

# **SPIRIT BEINGS AND THE ABORIGINAL LANDSCAPE OF THE LOWER MURRAY, SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

*PHILIP A. CLARKE*

## **Summary**

In the historic and ethnographic record for Aboriginal culture in the Lower Murray, there is a body of mythology, on spirit beings, that does not directly relate to a creation period or as is sometimes referred to, the 'Dreaming'. Although not generally associated with land transforming events in the mythology, these beliefs are nonetheless revealing of Aboriginal perceptions of the Lower Murray landscape. This paper provides an overview of the records concerning spirit beings and adds further Aboriginal ethnographic details from the 1980s. A cultural geographical approach is adopted, which considers the role of spirit beliefs in the Aboriginal perception of place in the cultural landscape.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the anthropological literature of Aboriginal Australia, the study of mythology and its relationship to land is generally limited to the deep religious aspects of the creation period, often termed the 'Dreaming'.<sup>1</sup> For Australian anthropology, one consequence of this is the neglect of mythical beliefs linked to spirit beings that were perceived by Aboriginal people to have an existence separate from the 'Dreaming' ancestors. In mythology, these spirits are not 'creators', although sometimes their contemporaries, but rather co-residents of a landscape shared with Aboriginal people. This paper brings together wide ranging written sources and provides new ethnographic material for southern Australia gathered in the 1980s. A focus of the study is the investigation of how the more recent knowledge of Aboriginal people combines pre-European traditions with those that developed from relationships to a landscape altered by British expansion starting in the 1830s.

## SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

The Lower Murray region of South Australia is the most heavily worked ethnographic area in southern Australia (Fig.1). The Aboriginal people

here are generally known as the Ngarrindjeri. An outline of this diverse literature is provided in detail elsewhere (Clarke 1994, 1995). Briefly, the authors from the nineteenth century can be divided into early explorers and colonists of the 1840s (R. Penney, G. French Angas, W. A. Cawthorne and W. Wyatt) and missionaries from 1840s to 1870s (H. A. E. Meyer and G. Taplin). In the twentieth century there are anthropologists from 1918 to the present (A. R. Brown, A. Harvey, N. B. Tindale, R. M. and C. H. Berndt, P. A. Clarke), a folklorist in 1930 (W. Ramsay Smith), a sociologist in the 1970s (G. Killington) and local historians from the 1980s (R. Linn and L. Padman). Although all these recorders are influenced towards their individual social and disciplinary backgrounds, together they provide an outline of Aboriginal spirit beliefs in the nineteenth and twentieth century.

This paper provides some data from Aboriginal people interviewed in the 1980s by the author. The major Aboriginal sources were Lola Cameron-Bonney, Ron Bonney, Marj Koolmatric, Paul Kropinyeri and Lindsay Wilson. Their information has a strong relationship to the pre-European past. Nevertheless, it also reflects the development of contemporary cultural forms through the interaction of an indigenous minority and the hegemonic non-Aboriginal culture. The sites associated with the beliefs are often

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<sup>1</sup> See Clarke (1995) for a description of Lower Murray 'Dreamings'.

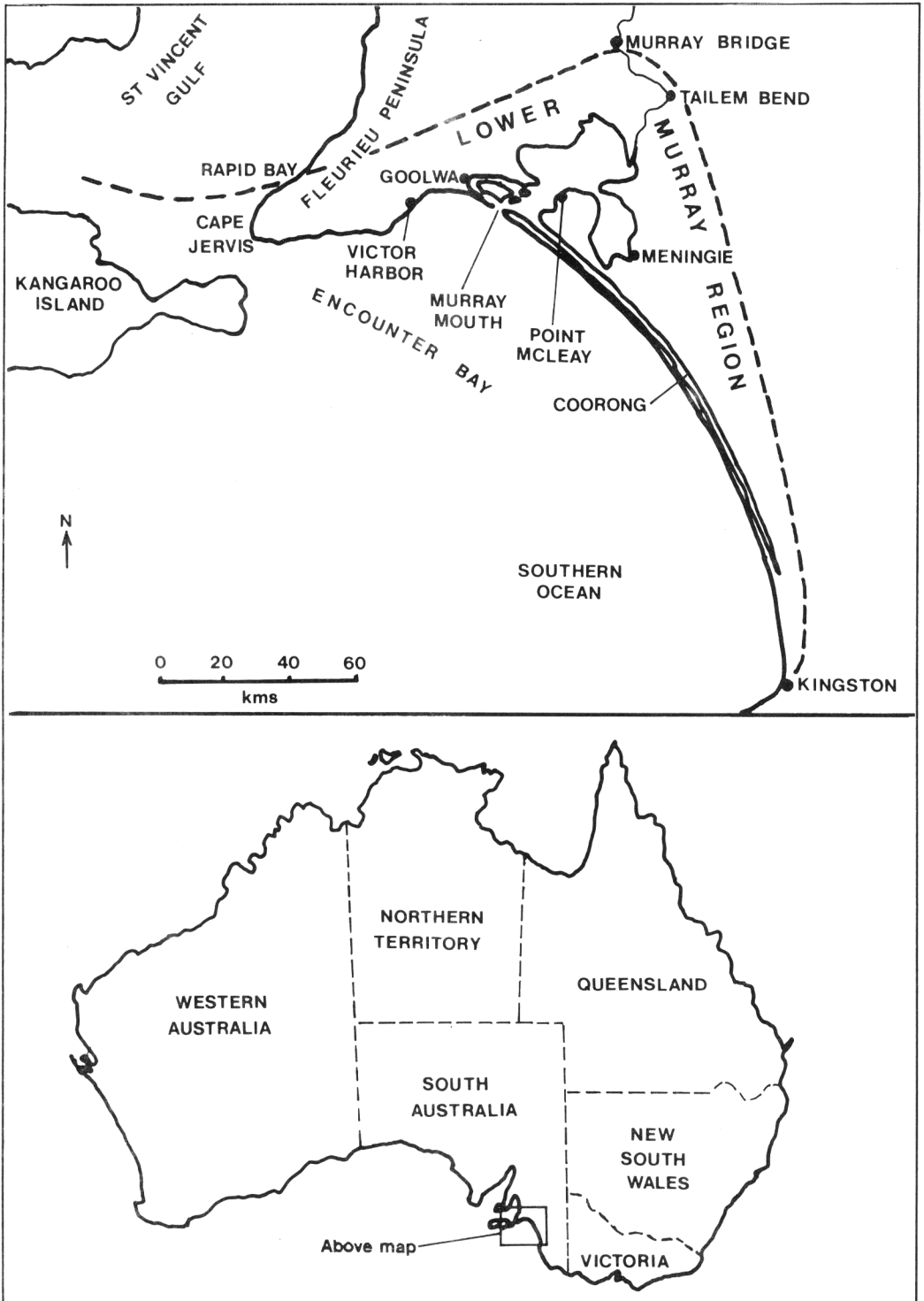


FIGURE 1. The Lower Murray cultural region.

