MELDING OF TWO SPIRITS:
FROM THE 'YIMINGA' OF THE TIWI
TO THE 'YIMINGA' OF CHRISTIANITY

by
Sister Anne Gardiner

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INTRODUCTION

This is the text of a talk given by Sister Anne Gardiner at the State Library in August 1991 as one of the Library's 'Under the Banyan Tree' lunchtime entertainments.

Sister Anne is presently Principal of St Theresa's School, Nguiu, on Bathurst Island. She first taught at St. Theresa's in 1953, and has spent a total of 26 years with the Tiwi, having also taught at various other Catholic missions in the Territory and in Nauru.

During her period at Bathurst Island Sister Anne has seen many changes take place, and has been a strong proponent of the Tiwi people assuming responsibility for their own destiny. She gave strong support to the women of the island in playing a more active part in the life of the community, and supporting Bi-lingual Education.

Today Bathurst is beset by far less of the evils bedevilling other Aboriginal communities, and this is true, in no small measure, to the united community spirit which the Tiwi women have done so much to promote, with, we must not forget, the strong backing of Sister Anne Gardiner.

It is from this position of strength, the strength of a truly united, Christian community, that the Tiwi face the problems of the 90s, and Sister Anne is, as always, working with them to overcome, or to come to terms with, the issues and changes of modern times.
MELDING OF TWO SPIRITS:
FROM THE 'YIMINGA' OF THE TIWI
TO THE 'YIMINGA' OF CHRISTIANITY

by
Sister Anne Gardiner

My reason for giving this talk, with the sub-title "From the 'Yiminga' of the Tiwi to the 'Yiminga' of Christianity", is twofold.

Firstly, there has been so much written concerning the Tiwi people. Books relating to studies made by anthropologists, sporting achievements, enterprise achievements and so on. Therefore, when I was asked to choose a topic to speak on, I at once thought of the mission story, this solely because I felt comfortable with it. But, after thinking deeply into what makes a Tiwi a Tiwi, I came up with the following idea.

What is it that really makes the Tiwi people the persons I see them to be?
My answer came with the word 'Yiminga'. The Tiwi word means Life, Spirit, Pulse. In other words, it is the line of life.

The 'Yiminga', the pulse, the secure knowledge of who they are, has been handed down, generation by generation.

And for the Tiwi it came from their myths. The Encyclopaedia Brittanica defines the role of myth as:

"...dealing with religious customs, with the creation of the world, and with the supernatural forces that have shaped the world in its present form."

It is more than a story, it is associated with religious ceremony and sacred places and objects. It has the deeper concern for the preservation of life itself.

Ritual is described as the lived-myth and has the two-fold purpose of informing the younger members of the community how the world came to be, and of actively helping to preserve it as it is and to prevent it from relapsing into chaos.

The myth does for the group what spirituality does for the individual. It poses the questions: "What are we? Why are we living? Where is life leading to?"

All three questions can be answered by the Tiwi with their one word 'Yiminga'. I say this because of the knowledge I have gained in working with the Tiwi people themselves and with Sister Teresa Ward, teacher linguist and foundation member of the Tiwi Bi-Lingual Education Program.
In her recent publication, "Towards an Understanding of the Tiwi Language/Culture Context", she writes:

"The skin group system in Tiwi culture is matrilineal, and is an extremely important aspect of life. In fact, the same word Yiminga means totem, skin group, life, spirit, breath, pulse."

Sister Teresa goes on:

"One of the many things determined by one's skin group in Tiwi life is the marriage line. A marriage is usually arranged between families, but always keeping to the marriageable lines. Even those who apparently choose their partner do not make a random choice, but again they always adhere to the traditional lines of acceptable marriage. The 'Yiminga' of life."

And again:

"For the Tiwi, their dreaming dance comes to them from their father, so that if one's father is crocodile, 'yirritkipayi', then all his children have the crocodile dance too."

In this we see that the 'Yiminga' life is handed in fact from generation to generation.

As well as their dreaming dance, the Tiwi have their own particular creation story. Here I would like to dwell for a few moments on Genesis, chapter 1, verses 1-2.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep and God's spirit hovered over the water."

This belief in the spirit has been with us since time began. The Tiwi creation story is one that has been handed down by word of mouth from family to family since any living person can remember.

As in Genesis the Tiwi creation story speaks of darkness and emptiness.

Then Murtankala, the creation woman, appeared. She came from beneath the earth where there were some people who roamed about in darkness. As she clawed her way from the cave below she carried on her back her children, two girls and a boy.

"Now these Tiwi people were isolated from all other people because of their island habitat. Thus, the word 'Tiwi' did not mean 'people' in the sense of all human beings, but rather 'we the people' or 'the chosen people' who live and own the islands, as distinct from any other alleged human beings who might show up from time to time on the beaches."
Thus the 'pulse', the breath of the Tiwi was kept intact.

