

Chapter 2. Death and regeneration:

The Moon in Australian Aboriginal myths of the origin of death

by *Eric Venbrux*¹

Abstract: The moon figures prominently in various Australian Aboriginal myths about the origin of death. In these myths an ancestral being dies and another being, the moon, offers to revive the first dead ever. The offer, however, is refused. Hence, death has come to the world.

The myth of the cultural hero Purukupali and his brother Tapara from Bathurst and Melville Islands, northern Australia, is a case in point. Towards the end of the creation period Purukupali introduced death into Tiwi society. Purukupali fought with his younger maternal brother, Tapara, after the latter had seduced Purukupali's wife and her son had died as a result of neglect. Tapara offered to bring the child back to life but Purukupali refused the offer and said that because of his son had died all people had to die. In his fight Tapara injured Purukupali's leg with a forked throwing club. Tapara was hurt above the eye, and transformed into the moon. Every month the scar left by the injury above the eye still can be seen on the moon. In one version of the myth Purukupali's baby, Djinani, dies of starvation; in another he dies of thirst due to having been left in the hot sun, while Tapara and Purukupali's wife Bima were having sex in the bushes. Bima was grief-stricken: her wailing sounds can still be heard, because she turned into Waijai, the curlew. Whereas Tapara might be seen as a symbol of regeneration; think of the waning and waxing of the moon, and Tapara's promise to bring Purukupali's dead son (Djinani) back to life within three days, Purukupali issued death: as his son had died, he said, all people would have to die.

In this paper I will compare Aboriginal myths involving death and the moon, as recorded by a number of ethnographers in the respective hunter-gatherer societies across Australia, that have the refusal of a regeneration to life as their theme. These myths may belong to the oldest intangible cultural heritage of humankind.

*Introduction*²

The moon figures prominently in various Australian Aboriginal myths about the ori-

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gin of death. In these myths an ancestral being dies and another being, the moon, offers to revive the first ever dead. The offer, however, is refused. Hence, death has come to the world.

In this paper, I will compare Aboriginal myths involving death and the moon having the refusal of a regeneration to life as their theme, that have been recorded by a number of ethnographers of the respective hunter-gatherer societies across Australia. These myths may belong to the oldest intangible cultural heritage of humankind, but this should not be taken for granted.

Evidence of the oral transmission of the tales over thousands of years is lacking (as is the case with most European folktales, see Venbrux & Meder 1999; Meder & Venbrux 2000). Besides, they have been transmitted through different media, frequently in a fragmentary manner, and – depending on the nature of the tales – with various levels of secrecy (see also Berndt & Berndt 1989). As Patricia Waterman notes in her tale-type index, ‘The subtlety and complexity of the Aboriginal oral narratives may surprise those unfamiliar with the tradition’ (1987: 13). She lists 28 distinct moon narratives (Waterman 1987: 22-28),³ a further seven under the heading ‘origin of death: moon offers life, man chooses death’ (Ibid.: 84-85),⁴ and four more classified as ‘origin of death: other moon narratives’ (Ibid.: 85-86).⁵ The last two categories are of interest here, but the more general moon narratives also contain elements that may be considered in relation to the origin-of-death tales. Waterman’s index is a very useful tool, but it must be noted that her overview of these types of tales is incomplete. Drawing on the ethnographic record, I will add three new types to the ones already identified by Waterman in this paper.

Scholarly interest in the lore and customs of Aborigines, as I will point out in the next section, emerged from the idea that the indigenous people of Australia could be seen as Western man’s ‘contemporary ancestors,’ representing the dawn of human civilization, where one could ‘see man living as much he did 50,000 years ago’ (Mountford 1956: 417). Equally elusive might be the ideology of Aborigines themselves that their cosmology is unchanging (Myers 1986), readily adopted in Western popular wisdom (Chippindale 1994) to the extent that Aborigines have to accommodate others’ perceptions of their past and to live by it (Merlan 1998; Venbrux 2002a, 2007). Furthermore, narrations are affected by attempts to reconstruct a past, also in view of identity and land rights (see Haviland & Hart 1998; Venbrux 2002b). And finally, many renditions of myths in popular publications ‘belong under the title of Australian-European literature, rather than Aboriginal’ (Berndt & Berndt 1988: 389). However, these are too inaccurate to be considered here.

In order to understand the myths it is first necessary to say something about Aboriginal cosmology in general. I will then discuss the selected myths about how

³ Nrs. 20, 23, 26, 29, 32, 35, 38, 41, 44, 47, 50, 53, 56, 59, 62, 65, 68, 71, 74, 77, 80, 83, 86, 89, 92, 95, 98, 101, 104 (Waterman 1987: 22-28).

⁴ Nrs. 2850, 2855, 2860, 2870, 2880, 2885, 2890 (Waterman 1987: 84-85).

