

# CHAPTER 1

## THE VERY FIRST PILGRIMAGE: AN INSPIRED TRAJECTORY OUT OF AFRICA TO AUSTRALIA

IAN S. MCINTOSH

*“Your feet will never take you where your mind has never been.”*  
—Evangelist Bill Winston

### Introduction

The place of religion in the story of human evolution is well documented (Bellah, 2011). So too is the connection between ancient migration and cumulative cultural evolution (Bellwood, 2013; Henrich, 2020). However, the link between religion and migration, between the emergence of symbolic thinking and global mobility, is far less obvious. Is there a spiritual or religious dimension to the story of the peopling of the world?

In this chapter,<sup>1</sup> I build upon the groundbreaking research of archaeologist Clive Gamble (1994; 2013) on the evolution of human imagination in response to the age-old question “Why are people everywhere?” Specifically, I draw upon my own ethnographic research in Arnhem Land, Australia, as well as pilgrimage and cognitive dissonance theory to explore the role of cosmology and culture in the migration of some of the ancestors of the First Australians ‘Out of Africa’ beginning 70-100,000 thousand years ago.<sup>2</sup> In the long journey from Africa to Arabia, to India, and South-east Asia, my focus is 50,000 years ago when these

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper appeared in the *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 10(4).

<sup>2</sup> While not an established fact, the Out of Africa hypothesis has mounting academic support over its rival multiregional hypothesis. See Oppenheimer, 2004; and Petraglia et al, 2010.

pioneers took the seemingly irrational step of crossing the sea from what is now Indonesia to the uninhabited continent of Australia, which, for all they knew, did not exist.<sup>3</sup> This was an extraordinary step, because:

For more than three million years water had been a danger to the human [and their predecessors] and a barrier, limiting and constraining [their] movement. [They] could not cross a lake or a deep, wide river, nor could [they] venture outward from the seashore (Festinger, 1983, 31).



Image 1. Map of early human migration from Africa to Australia beginning 70-100,000 years ago.

Now they were perched on the edge of the known world. Did they see smoke rising over the horizon or birds flocking in that direction, and consider this to be a signal from the ancestors that their destiny lay over the waters, or was their decision linked to superstition, warfare, famine, or disease? Was it in response to an environmental calamity or was there a need for a new beginning, a complete separation from what had gone before, or were they inspired by the vision of an influential person or group? After taking this fateful step there was no going back. Australia would be their home for the next 50,000 years.

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<sup>3</sup> Molecular clock estimates and genetic and archaeological studies suggest an initial colonization of Australia around 50,000 years ago. See Allen et al, 2020.

In my speculations on the nature of early human mobility—based largely on an intriguing narrative associated with the place of the rising sun in north Australian Indigenous mythology—I look beyond conventional explanations of “human drift”, i.e., that populations increased when times were good, and primates extended their base into new territories to meet their expanding needs (see Carotenuto, 2016). However, being led by their stomachs or simply the lure of greener pastures does not explain the possibility of a sea voyage 40,000 years before the first appearance of boats in the archaeological record. An alternate explanation is needed to advance our understanding of the motivations of *Homo sapiens* for this epic sea crossing.

In this chapter I propose a rationale linked to Gamble’s (1994, 244) conclusion of purposive, imaginative and deliberate action in the peopling of the world. In the case of the First Australians, I speculate that the decision to head to sea was driven by a search for the sacred and, in particular, the cognitive dissonance associated with the anticipation of the fulfillment of prophecy, as defined by Festinger (1956).

In my hypothesis, the mechanism driving migration is still visible in the world today as pilgrimage, especially those cases in which religious communities send forth their members into the world to bring back lessons, inspiration, or truth, for the greater common good (See Clift and Clift, 2004; Greenia, 2018; McIntosh, 2020; Turner and Turner, 2011).<sup>4</sup> I contend that when the universal pilgrim steps outside of the routines of his or her daily life and steers a course in the direction of some great unknown—whether it be the meaning of the divine or to find one’s place in the sacred order of things—one can almost hear the echo of the footsteps of those first pilgrims out of Africa.

Whatever the nature of human religion 50,000 years ago when the ancestors of Australia’s Aboriginal peoples stood at land’s end, the reasons for mobility then are just as applicable today in terms of our desire or need for pilgrimage, and for transcending time and space in the quest for understanding and growth. This need to explore, to know, and affirm, is ever-present and is as essential as ever for building stronger societies in the face of today’s many challenges. As Rabindranath Tagore (2013) says, we are forever grappling with ideas of a tethered but protected life within a structured and settled society and the freedom of the soul to wander endlessly in search of the numinous. In this chapter, I will add to this a third and most vital step, namely, bringing home the fruits of those exploratory

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<sup>4</sup> Consider, for example, the Amish rite of passage known as Rumspringa where youth experience and reflect upon the non-Amish world in a period spent away from the home community.

journeys to the parent community. I suggest that the dialectical relationship between dealing with those inescapable physical realities to which humans have always had to respond, and the cultural and religious dynamic linked to the search for the sacred, has fueled our journeys since the dawn of time and will continue to do so in the future.

## The Context for Migration

Between seventy and hundred thousand years ago, the forebears of some of Australia's First Nations left Africa on an immense journey. After some 2,000 generations—interrupted perhaps by the Toba volcanic eruption on Sumatra 74,000 years ago which resulted in six to ten years of “nuclear winter” and the near extinction of humans,<sup>5</sup>—the passage through new and unfamiliar territories of these first modern human beings terminated in the Sahul, a supercontinent that included mainland Australia, Papua, and Tasmania. By some estimates, as few as several hundred people made the sea crossing in this first occupation of the land “Downunder” (Allen and O’Connell et al, 2020; Tobler et al, 2017). More significantly, given the nature of oceanic currents and wind patterns, their voyage from south-east Asia to Australia is deemed to have been deliberate rather than accidental (Allen and O’Connell et al, 2020; Norman and Inglis et al, 2020).

Research on the key drivers of ancient human migrations has emphasized access to food and water resources, predator evasion, climate change, population growth, the search for marriage partners, as well as the idea of a “selfish gene” (Dawkins, 1976) and the “territorial imperative” (Ardrey, 1966). In this chapter, I argue that the spiritual predisposition of early humans—which was linked to brain size or encephalization (Gamble, 2013)—was the equal to any other factor. This is why I describe this vast trek of the forebears of Australia's Indigenous peoples as an inspired journey or the very first pilgrimage.

Understanding the possible religious or spiritual motivations for early mobility, beyond the evidence provided by skeletal remains and tools, mitochondrial DNA, and historical linguistics, and so on, is a highly speculative task. My conclusions must always be tentative as the subject matter is centered on the very origins of human stirrings.

Following the cognitive revolution of c.100,000 years ago, when our brains reached a certain level of evolutionary development, we began to see the world in poetical, mythological or spiritual ways. From this point onwards, alone among the species, we would reflect upon our place in the

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<sup>5</sup> See Prothero (2018) and Oppenheimer (2004, 84).

universe and on our mortality. Is it a coincidence that when humans first began to think through a mystical lens, they would seek answers to their questions over the horizon? That while their allegiance, as bearers of a culture acquired as members of a society, was to territorially-bound sacred core beliefs (Durkheim, 1965), they also perceived a greater whole and a “center out there”—which Turner (1973) describes as the pilgrim’s goal.

Population dynamics and climate change may have fueled human mobility in the first instance, but they cannot explain why a small band of coast-hugging hunter-gatherers—encountering the world for the very first time—kept on moving, including across a considerable body of water. In attempting to answer this question, researchers like Peregrine, Peiros and Feldman (2009) stress the need for an interdisciplinary approach but are silent on the influence of what the philosopher Nietzsche (1998) calls the “world symphony”<sup>6</sup> on the peopling of the planet. I suggest that rather than being motivated by purely material factors, the pilgrim pioneers were drawn in equal part by a desire to supplant chaos with a sacred world order of their own that would provide them with an opportunity to flourish, as I describe later.

