

The embodiment of sorcery: Supernatural aggression, belief and envy in a remote Aboriginal community

Victoria Burbank

University of Western Australia

Anthropologists have long attempted to come to grips with Indigenous Australian sorcery beliefs and especially with the idea that acts with no understandable efficacy bring about illness and death. In this ethnographic interpretation of sorcery beliefs in the remote community of Numbulwar, I follow those few who have attempted to find a link between these apparently harmless acts and real physiological consequences, arguing that the fear of sorcery that pervades Numbulwar contributes directly to the stress of daily life and indirectly to the premature morbidity and mortality of too many lives. Belief is posited as the mechanism whereby the human stress response is activated to a harmful extent, a process in which the projection of envious feelings may often be critical.

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INTRODUCTION: AN EMBODIMENT VIEW OF SORCERY

Starting from a position of disbelief in the techniques said to be responsible for a sorcery death, outside observers of Aboriginal Australia have largely avoided the question of magical practices' efficacy in bringing sickness, death and other misfortune to their victims. The Berndts, for example, say:

Do Aborigines really perform sorcery, or magic? In one sense, it does not matter whether they do or not. If they believe that such performances take place with the results that are claimed for them, this has almost the same social consequences as if they actually did so. It is the belief, influencing their behaviour in relation to one another, which counts (Berndt and Berndt 1992:305).

At least one outside observer, however, the physician Don Eastwell (1982), attempted to discover the mechanisms whereby known victims of sorcery died. His report that extreme dehydration actually effects such deaths, does not, however, look to the purported activities of the sorcerer, but instead to the body's physiology.¹ Here I present an interpretation of sorcery's efficacy that somewhat resembles both of these

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examples: Eastwell's insofar as I look at biomedical factors, the Berndts' insofar as I highlight the power of belief in bringing about concrete results. I argue that via the fear it creates in the remote community of Numbulwar, sorcery contributes directly to the stress of daily life and indirectly to the premature morbidity and mortality characteristic of Aboriginal lives more generally. I assume, however, and with good reason, given the prolonged experience of subordination and marginalisation of Numbulwar's Indigenous population, not to mention Indigenous populations across Australia, that the postcolonial regime imposed upon it from outside is the principal source of harmful stress in this community (Burbank 2011; Sapolsky 2004; cf Musharbash 2014).

Feelings of fear, anger and general distress, neuroscientists tell us (e.g. LeDoux 1996; Panksepp 1998), are our conscious experiences of the activation of our stress system, the Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal, or HPA, Axis. This system is a part of our vertebrate inheritance and, clearly, its motivation of flight or fight has maintained our species' existence. In our current circumstances, however, and particularly in the circumstance of people like those at Numbulwar, our stress system may be undermining our wellbeing. It is generally understood by social determinants of health researchers (e.g. Brunner and Marmot 1999) that an overactive HPA Axis is a major source of just the kinds of ill health that plague Indigenous Australians: high blood pressure, kidney disease, diabetes, stroke and coronary heart disease. Regrettably, Numbulwar appears to provide an example of the relationship between unhealthy levels of stress and premature morbidity and mortality, where some cultural beliefs may make matters worse. I have seen there more grief, anger and fear over the premature death of family members than I have cared to. This distress is, I suspect, exacerbated by beliefs that a kinsman's life has been taken by another person, possibly, by someone in the community, sometimes, with the assistance of 'family'.

The HPA Axis works well when a threat is specific and momentary. It moves us to act, and may save our lives. But when a threat is amorphous, unseen and continuous our HPA Axis remains activated longer than it should be, eventually creating the kinds of medical conditions that may lead to early death (Brunner and Marmot 1999). Thus a vicious circle is set in motion in communities such as Numbulwar. A young man or woman dies, sorcery is suspected and feared, an unhealthily prolonged activation of the HPA Axis accompanies these experiences and contributes to the probability of premature death for another young man or woman in the community. A sorcery death to outsiders seems unlikely to have been accomplished by the suspected means. According to my argument, sorcery's potency is real but acts more circuitously than local theory would have it. I think the Berndts were right when they said that, 'it is the belief . . . which counts (1992:305)', although I see its importance to be of greater relevance to the kin of a sorcery victim than to the victim, him or herself. Belief in the ill will of family, neighbours or strangers along with the distress of losing (often many) close kin before their time, and the social and economic disruption that may follow can take a physical toll on survivors, and even on their unborn offspring (e.g. see Burbank 2011, 2012), eventually contributing to untimely death. The sorcerer, then,

should such an individual exist, may still take satisfaction from his or her act, as will be seen in the pages that follow.