⁵ Nrs. 2905, 2920, 2930, 2940 (Waterman 1987: 85-86).

death came into the world and offer a comparison. I will look at some of allusions which are made in the ritual, particularly the blaming of a mythical ancestor for the occurrence of death. The next section deals with the moon as a symbol of regeneration. I then conclude with a discussion of the myths, returning to the possibility of antiquity, but not automatically assuming that Aborigines should be considered our ‘contemporary ancestors’.

Contemporary ancestors

The interest in Australian Aboriginal beliefs and traditions increased in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. European scholars tried to understand the origin and evolution not only of the human species, but also of its religion and culture. Australian Aborigines were believed to still be in the early stages of this development, representing the dawn of humankind, according to the learned models of cultural evolution at the time. It was expected that the so-called ‘wild’ Aborigines in remote Australia, almost untouched by European civilisation, would thus enable scholars to gain a better understanding of how their forbearers must have lived tens of thousands years ago. Somehow the ‘primitive’ way of life, beliefs and traditions, dating back to the Stone Age, would have survived in Australia. In other words, the Australian hunter-gatherers encountered by Europeans were considered the latter’s ‘contemporary ancestors.’⁶ The term Aborigines denotes this understanding of a people from the origin (‘ab origine’), exemplary for the beginnings or early manifestations of social institutions and cultural forms.

The case of the Australian Aborigines was of great importance for social theorizing (Hiatt 1996). For example, Émile Durkheim’s work on the elementary forms of religion and Sigmund Freud’s idea of the primordial band were based on contemporary knowledge about indigenous Australians. Moreover, the books published by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen beginning to appear in 1899 made a tremendous contribution. As a postmaster at Alice Springs, Gillen had become acquainted with Aborigines in Central Australia. He and Spencer – a Melbourne professor – managed to document their traditions and beliefs in great detail. Spencer and Gillen did so on the basis of first-hand information and even direct observation of a totemic ceremony that would become crucial evidence for Durkheim concerning his theory on social cohesion. Bronislaw Malinowski also grappled with Australian materials in his doctoral thesis on the Aboriginal family. And Alfred Radcliffe-Brown, who was to become another leading scholar in the field of anthropology, documented and analyzed the intricacies of Aboriginal social organisation and the variety of systems of kinship in Australia (see also Hiatt 1996).

The evolutionary interest had waned before a systematic study of myths across Australia had been made. Ursula McConnel is credited with being ‘the first to publish

⁶ See Venbrux and Jones 2002.

a systematic series of myths' (Berndt & Berndt 1988: 389), albeit this concerned a single society. A great many ethnographers have recorded Aboriginal myths in the twentieth century (see for further details, Hiatt 1975; Berndt & Berndt 1988, 1989). However, Patrica Waterman (1987) was the first to provide an index of the available materials.

It must be noted that across Australia an estimated five hundred distinct indigenous languages were spoken. With also considerable variation in their habitat, Aboriginal groups differed in lifestyle and cultural practices enough for the continent to harbor a hundred or two hundred indigenous cultures. The picture is somewhat complicated, because a great many Aborigines happen or happened to be multilingual. Almost all Aborigines, however, share adherence to the general outline of a cosmology.

The Dreaming

The central concept for understanding Aboriginal cosmology is the Dreaming. The Dreaming signifies the mythological, formative era during which the enduring shape of the earth was created, patterns of living were established, and laws for human behaviour were set down. The forementioned Spencer and Gillen introduced the term 'the Dream time' for Aboriginal cosmology. It was their translation of the word *alcher-inga* from the Aranda (now: Arrente) in Central Australia. Although this translation is somewhat misleading, Aborigines have adopted it when speaking about their world-view in English (Stanner 1979). Most commonly used by Aborigines today are the terms *The Dreaming* and *Dreaming*. Another expression that has currency is *The Law*.

Dreamtime, the Dreaming and related terms refer to the creation time. According to Aboriginal creation stories, Ancestral Beings reshaped the world in a long distant past. It must be noted that in contrast to the creation myths of world religions this was not a creation out of nothing. The world already existed as an inert, amorphous mass of clay or, covered by water, in fluid condition (Maddock 1982). The powers of the Dreaming emerged from this mass, came to the surface, took human-like shapes, and wandered over the earth. In the process, they had their adventures, recounted in the creation stories, that were events that moulded the landscape, and created nature and culture. Ancestral Beings transformed into animals and other creatures, vegetation, natural features, such as rocks and creeks and waterholes, 'natural forces', such as thunder and rain, and visible elements and formations in the sky (Mountford 1958). The Ancestral Beings or 'world-creative powers,' as Maddock (1982) calls them, gave Aborigines a blueprint for their way of life. According to the creation stories, the Ancestral Beings also installed the major religious ceremonies.

