

1

Kanyirninpa and 'Holding'

*If you hold that person, that person will return
that respect to you.*

That day, when I first picked up the marble and considered the Puntu use of the Kukatja word 'kanyirninpa', translated by the English word 'holding', proved the beginning of many further reflections and discussions. Not only did I discover that Puntu use the word kanyirninpa in many different contexts, I realised as well that they perceive it as key to understanding walytja (family) and relationships (see Appendix, p. 226). Kanyirninpa is deeply embedded in desert life and values. Puntu also believe its absence helps to explain some of the social problems currently being experienced by young men. Myers discussed the concept of kanyirninpa in his work with the Pintupi in the early 1970s (Myers 1986). Folds developed his ideas further (Folds 2001) and Bob Randall discusses the concept in his book *Songman* (2003). However, no one has explored how holding related to the growth and health of young Aboriginal men, particularly within the contexts of contemporary and rapidly changing social worlds.

Kanyirninpa is the present tense of the Kukatja verb kanyila (imperative form). It has been translated into English as, '1) have; keep; hold; 2) give birth to; have (young); 3) wear (clothing)' (Valiquette 1993, p. 18). It can be used in a variety of contexts and with different meanings. 'Where's my car?' 'Nyarralu kanyirninpa', 'he has it over there'. Puntu will use kanyirninpa when describing

something they possess or are wearing: 'kurlarta kanyirninpa', 'I am holding a spear' or 'kanyirninparnatju patarlarnatju', 'I am wearing a skirt'. Or, they will use it in reference to giving birth, such as the title of the Christmas carol, 'Marylu kanyirnu Tjiitju', 'Mary gave birth to Jesus'. The polysemic use of kanyirninpa is reflected in other desert languages such as Pitjantjatjara/Yakunytjatjara and Pintupi/Luritja. Not surprisingly, the translation of kanyirninpa into English provides its own range of polysemic variations around the English words, 'have', 'keep' and 'hold'. For example, in English there are 49 separate meanings associated with the word *have*, 48 for the word *keep*, and 55 for the word *hold* (*Macquarie dictionary* 2001).

In this book I am focusing on a particular cultural context and meaning of kanyirninpa, that of holding. Not only is this a rich and complex word within contemporary desert culture, but its use needs to be separated carefully from the use of kanyirninpa in other contexts, and the use of other Kukatja words that suggest holding. For example, the image of the hand holding a marble, with which I began this book, presents one aspect of holding. When Puntu say they are 'holding onto their culture' they will use the same word but mean something quite different. In the former case holding suggests support and nurturance; in the latter case it indicates firm control or possession. As a Puntu made the distinction: one might grab hold of one's culture but with people, 'you don't grab them, you care for them'. I am using the word kanyirninpa in the latter and very specific sense.

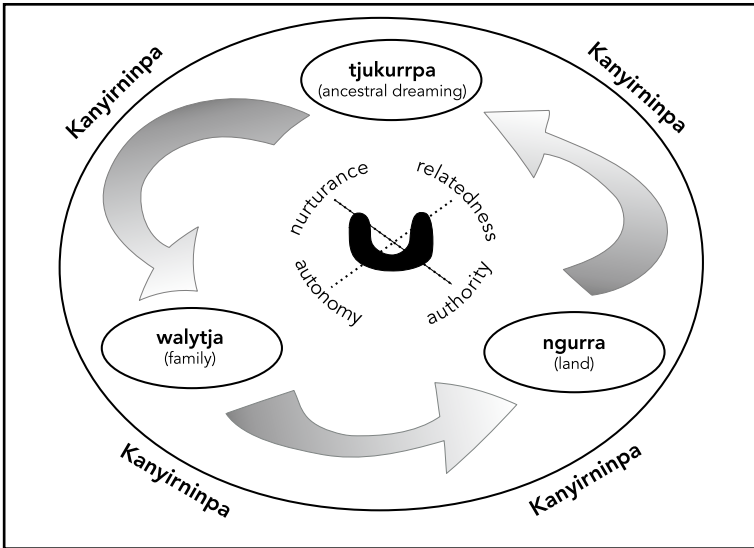
In his ethnographic work Myers identified the cultural significance of the Pintupi word kanyininpa. As with the Kukatja kanyirninpa, Myers identified a wide use of kanyininpa within Pintupi language and its association not only with various types of physical possession but also with the moral order (Myers 1982, p. 83). He suggested that kanyininpa existed as a 'dominant symbol' within Pintupi culture (p. 83).¹ Hence, when a child was held against its mother's breast, 'kanyinu yampungka', Myers argued that this invoked a double and inter-related effect. It evoked the 'image of security, protection and nourishment' (p. 83). It also, in reference to Victor Turner's

Holding Men

understanding of symbols, invoked with it 'an ideological or social referent to the relationship between the generations' (p. 83). What Myers translated as, 'looking after', 'nurturance', 'holding', referred to a primary and highly significant way in which the Pintupi understood and reproduced their society across generations (Myers 1980, p. 312; 1982, p. 81).