A SORCERY CASE AT NUMBULWAR

In mid-1978, in this southeast Arnhem Land community, a man estimated to be in his early sixties suffered a cerebral haemorrhage and died eleven days later. Following the stroke, Lily, a local woman, visited Tina, the wife of the dead man's brother, Theodore². She brought news, she said, from the clinic nurse, who had explained that the stricken man's brain was, 'all broke up and full of blood. If the Sister just said nothing we would start thinking about who did it. But the Sister told us about that blood. You don't think about that kind and you tell that old man not to think about that kind', 'that kind' meaning sorcery.

Tina agreed to this and the two women proceeded to discuss how the deceased's brain might have become 'broken', this discussion, however, soon turned to talk of sorcery. Initially, Tina speculated that it might have been the result of a past head wound. She also proposed that her brother-in-law had worked 'too hard' drilling bores in his earlier days. Shifting to ideas about sorcery, she said something might have been put in his head before he came to Numbulwar, and Lily agreed, pointing out that when he first arrived he was saying hello to everyone, a peculiarity associated with whitefellas, and a sign that he had something affecting him before he came to the community. The people with whom he had been playing cards when he was struck down could not have been responsible, she added, for they were her 'family'. Later, in a discussion with Lily on this subject, my suggestion that a brain could simply get old and worn-out made no apparent impression; she continued to speak in terms of human causation.

In spite of Lily's message from the nurse, later that day Theodore told me he was thinking about 'murderer':

We'll have to send his clothes to his Dreaming. There his uncle will fix everything. Somebody might fall down on Groote or here or at Roper. Anywhere. Then we'll know. [His close father's mother's brother] wanted to take up his spears straight away, but I told him to wait and we'll find out properly with the clothes.³

On the night that Theodore was told of his brother's demise, he stood on a sand dune and made the following accusation: 'Don't talk to me about other mob, *mulunguwa* [sorcerers], Old Hat's mob. It's you mob here.' In the days following, various suggestions were put forth about possible suspects, a visiting group of the deceased's brothers had a meeting over the cause of death and Theodore had to talk two of his uncles out of fighting. It was decided that the clothes of the dead man could not be used for the divination of his murderer, for his little daughter had accidentally touched them after they had been removed from the body. The hair of the dead can also be used to discover a murderer, but they said they had forgotten to get some before the burial. On the day following his brother's death, Theodore sat

by himself in the nearby bush, so that, explained Tina, his dead brother could send him a sign of the killer. In the past, when bodies were placed on a platform for decomposition, the platform might be burnt after it had served its purpose. Then the murderer's body would break out in sores. In recent times, with Western-style internment, it was said that relatives of the dead might visit the grave to look for signs of the assassin.

SORCERY AT NUMBULWAR

Once the Rose River Mission, established in 1952 by the Anglican's Church Missionary Society, Numbulwar is a community of approximately 1000 people, most of whom were originally Wubuy speakers, known as the Nunggubuyu or Numburindi.⁴ My visits to Numbulwar, over a span of 30 years, and the observations of earlier anthropological visitors and mission records, make it clear that this is a community (like many others in remote Australia) characterised both by dramatic change and notable constancy.

The impact of Western institutions, occupations, arrangements and goods has clearly changed Indigenous life. Since 1977, for example, I have found people working at Western occupations, but the majority, some of whom continue to hunt, fish and gather, are supported by welfare. In place of past pursuits, children have long attended the local school, and some of the adults the church. Over the decades, community governance has changed from that of the mission superintendents to an intercultural local council, which by the 2000s included a number of women. Increasingly Western things such as houses, phones, vehicles and televisions have gained in importance in people's lives.