European constructions, such as church graveyards, paths and clumps of trees left in paddocks. During the 1980s in the Aboriginal community of the Lower Murray, knowledge about spirit beings far outweighed that of 'Dreaming' stories. Non-Aboriginal forces have deeply affected the indigenous culture in the Lower Murray region. Thus traditions do change through time.

The study of how space is humanised is a major theme in human geography. How modern landscapes are produced from interaction between human populations and earlier forms of landscape is the concern of the subdiscipline of cultural geography. This paper looks at the linkages between the culture of the Aboriginal inhabitants, their use of the landscape and the perceived territoriality of the spirits. The aims therefore fall within the objectives of cultural geography.

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC DETAILS

The use of 'spirit being' in this paper covers a wide group of disparate beliefs. Nonetheless, the unifying features are their separateness from both the ancestors involved in the main creative mythological period and the Aboriginal population.<sup>2</sup> Before the arrival of Europeans in Australia, Aboriginal people considered that they were co-residents of the landscape, sharing it with many spirit beings.<sup>3</sup> To Aboriginal people in the Lower Murray, who were probably not unique in this regard, the spirit beings and places associated with them formed distinct parts of the perceived cultural landscape. Unlike the 'Dreaming' ancestors, whose presence is indicated by what they left behind, these spirits existed contemporaneously with people.

In the 1980s most Aboriginal people in southern South Australia no longer possessed detailed information of the body of knowledge

the literature has described as the 'Dreaming', but they strongly believed in various spirits.<sup>4</sup> Aboriginal spirit beliefs in the Lower Murray reflect the connection between group identity and *place*. Many of these spirits possessed some human characteristics and, like people, they were dispersed according to attributes of the cultural landscape. Most spirit beings were either greatly feared or at least regarded as a nuisance. Angas says:

They are in perpetual fear of malignant spirits, or bad men, who, they say, go abroad at night; and they seldom venture from the encampment after dusk, even to fetch water, without carrying a firestick in their hands, which they consider has the property of repelling these evil spirits (Angas 1847: 88).

The term 'mooldtharp' was applied by Angas as a general term for an 'evil spirit' (1847: 96,138). He used it to mean an 'evil' species of flycatcher, an earthquake or a whirlpool. Ramsay Smith said it was 'a spirit which assumes many shapes. It may come as a kangaroo, or a wombat, or a lizard' (1930: 349). The Tangani people of the Coorong believed that the *muldarpi* were decorated and disguised men who came from the west or north to kill them (Tindale 1931-34: 165,229). To the Yaraldi of Lake Alexandrina, a *melapi* or *mulapi* was considered to be a shape changer that killed people (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 205,206). This term, written here as *mu:ldapi*, was used in the 1980s, particularly by Aboriginal people in the Lower Murray, as a term for a generalised 'bad' spirit. The following sections provide detailed information on spirit beings.

#### SPIRIT MEN

Oral tradition in the local Aboriginal community was rich in stories concerning humanoid creatures that, due to their overall similarity, are described here as spirit men. The

<sup>2</sup> Lower Murray beliefs concerning *gupas* and *prupi* (ghosts and spirits of local people) will be the subject of a future paper.

<sup>3</sup> Tindale (nd) provides an overview of Aboriginal beliefs concerning spirit beings, which he terms 'little folk' and 'little people', linking them to a 'pygmoid race'. Berndt and Berndt (1989) give ethnographic examples of 'spirit beings' from northern and central Australia. Mountford (1958: 144-159) describes the association between spirit people and land for the Tiwi of Melville and Bathurst Island.

<sup>4</sup> It has been reported by several authors that Aboriginal people in the southern districts of South Australia during the second half of the twentieth century had poor knowledge of their early 'traditional background'. For example, see R. M. Berndt and C. H. Berndt (1951: 197,229-233), Killington (1971: 6), Gale (1972: 13,14), R.M. Berndt (1989: 64), C. H. Berndt (1989: 17), and Berndt and Berndt (1993: 297). Hemming (1988: 192) acknowledged the lack of detailed knowledge concerning the 'Dreaming' in the Lower Murray community during the 1980s, when he claimed that of the people he consulted 'all knew only fragments' of the Ngununderi mythology.



