

# Close encounters: UFO beliefs in a remote Australian Aboriginal community

EIRIK SAETHRE *University of Pretoria*

Although UFOs, flying saucers, and extraterrestrials are traditionally considered to be concepts associated with the 'West', indigenous people are also familiar with these ideas. In a remote Aboriginal community in Central Australia, Warlpiri residents regularly sight and discuss UFOs. In addition to reflecting attributes of extraterrestrials found in film and television portrayals, Warlpiri descriptions of 'the aliens' also emphasize an involvement with the environment, local cosmological themes, and the engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Consequently, Warlpiri UFO narratives are one way in which the boundedness of, and interplay between, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal realms can be explored.

UFO beliefs exist around the world, yet, despite minor differences, many of the fundamental descriptions and attributes of UFOs and extraterrestrials are considered to be relatively similar (Curran 1985: 23). Modern conceptions of UFOs are often traced to the first sighting of a flying saucer in 1947 and can incorporate a number of elements, including extraterrestrial visitors, alien abductions, and government cover-ups. Research shows that it is countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia where UFO beliefs are the most prolific (Chalker 1996; Gallup & Newport 1991; Mack 1994). This has led Mack (1994: 11) to note that it is in 'Western countries or countries dominated by Western culture and values' that UFO beliefs occur, while the phenomenon of alien abduction has been called 'a product of the mind of Western white people' (Randles 1988: 158).

Recent notions of UFOs might have been born in 'the West', but indigenous beliefs are regularly reinterpreted to provide proof of the existence of extraterrestrials in the Americas (Marrs 2000; Raynes 2004; Red Star 2000; 2002), Oceania (Chalker 1996), and Southern Africa (Hind 1987; Mack 1999). For instance, some Hopi have asserted that stories of Star People were historic encounters with extraterrestrials (Rothstein 2003: 261). In South Africa, Credo Mutwa claims that he, like many Africans, is familiar with a number of extraterrestrial species that inhabit the earth, such as *tokoloshe*, a baboon-like witch familiar (Martin 1999). Despite a number of examples around the world, however, the topic of UFOs within an indigenous context is one that has largely escaped critical attention.<sup>1</sup>

While conducting Ph.D. fieldwork in Central Australia from 1996 to 1999, I discovered that residents of a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory also possess detailed and unique beliefs regarding UFOs. Discussions of 'the aliens' regularly occurred, during which Aboriginal residents often recounted tales of UFO sightings. I was able to interview eighteen people who claimed to have seen UFOs either in the community or in its vicinity. I also spoke with several others who described encounters that had occurred to a relative, friend, or acquaintance.<sup>2</sup> Although the sightings were always brief and the inhabitants were never seen, Warlpiri people asserted that UFOs were spaceships piloted by extraterrestrial beings. The aliens were thought to search for and procure water from the desert. Furthermore, while UFOs were capable of abducting humans, Aboriginal residents emphasized that these victims were exclusively non-Aboriginal.

Warlpiri accounts of flying saucers and extraterrestrials resemble popularized notions of UFOs that are reflected in American television and film but they also differ in crucial ways. An examination of local UFO narratives reveals themes that are also present in accounts of cosmological beings such as rainbow serpents. Consequently, I believe that Warlpiri beliefs concerning the aliens are one way in which the boundaries between indigenous and non-indigenous may be examined. Because Aboriginal UFO tales often amalgamate features of 'Western' extraterrestrials with local cosmological themes, they are an example which can provide an understanding of the close encounters between indigenous and non-indigenous people and 'traditions' that take place in remote Aboriginal communities.

### **A remote Aboriginal community**

Prior to the settlement of the Australian continent by Europeans, Warlpiri people were nomads, moving between sites in the Tanami Desert, hunting and gathering. The pattern of their movement was strongly influenced by the distribution of water. During the months when precipitation and vegetable foods were more plentiful, Warlpiri people congregated in large groups that moved from one water source to another (Meggitt 1962: 49). After the rains ceased, and water became less plentiful, the group would disperse into smaller units, usually comprising a nuclear family. Survival in the desert depended on possessing a comprehensive knowledge of water sources. Once the rains returned, larger groups would assemble once again and the pattern would be repeated.

