurpa. To the Anangu, Uluru can be read like a book. They do not have the need to build amazing temples for their spirits because all they need can be found in nature itself. Climbing Uluru shows disrespect for Anangu culture. It is like going to a church and sitting on the altar.

The existing Uluru climb is the traditional route taken by ancestral Mala men on their arrival at Uluru. Because this path is of great spiritual significance, Anangu rarely climb Uluru. In a brochure available at the Cultural Centre in the park Tjamiwa writes:

“That is a really important sacred thing that you are climbing . . . You shouldn’t climb. It is not the real thing about this place. The real thing is listening to everything. Listening and understanding everything. Why are we going to tell you to go away (and ask you not to climb)? So that you understand this . . . so that you understand, we are informing you: Don’t climb. And maybe that makes you a bit sad. But any way, that is what we have to say. We are obliged to say. And all the tourists will brighten up and say: ‘Oh, I see. This is the right way. This is the thing that is right.’ This is the proper way: No climbing.”

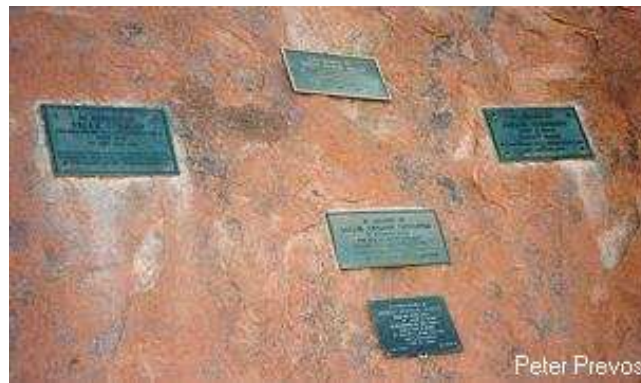


Figure 4: Memorial Plaques at the base of the climb

Climbing the rock is also dangerous and many people have died doing so. The plaques on the base of the climb are silent witnesses of some of these deaths. One of the plaques says “. . . it was his lifetime dream to climb Ayers Rock”.

The best way to experience Uluru is to walk around it. Passing by the sacred sites and learn about Tjukurpa.

4 Kata Tjuṯa

About forty-two kilometers away from Uluru lies Kata Tjuṯa or The Olgas. It is a vast area of more than 20 square km of enormous red domes. The area is extremely significant to Anangu. Much of the area of Kata Tjuṯa is associated with ritual information and activities which remain the exclusive knowledge of initiated men and is therefore restricted. Because of this, no details or performances of ceremonies or inma associated with Kata Tjuṯa are known to the outside world.

Therefore I have nothing much to say about Kata Tjuṯa, except for this picture.



Figure 5: Kata Tjuṯa

5 Uluru

A great deal of the Anangu Tjukurpa is related to Uluru. There are many sacred sites around Uluru and three of them have been fenced off because of their great significance to the Anangu. Sacred sites are distinct areas where, according to Tjukurpa, only initiated Anangu women and/or men are allowed to go. These places are very powerful and in Anangu law it is both unsafe and forbidden for men to enter or look intently at women's sacred sites, and for women, children and uninitiated men to enter or look at men's sacred sites.

It is also not allowed to photograph these sites because of their spiritual significance. Judging by the signboards surrounding the sacred areas this is taken very seriously by the local authorities.

There are many mythologies surrounding Uluru. The details of all these stories however, cannot be told to the uninitiated. For the Anangu this is one of the most crucial aspects of understanding the Tjukurpa. The knowledge is given to the right people as they grow and become ready to accept the responsibility that such knowledge bestows upon somebody. This is why there are only few stories known about the Tjukurpa surrounding Uluru.

Several stories relating to Uluru that be told to the Minga. One of these is the Mala story. Many visible features on the northern face of Uluru are connected to this story. This story is copied from the booklet sold at the Cultural Centre in the National Park. In the Cultural Centre there is also a video display showing some of the inma (ceremonies) related to the Mala story.

On the Mala walk, you will see some of the very places where the Mala prepare for ceremony. As you walk through this you will be surrounded by the Mala Tjukurpa.

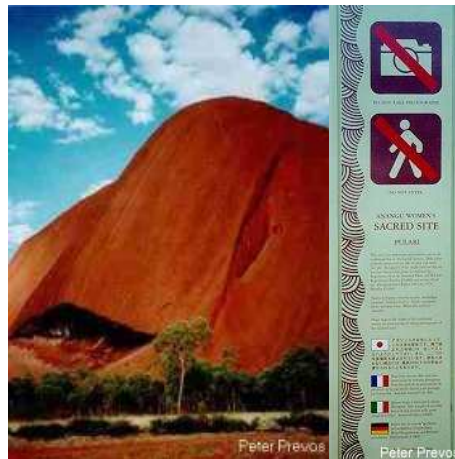


Figure 6: Whale face and warning sign

In the beginning, Mala men, women and children must travel a long way from the west and the north to reach Uluru. When they arrive they camp at separate sites from one another in groups of young men; old men; young and single women; and old and married women. They do this because they are here for an inma.

