

Fred R. Myers, *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press; Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1986. Pp. 334. US\$27.50.

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The problem is that Fred Myers is not quite sure whether to believe the Pintupi, an Aboriginal people of the Western Desert of Australia with whom he has worked. "The Pintupi interpret their society as the continuation of a preordained cosmic order," he writes (p. 219). Yet Myers himself interprets "the Dreaming" as "a projection into symbolic space of various social processes" (p. 47). The meaning of the Dreaming, he later reiterates, "should be sought within a particular form of social life rather than in ahistorical concerns" (pp. 69-70). The Pintupi, on the other hand, insist that "the Ideal comes first" (p. 69). The book claims to have demonstrated "the essential foundation of Pintupi transcendentalism in the lived world of their daily experience" (p. 286), yet it shows us that the lived world of Pintupi daily experience is demonstrably variable: "immediate," "negotiable," "political." The Dreaming, by contrast, is described as "eternal," "timeless," in theory unchanging. The problem can be seen as a strictly logical one without reference to ethnography: A constant, if it occupies the ontological status of an "Ideal" may be variable in its practice, but variable practice cannot be *represented* by a constant, Ideal or otherwise.

The problem of whom to believe occurs again in the domain of "kinship" (chapter 7). The Pintupi appear to insist (as do other Australian

Aboriginal people) that at some level "all individuals" are "incorporated" into "a system on kinship" (p. 180); they appear to insist that "Everyone" belongs to one of the subsections (p. 183). In other words everyone is *in a priori*. Myers, though, tells us that "the larger regional system . . . is *built out of* egocentric or dyadic links among individuals" (p. 159; emphasis added). In other words, relations appear in this view to extend from the individual *out* in an expanding, and variable, manner.

The problem is crucial: Myers claims to be proceeding from the Pintupi's own frame of reference. The problem is difficult to resolve: In the context of the book, it is of course only Fred Myers that is actually talking; certain critical information is lacking. For instance, who is the "everyone," the "all," to whom Myers and presumably the Pintupi are referring? Are "kinship" terms and "subsection" names applied literally to "everyone," to "all," in the universe, or only to a certain range of people? The text is unclear, the data ambiguous.

The problem, I think, is not entirely due to real ambiguities in Pintupi culture. Behind the discussion is, I think, the materialist (in the Marvin Harris/Marxist sense) presupposition that ideology is superstructure, reflecting society's real base in relations of (re)production. Saying that base and superstructure interact dialectically such that ideology becomes a temporary factor in material production (and social reproduction), as Myers and others do, remains within the parameters of the paradigm. What is overlooked by remaining within these parameters is the different epistemological status of certain *kinds* of ideas, some of which we may consider ideologies in this sense and some not. The Dreaming is, in my view, of the "not" variety. I think the Pintupi share the same view.

Another presupposition behind the discussion is, I think, the extensionist one that kinship relations expand outward from E/ego to encompass and enfold others. Indeed there is also the extensionist presupposition that something called kinship is apparent in all societies. To say that such relations are not built from "blocks"--that is, not built from descent groups as in the Pintupi case, as Myers does--again remains within the parameters of the paradigm. What is overlooked by remaining within these parameters is that, in the case of Australian Aboriginal studies at least, the Dreaming may *be* kinship--the relationships we call "kinship" relations may already be "out there," prebuilt, awaiting real individuals to express or discover and work them.

In short, the general problem is that this book remains trapped within, not only materialist, but Western materialist, assumptions,

despite the best of intentions and efforts by the author to escape them. Myers's dialectic, for instance, sees "self" → "other" as "resolved" in Pintupi society through a "relatedness" established by the Law of the Dreaming. If "resolved," then why does "personal autonomy" remain the overwhelming concern of the Pintupi, as Myers insists throughout? It is insufficient to say that one becomes autonomous only through sustaining relations with others (p. 110). This is to end in obfuscation, if not contradiction. The way out, I believe, is to realize that the Pintupi are on a different tack--to realize that the author (and he is by no means alone) is trapped within a one-dimensional dialectic that begins with "self" opposed to "other" and which can only (successfully) end in "sharing," "caring," and "equality." The way out, I believe, is to see "transcendence" not as a dimension leading one positively out of opposition into "synthesis," as Myers does, but as a dimension leading one negatively away from opposition in a completely different direction. In this direction, "differentiation" is not only not the problem it is for Myers, but is a positive and integral aspect of the end result. Call that end result "complementarity," "interdependence," even "federation," but do not confuse it with "sharing," "caring," "equality," or "cooperation."

This said, there are real ambiguities within Pintupi society as a result of combining what I have called "locality incorporative" aspects appropriate to economic development with "kinline-confederational" aspects appropriate to peaceful coexistence. In the former mode, I have argued, autonomy and self-sufficiency are driving forces; in the latter, they are not. Ambiguities reflecting a tension between these two modes are admirably documented by Myers. With the Pintupi we seem to be at the very limits of what it means to be Australian in the Aboriginal sense. There *is* an element of coresidentiality in their society; there *is* a sense in which the unity of the regional coresidential network of interpersonal relations is significant as such; relations *are* more negotiable and "extendable," boundaries more flexible; the individual *is* relatively more autonomous; bilaterality and situation (conception site) *do* outweigh "lineality" and "descent" in the transmission of "ownership" rights; relations through cross-sex links *are* emphasized, again, over "lineal descent" relations. I can only agree that

In the Western Desert, there are no enduring corporations of this sort. Only the Dreaming remains as a control, a structure beyond individuals and binding them to itself, but it is, correspondingly, felt more intensely as an imperative here than elsewhere in Australia. Although individuals in other parts of Aus-

tralia appear more constrained by membership in a group and political alliances of the past, they are freer in the invention of song, dance, and innovation. Western Desert people are known throughout Australia for their conservatism and the strength of their adherence to the Law. (P. 297)

I have reviewed the book in terms of what it claims to be: not so much an ethnography as a dialogue between experience and theory--not only those of the author but also those of his subject, the Pintupi. As such the book represents an important contribution to our continuing dialogue with each other as anthropologists and with the Aboriginal people instructing us.