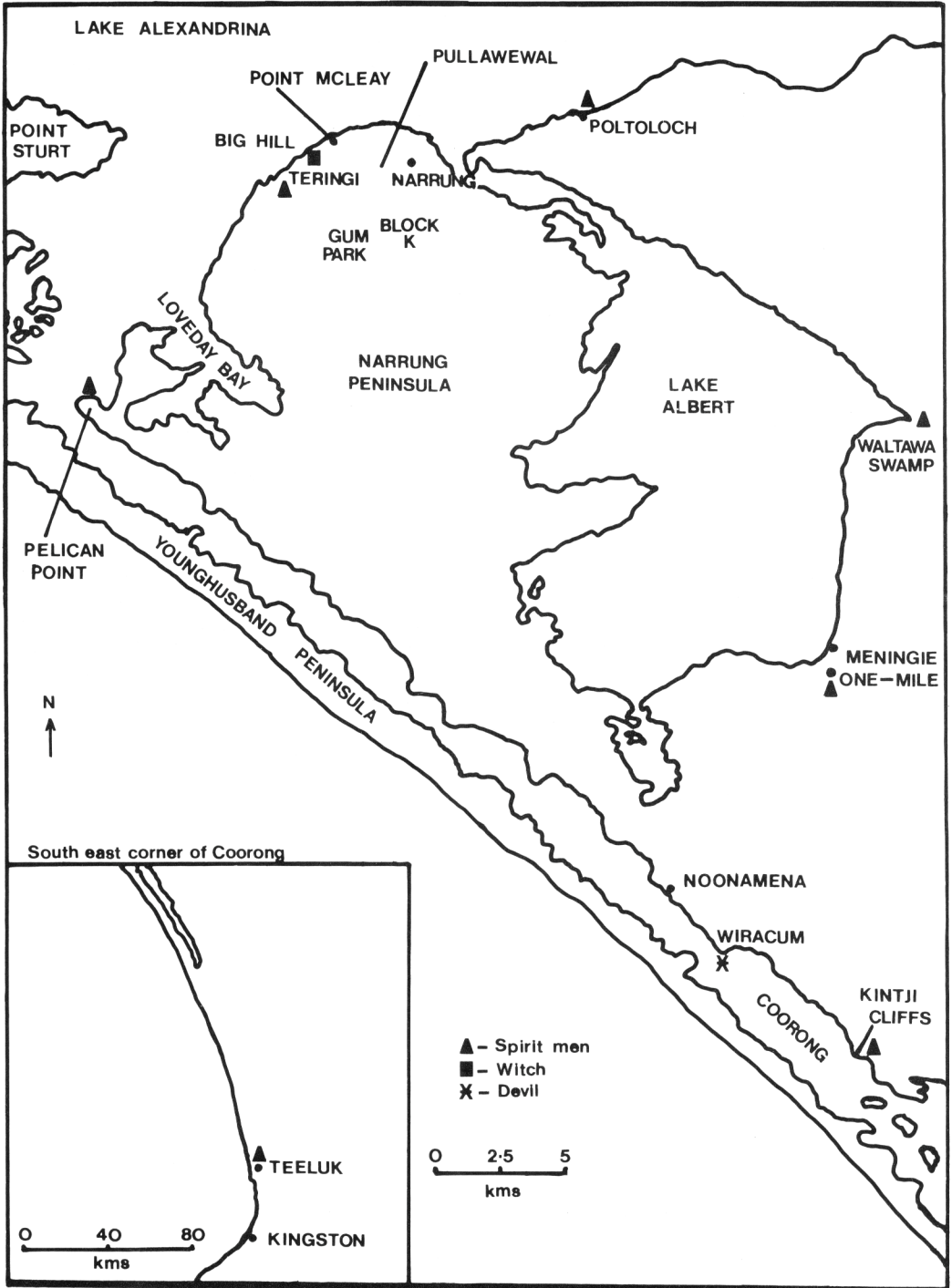


FIGURE 2. Spirit men, witch and devil sites in the Lower Murray.

shared characteristics are that they were generally described as 'coloured' (not black), often little, usually mischievous, and generally associated with a particular type of landscape. The exact relationship of this category of spirits to the pre-European system of beliefs is difficult to determine, as the ethnography has tended to ignore myths that were not concerned with the creative period.<sup>5</sup> In one of the rare written accounts, beings called *raitchari* were described as 'pygmy men who sometimes act as guides to hot men, sometimes lead them astray. They used to live in the scrub' (Harvey 1939). The 'hot men' are presumably people with some form of ceremonial status. It is likely that these spirit men were considered by ethnographers to have more of a fairy-tale quality than deep social or religious significance. Most of the information on these beings discussed here has been gathered from more recent sources. How spirit men were regarded is an important indicator of the degree to which both pre-European and post-European landscapes were humanised.

Although the spirit men were humanoid, Aboriginal people always described them in terms that highlight their distinctiveness from the Aboriginal population. The non-Aboriginality of spirit men was confirmed by their strange colouring and generally small size. They were often reported as being red all over, but there are many other accounts of beings in different colours. For instance, one Aboriginal person interviewed in the 1980s claimed to have seen 'little yellow men' amongst the reeds growing along the mainland side of the Coorong. Another said that 'green men' lived at Poltaloch on the southern shore of Lake Alexandrina. Another variation is 'little white men' with spiky ears, reportedly existing somewhere in the Meningie area. Adults to frighten children into obedience often used the existence of such beings.

The 'little red men' were said to have been seen at Pelican Point, Teringie and Poltaloch (Fig.2). Some people call these particular beings '*kintji* men' or '*kindi* men'. In the ethnographic record they are sometimes described as 'imps' or 'dwarf

beings'.<sup>6</sup> A small point on the mainland side of the Coorong just south of Noonamena, known by local Aboriginal people as the Kintji Cliffs, was regarded as the home of *kintji* spirits. Another site, Kindjunga Hill near the Coorong south east of Pelican Point, was recorded as the home of *kindja* spirits who lived in its caves and amongst its rocky outcrops (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 208). These particular spirits were associated with the territory of the Talkundjeri descent group. Other places related to the *kintji* were Kentjingatung and Kintjanga, which are low sandy rises on southern Campbell Park Station near Lake Albert.<sup>7</sup> A sighting of a 'little red man' was reported in the 1950s alongside a swamp near the One Mile Camp situated on the outskirts of Meningie. The spirit surprised an Aboriginal man and his young son walking along a path. The man was paralysed but the boy escaped to raise the alarm. Several men from the camp came to the aid of the father who was still on his back. As with the other spirit men of the Lower Murray, the little red men were often seen in proximity to water, but believed to dwell in higher places.

Aboriginal people disagreed on the colour of the *kintji*. A Lower Murray man stated they were small white men with dark beards. Interestingly, this person knew a story that linked these spirits with the southern Eyre Peninsula landscape. He said that once the *kintji* men told an Aboriginal man at Port Lincoln that they were intending to leave the area on the first calm day. When such a day came along, they all walked in single file into a cloud of mist. It is possible that the name of the *kintji* men, if not the belief itself, originated from outside of the Lower Murray region. The term *kintji* is possibly related to *kinchirra* from the 'Nimbalda' people of the Mount Freeling area of the Flinders Ranges. The term *kinchirra* was reported by Smith (in Taplin 1879: 88) as meaning 'spirit who fetches spirits of the recent dead to the land of the west'. Similarly, *kindara*, was said to mean the 'place where spirits go' in Adnyamathanha language of the Flinders Ranges (McEntee & McKenzie 1992: 34), and *kintjura*, was the 'spirit world' in the Ngadjuri language of

<sup>5</sup> Tindale (1936: 60,61) provides one of the few records of spirit people of the type described here. He mentioned 'little people' who were said, by his informants, to have lived near Marion Bay on Yorke Peninsula. Cameron-Bonney (1990: 19) provides another record from Victoria.

<sup>6</sup> Tindale 'Milerum' manuscript, Stage A #9, Anthropology Archives, South Australian Museum. Tindale considered that fairy penguins may have been the source of this belief.

<sup>7</sup> Tindale 'Milerum' manuscript, Stage A #9, Anthropology Archives, South Australian Museum.

the mid north of South Australia (Berndt & Vogelsang 1941: 9). Similar spirit beings, the *taikuni*, were said by Aboriginal people in the 1940s to have lived in little knobbed hills around the Lower Lakes, Adelaide Hills and north as far as Gawler (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 207,208).

Sightings of these spirits continued during the 1980s. For instance, a Lower Murray man claimed to have sighted two *kintji* men whilst 'swan egging' (swan egg collecting) at Waltawa Swamp, about nine kilometres north of Meningie. The spirits were apparently seen standing amongst reeds. They were described as small, light grey all over, with shoulder length hair and a long neck. Of the face, only the features of the two eyes were noticed. These were shiny black and just under five centimetres in diameter. The spirits reportedly disappeared when the person's gaze shifted for an instant. Another Aboriginal man later told him that he was lucky: it was said that when the eyes of the *kintji* are red, not black as the case in the above beings, they intend to do mischief.

There is some similarity between the 'red men' and the 'natja men' from the Tatiara district of the south east of South Australia. The *natja* men were described in the 1980s as 'red hairy men', also said to look 'like monkeys or orang-utans'. Ramsay Smith records an unlocalised story about a 'queer little red man', called 'Yara-ma-yha-who', that was reportedly told to children as a threat against misbehaving (1930: 342-345). In the 1980s another individual claimed that many years ago 'silver men' were seen on a hill near Teeluk, north of Kingston. These spirits were described as having an 'arrow-like covering' and were blamed for upsetting local cattle. The silver men eluded attempts by an Aboriginal man to capture them.