Many Indigenous categories, social arrangements and beliefs still hold sway, however. Sorcery is one of these beliefs. It is, I would say, as does Biernoff, an anthropologist who worked at Numbulwar between 1971 and 1972, 'an intrinsic element' of the local culture 'and as such is a part of perceived reality' (1982:147). It is an integral part of the supernatural landscape: Christianity, the Law, that is, the imperatives of life established by the Dreaming, love magic, and a variety of other beliefs and practices that rest on forces beyond nature. All of these beliefs are seen to be intertwined with human action and intention, an example of which is provided by Lily's persistence in suggesting that human agency had a part in Theodore's brother's death. The subordination of Aboriginal people to the values and demands of an encompassing polity, creating circumstances which have been associated with excessive psychosocial stress and rates of premature illness and death (e.g. Wilkinson 2005; Burbank 2011) is another constant that I have observed, and I argue that sorcery beliefs contribute to and are reinforced by this state of affairs.

There are many ways to kill someone with sorcery: a fish or kangaroo bone may be pointed at the victim, a person's tea may be poisoned with an unidentified shrub or a sugar like substance may be sprinkled on someone's clothes. Body exuviate, fingernails, hair or urine may also be used to bring about illness or death. Urine, for

example, may be stabbed if it is found on the ground. Here Tina describes the most elaborate form of sorcery I have been told about, a technique which greatly resembles those related to Warner (1937) at Milingimbi in the early 1930s:

Somebody come up telling you, "You sit down, you've got trouble" . . . You can't come outside, by and by they'll kill you. Like you've been stealing tobacco or food for a ceremony. They can kill you with a spear, tomahawk. You go to get wood, might be there they kill you. Angry man kill you with a spear. They fix you up, just like a doctor. Then you lay down, you sleep. They tell you, "Three days you stay, you feel sick, in one week you die." You get up now. You don't see them. They've got a song so you can't see them. You've got a mark: that's where he struck you with the spear and then shut the cut up. You go and sit in camp, see a girl, you get wild, grab a stick. You get wild because of that mark. You get up now. "You've been talk at me. You've been swearing. Come on, you and me will fight". Right, well she might strike you now, she's got a stick or just with her hand. Well you die now. Like next morning you die. Or you feel sick and you die (in Burbank 1994: 50).

Biernoff's comments on sorcery at Numbulwar include the following observations: with the exception of the 'very young and very old', all deaths are attributed to it; anyone (presumably adult) can use sorcery but while there may be sorcerers at Numbulwar, it is outsiders who are 'most feared'. Public discourse with regard to sorcery is 'circumspect' and sorcery may be 'directed serially at members of a family or lineage' when it is used in retribution for some offence (1982:147–148). I can confirm most of these observations on the basis of what I was told of sorcery on my visits to Numbulwar in the late 1970s. Sorcery beliefs, as is probably the case with any set of beliefs, are not static, however. In the 1970s people spoke of *mulunguwa*, for example, as did Theodore in regard to his brother's death. *Mulunguwa* are usually, but not always, outsiders who come from the south to kill in the manner just described. They are other humans, not *bardirrinnya* or 'devil-devil', spirits of the dead.⁵ During my last series of trips, however, I heard little, if any, discussion of *mulunguwa*, although a number of deaths were attributed to sorcery. Another apparent change is the openness with which sorcery is now discussed. As Biernoff (1982) has mentioned, sorcery is often spoken of circumspectly. Circumlocutions such as Lily's when she told Tina not to 'think about that kind' are often used in conversations. In the 1970s and 1980s, sorcery was generally referred to as 'trouble' as were other acts of aggression, whether verbal or physical (Burbank 1994: 49–50). By 2003, sorcery had been given a specific Aboriginal English label: 'black magic'⁶, although some people continued to use circumlocutions. Between 2003 and 2007, it was also said that 'young people', that is, unmarried adolescents or young adults, were using sorcery, something I had not heard of before. In past conversations, it was usually senior men in the community who were accused of a suspect death.

A person may be ensorcelled for a number of reasons. High on the list is making a mistake in a ceremony or misbehaving (e.g. fighting or eloping) when a ceremony is taking place. Women, who are expected to provide food for male participants in a ceremony, direct this activity or assist by fetching firewood and water, but fail to do so,

can expect supernatural punishment. A woman who leaves a man of high ceremonial status for another will, upon the former's death, be denied a *jirrward*, a collar of woven fibre. This leaves her open to sorcery. In recent times, a woman who sleeps with a man or takes another husband before the *jirrward* has been removed is also at risk as is the man who cohabits with her. Sorcery may also be used as a form of retaliation following disputes or fights. In addition someone may be ensorcelled because of 'jealousing'.