Some of the narrated events of the Dreaming are re-enacted in those ceremonies. Although the Dreaming refers to the long distant past during the creation period, it is far more than that. For Aborigines, the Dreaming is omnipresent in space and time – past, present and future. Consequently, W.E.H. Stanner (1979: 24) translates the Dreaming as 'everywhen'. Generally speaking, Aborigines attribute all acts of

creativity to the Ancestral Beings of the Dreaming. So, in principle, there is no difference between patterns or designs found in nature and those made by Aborigines in the context of their ceremonial life. Both kinds of design may be conceived of as traces of the Dreaming, containing spiritual power. Hence, as Peter Sutton makes clear, Aborigines will not unnecessarily make markings, such as doodling or scratching with a stick in the sand. Their world is one of meaningful signs (Sutton 1988: 13-14). And every sign is a statement of their being in the world.

The Dreaming thus continues to have relevance for the present as well as for the future, since Ancestral Beings were present and active not only at the beginning of life, but continue to exist and exert their influence. They are incorporated into the social system of clans and kinship, and their interrelationships resemble the ones between social groupings. Following Kenneth Maddock (1982), a distinction between these Ancestral Beings can be made between so-called transcendental and totemic powers. The difference between both types of power corresponds to differences in the magnitude of their creative acts. Furthermore, the former transcends the specific social divisions connected to clans or particular kinship relations. The latter are associated with certain social groups to the exclusion of others. The myths discussed in this paper concern totemic powers or ancestors.

Throughout Australia, a great diversity in mythological beliefs can be discerned. An example may be seen in geographical differences in the perception of transcendental powers. In the southern and eastern parts of Australia, an 'All-Father' figure is said to have had decisive influence in shaping the earth, whereas in northern Australia, such formative power is ascribed to an 'All-Mother' figure.⁷ Respective examples are Ngurunderi from the Lower River Murray area and Murtankala from Bathurst and Melville Islands. The majority of religious myths describe the wanderings and activities of various creative beings. However, in view of the great variation in the natural environment, it is not unsurprising that there exists an equal variety in explanatory myths. Moreover, even within clans and kinship groups, no single version is necessarily accepted as the only correct one. Frequently, the ancestral connections referred to reflect the protagonists' representations of social relations and subsequent relations to the land. Ideologically, Aborigines state they belong to the land rather than that the land belongs to them. Claims to the relevant ancestral connections have to be rooted in the authority of the Dreamtime, a privilege of the initiated, but still more of an achievement than a given since new aspects of Dreamtime stories, supposed to have always been there, can be revealed in a dream, a vision, or a newly made design (*cf.* Myers 1986). Whether such revelations, embodying the hidden dynamics of the Dreamtime, catch on and find acceptance or not often depends on the political state of affairs. Interestingly, introduced species, Jesus, cars, and planes, among other things, have become appropriated and incorporated in Aboriginal totemic systems.⁸

⁷ See also Hiatt's chapter on the high-god controversy (Hiatt 1996: 100-119).

⁸ Anke Tonnaer 2007 has shown how an airplane dance at Borroloola on two different occasions was

How death came into the world

According to Ronald and Catherine Berndt, who recorded numerous indigenous myths across Australia, 'the inevitability of death is emphasized' (Berndt & Berndt, 1988: 453). The moon figures prominently in various Australian Aboriginal myths about the origin of death. In these myths, an ancestral being dies and another being, the moon, offers to revive the first ever dead. The offer, however, is refused. Hence, death has come to the world. The myth of the cultural hero Purukupali and his brother Tapara from Bathurst and Melville Islands, in northern Australia, is a case in point:

'Towards the end of the creation period Purukupali introduced death into Tiwi society. Purukupali fought with his younger maternal brother, Tapara, after the latter had seduced Purukupali's wife and her son had died as a result of neglect. Tapara offered to bring the child back to life but Purukupali refused the offer and said that because his son had died, all people had to die. In his fight, Tapara injured Purukupali's leg with a forked throwing club. Tapara was hurt above the eye, and transformed into the moon. Every month the scar left by the injury above the eye still can be seen on the moon. In one version of the myth, Purukupali's baby, Djinani, dies of starvation; in another, he dies of thirst due to having been left in the hot sun, while Tapara and Purukupali's wife Bima were having sex in the bushes. Bima was grief-stricken: her wailing sounds can still be heard, because she turned into Waijai, the curlew. [In spite of Tapara's] promise to bring Purukupali's dead son (Djinani) back to life within three days, Purukupali issued death: as his son had died, he said, all people would have to die' (Venbrux & Tonnaer 2009).⁹

I will return to this particular discussion of the myths (and its variants), but first I would like to share a few other tales as Aboriginal myths involving death and the moon that have the refusal of regeneration to life as their theme which have been recorded across Australia. These are neither the only Australian Aboriginal myths explaining how death came into the world nor do they seem to be confined exclusively to the smallest continent.¹⁰

used by local Aborigines to forge relations with the outside world. This occurred by respectively preparing male and female performers to pull on one occasion white men from the audience and white women on the other occasion.