A common element to many of the accounts of spirit men is that only one or two of them were seen together, usually in swamps and lagoons where Aboriginal duck hunting and 'swan egging' activities occurred. A Lower Murray man reported 'red men' at Pelican Point earlier this century: an Aboriginal duck hunter who had disregarded warnings about these spirit men being there, shot some ducks and started to search for them in the spot where they had fallen. He then noticed a 'red man' was picking up the ducks. The Aboriginal

man grabbed his gun and fled. Another story involved a Kingston man, Alf Watson, who was apparently duck hunting with his rifle when he saw a *kintji* man among the *winggi* (sagitt sedge).<sup>8</sup> This spirit caused him to freeze and he fell on his back. The *kintji* man came up to Alf and sat on him, feeling his face with interest. This was because this type of spirit man was bearded, whereas Alf Watson was clean-shaven. Alf claimed afterwards that he could feel the *kintji* man's cold bottom on his chest through his flannel shirt. According to several Aboriginal sources, Lower Murray people who hunted in areas that were recognised as being inhabited by 'red men' used to leave one or two ducks behind for them.

#### HEALERS, SORCERERS AND WILD PEOPLE

Knowledgeable people, who possessed skills in both healing and sorcery, had an important role in Aboriginal society of pre-European Australia.<sup>9</sup> From the ethnographic accounts, it appears that a powerful person was often both a healer and a sorcerer, depending on context. It is likely that as people grew older, their perceived skills in healing and sorcery balanced the decline in their physical powers. The possession of this knowledge attracted fear and respect from other members of the community. Aboriginal people from remote groups were often suspected of being sorcerers, sometimes called 'wild blackfellows'. In the pre-European period, the fear of such beings was prompted by occasional attacks from foreign Aboriginal groups. European colonisation probably increased the fear of 'wild blackfellows' by creating categories of 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' ('wild') Aboriginal people. During the early years of European settlement in the southern districts, Aboriginal people feared 'wild blackfellows' creeping up to practice sorcery upon, or perhaps kill, them (Wilkinson 1848: 330). In the Lower Murray, Aboriginal people believed that certain celestial events foretold the coming of 'wild blackfellows' (Taplin Journals, 4-7 June 1859).

In earlier times these 'doctors' or 'sorcerers' were often people, living or dead, who were

<sup>8</sup> Tindale Journals, Anthropology Archives, South Australian Museum. A similar version of this account was also known by Aboriginal sources living in the South East during the 1980s.

<sup>9</sup> For a description of 'clever men', see Cawte (1974) and Elkin (1977).



perceived as having command over life forces and the elements of the landscape. For instance, Angus claims 'They [Lower Murray people] place great faith in sorcerers; who pretend, by charms and magic ceremonies, to counteract the influence of the spirits, to cure sickness; to cause rain and thunder, and perform other supernatural actions' (1847: 89). Sickness was generally conceived as being caused by the evil spirit of some person who had a grudge against them (Angus 1847: 96). A knowledgeable person would therefore be consulted to diagnose and correct the problem. There is a wealth of recorded material concerning the body of knowledge generally referred to in the literature as sorcery.<sup>10</sup> It is often difficult to separate the concepts of the healer, sorcerer and spirit being. To use exclusively any of these terms to define such people understates their role in their own culture. However, there appears to be no equivalent English term for them.<sup>11</sup>

In the 1980s sorcerers were generally perceived by Aboriginal people in the Lower Murray to exist only as spirit beings, not as living people or linked to anyone now deceased. They were called *kuratji* ('feather-foots') or by their original local language name, *thampamalathi*. A general fear of sorcery persisted in the community. For instance, people were careful about the disposal of their hair when it was cut, to ensure that it was not used to 'sing' them.<sup>12</sup> Reports of *kuratji* visitations occurred in the 1980s. For instance, according to Aboriginal people living in the South East, a *kuratji* was visiting at Woods Well on the Coorong, apparent from the 'squashed cockroach' and 'human dung' smell. Other accounts from Aboriginal people in the 1980s say the smell is *ngruwi* ('dead body fat'). The *kuratji* spirits were usually considered to be periodic visitors. When in the Point McLeay area, they were believed to stay out at quiet scrubby places, such as sections of the Block K and Gum Park farms run by the Point McLeay Aboriginal Council. Aboriginal working-men were said to be 'very careful to cover their *kantji*

[urine] and *mranthin* [faeces] when out in the paddocks'. Sometimes, clearings in the bush were attributed to activities of the *kuratji*, which, in turn, were attributed to spirit beings that had 'come down from the north', possibly to punish someone. Whether sorcerers, healers and 'wild people' were human or spirit beings, what Lower Murray people knew about them in the 1980s had links to their 'traditional' pre-European past.

#### WITJ-WITJ, WITCHES AND DEVILS

In southern South Australia during the 1980s, there were beliefs that some spirit creatures were once human. Such an example is the Witj-witj of the Riverland district, who reportedly was a female spirit that frightened animals away from Aboriginal hunters.<sup>13</sup> In her human form, she was sent away from her people for 'breaking the rules'. Another female spirit considered to be bad is associated with the Point McLeay area. Here is a place Aboriginal people call the Witches Cave in the cliffs of Big Hill facing Lake Alexandrina. Sometimes parents at Point McLeay quieten their children with threats that 'the witches will come down from Big Hill and take you away'. The Witches Cave is considered to be a dangerous place, due to the steepness of the cliff face and the friable nature of the rock. There are also other sites associated with 'bad spirits'. According to Aboriginal sources, the local name of Wirakum Point at Noonamena refers to a 'bogey man' or 'devil' (Fig.2).

#### THE BUT-BUT SPIRIT

Aboriginal people in the 1980s described a being called the *but-but* as a dangerous but stupid spirit creature. It had only one arm and one leg. The 'old people' (men and women from previous generations who were knowledgeable in

<sup>10</sup> Most ethnographies of the Lower Murray people have some mention of sorcery practices and beliefs. For detailed accounts see Meyer (1846 [1879: 195–200]), Taplin (1874 [1879: 19,23–31]) and Berndt and Berndt (1993: 252–266).

<sup>11</sup> Partly for this reason, Elkin called this class of people 'Aboriginal men of high degree' (Elkin 1977).

<sup>12</sup> Killington (1971: 48,87) recorded from a Lower Murray person that hair was the 'trigger' on a pointing-bone, and as such was considered to have the property of being able to work into your skin, carrying with it poison. In the 1980s, some Lower Murray people believed that their own human hair, if swallowed, acted to 'spear' intestinal worms.

<sup>13</sup> Barney Lindsay in Education Department of South Australia (1991: 34,35) provides an account of the female spirit creature, Witj-witj. There is also a record of a male ancestor from the Murray River region with a similar name, Witjawitj (Tindale 1930–52: 303,304). These names may be derived from the European term, 'witch'.

