

MYTH, RITUAL AND THE SACRED

Uluru as a Sacred Space*

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1 Introduction

Uluru is a place of deep spiritual and cultural significance to the local aboriginal people, the Anangu. It is also an important tourist destination which has become the most famous icon of the Australian outback. In the next two paragraphs I shall give a brief description of how Uluru or Ayers Rock is experienced by the Anangu and the non-aboriginal visitors. In this Brief Study I shall use the name Uluru when writing from the Anangu perspective and Ayers Rock when writing from the visitors' perspective.

2 Uluru

Uluru is not looked upon by the Anangu as one single spiritual object. The formation and creation of the specific characteristics of Uluru are the outcome of several stories and myths which are not necessarily connected.¹ The spiritual story about Uluru is based on the so called Tjukurpa of the Anangu people. In western cultures the Tjukurpa is frequently described as 'dreaming' or 'dreamtime'. This translation is inaccurate because the Tjukurpa does not refer to ideas obtained in a dream.² Tjukurpa is surrounded in secrecy, the details of all the stories can not be told to everyone. Most Australian Aboriginal words which may be translated as 'sacred'

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¹Anne J Kerle, *Uluru, Kata Tjuta & Watarrka: Ayers Rock the Olga's and Kings Canyon, Northern Territories*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 1995).

²Ibid.

imply some degree of secrecy.³ It is therefore neither possible nor permissible to fully understand the complexities of the Tjukurpa. Only few stories about Uluru are known to the uninitiated.

Kata Tjuta, another monolith nearby Uluru, is a particularly important area, managed only by initiated men. For this reason there are no Tjukurpa stories which can be told to the casual visitor.⁴

Around Uluru there are fourteen individual sacred sites. Two of the sites are a part of the Tjukurpa celebrated by women and must not be entered by men or uninitiated women. Mircea Eliade states that for religious man, space is not homogeneous.⁵ For the Anangu the sacred sites have a different quality than the other parts of Uluru. Uluru is the hierophany of the Tjukurpa, a manifestation of the ancestral beings in the profane world.

3 Ayers Rock

The difference in experience of Uluru / Ayers Rock becomes apparent in the different names used by the Anangu and the visitors. The prime purpose for non-Anangu to visit Ayers Rock is recreation. Nearby the monolith is the 'Ayers Rock Resort' where most of the visitors reside. The visitors used to stay right next to the rock, thereby desacralising the sacred sites. After the land was handed back to the Anangu, the resort was built and the sacred sites were reinstated.

To the visitors, Ayers Rock is a geological wonder of nature. There are no creation myths explaining the origins of the monolith, but instead there are scientific geological theories about how the rock once was a river bed.

The two big attractions for the visitors are the sunset at Ayers Rock and for some climbing to the top of the rock. The Anangu discourage visitors from climbing the rock. What visitors call the climb goes over the traditional route taken by ancestral Mala men on their arrival at Uluru. Because the path is of spiritual significance to the Anangu, they don't climb the rock.⁶ Visitors are discouraged to climb the rock, but there is no prohibition to climb. This is a different situation for some of the sacred sites around the rock which have been mentioned in the

³Ronald Berndt and Catharine Berndt, *The world of the first Australians*, (Canberra: Australian Studies Press, 1996).

⁴Kerle (1995).

⁵Mircea Eliade, *The sacred and the profane*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1959).

⁶Australian Nature Conservation Agency and the Mutitjulu Community Incorporated, *An insight to Uluru*, 1990.

previous paragraph.

These sites are fenced and warning signs indicate that it is forbidden to enter these sites or even photograph them, sanctioned with a \$5,000 fine. These fenced sites are a clear demonstration of the tension between the Anangu and the visitors. For the visitors, space is homogeneous, there is no qualitative difference between one spot or the other.⁷ The fence acts the threshold to the sacred site, a warning to the uninitiated who do not know the Tjukurpa.

4 Conclusion

Uluru is experienced by different people in different ways. For the Anangu, Uluru represents a sacred place, a manifestation of the Tjukurpa. The visitors mainly look upon Ayers Rock as an impressive natural phenomena. The tension between the two experiences of Uluru becomes clear in the following passage taken from the pamphlet 'Welcome to Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park' distributed by the Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre:

The tourist comes here with the camera taking pictures all over. What has he got? Another photo to take home, keep part of Uluru. He should get another lens see straight inside. Wouldn't see big rock then. He would see that Kuniya living right inside there as from the beginning. He might throw his camera away then. (*Tjamiwa*).

Eliade has described the differences between the sacred and profane experience of space.⁸ He states that for religious man, space is not homogeneous, there is a qualitative differentiation in space. In the profane experience, space is homogeneous and neutral, there are no qualitative differences. Eliade further argues that we must not confuse the concept of homogeneous and neutral geometrical space with the experience of profane space since the profane experience is never found in a pure state.

Although the visitors do not subscribe to the same religious beliefs as the Anangu, the experience of Uluru is not an absolute profane one. The experience of profane space includes values that recall the non-homogeneity peculiar to the religious

⁷Eliade (1959).

⁸Ibid.

experience of space.⁹ Even without the background of Tjukurpa, Uluru—or if one prefers, Ayers Rock—is an inspirational natural monument. The geological theory about Uluru is in many ways equally steeped in mystery as the Tjukurpa. The concept of a period of time spanning hundreds of millions of years is beyond easy comprehension.¹⁰ Everybody who visits Uluru can not escape a feeling of awe about the place. The beautiful colours that Uluru displays in different lights, the vastness of the landscape and the enigmatic view of this gigantic monolith are unforgettable sights.

References

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⁹Eliade (1959).

¹⁰Kerle (1995).