HOW CAN PEOPLE BELIEVE IN THE IMPOSSIBLE?

'Impossible' is a domain established by convention. One cultural group's impossible is another's possible. Here, I impose a Western scientific discourse and assume that those who believe a kinsperson to have been murdered by magic are believing in an impossibility. Sorcery is, nevertheless, an important belief, for according to my argument, it is a distal cause of illness or death, not of the target, however, but of the believer.

My question about sorcery belief at Numbulwar has been preceded by extensive anthropological thinking on belief in the supernatural, including ideas about the primitive mind and human rationality (see Reid 1983; Luhrman 1989; Stewart and Strathern 2004 for overviews). Persuaded that humans are natural scientists, that is, that they have long sought evidence to substantiate or disprove their beliefs, I approach sorcery belief at Numbulwar, a la Taylor, Frazier and Horton, as a preindustrial attempt to understand and manipulate natural and social worlds (Dunbar 1995). I accept, however, that human minds are both rational and 'primitive' and that both these characteristics are at play in any belief, but especially beliefs that ascribe power to the supernatural, whether it be that of the Abrahamic god or that of the Arnhem Land sorcerer (see Boyer 1994). By 'primitive' I simply mean 'original', 'primary' or 'essential' (Diamond 1974: 119,123-125), and refer to the evolved human brain/mind, experience of which is largely outside our consciousness.

Drawing upon the idea of 'cognitive constraints', Boyer (e.g. 1994, 2003, 2008) casts religious thought, that is, any thought about supernatural agents, objects or actions, as a consequence of normal human cognitive systems such as 'theory of mind', 'agency-detection', and the 'logic of social exchange'. Humans, he argues, acquire such thoughts from the cultural environment, and maintain them as beliefs because they find them 'intuitively plausible'. Supernatural beliefs generally include two components, first a perception of something belonging to a conceptual domain, e.g. a person, animal or object. Once perceived, its apprehension activates domain appropriate information and expectations about it. For example, once we identify something as a kind of object, we do not expect it to move of its own volition (Resnick 1994: 487-8). We experience such information as sensible and such expectations as reasonable. The second component of such thought is counterintuitive information, e.g. a person who can disappear in front of our eyes. Research suggests that it is this combination of both the intuitive and counterintuitive understanding of something

that makes the supernatural both memorable and easily transmitted (Boyer and Ramble 2001). The idea of one person killing another via magical rather than material means is just the sort of idea that our minds can entertain.

But we are natural scientists too, engaging in rational hypotheses testing activity. Evidence is important to us, even where belief in the supernatural is concerned, and anthropologists have observed that magical beliefs are reinforced by empirical observations. Gannath Obeyesekere (1975: 21) for example, has suggested that the frequency of misfortune encountered in Sri Lankan Villages is sufficient to persuade those who petition sorcerers that their investment in a sacrificial goat or pig has been money well spent. Given the frequency with which people die at Numbulwar, and given the disproportionate number of deaths of young and middle aged people, there is evidence enough that something unnatural is taking place (see also Musharbash 2014). As Janice Reid has said of similar beliefs at Yirrkala, they persist because they are 'devastatingly true' (1983:153).

At Numbulwar talk of sorcery, while once more circumspect than it has been in recent years, is not, in my experience, kept from the young. The content of such talk is also consonant with a composite of other beliefs and experience of the complexity of life at Numbulwar, where family identity has significant emotional resonance in an environment of material scarcity and social stress. Christianity and biomedical theories of mortality are also a part of the cultural environment and are discourses that might be seen to compete with and vanquish ideas about sorcery. Sorcery, however, seems to co-exist alongside them. What is the source of this resilience? The Aboriginal English/Kriol word 'jealous' provides us with an entree into some of this complex combination of experience, emotion and belief, found largely within 'family'.