"For this exclusion of outsiders from the real 'usness' and hence from real 'human-ness' was continued when the Europeans began to arrive in the early nineteenth century, certainly as late as 1930 the Tiwi people continued to call and think of themselves as Tiwi, the people, and to use other words for all non-Tiwi, whether they were mainland Aboriginals, Malay fishermen, Japanese pearl divers, French priests or British officials, who penetrated into their exclusive little cosmos." (Hart and Pilling)

Coupled with their 'Yiminga' is their strong belief in the 'Yirrungwarra', the Tiwi spirits. These spirits to the modern day Tiwi are still real. Some, like the 'Marpurtiti' spirits of the dead, are feared, whilst others, like the 'Payamarnuwa', are their friends.

Their two main ceremonies, the 'Pukumani' death ceremony and the 'Kurlaina' yam ceremony, can be traced back to Murtankala, their creation woman.

"The first pukumani funeral ceremony was held following the death of Purrukuparl, who was the male child in Tiwi mythology of Murtankala. The 'Kurlanta' ceremony was given to the Tiwi by the 'Nyingawi', the little spirit people. In this ceremony there is of course a prescribed ritual to follow." (Ward 1990)

Now having mentioned the arrival of non-Tiwi onto their beaches, you may recall that a French priest was mentioned. He was Francis Xavier Gsell, Missionary of the Sacred Heart, who in 1910 wrote to the then Administrator of the Northern Territory, asking for permission to set up an Aboriginal Reserve on part of one of the Tiwi Islands.

Permission was given but disapproval was shown as to the worth of the venture. Much could be said about Francis Xavier Gsell and those early days, but I feel that this can wait for another time.

What I want to dwell on is that in June 1911, when Father Gsell arrived with his message, i.e. the Christian message, little did he realise that he was entering the land of 'Yiminga', of ritual and ceremony, and that in years to come the people of Murtankala would embrace the Christian belief and make their faith resound in their own special way.

Father Gsell's task was to evangelize a culture which had totally different roots to his own. He came to inculturate the Gospel message of Jesus. Unknown to him, the people he came to were already very strongly rooted in their own spiritual history. Let me stress here the definition of inculturation. It is the dynamic relationship between the Christian message and culture, or an insertion of the Christian life into the culture. It is not the same as encapsulation, which is the process of learning, from childhood onwards, that enables the individual to become an integrated part of his or her culture.
The greatest insertion of Christian life into culture is expressed in John's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 4, when he wrote:

"The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

And this was Francis Xavier Gsell's task – to bring this Word to the Tiwi people. Over the years mistakes have been made but new directions were given by Vatican 11 in Evangeli Nuntiandi, which stated:

"...that what matters is to evangelize human cultures, not in a purely decorative way as if were by applying a thin veneer, but in a vital way, in depth and right to their very roots."

So new insights have evolved.

So listening to the 'Yiminga' of the Tiwi our task quickly moves from a telling to a listening phase.

"We have to let the Gospel message be heard in language/culture and then encourage the people to reflect the Gospel message in their own terms and traditions and, yes, with cadences of their own dreaming."

(Evangeli Nuntiandi-2nd Vatican Council)

Here we return to our Murtankala creation story and reflect again that Tiwi people are spiritual people. They too have had their Old Testament period. We Europeans are beginning to realise how we have unwittingly forced an European perspective on the Christian experience. There were black Ethiopian Christians for five hundred years before St. Patrick was captured by the Irish. We failed to realise that the Holy Spirit reached other cultures before the missionaries.

The studies of other religions have taught us that understandings of the meaning of life have been drastically shaped by environment. There are noticeable differences in the type of myths of those who live in the desert, in the mountains, by the sea, and from those susceptible to the changing vicissitudes of natural elements. According to Stanner, an Australian anthropologist, who wrote in 1965:

"Australian Aboriginal people are distinctly different from most other cultures, for the following reasons:

* they have had occupation of the land for a very great span of time

* they have had profound isolation from outside influence

* they have faced predictable and unchanging environment."

Aboriginal and, in this case, Tiwi religion has therefore been distinctly shaped.
Let us reflect on our Genesis story once again:

* we were created to share a likeness with God
* we were commissioned to be fruitful, and subdue the earth
* we are the author of Sin/Evil in the world, the snake seduced us
* we suffer disunity and pain in the world because of sin
* the woman encouraged and pays a special price for sin in the world.

With the Tiwi story, there is:

* a Father/Ancestor particular to each family's dreaming
* The Genesis story was to multiply – the Tiwi story was to maintain (country)
* The Genesis story was to subdue – the Tiwi story was to co-exist (skin groups)
* The Genesis story attributes Evil to original sin – the Tiwi story does not depend on the concept of sin. (spirits)

We must keep in mind that our Aboriginal people, our Tiwi people, have had their premonitions as well. And when we non-Aboriginal people allow these premonitions to flower:

* we are reinforcing the identity of Aboriginal people
* we are adding the dynamism of Christianity to a culture that contended with an unchanging environment
* we are enriching ourselves with insights that might help stay the cultural disintegration from which European society and our own Australian society now suffers.