Textbooks describing the origins of religion—defined here as systems belief and practice relative to the sacred that unite a moral community (Bellah, 2011)—provide few clues on mobility. Even detailed research on the human legacy by Leon Festinger (1983)—whose earlier thesis on cognitive dissonance informs the conclusions in this paper—sheds but little light on this topic. Festinger uses the expression “psychological confusion” in the wake of failed religious predictions or interventions to explain the emergence of increasingly more complex forms of religious expression, but does not link such circumstances to mobility.

As stated earlier, there is a strong correlation between human migration out of Africa and cultural and genomic evolution, but a deafening silence on the rise of spiritual practices as a driver of the mobility that made this evolution possible. Robert Clarke (1997), for instance, argues that the spread of humans across the globe was due to three factors: anatomy, technology, and social organization. And yet he begins his book “The Global Imperative” with a potential fourth factor, namely the numinous. Unfortunately, beyond this quote from Albert Einstein, he does not elaborate:

The individual feels the nothingness of human desires and aims and the sublimity and marvelous order which reveal themselves both in nature and

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<sup>6</sup> Nietzsche (1998, 48) says: “The philosopher seeks to hear within himself the echoes of the world symphony and to re-project them in the form of concepts.”

in the world of thought. [They look] upon individual existence as a sort of prison and want to experience the universe as a single significant whole (Clarke, 1997: 2).

Indeed, religious scholar Huston Smith (2001) uses the expression “a god-shaped hole in the human heart” to describe our motivation for seeking that fundamental connectedness with other parts of the universe. Smith argues that the void can only be filled with the divine, thus setting up the eternal quest for understanding the purpose of our existence.

In apparent support of this view, from at least 50,000 years ago, graves and grave goods, painted tools and bones, carved artifacts of “impossible creatures,” and cave paintings suggestive of sympathetic magic, indicate that the lives of human beings have been forever bound within a quest to find out who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.<sup>7</sup> Are migration and the emergence of religious practice thus intimately entwined? Did the concept of the void translate into an innate longing for something outside of oneself, something transcendental and transformative that became the object of an external quest? In the modern era, does this same compulsion find expression in scientific discovery leading us into space in an ongoing search for the ultimate answers to our questions?

The idea that a longing for value in life—a belief that existence is not accidental or meaningless—was a key driver in human migration, is the proposition explored in this paper. My goal, therefore, is to move beyond explanations that describe migration as being unplanned or not even comprehended by those involved, or simply inherent in human nature (King, 2007, 16).

My contention is that without such a consideration, the momentous journey out of Africa and across the waters will continue to be misunderstood. As Bertalaniffy (1968, 8) says, we are not just the playthings or victims of history. Our actions and decisions are informed by socio-cultural systems. When human populations moved, whatever the cause, they took with them their understandings of the world.<sup>8</sup> As author Maya Angelou (2004, 424) says: “You never can leave home. You take it with you everywhere you go.”

There are many fields of scientific research that might be brought to bear in this inquiry, including archaeology, anthropology and social

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<sup>7</sup> See Aubert et al (2019) on the 44,000-year-old therianthropes—part-animal, part-human rock art figures—hunting wild pigs and dwarf buffaloes in Indonesia. These may be the oldest known evidence for the human ability to imagine the existence of supernatural beings.

<sup>8</sup> In precolonial days, Indigenous Australians traveling outside their home territories would carry their sacred paraphernalia with them.

psychology, but my raw material comes entirely from the ethnographic record of northern Australia. The religious practice and oral history of the Yolngu (Aboriginal) peoples of Arnhem Land guide my thinking as I explore the question of what a sacred dimension to travel might have looked like at the dawn of time, especially in the realm of the mythical and structural—outer action with inner meaning. The emerging field of pilgrimage studies, in particular the notions of the “hero’s journey” (Campbell, 1949) and ‘communitas and liminality’ (Turner, 1973), allow for speculation on the capacity of pilgrims for strengthening a community’s core sacred beliefs by bringing home the lessons of encounters on new frontiers. Finally, as I mentioned earlier, I posit the idea that many of today’s pilgrimages exhibit the same elements central to the never-ending quest for the sacred and represent a faint echo of these original journeys out of Africa.

### **An Inspired Trajectory?**

The extraordinary success of the human species in colonizing the world was due to an inherent ability to occupy diverse and extreme environments, including deserts, rainforests, mountains, and even the Arctic Circle. As Bellwood (2013, xiv) argues, human evolution through myriad genetic and cultural innovations is fundamentally linked to this process of colonization of new territories. He says that internally generated mutations and cultural innovations found new and fertile ground on which to proliferate and expand to a degree unthinkable if the carriers all stayed at home. Clarke (1997, 7) concurs, and adds that humans were compelled to extend their reach to every habitable part world by their very nature for:

...without the option of mobility, a group must practice a considerable degree of self-restraint in both numbers and lifestyle. This option requires that we sharply restrict both our population and our individual consumption levels, something that few...are willing to accept if we have other alternatives.

And the nature of this mobility? Some researchers argue that humans have a roaming or wandering gene and that people simply expanded outwards from the center following the line of least resistance like ink on blotting paper. Marsella and Ring (2003, 3), for example, say that humankind has an instinctual and inborn disposition and inclination to wander and wander in search of new opportunities and horizons. This inclination to go “walkabout”, however, is inaccurate, for this so-called wondering and wandering took place within a specific cultural context, a living, breathing culture that would have imbued travel with deep meaning.

Indeed, Nicholas Wade (2006, 76) asked the important question that provoked this inquiry, namely that we might be able to learn about the motivations of the first migrants from the cultural and religious practices of groups like the Australian Aborigines.<sup>9</sup> In his book on the faith instinct, however, he merely repeats the conventional interpretation as follows:

Rather than trek determinedly into the unknown or expose their families to the hazards of exploration for its own sake, it is more likely that...they moved a short distance and stayed put. After a number of years, as new births swelled the group's size, it would have divided so as to prevent the usual discord that wells up in larger foraging populations.

Likewise, Peregrine, Peiros and Feldman (2009,177), in a proposition that also ignores the cultural dimension, say that:

Human groups have never been isolated or stagnant; rather [they] moved amoeba-like across the face of the earth—interacting, absorbing, repelling, intermixing, and being absorbed by other groups.

What these researchers fail to explain is this predilection or need for movement within the ever-changing cultures of *Homo sapiens*. How did early humans make sense of, or rationalize, mobility? Specifically, what was the mechanism for travel beyond the comfort zone, the *axis mundi* or sacred center of their communities? Beyond meeting their reciprocal obligations and responsibilities to ensure the survival of their social group, what was driving these peoples into the great unknown? What were the needs of the group that would endorse the quest of certain of its members to put their lives at risk in the exploration of the new?

Without doubt, there were very real causes for migration, but I am looking well beyond the hypothesis of people gradually moving in the direction of more fertile lands and favorable climes in tandem with population increase and the slow outstripping of resources in any particular area; “Dunbar’s number” of 150 meaningful social contacts being the trigger for a group to splinter (Dunbar, 2010).<sup>10</sup> In such a scenario, the

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<sup>9</sup> Festinger (1983, xii) warns against the use anthropological data about contemporary groups to support interpretations about the past because of the significant psychological and social differences between modern and ancient peoples.