⁹ The islands' remaining mythological ancestors gathered and, following Purukupali's instructions, they performed a cycle of death rites for the first time. Tiwi people today still follow the script laid down in the creation period. This includes the ritual roles they enact, the designs and carved and painted posts erected at the conclusion of the final ceremony, called *iloti*, meaning 'for good' or 'forever.'

¹⁰ Frazer 1913: 59-86 distinguishes four types of myths of the origin of death:

- 1) Two Messengers,
- 2) the Waxing and Waning of the Moon,
- 3) the Serpent and his Cast Skin, and
- 4) the Banana.

With regard to the second one, concerning the moon, he offers examples from Australia, Asia and Africa. According to Frazer these myths

'all imply a belief that death is not a necessary part of the order of nature, but that it originated in a pure mistake or misdeed of some sort on somebody's part, and that we should all have lived happy and immortal if it had not been for that disastrous blunder or crime' (1913: 84).

Waterman (1987: 84-85) indexes 2850 Moon and the old man; 2855 Moon and turkey; 2860 Moon, bronze-wing pigeon and the water of life; 2870 Moon, his dog and water; 2880 Moon and Purakapali's child; 2885 Moon, native cat and kangaroo; and 2890 Moon and parrot fish as the types of oral narratives concerning the origin of death in which 'moon offers life, man chooses death.'¹¹

Another type of tale might be referred to as the *Moon and dingo*. The following was recorded from a man named Daly by anthropologist Deborah Rose (1992: 104) at Victoria River Downs in the northwest of the Northern Territory:

'Yeah. Well him [Moon] been talk: "You want to die, die! Bones to bones. *Kujip. Kujip* mean where he got to go back to bones. That what it really means now . . . [He was being] Cruel. That *waluku* [dog; dingo] said: "You try, learn me how to go."

Jakilin [Moon] been die, and him come out for four days. And him [dog] been say: "You can't see em me come out four days. I'll go forever." And this *walaku* been die, and forget him altogether. Nother *walaku* been talk: "We gotto go like that." And there, we go like that, all right. And he couldn't make a change. I don't know why. That *jakilin* should have been say, Moon should have say: "Ah, that's bad. No good you stay back, like that. Why don't you come back again?" That *walaku* been do wrong. Yeah. Nother dog been there: "What's the good, poor bugger. Come back, come back, make a new life. And you'll die and come back with new life." Nothing good. He made mistake now, *walaku* . . . You think. What's a good life? *Jakilin*, that Moon. That one we had to miss out. We have been follow that dog. We never make change. We should have followed this Moon.'

In short, since the mythical Dingo ancestor decided to die, it was people's fate to be mortal. He could be blamed for it because the Moon had offered him the chance to become immortal.

In the next tale Moon and Possum have a fight. After being fatally wounded, the mythical ancestor Possum decrees that from then on all people have to die like himself. The Moon's offer of immortality comes too late. This type of tale might be called *Moon and Possum*. An example is the following account recorded by the Berndts:

'Moon, Gurana, and Spotted Possum, Jindalbu, were once men: but they quarrelled. Possum picked up a sharp wooden yam stick and knocked Moon down. After a while Moon got up. Grabbed the same yam stick and hit Possum, mortally wounding him. As he was dying Possum spoke: "All the people who come after me, future generations, when they die they'll die forever." But Moon said, "You should have let me say something first, because I won't die forever. I'll die for a few days, but I will come back again in the shape of a new moon." As for human beings – we die forever because Possum spoke first. This took place at Manggumu on the mainland, in Maung country, where there are high rocks near Sandy Creek' (Berndt & Berndt 1988: 397).

Spencer and Gillen (1968 [1899]: 564) documented a variant of the *Moon and Possum* narrative among the Aranda from Central Australia:¹²

¹¹ Waterman notes, 'The moon is usually represented as male, and themes concerned with water, bone or shell, death and rebirth are common in moon narratives. In some accounts, moon exhibits characteristics typical of the dual trickster / culture hero figure, being on the one hand greedy, lascivious, sly, and on the other the initiator of marriage, marriage rules and child begetting' (1987: 22).

¹² Spencer and Gillen 1968 [1899]: 564 state that 'the moon [...] is regarded as of the male sex, and is

‘before there was any moon in the heavens, a man of the Anthinna or opossum totem died and he was buried, and shortly afterwards arose from his grave in the form of a boy. His people saw him rising and were very afraid and ran away. He followed them shouting, “Do not be frightened, do not run away, or you will die altogether; I shall die but shall rise again in the sky.” He subsequently grew into a man and died, reappearing as the moon; and since then he has continued to periodically die and come to life again; but the people who ran away died altogether. When no longer visible it is supposed that the moon man is living with his two wives who dwell far away in the west.’