Access to water continued to play a major role in the lives of Aboriginal people during the European exploration and settlement of the arid regions of the continent. As non-Aboriginal people began to move through the region, they also required reliable sources of water, often using them without consulting local Aboriginal groups. Giles writes, 'No doubt these ... [Aborigines] were dreadfully annoyed to find their little reservoirs discovered by such water-swallowing wretches as they doubtless thought white men and horses to be' (1889: 212). During his crossing of the desert in 1896 and 1897, Carnegie (1898) reports capturing a few Aboriginal people, using ropes and later chains as restraints, and attempting to force them to lead him to water. As the years progressed, pastoralists began to settle into the drier regions of the interior and required reliable sources of water for their cattle. When a drought struck Central Australia from 1924 to 1929, violent disputes occurred between pastoralists and Aboriginal people over the use of both land and water (Peterson, McConvell, Wild & Hagen 1978).

As a result of the drought and the subsequent scarcity of edible plants and animals in the bush, many Warlpiri people were forced to seek food from the settlers whom they had earlier avoided (Meggitt 1962: 24). The government's desire to prevent Aboriginal people from crowding towns such as Alice Springs, coupled with the need for Aboriginal labour on cattle stations, led to the creation of Aboriginal settlements in the Tanami Desert. The Aboriginal community, in which I would later conduct research, was established by the beginning of the 1950s. Although it was located over five hundred kilometres from a population centre, the settlement was abutting a cattle station, which was intended to provide employment for residents. Initially, Warlpiri people were brought to the community by truck from other settlements. By 1960, over two-thirds of the Warlpiri population was settled in communities supervised by the government (Meggitt 1962: 29).

The community has grown considerably since the 1950s, and during my research had a population of around 750 individuals, the majority of whom considered themselves to be Warlpiri. On average, Aboriginal people living in remote regions of the Northern Territory had lower incomes, less education, poorer housing conditions, and a higher disease burden than non-Aboriginal people. Owing to the lack of schooling, Aboriginal residents often did not possess the skills needed to perform trained jobs in the community. Given the low population and isolation of the community, a limited number of jobs were available. Approximately 67 per cent of the Aboriginal population living in the 'very remote' regions of the Northern Territory were either unemployed or not in the labour force (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001). Consequently, many residents received government benefits as their main form of income.

Despite its distance from an urban centre, a number of shops and services were available to residents, including a general store, video store, takeaway shop, clinic, church, outstation resource centre, women's centre, community government council, school, bank agent, and videoconferencing facilities. Many of the services in the community were managed and staffed by the approximately forty non-Aboriginal residents, who were employed as teachers, tradesmen, nurses, and supervisors. Because of its remote location, several governmental health service providers – the dentist, the ophthalmologist, the mental health officer, the women's health specialist, and others – visited the community on a semi-regular basis, often staying for no more than forty-eight hours.

Community residents spent their days engaged in a number of activities. During opening hours, the interior of the store was often busy with shoppers, while outside family members and acquaintances talked about daily events in the community. Conversations at the shop were just as likely to be about an individual being treated by a traditional healer as they were to be about Australian politics. On their way to and from outstations in the bush, other communities, or town, Aboriginal people would drive cars and four-wheel drive vehicles past buildings painted with Dreaming designs. Young men played Aussie Rules football and basketball. When injuries occurred during the match, both the clinic and indigenous healers were consulted. Television and movies were also a popular form of entertainment. Most homes possessed at least one TV and three channels were available, featuring shows ranging from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* to documentaries about Aboriginal people. Throughout the day and into the night, card games were played in which both cash and boomerangs could be wagered. During these games, one topic of conversation was often recent sightings of UFOs.