<sup>10</sup> In *Facing Mt. Kenya*, Jomo Kenyatta (1985) says that when tribal numbers reached the thousands, rendering it impossible to live as a group where members could refer to one another as father, mother, sister, brother etc., they had to rely on tribal identity to facilitate the rendering of mutual support as an all-important matter.



journey would continue away from occupied territories into new unpopulated lands. Some people would stay behind in the “parent” group and others leave in the “advance” group. Those left behind would either flourish, “back migrate”, or perish, or become mixed with other groups. There was no guarantee that the migrating groups would themselves survive, but others would continue the journey after their demise, or even overtake them.

In search of what I call an inspired trajectory out of Africa, I draw upon pilgrimage theory and my own ethnographic research among the Yolngu of northern Australia to shed light on mobility in small-scale traditional societies.

In the time frame under scrutiny, the global human population was probably in the tens or hundreds of thousands at most and evidence suggests that members of this first wave of Australia’s indigenous peoples met few other primates on their long journey across the globe, with the possible exception of Neanderthals (Green et al, 2010; Stone, 2004) and archaic humans like *Homo floresiensis* or “hobbits” on the island of Flores (Aiello, 2010). This opens the way for speculation upon the mechanics of human mobility from first principles.<sup>11</sup>

The picture of human migration becomes infinitely more complex with ensuing waves of migration out of Africa. Interactions with other populations, including the Neanderthal-like Denisovans in Asia, contested landscapes, competition for resources, “demonic” male violence, rival ideologies, personality cults, and so on, are all deserving of their own analyses in relation to early human migration.

My analysis ends with the arrival of the first peoples in Australia upwards of 50,000 years ago. Once there, they circumnavigated the continent in both directions before finally exploring and settling even in the now relatively inhospitable desert interior. Researchers have posited no satisfactory reasons for these extraordinary journeys or described why mobility was subsequently replaced by largely sedentary or transhumant lifestyles within a complex maze of “songlines” associated with the tracks of highly mobile religious deities. Subsequent research will consider the place of the numinous, or the quest for a “world symphony”, as a critical mobilizing factor.

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<sup>11</sup> Note that the period in question is well before the rise of agriculture and the phenomenon of surplus food, commerce and trade, permanent settlement, the division of labor, and growth of cities and civilizations.

## Challenge and Response

My starting point for exploring early human mobility is Arnold Toynbee's (1934) theory of "Challenge and Response". By challenge, Toynbee was referring to unpredictable occurrences that posed a threat to the livelihood of a group. Such a challenge, however, was not necessarily negative for it often carried within it the germ of an opportunity. By response, Toynbee was referring to the actions taken by the group to deal with these new conditions. Population growth, climate change, resource depletion, and so on, are all examples of such challenges. As Schmandt and Ward (2000, 1) argue, "response required vision, leadership, and action to overcome the threat and create a basis for survival and, hopefully, prosperity." Such responses, they say, included everything from inaction to a major change in the living arrangements of the group. These changes might be centered upon the introduction of new technologies, revised patterns of social organization, or transformed economic practices, or a combination thereof, and the success of these interventions was rarely immediate. Rather, the results often unfolded over a considerable period.

When considering the way that small-scale societies might respond to a challenge, it is important to acknowledge their extreme conservative nature. The ethnographic record is replete with examples of how the spirit of collectivism was ingrained in the minds of the people, including with iron-clad codes of ethics and duties, as in the case of the western Asian Yezidi people described by Gurdijeff (2002). He tells the agonizing story of a Yezidi child bound within a crude circle drawn by antagonists on a playground from which he could not escape. Honor and tradition preclude any possibility of this, and the child was at the mercy of his tormentors until Gurdijeff himself created an escape route by opening the circle. Something that is usually invisible, namely the strict social boundaries of a collective, is made visible in Yezidi culture. Such communities are bound together by beliefs held to be sacred, and these are defended against all outsiders. Within the circle is everything held to be precious, and they live as in Plato's Cave, finding comfort and security in the shadows. Only when there were few or no alternatives would they attempt something as dangerous as moving beyond the familiar, meaning outside the circle. As Gell-Mann (2009, xi) says, inertia is a strong motivation and people typically do not relocate away from their tightly knit traditional community—often linked to a specific environment—unless forced to do so.

Resistance to change in belief systems, even in the face of disconfirming evidence—as with paradigm shifts in science (see Kuhn, 1962)—is the hallmark of small-scale societies. Through the experience of

cognitive dissonance, true believers will respond to challenges by doubling down on existing beliefs and practices until such time that new prophesies are revealed, or better explanations emerge from within (Festinger et al, 1956).

The journey to the Sahul by the ancestors of Australia's Indigenous peoples, including the water crossing from south-east Asia mentioned earlier of at least 80km, begs the question of the necessity of undertaking such a challenge given the extreme conservative nature of their societies. Scientific evidence suggests that accidental drifting to Australia was very unlikely. Rather, recent studies indicate that the voyage was the result of coordinated movement (Bird et al, 2020; Norman et al, 2018). This begs the question of why community members would abandon their homes and undertake such a voyage? More precisely, if the goal was to strengthen the inner core or sacred beliefs of the parent community and help ensure its ultimate survival and growth, what sort of worldview and challenge might have led to this Rubicon-like crossing?

The relationship between the parent or home community and an advance or pioneering group is often likened to a feedback loop, a two-way flow of information that energizes parties on both sides of a frontier. Arthur C. Clarke (1977, 101) in his essay "Rockets to the Renaissance," considers the spiritual to be key in this reenergizing process:

Civilization cannot exist without new frontiers; it needs them both physically and spiritually. The physical need is obvious—new lands, new resources, new materials. The spiritual need is less apparent, but in the long run it is more important. We don't live by bread alone. We need adventure, variety, novelty, romance...a [person] goes swiftly mad if [they are] left in a silent darkened room, cut off completely from the external world. What is true of individuals is also true of societies; they can become insane without sufficient stimulus.

The science fiction writer goes on to say that the discoveries and struggles of the first expeditions to establish themselves in new worlds inspired a feeling of purpose and achievement among the stay-at-homes. A sense of wonder returned to their lives as their spirit of adventure was rekindled. With each forward step there was a corresponding re-examination and re-evaluation within the parent culture (Clarke, 1977, 103). Similarly, Buddhist Monk Thich Nhat Hanh (2001) argues that if we do not expand the boundaries of our understanding we will be imprisoned by our views and unable to be awakened to the truth.

However, uplifting and removing one's community beyond the *axis mundi* into unknown lands steeped in mystery, even if the generational

movement was a relatively short distance, would have presented a considerable intellectual puzzle. As Mary Helms (1988, 20) argues, conventional perspectives on mobility often fail to consider the ways in which humans invest their lives and the landscape with a remarkable diversity of properties and interpretations as part of our “innate ability to order and organize a chaotic world and cosmos.”

In traditional societies, space and distance are not neutral concepts, but accorded sociological, political, and especially ideological significance (Helms, 1988, 4). Just as certain cultures today may place emphasis on the vertical, with the upper realms linked to the idea of heaven, in olden times those places far distant from the *axis mundi* were probably regarded in supernatural or mythical terms. In moving beyond their comfort zones, the first migrants were putting their core beliefs or faith in society at risk. As sociologist Emile Durkheim (1965) has argued, small-scale societies identified with a clearly defined realm that was sacred and the object of reverence. All else was profane, and it was into this profane realm that the first peoples would inevitably be drawn. The question is why, and how such movement was rationalized.