Myers understood *kanyininpa* as a key cultural value that countered or resolved two other cultural values in Pintupi life, relatedness and autonomy (Myers 1986, p. 22). A strong and healthy Pintupi society needed to constrain the extremes of individual autonomy and social relatedness or egalitarianism. When older people took care of those who were younger they provided this counter or balance. *Kanyininpa* described a very particular expression of social reciprocity or exchange. While recognising different domains of *kanyininpa*, such as expressed in parental nurturance and the authority of the older men, Myers maintained that *kanyininpa* essentially derived from those ritual occasions when older men mediated the authority of the *tjurrkupa* at ceremony time (1980, p. 313). The authority of the older people also nurtured because it protected and cared for Pintupi society at that critical ceremonial moment when it experienced being renewed and reproduced. The nurturance of the older people was authoritative in that their instructions and directions arose from a cosmic imperative (p. 313). As a result, the older people ensured Pintupi life and culture would be maintained as each generation cared for and directed the generations that followed. *Kanyininpa* provided a critically important social context for young people to experience autonomy with responsibility, nurturance with authority. The values that linked *walytja* (family), *ngurra* (land) and *tjukurrpa* (dreaming) were deeply reinforced as older people inducted a younger generation into a cosmic and meaningful world. Pintupi society promoted individual autonomy, attentive care for members of one's *walytja* and respect for the authority of elders. *Kanyininpa* ensured that this society would be reproduced from one generation to the next.

While Myers acknowledged that holding was expressed shortly after birth (as the mother fed her baby at the breast), he did not



Kanyirninpa is represented here as encompassing key Puntu values and relationships found in walytja, ngurra and tjukurrpa. These are continually dynamic and inter-relating. Kanyirninpa balances the tensions of Puntu (U) expression along key pathways: authority with nurture, relatedness with autonomy.

explore how holding developed from childhood. Nor did he examine how holding might apply to young men outside the context of ceremonial Law and within the changing Aboriginal social world of the 1970s. It is also important to understand how Puntu men and women understand kanyirninpa. Gender voices offer distinctive, commensurate views, about the experience of holding which significantly changes when 'boys' become 'men'.

Some thirty years after Myer's work, kanyirninpa continues to exercise an important part of desert energy within the Kutjungka region. Kanyirninpa applies not just to men at the time of Law but to everyone. It includes people of all ages and both genders. Shortly after birth the mother can be seen to hold her child. She cares for her newborn child, 'yipilingku tjitji kanyirninpa'. She is nurturing, looking after, feeding and protecting her child. She, together with the child's father, is responsible for the child's safety, health and

Holding Men

welfare. While the father also helps, particularly if the child is a son, the mother is seen to take primary responsibility. Parents, and in particular the mother, will be severely criticised if they do not take the responsibility to care for their children.

Kanyirninpa is expressed in a number of interconnected ways. It includes nurturance but it also involves older people taking responsibility and offering protection for those they hold. This relationship between generations is named as 'respect'. Kanyirninpa is also expressed in relationships that involve teaching and learning where older people help young people 'grow up the right way'. While some elements within kanyirninpa remain constant over one's lifetime, others assume different cultural expressions as those who are held grow older and in turn hold others.

One English word that is often used to describe the expression of kanyirninpa is nurture or nurturance, where nurture means, 'to feed, nourish, or support during the stages of growth, as children or young' (*Macquarie dictionary* 2001). Providing food was, and continues to be, a key element of the holding relationship. Recorded stories of pre-mission experience reinforce the priority which hunting and gathering had in daily life. Intimate knowledge of land and seasons provided adults with the challenges and demands of survival. An essential ingredient of that existence was the sharing of food. The provision of food also assumed a priority in many early first-contact experiences.

Today, families supplement regular trips to the local community store with occasional hunting forays. And while the source and nature of food has significantly changed, the priority of daily hunting and gathering has not. Not only has the store become a daily meeting place, but it has also become the place where daily transactions over food are negotiated. The young depend upon such daily negotiations and can be especially vulnerable if there is a lack of food, money or someone to provide for them. If the store remains closed, if older people are waiting for their cheques, or money has been spent on gambling or alcohol, the young can go hungry. It is significant that when men talk about imprisonment they often mention the provision and regularity of meals.