In this case, the Possum ancestor turned into the moon. People were afraid because this man, who died, first resurfaced from the grave as a boy. They ran away and did not listen to his promise of immortality. As a result, from this time on all had to die except the moon.

Another additional ‘wrong’ occurs in the myth when the Moon breaks a strict taboo by trying to marry his mother-in-law. This resulted in a fight with the in-laws, but in this case the Moon declares all people have to die. The tale might be called *Moon and his Mother-in-Law*. Phyllis Kaberry (2004 [1939]: 128) wrote down the following version in the Kimberley in the north of Western Australia:

‘the moon, *djuru*, had tried to marry his mother-in-law, *nambin*, and had been attacked by the infuriated woman and her mates. In revenge he said, “I shall die now, but I shall come back in five days. But when you die, you will not come back.” This according to the natives, was the origin of death and wrong marriage. “We got to follow that one moon,” they would say with a grin, and pervert what should serve as a warning against the infringement of tribal law into a sanction for their own behaviour.’

The Moon’s behaviour in the mythological story happens to be an inversion of what people consider proper. His breach of the norm was not allowed, since the ancestors’ adherence to the (marriage) rules had severe consequences: the Moon decreed that they, and by implication their descendants, would die and not return to life.

While the previous three tale-types have not been indexed by Waterman, the following has, namely as the *Moon and Parrot fish* (1987: 85, nr. 2890). She also refers to W. Lloyd Warner’s classic work *A Black Civilization*, giving a summary of the account of the Murngin (Yolngu) of Arnhem Land:

‘The moon decided that when he died he would waste away leaving only bones but would be reborn. He urged parrot fish to do the same. Fish refused. Because of that choice, men die permanently’ (Ibid.).¹³

Warner’s full account (1958 [1937]: 523-524) is worth citing:

‘In the days of Wongar [creation time], Moon said to the Parrot Fish, “I’m going to die, but I won’t be finished, for I am going to be alive again and come back.”’

Parrot Fish said, “You are no good. What do you want to die and live again for?”

Moon said, “What about you?”

spoken of as *E rwta Oknurcha*, or a big man, its name being *Atninja*.’

¹³ Another version, concerning the same indigenous group, is summarized by Waterman 1987: 85 as follows: ‘The moon man and the parrot fish man fought, killing each other. Moon man’s spirit decreed he would live in the sky and be constantly reborn, but parrot fish would live in the sea and never come to life again.’

Parrot Fish said, ‘Me? I’ll die, but I won’t come back, and you can pick up my bones.’

‘Well, it doesn’t matter about you,’ said Moon. ‘When I die I want to come back. Every time I get sick and get more sick and get thinner and thinner and only my bones are left and then I’ll die, but I’ll come back again.’

The Moon then got sick and wasted away until it had died, then came back again. Parrot Fish said, ‘I won’t be that way. When I die, when man dies, we’ll stay dead. You come back, but that is wrong.’

The Parrot Fish died and never came back, but the Moon, ever since those Wongar days, has been well and fat, then become ill and wasted away until it was dead again, but it always comes back and grows to full size. When the Moon had had its conversation with Parrot Fish he had wanted Parrot Fish to be like him. He had said, ‘Come on and become alive again like me. I can fix you so that you will come alive again.’

‘No,’ said Parrot Fish, ‘I want to die and stay dead.’

‘This is what makes man stay dead and never come back to life. The Parrot Fish was a silly fool.’

Here, the narrator again blames a mythological ancestor, the Parrot Fish, for having brought death to the world, yet listening to the Moon could have prevented it.

Before I turn to Waterman’s nr. 2880, *Moon and Purakapali’s child*, I will briefly discuss the motivations beginning to emerge from the five other types that reject the moon’s offer of eternal life. In *Moon and the old man*, nr. 2850, an old man tells the Moon not to bring people to life again.¹⁴ The turkey denied the dying being restored to life by the Moon for he wanted to have their women, as related in nr. 2855, *Moon and turkey*. The next tale-type, nr. 2860, *Moon, bronze-wing pigeon and the water of life*, says the Moon has ‘the water of life’ but the Pigeon does not allow people to drink from it, or in a variant that the Pigeon also offers water to drink that turns people into mortals. In *Moon, his dogs and water*, nr. 2870, people refused to carry the Moon’s dogs across a stream on his request. Forewarned by the Moon, and angering him, they would no longer be reborn. Finally, the *Moon, native cat and kangaroo* tale-type, nr. 2885, tells that both the mythical ancestors of the Native Cat and the Kangaroo wanted to have nothing to do with the Moon, albeit they were advised by the latter that people need not remain dead (Waterman 1987: 84-85). In the next section, I will offer a comparison of these myths.