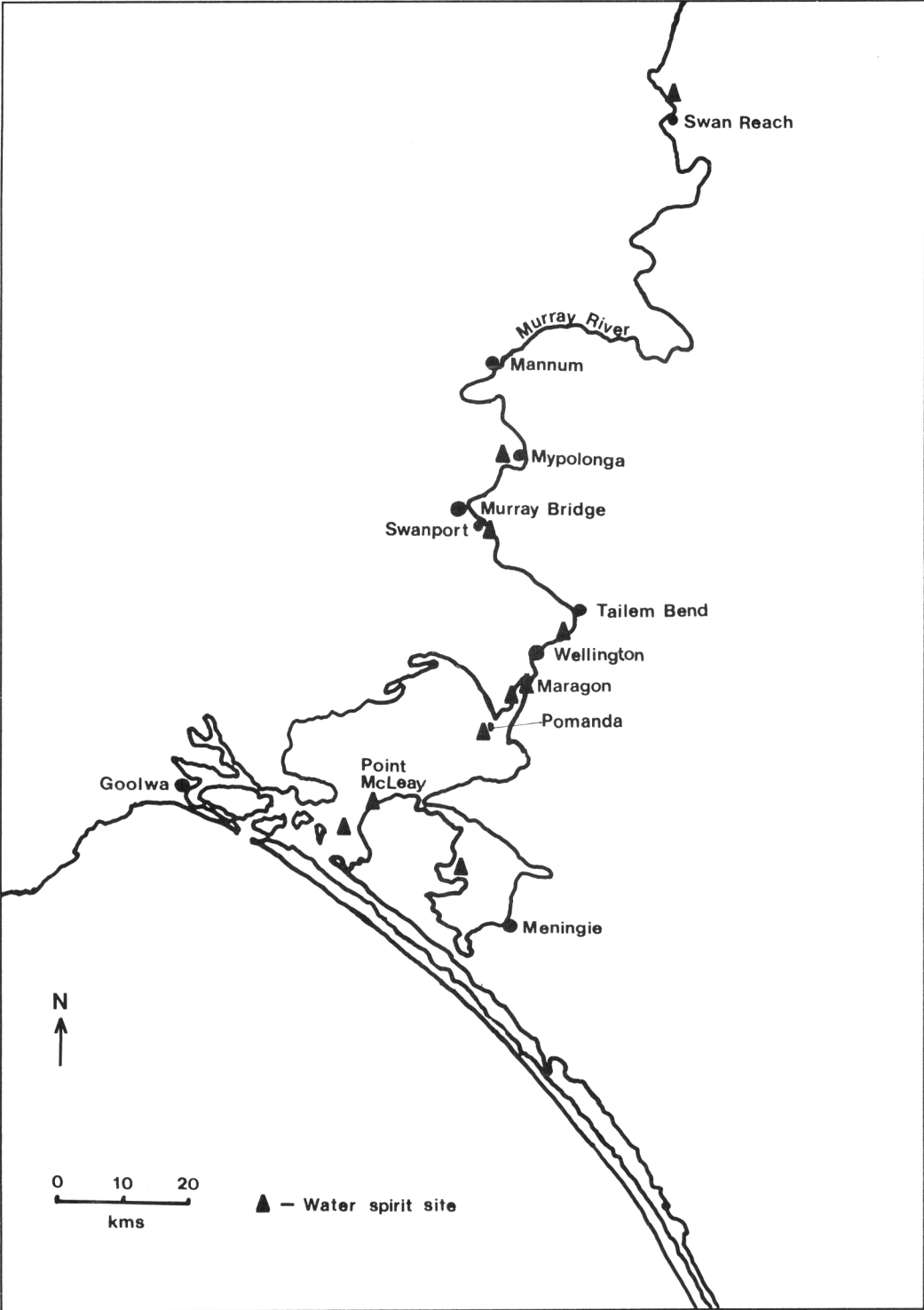


FIGURE 3. Water spirit sites in the Lower Murray.



Aboriginal tradition) apparently carried around with them bags of maggots in case *but-but* approached. If this happened, the people would lie down, putting the maggots on their eyes and mouth. This fooled the *but-but* into thinking that they were dead and passes them by. This spirit is not associated with any particular part of the landscape. The lack of sites connected with *but-but* suggests that the spirit moves randomly across the landscape, a fact that adds to its perceived stupidity.

#### MULGYEWONK AND OTHER WATER SPIRITS

Throughout south eastern Australia, there were Aboriginal accounts of water spirits, generally called 'bunyips' in the popular literature.<sup>14</sup> Some have been described as being animal-like, and others as predominantly humanoid creatures. In the case of the former, Aboriginal people at Moorunde near Swan Reach in the 1840s:

believed in the existence of a water spirit, which is much dreaded by them. They say it inhabits the Murray; but although they affirm that its appearance is of frequent occurrence, they have some difficulty in describing it. Its most usual form, however, is said to be that of an enormous star-fish (Angas 1847: 97,98).

All reports by Aboriginal people in the Lower Murray feature a more humanoid-type of spirit than that recorded above (Fig.3).<sup>15</sup> They called the 'bunyip' of the Lower Murray, the *mulgyewonk*. This class of water spirit was greatly feared. The booming noises it made were thought to cause rheumatism (Taplin 1874 [1879: 62]). Taplin records:

The blacks say that the Moolgewanke [*mulgyewonk*] has power to bewitch men and women and that he causes disease by the booming noise which he makes. I am now convinced that the noise does come

from the lake. They say that Mr Mason shot at one over on Pomont [Pomanda] and it made him ill afterwards by its power. They say he is very much like a pungari (seal) but has a face with a menake (beard) like a man (Taplin Journals, 2–3 July 1860).

The consistent theme of most descriptions of its behaviour was the threat of capturing children who strayed too close to the edge of the lake. A Yaraldi informant, Mark Wilson, said that the *mulgyewonk* would lie submerged in the shallow waters near the edge of the lake waiting for human victims.<sup>16</sup> He said that its long trailing hair in the water looked like waterweed. The smell of fish and duck grease, especially when children are washing their hands in the lake after a meal is said to attract the *mulgyewonk* (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 203). Taplin was told that a man, who had rubbed himself over with oil, descended by a rope to the bottom of the lake to rescue a child captured by the *mulgyewonk* (Taplin Journals, 16–17 September 1862).<sup>17</sup> He managed to drag the child out from amongst the *mulgyewonk*, who were sleeping, and get back safely. Even Ngurunderi, the main Dreamtime creator of the region, was not immune to the nuisance caused by this water spirit. At the Murray entrance to Lake Alexandrina, a *mulgyewonk* tore holes in his nets, which prevented him fishing for his family (Tindale & Pretty 1980: 50). All reports of the *mulgyewonk* reinforced it as a symbol of the dangerous nature of the waters in the Lower Lakes and Murray River region.

One European resident who lived near Narrung described an incident in the 1950s or 1960s when some Aboriginal children ran to her saying there was a *mulgyewonk* in the lake. She later heard that it turned out to be a floating tree trunk with its trailing roots partially out of the water. Apparently the children had remembered their parents' warnings about the lake and the water spirit. Children are associated with both the

<sup>14</sup> A general description of 'bunyip'-type water spirits is given in the *Observer*, 2 December 1893. See also Barrett (1946), Massola (1957), Hemming (1985), Ramson (1988: 109), Cameron-Bonney (1990: 16,17), Mulvaney (1994) and Smith (1996).