'JEALOUS' AND 'FAMILY'

Boyer (1994, 2003, 2008) is not alone in thinking that belief arises from both external and internal information. Researchers looking at the neuroanatomy of belief concur: belief, they agree, arises from socialisation, firsthand experience and the inherent workings of specific brain structures. Interpreting the behaviour of social others requires emotional-cognitive integration, provided by brain systems that, not coincidentally, have been found to be active supporters of religious belief (Kapogiannis *et al* 2009).⁷ Although such systems are characteristic of the generic human brain, when we work cross-culturally we cannot assume concordance of emotion terms or of emotional experience.⁸ While the ethnographic record provides considerable evidence that humans share a great deal in their experiences, arguments such as Reddy's (2001) that culture in the form of emotion words and scenarios has the power to change what may be a universal feeling response into variable emotional events direct us to anticipate variation of feeling along with shared components of feeling and look for the differences along with similarities.

Westerners sometimes use the word 'jealous' when they are speaking of what might normally be labelled 'envious' feelings, as in 'I am so jealous of your success'. It

is not surprising, then, that at Numbulwar the word 'jealous' is used to indicate what Westerners regard as both 'jealousy' and 'envy'. But Aboriginal 'jealous' is, in some ways, neither like Western 'jealousy' nor Western 'envy'. Most notable is the moral valence of this emotion. 'Jealous' is an emotion that motivates and initiates everyday practices that rarely invite negative moral evaluation. I refer here, in particular, to acts that Peterson (1993) has called 'demand sharing', that is, a demand that another, usually family member, give one something that he or she has. A stereotype of hunting and gathering peoples often includes the vision of groups of people willingly handing over their possessions to others. Ethnography on Aboriginal Australia challenges this vision (e.g. see Peterson 1993). Beyond infancy, if you want something, you need to ask for it (Hamilton 1981; Myers 1986; Brady 1992). Generosity arises from the fact that when asked for something, people usually comply.

Elsewhere (Burbank 2014) I have argued that something like 'envy', understood as a means of responding to a negative social comparison, the perception that one has or is less than another, is a constructive emotion in an egalitarian social formation. My confidence in this interpretation is both initiated and buttressed by the observation that 'jealous' precipitates acts that enforce the egalitarian ethos characteristic of communities like Numbulwar. There are, however, some circumstances in this community in which 'jealous' is subject to moral censure: when it is thought to have precipitated a deadly act of sorcery. I suggest that the experiences that initiate 'jealous' reinforce the plausibility of sorcery beliefs and that many of these take place in the 'family'.

'Family' is a fundamental aspect of Numbulwar's sociality, critical for both the ill and wellbeing of its people. 'Family', in Aboriginal English/Kriol can signify either the singular or the plural, referring to a 'close' kinsperson or to the collective of close kin, what anthropologists regard as a kindred.

The Western-styled houses in which the people of Numbulwar dwell, understandably contain only a part of anyone's 'family'. In 2003, for example, one house that I visited contained a married couple and their four children, the husband's widowed mother and his widowed brother and the latter's two school aged children. It also housed a sister's son and daughter. Subsequent to their birth, their mother had found a new partner and moved to another community leaving the children at Numbulwar. Other siblings, their offspring and partners and their children, along with elderly dependents, lived in houses nearby or in other parts of the town, as did the siblings, children and grandchildren of the couple's parents. The distance of their houses, however, did not prevent a strong connection to other family members and was overcome by daily visits and mobile phone calls.

This example of a household not only begins to illustrate 'family' composition but also both the trauma and succour that often, if not usually, characterise family life. In just one household we find two premature deaths, one of an older but still active man, the other of a mother of dependent children; we find a consequence of the marital tensions that characterise many young couples' relationships and an example of what may be the fate of their children. 'Family' is a place where difficulties may abound but also a refuge, in this instance for an older widow, a younger widower and two sets of

siblings abandoned, not only by death, but by at least one of their parents. In the larger 'family' we could count many other sources of adversity: poverty, physical and mental illness, substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, child neglect and domestic violence. Yet, I would judge this 'family', which includes able, industrious and charitable people, as fairly representative of the other families in the community.