Recall that these pilgrim pioneers were seeing the world for the very first time. The astounding complexity of the natural environment was unfolding before their very eyes, challenging their core assumptions and social conditioning. In the case of the First Australians, in following the coast and utilizing the same hunter-gatherer tools and skills they had developed ages ago in Africa, the shock of the new would have lessened but not eliminated. Indeed, if resources were readily at hand, the migratory process discouraged any significant change in social organization.<sup>12</sup> Mobility was obviously essential for survival, but in relocating their populations, first peoples put their beliefs on the line, understanding that the perceived rewards, however defined, far exceeded the threats or risks. And with each forward step into unfamiliar terrains populated with exotic and often dangerous animal and plant species, they would seek, where possible, to bring the new within the framework of their existing knowledge and belief systems.

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<sup>12</sup> Festinger (1983, 57) says mobility characterized early cultures, although 50,000 years ago, there is evidence of some human groups remaining in one place for a whole year.

## Primogeniture and Religion

In this section, I consider one potential challenge and response, that of population growth—reaching Dunbar’s number—and the resulting social disruption and dispersal. A well-documented response is primogeniture, which had its origins in medieval Europe’s feudal societies. With primogeniture, the right of succession to a large estate belonged solely to the firstborn son (Cecil, 2018). To distribute an inheritance among all the children would have resulted in the division of the land into ever-smaller parcels, until such time that deriving economic benefit from that land was impossible. By necessity, therefore, younger sons traveled far afield to make a name and a fortune of their own.

Scholars have advanced variations of primogeniture as a possible explanation for mobility in early human history. The migration of agricultural peoples, including the 2,300km voyage from the Philippines to the Mariana Islands and thence to eastern Polynesia beginning around 2,000 BCE, is one of the most extraordinary journeys in human history. Migration expert Peter Bellwood argues that the search for arable agricultural land by a growing population was a likely explanation, but with a caveat:

Simply looking for new islands for agricultural land or other resources does not explain everything, given the huge sizes of many islands of Southeast Asia even now uninhabited in some remote equatorial areas... My preference is for the *founder rank expansion* based on those younger sons and their families able to found only lineages of junior rank at home, who sought to found new senior lines through the colonization of new territories (Bellwood, 2013, 197).

If we go back even further in time, Dunbar, Knight and Power (1999) argue that in small-scale societies, some individuals took advantage of the system of group hunting, contributing nothing themselves. Over time, when the costs of belonging to such a society outweighed the benefits, the exploited left to be in smaller groups, leaving the parent group to grapple with the problem of idleness. Haidt (2013) views religion as an adaptive solution to this “free-rider” problem. Religion increased the survival chances of the collective by promoting a set of core sacred beliefs intimately linked to their social identity. Such a challenge and response, however, does not help illuminate the motives for mobility for religion acted to consolidate communities in the face of their many challenges. It reinforced order over chaos, and negentropy over entropy.

In my hypothesis, I am arguing for a link between the emergence of religion and migration. Beyond the generalized statement of the exploited

establishing new bases away from a parent community, is there anything deeper that might be extrapolated from available evidence linked to primogeniture?

While it is unknown whether there is any continuity in traditions over significant lengths of time, there are certainly some tantalizing clues. Berezkin (2009), for example, has mapped the distribution of mythology across the globe, providing striking evidence that people either took those ancient beliefs with them out of Africa, or such beliefs have spread through a process of cultural diffusion. Stories on the origin of death, which Festinger (1983, 118) links to the origins of religious practice, have been found from East Africa all the way to Patagonia in South America. When plotted on a map, the distribution of these narratives follows the actual patterns of the spread of humans across the world, including to Australia. While some of these myths about death may have emerged independently, they all speak to the prominence of powerful spiritual beliefs in the worldviews of early humans, and of people grappling with the essential truths of the human condition.

Such a conclusion is inevitable, for human beings cannot live without the consolation of a poetic view of the world, or without myths and ceremonies to sustain group emotions and functionality (Hays, 1963, 527-28). Indeed, Bloom (2009, 118) says it is impossible to make sense of human existence at all, past or present—including war, morality, law, and culture—without some appreciation of the spiritual or mythological. The first migrants, with an abundance of narratives which gave meaning to their lives, would have viewed those distant lands into which they would travel within a specific and changing supernatural or cosmological context. Consequently, a failure to include the social sciences in deliberations about early human migrations ensures that one of the great-unanswered questions of world history, namely, how and why the first modern humans dispersed from Africa and traversed the globe, will remain a mystery.

### **North Australian Totemism and Migration**

In 1994 I published a biography of the renowned Yolngu leader David Burrumarra, an individual of towering intellect and known throughout north-east Arnhem Land for his unparalleled knowledge of traditional songs, stories, and ceremony (McIntosh, 1994). During the writing of his life story, as might be expected, we would discuss various topics to the point of exhaustion or taboo. However, about traditional Aboriginal religion, known as totemism—an ancient set of spiritual beliefs and practices that

links people to the land and sea in timeless bonds of mutual benefit—there was no end to our deliberations.

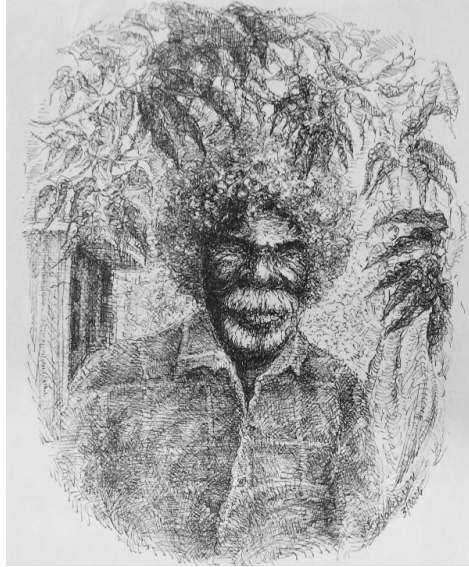


Image 2. Yolngu leader David Burrumarra, of Elcho Island, Northeast Arnhem Land. Drawing by Julia Blackburn. Used with permission.

In one extended consultation that lasted several months, Burrumarra described to me the clan affiliation and ritual significance of every bird, fish, animal, reptile, tree, plant, and insect in Arnhem Land (McIntosh, 2015, 52-65). From within this vast compendium, Burrumarra identified 45 totems for which his clan was the primary custodian, including the whale and the octopus, and a similar number of totems for which his group was a secondary or joint custodian. As Burrumarra looked out upon the richness of the natural world, he saw relationships, an extended family. All living things were affiliated with his own or related clans. To forcibly remove Indigenous peoples from their totemic environs, as has happened repeatedly in Australian history, was to remove them not just from their comfort zone, but from their very life support system. Nicholas Wade's suggestion of learning about the very first migrants from Aboriginal Australian culture and cosmology therefore faces a major hurdle. Burrumarra's people consider themselves to be autochthonous or born of the soil, and they practice a religion in which locality is key to identity.

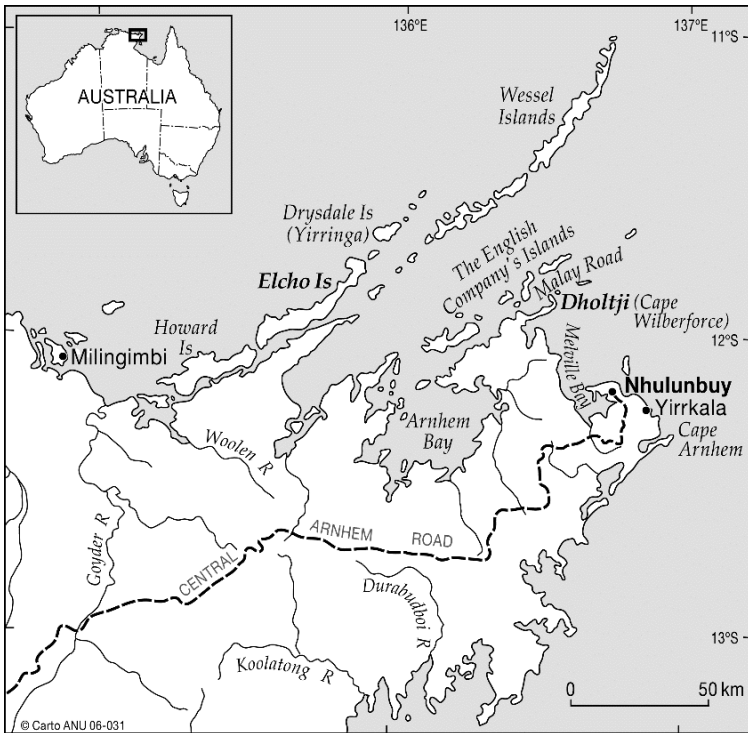


Image 3. Map of Northeast Arnhem Land, showing Elcho Island, Burrumarra's place of residence, and his traditional homelands on the English Company's and Wessel Islands.