Some Mala men, who come from the west, carry the ceremonial pole, Ngaltawata. They scramble quickly to the top of Uluru and plant the pole in the ground at the most northern corner to begin the Inma. From this moment on, everything becomes a part of the ceremony. Even everyday jobs like hunting, gathering and preparing food, collecting water, talking to people or just waiting, are done now in a proper way for ceremony. This has become law for men, women and children ever since.

The Mala are happy and busy. Suddenly people from the west come with an invitation to join another Inma. The Mala must refuse, as they have already started their own ceremony. The people from the west return in great anger at the insult. They plan to wreak vengeance upon the Mala in a terrible way.

Across the land comes an evil, black dog-like creature: Kurpany. He has been created by these people in the west to destroy the Mala ceremony. Luunpa, the kingfisher bird, cries a warning to the Mala. It is ignored, and Kurpany attacks and kills many Mala men, women and children. In terror the remaining Mala flee to the south with Kurpany chasing them all the way.

There are two signposted walks around Uluru. The Mutitjulu and the Mala walk. Both walks deal with a part of the Tjukurpa surrounding Uluru.

The waterholes are considered sacred places because they give life to people, animals and plants. Walking around Uluru one sees all the different colours and textures of the rock which are stunningly beautiful. Sometimes the skin looks like the skin of a gigantic petrified reptile.

I walked around Uluru twice and every time I saw new things. At times I was resting, admiring the beauty of the rock, thinking of the ancient stories that are contained in this monolith. For thousands of years people have worshipped this place as a bringer of life and a keeper of secrets.

6 Final thoughts

A culture can be described by three basic attitudes. First the attitude towards reality, second the attitude towards other humans and last the attitude towards the transcendent. There are major differences between Anangu and western culture in all three areas.

6.1 Attitude towards reality

In the western world, manipulation is the norm for dealing with reality. Engineers - like myself - change the physical world around us. Australian aboriginal people, on the other hand, used to barely change the land around them. In the early days of anthropology, cultures were judged by the way they manipulate reality. Cultures who do not know permanent buildings etcetera were considered primitive.

The Anangu do not need to manipulate the land around them too much. They clean the waterholes to prevent leaves from rotting inside them and they practice fire stick farming to control their surroundings, but there is no need for them to manipulate reality to the extent western culture does. They have no need to build elaborate temples because all they need is found in nature.

6.2 Attitude towards other humans

Australian aboriginal society is a tribal society. There are very strict rules inside and between the tribes. The key word is initiation. The older somebody becomes, the more they know about Tjukurpa and the more important they are.

In western culture this attitude is dominated by self determination. But too much freedom can result in chaos. Knowledge is available to all, the heated discussions on the suitability of certain material for children is a good example of how the pre-modern attitude collides with the post-modern idea of freedom.

6.3 Attitude towards the transcendent

The attitude towards the transcendent in western culture is dominated by detachment. When Christianity came to Europe all the old gods and spirits who resided in trees, the land, rocks, water were abandoned. In their place came one God who resides in heaven, far away from the people. In Catholic churches rituals are performed by selected men and the people can only look at these rituals, without any participation.¹

¹Carlos Eduardo Hernández Castillo from Colombia write to me: "However, I also would like to tell you that I don't agree with your sentence about the Catholic Church rituals. We participate in the rituals, although they are directed by the priest. Indeed, the most important part of the mass (receiving the Holy Communion) requires the direct participation of the community. Of course, you can decide to just look, but if you really

In the world view of the first Australians, the spiritual and the material are one and always connected. Rituals are performed by everybody who has passed a certain initiation, men and women both have their own set of inma. The material and the spiritual are one world in which we live.

7 Glossary

- Anangu: The local aboriginal people.
- Inma: Ritual or ceremony.
- Kata Tjuta: 'Many Heads', Anangu name for The Olgas.
- Mala: Ancestral beings.
- Minga: Ants, also used for tourists.
- Mutitjulu: Waterhole at the base of Uluru.
- Tjukurpa: The traditional law and mythology.
- Uluru: Original name for Ayers Rock. Has no specific meaning.



Figure 7: Sunset over Kata Tjuta

want to enjoy the ceremony, you should participate as much as you can (in fact, you are encouraged to do this).”