Family in any setting is likely to be an impassioned complex of competing and cooperative interests, though this may especially be the case in settings where kin cooperation is vital for physical and social existence. 'Family' can be a source of sadness, anger and fear but it is also a source of social, emotional and economic support. Generally, a person at Numbulwar is in close contact with, and dependent upon, 'family' throughout the lifespan. The early family environment at Numbulwar may, in most cases, be fairly described as a nurturing and responsive one. In the community there is an expectation that infants and small children will be protected from harm. This is displayed in the near immediate response to crying infants, the castigation of women thought to neglect or abuse their children and in the fights between adults precipitated by one child's attack on another (Burbank 1994). Yet family is also an environment of scarce resources, want and competition. Children, especially, but adults as well, need to compete with family members for attention and the necessities and comforts of life. Such competition may have become a more frequent aspect of family experience in recent years. The practice of 'demand sharing' (Peterson 1993) may be more noticeable today for there are many more things available to have and ask for. The growing disability to be seen in the community may also increase competition - in this case for the attention of scarce adult nurturers and guides. Family is thus an environment with the potential to be rife with 'jealous'. 'Jealous' can in many ways assist the continuation of an egalitarian social formation, but when increasing yet insufficient material goods and the decreasing availability of adult carers expand scarcity and want, 'jealous' has the potential to do harm.

A recent case of murder by sorcery illustrates the belief that 'family' may be complicit in a sorcery death. My attention was drawn to this case when a woman told me that although she regarded living on outstations as 'the good life', people were not going there because:

They afraid of people killing each other. Black magic. Scared of black magic, especially because no old people here, only young people. Some people got no good life; maybe they scared, because of that problem, that man that died at [country name]. They have to stay here now (in Burbank 2011: 94).

This woman was saying that people were afraid to live on the outstations because they might be ensorcelled, just like the man whose death was under discussion. In the course of the meetings, fights and general conversation about this death, it was said that one of the victim's brothers had assisted the murderer(s) to save his own skin (Burbank 2011: 96).

There is another way in which 'family' may be responsible for a sorcery death. This belief, similar to the idea that sorcery is 'directed serially at members of a family'

(Biernoff 1982:148), is seen in the following account. The sins of one family member can lead to the death of another:

New mission time, the first one to pass away was [a man's] little brother. It didn't matter that [another boy] was in the middle of the water and [the little brother] was near the shore, the [poisonous] jellyfish got him.

You mean he had a mark?

Yes.

Why would they do that to a little boy?

They do like that when they can't get his father. (in Burbank 1994: 89-90)

To ensure that the guilty party is affected and no other, those wishing to harm a specific person may secretly 'curse'⁹ a man with their own ceremony and tell him to kill the intended victim. If he were to refuse, he himself would die from their curse. Once the victim is dead, the curse on the murderer dissipates. Witnesses to the murder are also cursed. The curse makes them forget the murder and prevents them from talking about it if they remember. But not all murderers are so exacting and people accept that they may become a victim because of a kinsman's act.

Sorcery may also be a consequence of not acting as family should. Sharing within the family is a valued behaviour taught from early years on (Burbank 2014). Insufficient generosity may provoke an act of sorcery and those who ask for something are usually, and appropriately, only 'family', someone who is justifiably 'jealous' of something another has.

DISCUSSION: THE REINFORCEMENT OF SORCERY BELIEF

When one does not know for certain why a violent act was committed, or why someone has died, a safe guess is 'jealous'. In the 1970s I was told that Charlie Pride, Elvis Presley and 'Cassius Clay' were killed because, 'maybe someone was jealous'. In the 2000s, 'jealous' was said to be the ultimate cause of several deaths assumed to have been effected by sorcery (Burbank 2014). Following Reid (1983), who saw sorcery accusations at Yirrkala as statements about human relationships, I suggest that the ascription of 'jealous' is a projection of both early and subsequent feelings arising from competition with close 'family'. It strikes me as significant that 'jealous' is so routinely ascribed to deaths where sorcery is suspected but the cause of it undecided or unknown. I also think it significant that many positing a 'jealous' motive for sorcery were children or adolescents, that is, youngsters who might not have been privy to at least some of the information of their seniors. Biernoff (1982:148) observed that because of the secrecy with which sorcery is carried out, 'only an elder is likely to have access to information that might identify real and potential victims' and it is a 'healer' who will 'determine the cause'. Suspicion of sorcery thus provides a perfect blank canvas for the projection of strong emotion.