Let us remember – we were born with the values of our parents and the experiences and teachings of our grandfathers and many other forebears, experiences that have provided the currents in which we assimilate and accommodate new experience.

Our Tiwi people were born amid other currents, they have other collective memories and aggregate experiences in an entirely different swim.

In all of what has been said, I have tried to show that the Tiwi's spirit, his 'Yiminga', will live on.
Therefore, in recalling the fact that our Aboriginal people, our Tiwi people, have their strong bonds to their primal religious heritage, we should also recall that they now have accepted the Christian 'Yiminga' as well.

The Christian faith, the 'Yiminga', is deeply rooted in these people:

"...yet there is a searching for more authentic ways of expressing the living, and being both Tiwi and Christian. An enculturation is taking place which is evident in such things as the smoking ceremony being used as a purification before the liturgy on special days." (Ward, 1990)

I see an emergence of a unity of what it means to be a Tiwi Christian—Catholic. An expression that I have heard often is:

"God our Father has given us our way, which is not seen as opposed to their Catholic faith, but rather expressed in a Tiwi way." (Ward, 1990)

Therefore let us who are privileged to be part of the Jesus story in this present time recognise that we can allow these premonitions to flower... yes, we can do what the Pope asked us to do when he visited the Aboriginal people in Alice Springs. He asked us all to reinforce the identity of the Aboriginal people. To do this let us as a group here today take up the prayer prepared and composed by the Aboriginal people themselves for sharing with the Pope.

Father of all,
you gave us the dreaming.
You then made your love clear to us in the person of Jesus
We thank you for your care.
You own us, you are our hope,
Make us strong as we face the problems of change.
We ask you to help the people of Australia to listen to us and
respect our culture.
Make the knowledge of you grow strong in all people,
so that you can be at home in us and we can make a home for everyone in our land. Amen.
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MURTANKALA THE CREATOR

Long ago there were no people on the earth and darkness covered the land. There were no rivers or billabongs, there was no water in the streams, no hills or valleys. There were no animals living in the sea, no fish, turtles or crocodiles.

Above the sky there lived the Yamparriparri, the spirits who roamed around the earth looking for living things that they could devour. Below the earth there was a large cave separated from the earth by a valley and hills. Here in this land beneath the earth there were some people who roamed about in the darkness.

Among these people there lived one old woman. She was really big and bent and her face was lined and wrinkled. Her name was Murtankala. On her back she carried her children, two girls and a boy.

One day she dug her way from the cave below and arrived on the earth. When she knelt to rest, her children cried because they were hungry. Murtankala had no milk so she looked around for food for her children and for soft ground where she could lay them, but she could find nothing. There was no grass, no water nor any bushland where they could look for food.

Murtankala placed her children in a bark basket and tied it around her neck, for she was afraid of the Yamparriparri people because they might want to eat her children.

So then she began to crawl from that place where she had arrived on the earth. As she crawled along she made a large trench behind her and the sea water began to rush in behind her back.

She was facing towards where the sun now rises and her face was turned to the eastern side. She crawled on and after a long time returned to where she had first started and so she created these two islands. Murtankala crawled ashore and placed her children on the ground.

Then Murtankala wanted her children to have light so she called one woman from the cave below. Murtankala took hold of the bark of a tree and lit that piece of bark and she gave it to the woman who was holding a bark basket in her hand. Inside the basket there was the red soil of the earth.

Murtankala told the woman, 'You will light the fire in the sky, so my children can see and will be warm. Travel across the sky to the west, go down to the underworld and come up again in the east. So there will be light and darkness!'
Murtankala took hold of a bark basket with red earth inside it. She said to the other woman, 'You will throw this red soil high in the sky so my children will know that night is coming. And in the morning throw soil again and my children will know it is time to rise.'

When she finished speaking she disappeared and she was never seen again. Her two daughters, Paranala and Piyankala, and their brother Purrukuparli lived in that place where they camped.

Paranala became lonely. She wanted children to hold in her arms. Her sister Piyankala also wanted children. Piyankala said to her older sister, 'What shall we do?' So they went and talked together to Purrukuparli. He said to them, 'I will go and look for children for the two of you.'

So Purrukuparli went off.

For many days he looked around but did not see any children. Then he saw the little island called Wayiawu. When the tide was low he could walk on the reef and so he arrived there.

When he arrived at the sandbank he saw that tiny little person. He was climbing high up on the rocks as he saw him. That little person spoke to Purrukuparli and said, 'I'm Pitipituwu.'

So Purrukuparli asked him for children for his two sisters. The little person replied, 'I will become a spirit person and you and I will return to your camp. There I will cease being who I am and enter your younger sisters.'

Thus, Paranala and Piyankala had many children and grandchildren. Purrukuparli lived there happily with his wife Pima until the time of the death of their son, Jirnani.

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