Comparing the myths

The table below compares the ten, relevant myths:

type	tale / myth	offer refused by	cause
W2850	Moon and the old man	old man	said so (authority due to seniority)
W2855	Moon and turkey	turkey	desired to take the surviving women

¹⁴ Van Gennep 1905: 183 cites an example of this myth on the origin of death.

			after the death of the men
W2860	Moon, bronze-wing pigeon and the water of life	pigeon	pigeon did not allow old people to drink the life-restoring water of the moon or offered his own useless water to victims of sorcery
W2870	Moon, his dogs and water	people	disobeyed moon (challenged his authority)
W2880	Moon and Purakapali's child	Purakapali	his baby died out of neglect when his younger brother had seduced his wife
W2885	Moon, native cat and kangaroo	native cat or kangaroo	dislike of the moon
W2890	Moon and parrot fish	parrot fish	priority of decree: parrot fish spoke before moon
	Moon and dingo	dingo	dingo forgot about the moon's demonstration of how to be reborn
	Moon and possum	possum	fear of the revenant and rejuvenated possum
	Moon and his mother-in-law	moon	punishment moon for desiring his mother-in-law (illicit marriage)

Table 2.1. Comparing Australian myths of death and dying

Most strikingly, the Moon himself only opts for human mortality in one case – the *Moon and his Mother-in-Law* myth, whereas in all other cases the Moon's offer of eternal life fails to be accepted as a result of the (in)actions of other protagonists. The one exception happens to deal with the relationship with in-laws on which one is dependent to obtain women for the sake of human reproduction. The mother-in-law is the key figure with whom the Moon would have had to adhere to the prescribed avoidance relationship, out of respect. Furthermore, because she provided him with a (future) wife, he would have to provide services for her in return. But acting as an amorous suitor of the mother-in-law, as the Moon did, is one of the most serious breaches of the norm. Having sex with or 'marrying' one's mother-in-law is strictly taboo, such a marriage is illicit, and can only be answered with the severe punishment of the perpetrator (the Moon approached the woman, who strongly objected to this). This narrative illustrates that the occurrences in myths need not always be demonstrations of proper behaviour.

This myth, however, makes clear that mythical ancestors had to withstand the temptation and that for men to have a sexual relationship (the most radical inversion of avoidance) with their mother-in-law would be out of the question. In real life such cases do sometimes occur, and result in social tensions and conflict. Another ingrained social tension emerges in the myth of *Moon and Purakapali's child* (W2880),

that is, the tension between fraternal strife and fraternal generosity. Brothers have to support each other (are members of the same exogamous clan) but simultaneously they have to compete for the same category of women (potential wives of another clan with which their clan exchanges marriage partners). Moon, the younger brother, is taken to task not so much for having pinched Purukapali's wife, but for the neglect and subsequent death of Purukapali's child, while Moon had a love tryst with the child's mother. The competition for women is also a theme in the tale of the *Moon and turkey* (W2855), where the Turkey refuses to prevent his brothers' death, because he is after their women.

Further features of Aboriginal social life are also expressed in the myths. First and foremost, the importance of seniority: the right to speak and to issue decrees is held by initiated, senior men. The story of *Moon and the old man* (W2850) illustrates this, and, in addition, the authority of senior men is stressed in a number of the other myths (W2855, W2860, W2880, W2890). *Moon, his dogs, and the water of life* (W2870) offers an example wherein the Moon holds this authority, but is unduly challenged by other ancestral people. The Parrot fish, in the *Moon and the parrot fish* (W2890), appears to have been of equal status as the Moon, and here it is the priority of the decree that counts. Native Cat and Kangaroo disliked the Moon. As *Moon, native cat and kangaroo* (W2885) relates, they wanted to have nothing to do with him: the Moon thus failed to have authority over them in spite of his intangible asset, the promise of eternal life. Failure to remember lessons learned, as the *Moon and dingo* demonstrates, may have dire consequences. Unjustified fear rather than blind acceptance has the same effect in *Moon and possum*, although the senior mythical ancestor, Possum, turned into a boy: understandably, a junior person lacked the authority required to be listened to.

The Moon is presented similarly in the myths as a senior male person. They vary in their explanations for why the Moon's offer of life failed to be granted or accepted. These mythical occurrences have to be accepted as a fact of life for in people's worldview this happened to be the actions of their mythical ancestors that brought death into the world. Whether they like it or not, these formative actions cannot be undone by non-ancestral mortals.

Blaming the totemic ancestors

From the perspective of the narrators, however, the responsible totemic ancestors can be blamed for the deaths that do occur. If we return to my main example of the myth of *Moon and Purakapali's child* (W2880), this can be further demonstrated. As we have seen, totemic ancestors – such as Turkey, Possum and Parrot Fish – were blamed for having brought death into the world in other tales as well. This blaming may occur indeed in the narration of the myths concerned. It may also occur on the occasion of an actual death in verbal expressions and wailing as part of mourning behaviour and in song lyrics and other ritual actions.