'Projection', a concept introduced by Freud into the lexicon of psychology, was initially understood as the unconscious ascription to others of devalued qualities in the self, thus abolishing them, at least from consciousness. He proposed, as an example of this usage, that the taboos on corpses in 'primitive' societies arose from the projection of hostile feelings onto the 'wicked demon' the deceased had become (Freud 1912/1950: 60-63). Since that time there has been considerable debate about just what processes of mind enable projection and whether or not it defends the psyche against harm (e.g. Holmes 1978; Newman *et al.* 1997; Schimel and Greenberg 2003). Nevertheless, a convergence of research findings and observations of similarities between projection, empathy, theory of mind, intentionality and emotion regulation suggest that projection-like processes are robust human phenomena (e.g. Rice and Hoffman 2014; Kawada *et al.* 2004; Shamay Tsoory *et al.* 2009).

Use of the idea of projection has a long history in anthropological interpretation. Roheim (1932), for example, saw Central Desert devil beliefs as projections of hostility and resentment between parents and children. Whiting and Child (1953: 273) suggested that aggressive feelings are a prime candidate for projection, especially in circumstances where 'aggression is prevented because of fear of its consequences'. And Spiro (1952), though speaking of 'displacement' rather than projection, presents a picture similar to Freud's and to the one I paint below. Asking why on Ifaluk people persist in holding 'a manifestly dysfunctional belief' in 'malevolent ghosts' (497), he finds an answer in its deflection of aggressive drives that would disrupt the characteristic 'sharing, cooperation and kindness towards others' (501) of the community.

Hostile feelings and aggression are far from unknown at Numbulwar (Burbank 1994). Thinking about its families, it is difficult to imagine anyone who has not had to compete with 'family' for material and social goods, who has not been the target of 'jealous' and a request to give something that they did not want to give but gave, nevertheless. It is also difficult to imagine anyone who has not been the target of 'jealous' and asked for something that they did not give. And it is difficult to imagine a person who has not felt 'jealous', asked for a desired item and been refused. 'Jealous' experience infuses life in this community; while it brings an egalitarian good it also brings anger and fear, emotions that invite aggressive feelings. 'Jealous', anger and fear are manifest in daily acts: a fight between brothers over a marriageable woman, an argument between sisters over money one has and refuses to share, an adolescent's wish to hide a birthday cake that others might covet. This last example is particularly informative. I once hosted a birthday party for an adolescent girl. While requested, this was not a typical practice as far as I could discover. On the evening of the party, which, importantly, included only some of the adolescent's close family, she asked me to close the frosted louvres looking out of the kitchen/dining area. It was a hot and humid evening, though the sun was down, so I asked if her request was really necessary. She replied in the affirmative, explaining that someone might 'shoot' us, clearly referring to a 'jealous' act of sorcery.

Death at Numbulwar, as I have witnessed it, is almost invariably accompanied by anger and fear. As Biernoff (1982: 147) also observed, if a very old person dies, that is

to be expected. 'He has died himself, it was time for him'. The death of most adults is, however, suspect. The ages at which people are dying, sometimes in their 20s, and the unexpected nature of their deaths, along with the sheer frequency of these deaths, likely exacerbate such suspicion and provoke these emotions. Sometimes disrupting the larger community, close relatives of the deceased may display their feelings, months, if not years, after the death, damaging property or attacking people, verbally and physically. Most relevant for this discussion of emotion and belief are two particular forms of the mourners' feelings: the fear that a kinsman's act might bring about one's own death and the fear that a family member is involved in sorcery. Sorcery can be either a legitimate act, 'a means of retribution and social control' or 'a means of vengeance' (Biernoff 1982:47). There is always the possibility that a mistake has been made in a ceremony or that someone has knowingly, or unwittingly, violated the Law. There is always the possibility that the deceased offended or injured somebody within or outside the community. Thus, following a death in the family people may fear that they will be next, that the murderer(s) will not be satisfied with only the death of their kinsman. Fear may send them to another community where they think the murderer (s) cannot reach them. Alternatively, fear may keep them inside, a way of avoiding a murderer's attack but isolating them from others and preventing them from participating in the community's social life.