<sup>15</sup> The wormlike models of 'bunyips' that presently make up a coin-operated tourist attraction in Sturt Reserve at Murray Bridge are looked upon with disgust by many local Aboriginal residents, mainly because they do not look correct according to their own descriptions.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Moolgewauk' by Mark Wilson, Fry Papers, Anthropology Archives, S.A. Museum (Published in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of South Australia*, March 1985, 23(1): 11–16). Mark Wilson was a Yaraldi man.

<sup>17</sup> A closely related report is given in Wilson (cited above). See similar accounts given by Tindale (1930–52: 269,270), Berndt (1940a: 168), Rankine (in Isaacs 1980: 114; 1991: 121–123), and Berndt and Berndt (1993: 203,204). They all record that a boy is taken by *mulgyewonks* to live underwater. In a version published in a teaching manual (Education Department of South Australia 1991: 24,25), a man fishing is attacked by a *mulgyewonk*.

general story and many of the sightings. For example, in 1870, George Taplin's own son claimed to have seen the *mulgyewonk* in the lake (Linn 1988: 52).

It is likely that mounds of vegetation and earth trapped in the lake have resulted in some *mulgyewonk* 'sightings'. Before the building of the barrages, when seasonal fluctuations in the flow of the river into the lakes were much greater, large amounts of material were to be found floating there.<sup>18</sup> For instance, Angas says:

Floating islands, covered with reeds, are frequently to be seen on this [Murray] river. These masses of earth, originally detached from the banks by floods or otherwise, are frequently drifted from side to side, and not a few find their way to the lake (Angas 1847: 54).

Aboriginal people reported to Taplin that they had seen the *mulgyewonk* and that one of them had died and rotted close to the shore of the lake near Rankine's ferry (Taplin Journals, 16–17 September 1862). It is interesting to note that Aboriginal people at Point McLeay during George Taplin's time attributed the booming sound of the lake to the *mulgyewonk* breaking up gumtrees, which eventually floated down the Murray (Taplin Journals, 20 June 1860). Some of these *mulgyewonk* noises were probably caused by the sudden expulsion of mud under shifting sand in the Coorong.<sup>19</sup> Rather than claiming that the cultural experience of the *mulgyewonk* resulted from a misinterpretation of the environment, the earlier flow conditions in the Lower Lakes and Murray River would probably have promoted more 'sightings' than now possible.

Fieldwork in the 1980s has shown that Aboriginal people associated certain sites in the river and lakes with the *mulgyewonk*. Perhaps the most widely known in the Aboriginal community was the site of George Mason's former depot on the eastern banks of the Murray, near the opening of the river into Lake Alexandrina. This place,

called Maragon, was the site of many of the oral history accounts of *mulgyewonk* encounters during the last hundred years (Fig.3). Bubbles seen in the water here were considered to be proof of their existence. Several Aboriginal sources stated that there are rock holes under the cliffs at Maragon beneath the water level where these spirits lived. Understandably, for Aboriginal people swimming was not allowed at this spot. Mark Wilson's account cited above lists both Maragon and the cliffs of Pomond (Pomanda), about 8 kilometres to the south, as underwater homes for colonies of the *mulgyewonk*. Local Aboriginal people passing in canoes at night avoided the latter place, said to be their 'headquarters'. Another possible *mulgyewonk* site is Mypolonga, about 15 kilometres up river from Murray Bridge. Albert Karloan considered that this place name was possibly derived from the term *mulgyewonk* (Berndt 1940a: 166).

The *mulgyewonk* was also considered to have existed in Lake Albert and Lake Alexandrina waters. According to oral history among local European families, another site associated with this water spirit is the arm of Lake Albert. A member of a local European family claimed that Aboriginal groups for this reason avoided the area. At Point McLeay, some Aboriginal people in the 1980s remembered earlier times when the *mulgyewonk* was reportedly encountered in Lake Alexandrina. For instance, sometime during the 1940s, several elderly women, who had been fishing at the base of Big Hill at Point McLeay, hurried back to the settlement saying they had heard a *mulgyewonk* splashing a short distance into the lake. This spirit appears to have been perceived as located in all the permanent waterways of the Lower Murray (Fig.3). In the 1980s Aboriginal people in the Riverland considered that a hole in the cliff face near the site of a former mission station at Swan Reach was also the home of a *mulgyewonk*.<sup>20</sup> In 1952,

<sup>18</sup> Aboriginal informants have pointed out several large and weathered tree trunks of dead red gums lying along the shores of Lake Alexandrina. These tree sections, of a tree species not found in this part of the Lower Murray shore, were left behind after the 1956 flood. See Hemming and Jones (1989: 1) for a photograph of one such tree trunk at 'The Bullrushes'.

<sup>19</sup> The water origin of the booming noise appears certain. Taplin records in his Journals (26 June 1860) that he was convinced that the booming sound originated from in the lake. He heard it 12 times in 10 minutes one evening (Journals, 20 June 1860). See other accounts by Taplin (*Register*, 30 January 1862; 1874 [1879: 62,63]). Tindale puts forward a physical explanation of the origin of the booming sound (*Advertiser*, 12 May 1936). It is possible that the advent of frequent mechanical noises in the Lower Murray, such as gun blasts, quarry activity etc., has hidden this phenomenon. Also, it is likely that the barrages at the Murray Mouth and Coorong have altered the conditions that produced the booming effect.

<sup>20</sup> This term is recorded in the early Lower Murray languages. Nevertheless, the term has had much wider use since European settlement. For example, a paddle steamer, based at the Goolwa end but working along the Murray River in the 1860s, was named after the river spirit, being called the 'Moolgewanke' (Taplin Journals, 26 November 1862).

Joe Mason, from the Nganguruku people, considered that the river spirit, that he called the *muldjewangk*, still lived along the Murray River at Ranginj (Devon Downs). He claimed 'I reckon it weighs 150 pounds [68 kilograms] in weight. It makes ripples on the water when it swims' (Tindale 1930–52: 313). The use of the name for this spirit here possibly reflects the movement of Aboriginal people from the Lower Murray area to the Riverland after European settlement.

Most Aboriginal people during the 1980s who claimed to have previously seen or heard the *mulgyewonk* were people who had lived at Maragon. One such man stated that he and his family observed a *mulgyewonk* in the river while they were driving across the Swanport Bridge near Murray Bridge several years earlier. This same person claimed to have found a deep hole along the edge of Lake Alexandrina when he was younger. A foul stench and a whooshing noise came from it. After describing it to his father, he was told to keep away from this area, as it was the home of the *mulgyewonk*. Another Aboriginal source claimed 'Old fellas say that whirl pools are made by *mulgyewonks* cleaning their houses.' Although the *mulgyewonk* is sometimes reportedly seen in the Lower Murray, several Aboriginal sources of this century have said it is either extinct or at least very scarce. Mark Wilson (cited above) thought that the arrival of paddlesteamers and other boats on the river caused their destruction. This opinion was reinforced by Henry Rankine from Point McLeay who gave an account of a violent encounter between a river boat captain and a *mulgyewonk* (Rankine 1991: 122). Some Aboriginal people expressed opinions that the *mulgyewonk* was a 'prehistoric remnant', and 'like the Loch Ness monster'. This water spirit was a talking point in many Lower Murray families during the 1980s.