The sophisticated and highly selected totemic lifestyles of Indigenous Australians is foreign to the culture of the highly mobile first peoples who trekked their way across the world. If these first migrants had a totemic religion anything like Australia's Indigenous people, which is highly unlikely, then mobility is a conundrum.<sup>13</sup>

The many totemic narratives that Burrumarra carried around in his head, and that he referred to as his backbone, included some fascinating oral history like how his forefathers had regular contact with "little people" who could not speak—a possible reference to the ancient "hobbits" of Indonesia—

<sup>13</sup> When asked about his clan's purported African origins, and the perilous crossing between Indonesia and Australia 50,000 years ago, Burrumarra dismissed the idea saying, "Show me the boats," (McIntosh, 1994).



and other stories that appear to reference changes in the land and seascape as far back as the last Ice Age. For example, Burrumarra told me that his people once lived on the shores of a large freshwater “ocean” between Australia and Papua New Guinea which is now part of the Gulf of Carpentaria and the Arafura Sea. Beginning around 5,000 years ago with the last glacial melt, a massive saltwater inundation of what archaeologists call Lake Carpentaria forced Burrumarra’s ancestors to move to higher ground to the west, to what are now the Wessel and English Company’s Islands (See Image 3). Not only did this migration impact their diets—freshwater foods were gradually replaced with marine ones—the upheaval also obliged them to forge ties with the traditional owners of those new lands onto which they settled (Morris, 2023). Even today, members of Burrumarra’s clan acknowledge that their sacred sites sit atop land once owned exclusively by others.

Such narratives, and there are many, strongly support the idea that the Yolngu have been in the same region for at least 400 or more generations. In clan memory, many groups have come and gone, either erased in warfare, or died out from diseases or various other factors, or been absorbed into larger collectives. Yolngu know little of the existence of these older groups apart from scant references in clan songs or in personal names, their stories, to varying degrees, having been integrated into the mythology and oral history of those who came after. If we are to speculate on inspired motives for mobility, we need to go back much further in time to at least 2,000 generations, when Burrumarra’s ancestors stood on the edge of that great watery divide between Indonesia and Australia and take a deep dive into what we know of his people’s worldview and culture.

## Exploring Mobility in Traditional Culture

While religion ties the Yolngu to their sacred sites through what they perceive to be unchanging totemic traditions, my ethnographic field notes (1986-93) identify a range of factors that inspired mobility beyond the *axis mundi*, as in the story of the relocation of Burrumarra’s people following the last Ice Age. These include trade, ceremonial obligations, succession to lands of deceased groups, warfare, banishment of individuals or groups for crimes against society or the sacred laws, the search for marriage partners, and so on. Additionally, and much more recently, when Indonesian fishermen worked the north Australian coast beginning in the 1700s, Yolngu men were keen to travel to Makassar to taste the adventure of the wider world and bring back stories of what they had seen and heard. Yolngu women, however, were often kidnapped by the Indonesians and never

returned home, the last known instance being in the first decade of the twentieth century (McIntosh, 2015).

My field notes also highlight a deep sense of kinship between Yolngu and other Indigenous peoples both in Australia and from the lands to the north from whence they had come, suggestive of common origins in a great diaspora. In the late 1980s, Burrumarra spoke to me of his meeting with an Indigenous man from the other side of the continent. Instinctively, he knew that they were related—not in a biological sense—but through some sacred principle associated with the natural world for which they both drew inspiration.

In the search for insight into possible religious motives of this great diaspora, narratives such as this need to be interrogated. From my notes, it was apparent that in the pre-colonial world, Aboriginal peoples faced certain universal challenges and perennial needs, of which the following is but a sample:

1. Need for food and water.
2. Need for marriage partners.
3. Need to manage conflict within and between groups.
4. Need for solidarity as a prerequisite for group survival. “Our law is a road-maker. We make a road for everyone’s survival” (Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1987).
5. Need for a religious view of life to assuage the harshness of reality. “In times of calamity, people would look to their sacred places for comfort.” (Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1987)
6. Need to enhance the fertility of all species upon which the people were ultimately dependent. The Zulu concept of Ubuntu, namely “I am because you are,” is apposite.
7. Need for future thinking i.e., envisioning not just the possibility of a tomorrow, but of a better tomorrow. When discussing the motivations of his forebears, Burrumarra stressed that their actions in initiating certain beliefs and practices were driven by one simple notion, “So we could be here in the future.” (Burrumarra, pers. comm. 1987)

If one assumes that such needs are primordial, then within this milieu one will find the basis or rationale for human migration.

## **Ninety-Nine Faces of Motj**

When I questioned Burrumarra about the days before the arrival of Christian missions in the 1920s and 1930s he said that elders would spend their free

time in long conversation on things like sorcery—all deaths were attributed to the ill-intent of others—or finding wives, as in creating lineages, with a view to securing the future. There was also a major preoccupation with the spiritual dimension of life and meditating on the divine, which is known Australia-wide as the “Dreaming”.

When speaking of the influence of missionaries, Burrumarra said that they had encouraged his people to associate certain types of behavior with the idea of “good” and place them in one bundle and do the same with things that missionaries defined as “bad”. Sticking with the good and avoiding the bad was an avenue to the good life and salvation.

In the pre-mission period, there were no similar strictly-observed overarching bundles, not the least because clans, despite a shared legacy of certain religious traditions, often had distinct ideas of etiquette. There was no absolute moral compass and behaviors were judged largely by whether they enhanced the survival of the group or its prestige or allowed for a deeper understanding of, or reinforced, the legacy of deities, bringing people closer to the numinous.

When conveying his understanding of the spiritual realm, Burrumarra would do so by reference to *Motj* (or Muiit), his “telescope to the cosmos.” *Motj* was the special link between the natural and spiritual worlds, between the seen and the unseen. It was the very essence of the sacred and “...as essential to our earthly existence as water to life.” After all, Burrumarra said, *Motj* was the “...source of all things,” his word for God. Burrumarra added that:

*Motj* directs our thinking to a purpose. We speak to the wind, clouds, and the earth, and *Motj* speaks to us through them. *Motj* is all the ceremonial beliefs, our cultural traditions. What is a person without *Motj*? *Motj* is between nothing and yes, nowhere and truth... *Motj* manifestations like the whale or octopus help us to see, to believe. We draw life from them... Who we are comes from *Motj* (McIntosh, 2015, 59-65).