I can say little about the fear that a family member had a role in the death of a kinsman for people only spoke briefly of others holding such ideas, and I would like to think this an infrequent experience, but suggest that both these fears are reinforced by experiences of competition with 'family' and the feelings these entail. Both the kinsman who brings death to the family through a misdeed and the kinsman who more directly assists in a sorcery murder is the family member who asked for something the bereaved did not want to give or is the 'family' who, upon being asked for something, refused the request. Being asked for something one does not want to give, or not receiving something because someone refuses to give it, or gives it to another, invites anger, which is, in this community, generally expected to be followed by some form of aggression (Burbank 1994). Those one might harm, however, are the same people who are essential to one's social, emotional and material wellbeing; the harm such aggression might do and the consequences that might follow might well be feared.

Along with the advantages of projection, both Freud (1950) and Spiro (1952) saw disadvantages associated with the displacement of feelings onto another. For Freud projection 'turns a dead man into a [fearful] malignant enemy' (63). For Spiro, it creates anxiety and reduces energy for more productive endeavours. At Numbulwar, when hostility is projected onto an unknown other, someone from elsewhere or at least from another 'family', both the individual and the 'family' are, in theory at least, defended from the harm of aggression. The already dead alleviate the tensions of the living, maintaining the solidarity of 'family' and the viability of family life. However, the potential utility of this defence mechanism may be compromised if a family member is suspected of complicity in a death.

And even if this is not the case, though individuals are presumably able to dismiss their own 'jealous' and anger via this psychic process, they now may fear an unidentified community member or distant stranger, anticipating their own assassination, perhaps for years. Unfortunately, in this interpretation of sorcery beliefs, the already dead are not able to alleviate the tensions created by this consequent fear, which, if prolonged, is accompanied by an unhealthy activation of the stress response that may, eventually, contribute to an early death. Thus at Numbulwar too, a belief, aided by projection, may entail both benefits and costs. The benefits may be seen in the relative harmony of family life, the costs in the premature morbidity and mortality of the population.

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Please send correspondence to Victoria Burbank: victoria.burbank@uwa.edu.au

NOTES

- 1 Eastwell's idea that dehydration caused sorcery death was endorsed by Cawte (1983), another physician. Eastwell's ideas were critiqued with extensive ethnographic detail by anthropologists, Reid and Williams (1984). His paper was preceded by Cannon's (1942), a physiologist whose ideas somewhat foreshadow mine, though again, the physiological effects of concern are those of the sorcery victim.
- 2 All Indigenous names are pseudonyms.
- 3 In quotes from Aboriginal speakers some Kriol words have been translated into English. Most Aboriginal English and Kriol sentence structures have been converted into Standard English structures.
- 4 Other residents and visitors are identified as speakers of languages such as Mara, Wandarang, Anindilaguwa, and Ritharngu, although many in this population speak only Ngukurr Kriol and, sometimes, Aboriginal English.
- 5 Heath (1982:332) defines mulunguwa as 'maleficent sorcerer, murderer (usually a man from a remote country)' and gives bardiriya for devil/ghost.
- 6 I can only speculate on the origin of this phrase. Clearly it comes from Western culture, though whether from watching Western media, from conversing with whitefellas at Numbulwar or on visits to urban centres, e.g. Darwin, is unknown.
- 7 Kapogiannis *et al.* (2009) add a disclaimer to their findings saying that they are based solely on research with Western subjects. If, however, we accept Boyer's (1994, 2003, 2008) embrace of religious thought as any ideas about the supernatural, we can assume the applicability of them to non-Western settings.

- 8 We can never experience the interiority of emotions of anyone other than our self. Nevertheless, we think we understand something of our compatriots' feelings. In like manner, I believe, we can understand something of people socialized in different cultural settings. We listen to them talk about their feelings, attend to the emotion scenarios they describe, and learn something about the context in which their feelings emerge. Our empathetic capacities may also assist us in our task. For an extended discussions on this topic see Burbank (2011).
- 9 Heath (1982:332) provides the Wubuy words for cursing: 'lhunyma "to curse (person) by magic", nyiri anawu "curse song" (to curse a country, etc.)'.

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