Although the *mulgyewonk* was the main water spirit in the Lower Murray, there were also some lesser known beings. From an Aboriginal person came the following account:

The three sisters live in the lake [Lake Alexandrina] just out from Loveday Bay. They are bad. When you are in a boat there, the first wave pushing the boat so it points the wrong way. The second makes the edge dip. The third wave fills the bottom and turns it upside down.<sup>21</sup>

This story was told as proof about the dangerous waters of the lake, particularly near the islands at the Murray Mouth. Several examples of white fisherman and canoeists drowning in the region were given as additional evidence. All of the information on Lower Murray water spirits reinforces the danger element of human activity on or near the waterways. This expresses the Aboriginal perception that some areas of their landscape are not safe.

#### BIRD SPIRITS

Birds of one kind or another featured prominently in much of the Lower Murray mythology. In the pre-European world view of the Aboriginal people, many bird species were probably perceived as travellers between the cosmic and terrestrial landscapes, due to their ability to fly. In an early description of a spirit bird, Penney uses the term, 'muldaubie', which is a generic term for bad spirit. Penney says:

They believe that he appears at night when the moon is up, in the evening or just before the dawn of day, in the form of the screech-owl, although he assumes occasionally other appearances. Those to whom he appears in dreams or who see his form almost infallibly die.<sup>22</sup>

The screeching of the 'night-owl' was considered by Lower Murray people to be a sign that something was wrong (Ramsay Smith 1930: 322). This is consistent with early Aboriginal beliefs in western Victoria where owls were considered to be used by an evil spirit to watch over people who had strayed from the camp during the night (Dawson 1881: 49,52,53). The southern stone-curlew (*Burhinus grallarius*) too, appears to have been an omen for death across southern Australia (Berndt 1940b). To Yaraldi people, hearing the call of this bird at night foretold the death of a close relative (Berndt 1940b: 460,461). Although it was no longer heard in the Lower Murray region during the 1980s, Aboriginal people could remember hearing the southern stone-curlew's call along the Coorong in the 1950s and being told that it was an ill omen.

During fieldwork, the bird spirit most commonly spoken about in the Lower Murray was the 'mingka-bird'. The *mingka* was essentially a

<sup>21</sup> Clarke (1994: 135).

<sup>22</sup> Penney (as 'Cuique') in *South Australian Magazine*, June–July 1842: 389–394.



night time spirit. According to one report, there were two forms of this spirit, a northern and a southern type. The northern one lived in a cave at Mount Barker. Although it ranged far, including into the south, the *mingka* returned there each night. It was described by another source as a 'sphinx-like bird', which had a human head. It came around houses at night, making a noise like a baby crying. Some people said the *mingka* could also sound like a fox. One Aboriginal account described the call as a 'shrill whistle'. Like many of the spirits already mentioned, it was a commonly used threat to make children behave. According to Tindale's Potaruwutj informants from the South East, the '*Minkar* bird is an evil being, warns about death or trouble.'<sup>23</sup>

It was claimed in the 1980s that in the past some old men could turn into a *mingka* at will. In the South East, an Aboriginal 'doctor' named Old Jumbuck was said to have fought with a *mingka*-bird at Bordertown. During the fight the spirit-bird repeatedly changed form, from a bird to a human, until it eventually escaped. It was reported that only Aboriginal 'doctors' could do this. One young adult explained, 'If you kill a *mingka*-bird, you must burn all of its feathers. As each feather can grow into another *mingka*-bird. It is like a phoenix in this way.' The *mingka* was said to punish people who had done something wrong. One man, it was stated, lost all but two of his children to a *mingka*-bird as 'tribal punishment'. As with the *mulgyewonk*, children appeared to be perceived as most at risk to this spirit. Children doing forbidden things at night such as crying, whistling, or even putting such objects as hats or toys on their head, was thought to possibly cause a visit by a *mingka*-bird. The spirit bird was also an omen creature. There were several accounts of people hearing the *mingka* during the night, and then being told of the death of a close friend or relative the next day. On one occasion in the 1950s it was heard calling in the scrub adjacent to a Coorong fringecamp. It thrashed about in the dark, while everybody kept inside. The next day, the children found several tops of trees, measuring over 5 cms in diameter, which had been snapped off during the night. One person claimed that her grandmother had once talked to a *mingka*-bird, which had the head of her husband's recently dead grandfather. In most accounts of this spirit it

was thoroughly evil. It 'will steal a baby's breath if it hears one crying'. The 'breath' here was understood by Aboriginal sources to be the infant's spirit. The association of this bird with death was strong in all accounts.

Although the home of the *mingka*-bird was said to be Mount Barker, it was reported as seen and heard at settlements throughout the Lower Murray. Furthermore, it was said that the spirit could potentially be encountered anywhere that Lower Murray people lived. At Point McLeay, it was sometimes heard in trees on the settlement. Here, particular clumps have been pointed out as favourite roosts, such as those near the cemetery. Outside the Lower Murray area, this spirit was apparently heard in the Riverland of South Australia and one was reported as seen by a Lower Murray person whilst living in Victoria. In the 1980s, the association of the *mingka* with Lower Murray people was strong, so much so that it was virtually never mentioned in any context other than its unwanted attraction towards these people.

There are various Aboriginal names for this spirit: *mingka* was said to be a Potaruwutj language term from the South East and *merambi* the Tangani word from the Coorong (Tindale 1931-34: 228,229).<sup>24</sup> In the 1980s the Lower Murray name was stated to be *kowuk*, and it was described as a tawny frogmouth (*Podargus strigoides*). The spirit was also recorded as being able to assume the guise of various *ngaitji* (totemic 'friends'), such as an eagle, dog or hawk (Tindale 1931-34: 228,229). In these forms, the *mingka* carried the spirits of sinister beings, connected to their owners by *nunggi* or *kortui* described as 'like a spider web'. Men could kill these beings and the owners of the attending spirits with a 'sacred club'. Berndt suggested that the *mingka* was an owl (Berndt 1940b: 461). A Lower Murray person recorded by Killington stated that this spirit was the 'frogmouth owl' (Killington 1971: 49,50,88). Tindale said that *minkar* was the name for both the wedge-tailed eagle (*Aquila audax*) and the white-breasted sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) in the Potaruwutj language of the Tatiara region (cited in Condon 1955: 84). The association of large birds of prey with carrying the spirits of the dead was a common belief across Australia (Clarke 1991: 65). The Skyworld was perceived by Aboriginal

<sup>23</sup> Tindale vocabulary cards for the Potaruwutj of the South East (Anthropology Archives, S.A. Museum).