When Burrumarra spoke of the object of Yolngu ceremonial life, the relationship between the past and the present was framed not merely in terms of accessing ancestral power through ritual, but, rather, by achieving communion or “oneness” with *Motj*. Burrumarra said that in the creation period, there had been a great transformation. Those deities who gave form and purpose to the world came to be perceived by Yolngu as so many disjointed parts—the sea, land, sky, mountains, reef, clans, animals, birds, trees, and so on. The deities had broken everything up into manageable chunks to make it easier for people to think with (McIntosh, 2015, 52-65). And what made human beings so special was their capacity to recognize or

conceive of the original totemic “wholeness” and to try to devise complete stories that provided answers to all their questions.<sup>14</sup>

In their embrace of the divine, Yolngu were only permitted glimpses of the significance of these “manageable chunks” which I likened to the “Ninety-Nine Faces of Allah.” These glimpses cover all aspects of Yolngu culture, including power, unity, relationships, the afterlife, art and dance, intelligence, and so on—the entire way of life of the people. Here are sixteen “glimpses” into the numinous realm that help to distinguish the Yolngu sacred world order:

1. *Motj* provides Yolngu with *Marr*, a sense of internal strength and a clarity of purpose to help them overcome challenges. *Marr* is a quality cultivated by Yolngu to help them transcend pain or suffering in the pursuit of a perceived greater good.
2. *Motj* provides Yolngu with role models. When charismatic leaders placed ceremonial white paint on their face and body and gathered the people together for a ritual in the name of their deity, the assembled group was the deity, enacting its will in the world. Such leaders possess the power to maintain order and can inspire the youth to higher ways of thinking.
3. *Motj* inspires empathy. Certain motivated individuals can make the presence of deities real and meaningful in people’s lives. One noted Yolngu elder was in great demand at funerals because of his traditional singing. When accompanied by the didgeridoo and clapsticks, he would make the mourners feel their loss more profoundly, bringing them peace through a deeper appreciation of the divine.
4. *Motj* energizes ritual. As a young man, Burrumarra never believed the stories he heard about how the spirit of the deceased would travel on the back of a whale to the land of the dead. Then one day he saw his uncle perform a whale dance and he did it so well that Burrumarra no longer held any doubts. “He was the whale. He made the creation stories real for me.”
5. *Motj* has its own sacred language. Each clan has a unique dialect bestowed upon them by deities. Within that language, there are certain “power” words used only in ceremonial settings whose meanings are known only to the fully initiated. When spoken aloud, they are said to be the voice of the deity, bringing the sacred to the people in a way they can apprehend.

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<sup>14</sup> There is a striking similarity here with the Indian philosophy of Advaita which means “all is one.”

6. *Motj* is the landscape. Deities reveal themselves through what Mircea Eliade (1957) calls hierophonies or “eruptions,” and people honor such places through ritual and song.
7. *Motj* empowered the ancestors. Anthropomorphism pervades the Yolngu worldview. Yolngu believe themselves to be living in the shadow of people who came before them, people who lived much “closer” to the law than themselves. These ancestors had been in direct communication with the deities, and they left signs in the landscape of their passing, natural features that in no way could have been created by mere mortals. Such signs are deemed to be evidence of the supreme influence of deities.
8. *Motj* builds relationships. At the very heart of Yolngu culture is the deity-inspired kinship system that links people to the natural world. A person that sings “I am an octopus” calls the shark his mother, reflecting his actual mother’s primary totem, and the crocodile his grandmother, and so on. Through *Motj*, the entire natural world is bound up within the Yolngu kinship system.
9. *Motj* promotes the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Deities bestowed primary ownership of certain tracts of land—e.g., shark country—upon certain clans, but also gave rights to the songs and rituals of the shark to additional groups. Still others might access personal names drawn from that same totem. Individual groups cannot apprehend the big picture—the unfathomable whole—for they possess just one aspect of it. *Motj* reminds the people that only in solidarity is there the possibility of finding truth and understanding.
10. *Motj* inspires unity. Group solidarity, a legacy of deities, trumps individual interests. Survival required undivided effort on the part of all clan members, for the circumstances of life were always unpredictable. If one person decided to break ranks and go their own way, then either they would be brought back into the fold or, remembering the laws of old, “we would all go that way,” Burrumarra said.
11. *Motj* ensures vitality. When a clan becomes extinct, other groups with links to their totemic heritage create a plan for succession, for the responsible management of sacred sites has broad implications. From such places, the spirits of the newborn come into the world, and to that place, upon death, some part of their spirit returns. As all Yolngu are related through these sites, their protection ensures the continued vitality of the land and all its people.
12. *Motj* reflects perfection. The natural world gladly shares its bounty to followers of its totemic laws, as exemplified by the taste of wild honey and other culinary treasures. When that sweetness is felt on the tongue

it is an experience of pure delight and is understood as the essence of the deity, the manifestation of perfection.

13. *Motj* inspires sharing. Turtle eggs are symbolic of generosity. When the hunter finds a nest in the sand dunes, the gathered eggs must be shared with the group. That is the law. This much-admired quality, which makes the people feel good at heart, is a legacy of the deity.
14. *Motj* creates happiness. When water chestnuts ripen in the Dry Season, people “go mad” with desire for them, travelling vast distances and expending considerable resources to indulge their appetites without restraint. When times are good, there is no holding back, and the people laugh and sing, and give thanks to the deity that bequeathed them with this blessing.
15. *Motj* builds intelligence. Deities imbued certain totemic species with a form of intelligence that humans might also aspire. According to Burrumarra, those permitted by custom to eat the cuttlefish, for example, will feel the immediate impact on their intellect.
16. *Motj* is linked to paradise. The small red flying foxes that gather in immense numbers in the jungles of the northern Australian coastline each year symbolize the spirit of the dead. At a certain point, they all head out to sea, never to return. In the associated narratives, the flying foxes travel to a paradise. All that the Yolngu know for sure is that next year, another batch will also head out to sea, and it has been this way since time immemorial. The flying foxes are headed to the same place that Yolngu spirits of the dead will also travel, foretelling their fate.

These sixteen glimpses of *Motj* are like facets of a diamond: deities brought purpose and meaning to Yolngu lives, a language to understand the sacred and the skill to apprehend its marvelous complexities. *Motj* gave people the ability to appreciate personal qualities such as sharing, caring, and wisdom, and an opportunity to envision pan-Yolngu solidarity, which promises peace and prosperity for all.

Before there was *Motj* there was chaos, Burrumarra said, a reference to those earlier times, perhaps often reoccurring, when material factors overwhelmed the immaterial in the endless struggle for survival. The echo of those times of disorder in Aboriginal history, as demonstrated in the present day by the irrational or lawless behavior of certain clan individuals or groups, will bring forth howls of displeasure in community gatherings, for it is deemed to be more characteristic of the actions of a wild dog or dingo than of a cultured people, and not in tune with a society in search of a more perfect union with *Motj* (McIntosh, 2015, 66-78).

Burrumarra placed considerable emphasis on this contrast between the times associated with “nothing and nowhere” and “yes and truth”, meaning before and after *Motj* had entered their lives in a permanent way. One was associated with darkness and the other with light, i.e., the seemingly endless search for the numinous, and the merits of the spiritual life. This transition along the continuum from an emphasis on physical struggle and spiritual uncertainty to coordinated effort and enlightened lifeways was linked to his people’s unending quest for complete answers to their questions, and for being able to grasp what they had formerly understood to be an unfathomable whole, their “world symphony”. And in song, dance, music, and story, Burrumarra’s people would apprehend and celebrate this grand truth as best they could, to the very limits of their abilities, slowly replacing beliefs and behaviors associated with the earlier times of chaos with an enlightened system of law and order. In this transition, conflict was replaced with peace, doubt with certainty, and anarchy with organization, all with the sacred mandate of *Motj*. In my hypothesis, this process or transition was the mechanism driving people out of Africa and across the globe.