The Tiwi culture hero Purukapali was unforgiving with regard to the fatal neglect of his son. He made the law of human mortality, stating: 'Now that my son is dead we shall all follow him. We shall all have to follow my son. No one will ever come back. Everyone will die' (Osborne 1974: 83). In the myth's final episode Purukapali, carrying the corpse of his baby-boy, walks backwards into the sea. When the water closes over his head, he calls out: 'You must all follow me; as I die, so you must all die' (Mountford 1958: 30). The twice-decreed mortality, however, did not apply to his younger brother, Tapara. The latter turned into the moon.

During my fieldwork in the Tiwi Islands, bereaved senior men frequently blamed Purukapali, thus expressing their anger concerning the death of a loved one. In these ritualized exclamations and in their lyrics of mourning songs they said that they wanted to kill Purukapali, to spit and to hit him in the face. The men stressed how stupid Purukapali had been, he was 'talking wrong thing' (Venbrux 1995: 136). Notwithstanding their abhorrence of Purukapali sentencing humans to death, they also engaged in (partial) re-enactments of the myth. Stamping their feet in the mortuary rituals, for instance, might be seen as an allusion to the culture hero, who 'kept stamping his foot' (Osborne 1974: 83-84) when he told everyone they would have to die.

Allusions to the myth's episode of the fight between the two brothers are manifold in the mortuary rituals. For example, Purukapali was hurt with a forked fighting stick by his younger brother Tapara; therefore, two bands have to be painted on the leg by someone bereaved of an older brother. Repeatedly, the mythical fight is the theme of a song in the death rites. To cite the lyrics of one such a song as an example: 'Tapara and Purukapali had a fight, and Purukapali was wounded, got shot, at his leg by Tapara / He put blood running on the ceremonial ring (*milimika*).' The words refer to the myth, but –as was the case in this instance, may also refer to a fight between brothers that took place in real life. Tapara was hit in turn by Purukapali with a pointed fighting stick above his eye, the blood running over his face. Tapara's wounds can still be seen on the moon, for he turned into the moon, and this lunar manifestation is represented in ritual by the ceremonial ring.

The ritualized blaming of Purukapali helps to channel emotions, such as anger, after a death. This function of emotional release, besides the explanatory function of the myth, is an important one in the context of death-related behaviour, including mourning. On the symbolic level, however, the myth appears also of central importance in bringing about ritual transformations, the performance of rites of passage, due to the symbolism of death and rebirth. Whereas Purukapali stands for death, Tapara or the Moon is employed to symbolize rebirth and regeneration.

Regeneration

Purukapali said all had to die, but Tapara escaped this fate. People, therefore, identify with the latter when they want to emphasize regeneration. In other words, that in spite of Purukapali's condemning words life returns. Louis Allen (1975: 219) recorded the

following part of the myth that gives an account of T(j)apara's life-force:

'Tjapara became the Moon Man. He can be seen in the night sky, his face marked by the bruises and wounds that Purukapali inflicted. He still feels Purukapali at his heels, for he never ceases his restless journey. Hungry from his travels, he gorges on crabmeat, growing rounder and fatter each day until he has feasted so much he falls sick. His wasting body is the waning moon. Each month he dies, but after three days he comes back to life and begins his journey once again. His loneliness is over, for he has found many wives, the planets, who accompany him on his journey across the sky.'

The waning of the moon was always to be followed by its waxing. In another version, written down by Mountford (1958: 30), the eternal death and rebirth is stressed:

'When Tjapara saw what had happened, he changed himself into the moon. But he did not entirely escape the decree of Purukapali, for, even though Tjapara is eternally reincarnated, he has to die for three days. On any clear night, one can see on the face of the moon-man the wounds which he received in his fight with Purukapali so long ago.'

Most allusions to Tapara (regeneration) are found among increase rituals, in contrast to the mortuary rites in which Purukapali (death) turns out the most prominent character. To begin with, the seasonal increase ritual, called *kulama*, has to be performed at full moon, that is, when Tapara's strength and presence is optimal. Furthermore, this ritual (that lasts three days and nights) marks the transition of the wet season to the dry season. It coincides, in addition, with the initiation of youths, and as a psychotherapeutic ritual, dealing with grief and grievances during the first night, 'the night of sorrow', when the participants lie down (enacting symbolic death). It is structured by the ritual procedures of processing a certain type of round tuber with hairy roots, called *kulama*. These yams are poisonous in a raw state, but become edible when carefully prepared, roasted and soaked during the ritual. The performance of the ritual takes place when the yams have ripened. The ritual is concerned not only with the change of season and initiation, but also with interpersonal conflicts, the dead, growth in the natural environment and expansion of food production, human reproduction, prosperity, health, and people's well-being in general. It is not without significance that the sacred yams are placed in a ring made of long, green grass: this ring is called *tapara* or the moon. The poisonous yam is a potent symbol of sickness and danger; when processed in the ritual, rubbing the body with a mixture of yam mash and red ochre (Tapara's blood) is considered an effective prophylactic and healing act (cf. Venbrux 2008). In line with the powers of Tapara the symbolic actions in this particular and complex ritual work towards a renewal and regeneration of the people's world. The associations of Purukapali and Tapara –two major characters in a single myth, with respectively death and increase rites demonstrates the mythical characters' productiveness in ritual contexts as symbolic vehicles of death and regeneration.