<sup>24</sup> The Tindale vocabulary cards for the Potaruwutj of the South East (Anthropology Archives, S.A. Museum) lists *minkar* as a 'being, sinister, who may assume form of totem animal.'

groups of southern South Australia as a cosmic landscape where many of the constellations were bird spirits who had travelled there from the lower land (Clarke 1996).

The association of birds of prey with the power of foresight and as vehicles for spirits is not always expressed negatively. For instance, a 1980s account states that an Aboriginal man, named Joe Lock, who had lived at the Blackford Aboriginal Reserve in the South East earlier in the twentieth century, was able to turn his 'spirit' into an eagle. One day, reportedly after he had flown about as an eagle, he was able to accurately describe a group of people travelling to the Blackford Reserve in a horse and buggy, long before they arrived. While his spirit was an eagle, his living body, which was left lying on a blanket, was not moved. In another version, it was an eaglehawk that Lock turned into while his human body was under a blanket (Berndt & Berndt 1993: 249,250). These accounts, and that of the *mingka*-bird above, indicate that Aboriginal people perceived some birds as being a vehicle for the human soul.

The *Ngout-ngout* was an individual spirit associated with birds.<sup>25</sup> She was reportedly once a woman who was expelled from her local group for breaking custom. For revenge, *Ngout-ngout* tricked children into becoming lost. This she achieved by using a trail of flowers to distract them. *Ngout-ngout* could turn into a bird. This story was told to children with the warning that they never wander off.

Some bird species commonly seen during the day have a similar role to the *mingka* as omens. In the Lower Murray during the 1980s the most commonly held belief in omens concerned the willie wagtail (*Rhipidura leucophrys*), *ritjaruki*. When this bird was observed persistently making strange erratic movements near a person's house, it was perceived as a message that someone had died. Tapping on a window was taken as a particularly bad sign. A variation of this belief

was that when a *ritjaruki* is observed with a rusty colour on its beak, this means someone would die. One elderly Lower Murray woman living at Point McLeay in the 1980s said '*Ritjaruki*. Him good telephone at Raukkan that fella.' There were many examples of observations of the *ritjaruki* being used to forecast human death. The negative influence of the bird was made apparent when a young man at Point McLeay was said to have behaved recklessly after having accidentally run over and killed a *ritjaruki*. Since its omens were invariably considered to be unwanted, the bird was sometimes chased away. In the Lower Murray during the 1840s for instance:

An elegant species of flycatcher, of a black colour, which continually hovers about in search of insects, performing all manner of graceful manoeuvres in the air, is regarded by them as an evil spirit, and is called mooldharp, or devil. Whenever they see it, they pelt it with sticks and stones, though they are afraid to touch or destroy it (Angas 1847: p.96).

The ability of this bird to summon bad news appears to have been widespread elsewhere in southern Australia.<sup>26</sup> It is likely that the attention the willie wagtail attracts from its highly energetic movement across low and open areas, such as around houses and cars, added to the likelihood of this species being used as an omen.

There are other examples of birds being used to predict death. For instance, one Aboriginal person in the 1980s said that her mother's *nga:tji* (totemic 'friend'), a swallow (probably *Hirundo neoxena*), would fly up close to them and 'sob like a child' if someone close was dying.<sup>27</sup> It is likely that in earlier times, totemic species and objects would have been considered to have the power to warn people of danger or death. Another account sometimes told at Point McLeay involved a pelican, *nguri* (*Pelecanus conspicillatus*). Sometime before the 1970s, when Point McLeay was still the Government Mission Station, an Aboriginal man was out hunting near Narrung. He observed a pelican flying overhead and he

<sup>25</sup> An account by Barney Lindsay is given in Education Department of South Australia (1991: 18,19). The relationship between this female spirit and male human spirits such as *Ngaungaut* of Devon Down (Tindale 1930–52: 303,304) and *Ngout-Ngout* of western Victoria (Massola 1968: 20,21) is not clear.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, on Yorke Peninsula, the willie wagtail was also considered to be a 'message-carrier' (Ramsay Smith 1930: 342). In the 1980s, a western Victorian Aboriginal person said that they also considered the willie wagtail to be a bad omen there. She knew of two occasions where people had reportedly died soon after seeing this bird tapping on their window. A Lower Murray informant claimed that the willie wagtail, called by them 'tjiri tjiri', as an omen, was a belief from the Portland district of Western Victoria (Killington 1971: 49,50,82).

<sup>27</sup> For an outline of 'nga:tji', see Meyer (1843(2): 86; 1846 [1879: 198]), and Taplin (1874 [1879: 1]; 1879: 131).



raised his gun to shoot it. Pelican flesh is considered bad eating but the feathers were used in ornament making. Nevertheless, the bird was acting strangely so it was not shot. The pelican flew several times over the man's head and then out over Point McLeay and across the lake towards Adelaide. This was interpreted as a message that the man's brother, who was known to be in an Adelaide hospital, had just died. The story concludes with the later surprise of the Mission superintendent, who had come down to the man's house with the message of the death, at being told the family already knew.

The ability of birds to fly and the more frequent observation of them made them more suitable than other land-based animals as omens. The specific behaviour of certain species, such as the willie wagtail, seems to have been a major factor in their designation as message carriers. The night time activity or the ability to fly high were probably important characteristics in the identity of other spirits. For other birds, peculiar behaviour on single occasions was interpreted as a sign. Although much of the folklore formerly known by Aboriginal people was lost or significantly altered by the 1980s, the Aboriginal practice of seeking information from signs in the environment persisted.

#### CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRIT BEINGS

The Aboriginal cultural landscape of the past was imbued with meaning, not just with the topographical reminders of the actions of creative 'Dreamtime' ancestors, but by the perceived occupation of spirits. As with biotic organisms, such as plants and animals, these beings were considered to exhibit particular spatial behaviours. With a few exceptions, the spirits exhibited their own territoriality. The beliefs in spirit beings contain encoded knowledge about the landscape,

particularly about dangerous places and the movements of human spirits after death. Many of the accounts given in this paper either relate directly to children, or concern the actions of beings that could be used as threats by adults to help control the behaviour of them. Other spirits served as omens, providing a means by which Aboriginal people could make predictions on the future. Fundamental to many of the beliefs is the Aboriginal notion of a person's spirit surviving death and being able to be summoned and carried away by spirits. In some contexts, most of the spirits discussed in this paper could be termed as *mu:ldapi*, stressing their potentially negative impact upon the lives of Lower Murray people.

Twentieth century Aboriginal culture in southern Australia has often been described in sociological rather than cultural terms. There are nevertheless elements of the pre-European world view that have persisted here. During the 1980s, beliefs in spirits, albeit in greatly modified form, served to 'explain' the rural landscape in a manner that relates to how they probably explained the pre-European landscape. Aboriginal people also derived some enjoyment in these beliefs as stories. They were also important as signifiers used by Aboriginal people in the Lower Murray to express their regional identity. By engaging in the discussion of the activities of spirits as fellow occupants of their land, Aboriginal people were highlighting their identity with respect to the local landscape.

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