### Seeking the Land of the Rising Sun

In the great transition referenced by Burrumarra from a chaotic world order to seeing and experiencing *Motj* in everyday ordered life, there was one “chunk” or “glimpse” that was singled out as a potential driver of early mobility: their appreciation of the land of the rising sun, the source of all life. In what is viewed by Yolngu today as a revelation or turning point, the gods came to them at their time of greatest need from the direction of the rising sun. It is unknown if there was an accompanying vision or prophesy, only that the transition away from earlier anarchic ways of being was underway.<sup>15</sup>

Around 50,000 years ago, the forebears of some of Australia’s Indigenous peoples stood on a south-east Asian shoreline and made the conscious decision to tackle the unknown, heading out to sea in the direction of their ultimate homeland. Material considerations may have predominated in their journey thus far, but now, other sorts of considerations prevailed to lead them into a new world.

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<sup>15</sup> It is interesting to speculate upon the impact of the Toba eruption 74,000 years ago when global temperatures decreased and the world fell into darkness for up to ten years. Most non-African human populations derive from survivors of this nuclear winter. Was the return of the sun a factor in eastwards migration towards the rising sun? See Prothero (2018).

In a detailed review of my field notes, the most striking clue to this decision is centered on the profound sense of reciprocity that Burrumarra described between certain Yolngu clans and their “land of the dead”. Yolngu send the spirits of their deceased to this fabled place in the east where the sun rises. This is understood to be a place of opulence. Food is always plentiful, pain non-existent, and the weather always pleasing.

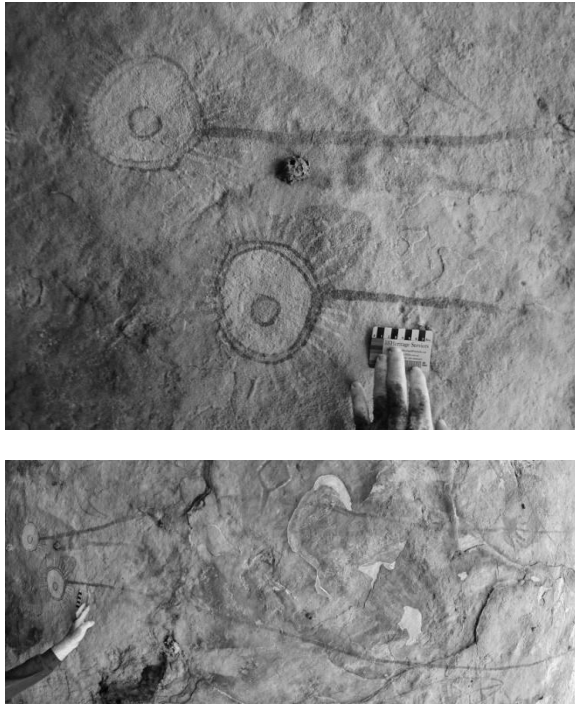
Time-honored Yolngu ceremonies propel the spirits of the newly deceased eastwards to this place to join their ancestors. This is an exchange relationship, because from this place—at the beginning of time—came *Motj* bringing law and order and meaning and purpose to their lives. The deities united all the ragtag groups through a system of kinship based on moieties and clans that is still observed today. Those deities also linked the clans with specific totems and allowed them to set down roots for the very first time.

Colorful cave paintings on the Wessel Islands in Burrumarra’s territory show a messenger from the “undying lands.” (See Images 4 and 5). It is Venus, shown as a bright star attached to a long rope, whose role as the “Morning Star” deity is to follow up on the work of the founding deities. At daybreak, the deities haul her back to the realm of the sunrise, for she must abide there, despite her desire to live among mortals. To this fabled world, the Yolngu, in spirit form, make their final journey and, from this spiritual homeland, all manner of benefits flow to the living. In their ceremonies, including that of the Morning Star (Venus), the Yolngu honor this timeless relationship of reciprocity.

The spiritual orientation of the first humans arriving in the Sahul (Australia and Papua) is unknown and unknowable, but we can certainly speculate that when they found themselves in a place in which further travel was impossible—perhaps bordered to the south and north by other migrant groups—they began to settle. However, so deeply ingrained in their culture was the idea that ultimate truths were associated with a journey eastward, seemingly without end, that upon death, the spirits of the Yolngu continued where their ancestors left off.

Settlement facilitated the emergence of ever more complex totemic religious traditions and the Yolngu were to find their own answer to the ubiquitous problem of humankind’s “hole in the heart”. Chaos had been replaced with a sacred world order. In other words, beyond the obligations and responsibilities placed by society on individuals to ensure their survival, the people knew that their identity and purpose was tied to some great unknown associated with the sun, which had become the central animating feature of their belief system, the supreme object of their curiosity and desire.





Images 4 and 5: Cave painting of Venus as the Morning Star deity, Wessel Islands.  
© Tim Stone. Used with permission.

On their newly sanctified lands, the ancestors of the Yolngu grew as a collective by adhering to the laws of deities that had left something of their essence all along the northeast Arnhem Land coastline. The trading and ceremonial alliances that they developed, along with the spiritual exchange centered on the land of the dead, allowed them to flourish in place.

The first peoples migrating out of Africa may not have been searching for a totemic lifestyle like this—they probably did not know what they were looking for—but in time this became the spiritual solution they were seeking. Australia became the place of their dreams, a place where they could feel that they belonged and could grow. Was this the motivation of their ancestor's inspired trajectory out of Africa? Was the goal to resolve the cognitive dissonance associated that profound question that lies at the very core of human existence i.e., that we do not live by bread or breath alone?

## Mobility in Perspective

The people who stood on the eastern shores of south-east Asia 50,000 years ago faced a quandary. They had to choose between ending their journey (retracing their steps or trekking northwards) or continuing across an indefinite body of water eastwards in the direction of the unknown.<sup>16</sup> A small group of pioneers filled with religious ecstasy or *Marr*, chose this latter option. One might argue that without such a driving force, such a journey would have been impossible.

In grappling with the eternal questions of who we are as human beings and what we can be, social groups since time immemorial have sent forth their members in search of answers. In the nomenclature of the present day, this is called pilgrimage (Margry, 2008). Even cultures that profess an ideology of changelessness, such as the Indigenous Australians, are constantly responding to a changing world in ways that uphold the sanctity of the sacred realm (Rudder, 1993). Indeed, stepping outside of the circle has been the hallmark of, and even an explanation for, our species' extraordinary success in the world. And small groups of human beings have done so time and time again, continually building a bank of inherited intelligence and skills that reinforced earlier accomplishments leading, inevitably, to our enhanced place in the world order. As Gamble (1994, 110) argues:

The impetus for exploration comes not from some sort of adaptive curiosity. Instead, it stems from the nature of the cooperative alliances, negotiated and contested between the core and peripheral members of the social group...When exploring, individuals are constantly comparing, evaluating, rejecting, and ranking the habitats they pass through. On the basis of this information they can return with the core group to occupy a site explored on earlier occasions.

Extrapolating from the writings of theologian Martin Buber (1966), this mobility into strange and unfamiliar territory—what Turner (1973) calls the liminal zone—derives not so much for what lies outside the circle—as in prioritizing discovery—but from our deep respect for what lies within it, and our wish to affirm its truth and prestige. In Buber's philosophy of authenticating the sacred core, members have a common relation to this

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<sup>16</sup> Recent archaeological excavations strongly suggest a northern migration route to Australia from Sulawesi and New Guinea by the very first Australians 50,000 years ago. Subsequent waves of migrants also came from Timor from at least 44,000 years ago. (See Shipton, Morely et al. 2024).

clearly defined center that overrides all other relations. The revered center must be something concrete, like a sacred text (such as the Torah), a person (such as Jesus Christ), or a set of rituals (as in Confucianism). As people see, study, and come to understand it, they become aware of the divine, and their attention is turned outward to the world around them, to larger levels of engagement and membership. This is where their work lies, for it is only beyond the circle that the authority and authenticity of the center is proven.