Concluding discussion

A significant way in which belief is transformed into action is through Aboriginal ritual. Ritual and mythology are closely intertwined. I have pointed out above some allusions to the myth of the *Moon and Purukapali's child* (W2880) in ritual in order to show that this moon narrative not only provides an explanation of how death came to the world, but also offers a model for symbolic death and rebirth in major rites of passage. What is more, the myth appears to have a function in the release of emotions, especially anger, since after a death, the culture hero Purukapali is blamed for it in a ritualized manner.

In addition to the seven moon myths under the rubric 'origin of death: moon offers life, man chooses death' outlined and indexed by Waterman (1987), I identified three further ones: *Moon and dingo*, *Moon and possum*, and *Moon and his mother-in-law*. The comparison of the ten available myths from across Australia has shown that the motivations to refuse the moon's offer of life varied. These motivations could be better understood in the context of Aboriginal social practices and norms. It also became clear, however, that the behaviour of mythical totemic ancestors did not necessarily demonstrate the rules of proper conduct. The case of *Moon and his mother-in-law*, for example, might only be regarded as a 'blueprint' if the Moon's behaviour is considered an inversion of the way in which people ought to behave.

'The interpretation of Australian myths,' as Hiatt (1975: 3) points out, 'has been guided in the main by four separate though not necessarily incompatible ideas about the nature and purpose of the subject matter. They are that myth is, or may be at least in part, a kind of (a) history, (b) charter, (c) dream, or (d) ontology.'

The myth of the *Moon and Purukapali's child* (W2880) can be interpreted in these ways. For A.P. Elkin (1964 [1938]: 215),

'mythology is not just a matter of words and records, but of action and life.'

The primary aim of myths, in his view, is keeping Aborigines 'in living touch with the creative dream-time;' and, therefore, Elkin claims, '*the myth is life-giving*' (Ibid.). The expected efficacy of ritual gestures alluding to the Tiwi moon myth seems to underscore this point. Moreover, the myth deals with both death and regeneration.

Although the antiquity of this particular myth (or of the ten myths for that matter) cannot be established, long-term isolation of the Tiwi from the mainland may be taken into account. Since the last Ice Age, that is, for some 8,000 years they would have been separated from other Aborigines until the beginning of the twentieth century; this is supported by linguistic and genetic evidence (see Hart, Pilling & Goodale 1988; Osborne 1974; Kirk 1983). If the myth is indeed authentic, its content may present a theme that is very old, even more so because comparable moon myths have been recorded at various places across Australia. It is not my aim to engage in speculation here, but we simply cannot exclude the possibility.

For one thing, the moon must have been there all the time. As Smith (1970: 71) attests, Aborigines observed and had knowledge of the course of the moon. The

waxing and waning of the moon could not go unnoticed. (I was told Tiwi Aborigines of olden times were also keen observers of the tides). The moon did become an apt symbol of regeneration in the local religion.¹⁵ The anthropomorphism concerning natural phenomena like the moon is widespread. Theo Meder's discussion of the *Man in the moon* (1997) concerns European folktales. He refers to 'Das Märchen vom Mann im Monde,' published by Ludwig Bechstein in 1857, and numerous other versions that share a common theme where someone has committed a wrong and, therefore, is similarly sent to the moon. He discerns the motifs in all of these tales as answers to the following questions: 'who do we see in the moon?; what is his name?; what did he do wrong?; how did he get to the moon?; what was his punishment?' (Meder 1997: 223).¹⁶ These questions are also answered by the Australian myth of *Moon and Purukapali's child* (W2880). What they all have in common is that they are etiological tales. The moon myths discussed in this paper also explain how death came into the world and they make clear who should be blamed for it.

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¹⁵ See also McConnel 1931.

¹⁶ Interestingly, Meder refers to Dante's *Divina Comedia* (early fourteenth century) in which the punishment of the man in the moon has to do with fraternal strife: his name is Cain, and he has been sent there by God for the bodily harm he inflicted on his brother Abel 1997: 223. Tapara who fought his brother Purukapali ended up there as well.

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