In my hypothesis, this ‘mechanism’ was pivotal in driving early human mobility. It also dovetails with mythologist Joseph Campbell’s notion of the hero’s journey, which is like a snapshot of the much larger process outlined by Buber. In his *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell (1949) describes the outward journey as an archetype or monomyth underling a wide range of religious stories, myths, folklore, legends, and fairy tales. It involves a hero who goes on an adventure, learns a lesson, wins a victory and, with that newfound knowledge, returns home transformed, with lessons for all and, more often than not, treasure in abundance. Such archetypal journeys are always in response to specific challenges, and the responses are geared to the well-being of the collective and its sacred center.

In Burrumarra’s worldview, the sacred core was *Motj* and this included both the deities and their perceived unchanging laws and practices. *Motj* was the source of life, culture and identity for Yolngu. Today, however, the majority of Aboriginal people in Arnhem Land are Christians and while the idea of a paradise associated with the land of the rising sun has been largely supplanted by the idea of a God-dwelling heavenly abode, the two belief systems coexist on the ceremonial ground. Absolute belief is not absolute unless it encompasses all existing realities, so traditional Yolngu funerals usually culminate with a Christian prayer, for many of those Dreaming deities are now seen as the harbingers of a greater truth, i.e., that which was revealed within the pages of the Bible. In this manner, religious leaders manage to keep the sacred core beliefs in tune with what they continue to find out about the world at large in their continued efforts to manage and grow their communities.

It is therefore evident that cosmology and culture—in equal part with more mundane factors including population growth or conflict—drew Burrumarra’s ancestors across the waters. Cosmology and culture sent their souls to the land of the dead, just as today the Yolngu worldview directs the prayers of Christian mourners to the heavens above. In both cases, there is this desire for truth, a longing to be ever closer to it, and eventually to abide within it. Thought leaders will do whatever is in their power to make the sacred real in the people’s lives. As Alfred Lord Tennyson writes in his

poem *Ulysses*, they will not rest from this endeavor “To *strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield*”. As it has ever been.

Through their sacred beliefs Yolngu live as if on a cloud, buoyed up by those feelings of ecstasy and well-being associated with the numinous, living not in the world as it is, but as prescribed by *Motj*. I experienced this sense of spiritual ‘buoyancy’ firsthand during the Arnhem Land Christian Revival in the 1980s when it was said that the holy spirit was made manifest at Elcho Island. Burrumarra’s community was alive with prayer and prophecies and a significant shift was taking place in Yolngu beliefs. Even little children were having visions that were being shared over loudspeakers to an enthralled population. The Yolngu were filled with *Marr* and had no doubts about their embrace of Christianity, even if it was the religion of the colonizer. In fact, so inspired were the people during prayers that it was as if their feet didn’t even touch the ground. Outside the sanctified Revival stadium, they were still grappling with earthy challenges but in their minds, they were floating high above such profane concerns, seeking, as I said, to be closer to the truth, and to abide therein. In their own way, they were on a journey, and taking their ancient culture with them, into an entirely new arena (See McIntosh, 2015, 79-100).

In the wake of the holy spirit visitation, Christian leaders from Elcho Island saw themselves as having a mandate to bring an Indigenous vision of Christianity to the rest of Australia. Known outside Arnhem Land as the “Black Crusade”, Yolngu travelled throughout the Outback communities and major state capitals spreading the “Good News” (Bos, 1988). I was present at a Christian Festival in Alice Springs in 1991, for example, when an Aboriginal elder praised the efforts of the visitors for they had transformed his homeland from an Old Testament “valley of dry bones” into a living community. He said that when members of Burrumarra’s extended family came to his settlement there was not a single living thing there. All the people were spiritually dead, but then they found “a new way” and life returned to the valley. Here was an example of religious ecstasy as the medium for travel beyond the *axis mundi* to the far reaches of the Australian continent.

In a similar way, at land’s end in Indonesia 50,000 years ago, I believe that a vision or prophecy probably drove the people forward towards Australia, alongside the pure exhilaration that comes from a journey into the unknown, as was the case with the Polynesians (Irwin, 1992).<sup>17</sup> There would

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<sup>17</sup> Popular fiction includes many examples that shed light on this process, like John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. In the first, the pilgrim has a vision of destruction and seeks an incorruptible inheritance in heaven for all who seek it. The second also emphasizes the power of a personal

have been tears of sadness from members of the parent group, and revelry and a strong sense of *communitas*<sup>18</sup> from members of the advance party. Reading signs into the land- or seascape gave them an energy and resolve to attempt the impossible, and in Australia they would ultimately find that type of *Motj* that would facilitate their ultimate settlement, growth, and prosperity, because that was understood to be their destiny.

### **Conclusion: From Chaos to Order in Search of a World Symphony**

“A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.” Oscar Wilde

As I said at the outset, understanding the phenomenon of early human mobility will always be a work in progress. Clive Gamble (2013) emphasizes that it was our imaginative ability to “go beyond” and create societies where people lived apart yet stayed in touch that made us such effective world settlers. But was there a sacred dimension to the deployment of our imaginations that facilitated the peopling of the world? What were those stories that inspired people to:

...think deeply about the origins of the cosmos, human existence, the relationship humans...have with one another, the natural world, and the incomprehensible power that gave rise to the unfolding space-time continuum we call the universe (Wolfe, 2014, 26).

Wade (2006) suggested that insight into mythology and mobility might be found in Indigenous Australian cosmology and culture and, in this chapter, I have explored the place of *Motj* in enabling the transition of Yolngu society from a state of chaos to a sacred world order and a “world symphony” of their own. The driving mechanism for this inspired trajectory, I have shown, is analogous to the modern-day practice of pilgrimage, where the pilgrim brings back stories to strengthen the parent community, enrich its legends, and endorse, elaborate upon or even challenge, its sacred truths.

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vision and cooperative action, learning from others, and cumulative knowledge, for the survival of a community.

<sup>18</sup> Sense of community or camaraderie engendered by shared experience, often linked to a rite of passage (Turner, 1973).

Two discreet influences are in tension in this pilgrimage scenario. One is the inherent need of the community to expand and for its members to explore and tackle the boundaries of their understanding. The other is to maintain the status quo and protect the sacred center that gives meaning and security to its members. One pushes the limits of our knowledge through cutting edge engagement with the world, while the other tries to build an impenetrable wall around the sacred core. The former tries to tear down that wall, while the latter is always trying to keep up with the new, adapting as needed to maintain the core's integrity and authority.

Based on the evidence of *Motj* presented here, this dialectical relationship, namely, resolving the conflict that exists between the need to grapple with life's perpetual struggles in novel ways and the knowledge of another dimension to life that transcends such realities, was a driving force in early human migration.

The unique solution to the "god-shaped hole in the heart"—namely the yearning of the soul that drives us on our spiritual quest—that was discovered by Australia's Aborigines and called totemism by academics—saw them living in harmony with the natural world for tens of thousands of years. Seventeenth century philosopher Blaise Pascal postulated in his book *Pensees* that there was an original Eden in which humans lived in true happiness. Data presented here, however, suggest that from the very beginning, human beings went looking for Eden and, in countless settings across the globe and throughout time, found solutions to this primal need.

In the latter portion of their great journey, the ancestors of Australia's First Peoples would find answers by moving in the direction of the rising sun and establishing relations of reciprocity with deities associated with that hallowed place. Memories of their vast journey out of Africa and of the times of chaos would ultimately be erased and replaced with a timeless view of autochthony, i.e., that they were born of the Australian soil. And in place of their search for paradise in their own lifetimes came a seemingly timeless totemic religious practice and a spiritual journey at life's end fueled by the promise of answers to all their questions and an end to their struggles.

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