### UFO sightings

During the two years in which I lived in the community in the late 1990s, I never witnessed what either I or others considered to be a UFO sighting. Consequently, my research is based entirely upon the descriptions of others. I recorded the details of sightings provided by eighteen eyewitnesses and was told second-hand of several more. Although not everyone in the community had seen a UFO, many people asserted that they were a reality. While I was able to interview a number of people who claimed to have had encounters with UFOs or who affirmed their existence, I met only five Aboriginal people who declared that UFOs were a figment of people's imagination. These individuals, ranging in age from 25 to 53, simply dismissed the topic as ridiculous and did not offer an alternative explanation for UFO sightings, such as a ghost, shooting star, or aircraft.

Regardless of whether or not an individual had seen a UFO, or even believed in their actual existence, everyone with whom I spoke acknowledged that people regularly professed to have encountered UFOs in or around the community. Residents claimed that because these sightings occurred with such frequency, they were exceptional. Warlpiri people reported that friends and relatives living in other Aboriginal communities or in urban centres only rarely encountered UFOs, if at all. When I travelled to other Warlpiri settlements, UFOs were rarely discussed, and when they were, the community in which I was living was almost always mentioned. Both residents and non-residents, some of whom lived several hundred kilometres away, referred to UFOs as a localized phenomenon.

The majority of conversations that I observed regarding the aliens either recounted a sighting that someone had witnessed recently or examined the characteristics of UFOs. Descriptions of over half the sightings that I recorded occurred in normal conversation, while people were engaged in common activities. For instance, while sitting around a card game late at night, Deborah (30) related that after she and two other women encountered a large UFO, a member of the party felt a twinge in her stomach. One of the female members of the card game jokingly mused that perhaps this meant that the woman was pregnant with alien babies. On another occasion, while I was with a group of men visiting a water hole, Geoffrey (46) told of the UFO he had seen several months earlier in the vicinity.

Residents reported seeing UFOs while engaged in a variety of endeavours, including driving to town or a neighbouring community, visiting an outstation, playing cards, hunting, camping in the bush, or attending a ceremony. Both men and women aged between 12 and 51 years old reported sighting UFOs, and only half of the witnesses were alone at the time of the encounter. Three individuals claimed to have seen UFOs on more than one occasion. All of the sightings described took place within a five-year period. Nevertheless encounters with UFOs were never referred to as a new phenomenon. Richard (43) stated that the aliens had been coming to this region of the Tanami 'for a long time'. He encouraged me to speak to the older male residents of the community, assuring me that they would report that their grandfathers also sighted UFOs. However, most of the residents with whom I spoke did not refer to UFOs as either a recent or ancient occurrence. Consequently, it was impossible to establish accurately when community residents first began to have encounters with the aliens.

Witnesses uniformly described UFOs as similar to most television and film portrayals of flying saucers: large, disc-shaped, brightly lit objects that fly through the sky. The massive size and disc-shape of the UFO, as well as its dazzling lights and great speed,

were the attributes that people recall the most. James (34) described the UFO that he glimpsed while driving back alone from working at a gold mine as 'bigger than the Woolworths [store] in [town] and brighter than the disco'. Susan (38) depicted the UFO she observed while visiting an outstation on a school trip as larger than a football oval.

All of the encounters lasted only a few seconds. In most instances, people reported nothing more than seeing a UFO fly overhead quickly. For instance, one morning Alan (42) stated that the previous evening, while playing cards, a large UFO raced over his head. He described the sighting as only lasting a few seconds because of the great speed at which the UFO moved. In a few instances, people reported 'surprising' a UFO that was motionless. James, for instance, said that after driving over the crest of a hill, he noticed a UFO lying stationary on the ground. He believed that he was observed because a few seconds later the UFO quickly rose into the sky and disappeared. Rachel (26) recounted that the UFO she saw while driving to an outstation with five other people seemed to be hovering off to the side of the road. After a few moments, it quickly flew away. In all of these instances, the encounters were brief, with the UFO departing hastily after being glimpsed.

While there were a number of UFO sightings each year, none involved sustained or close contact. Community residents who sighted UFOs never claimed to have seen or had any communication with the inhabitants of a flying saucer. Residents who encountered UFOs did so at a distance. The only physical characteristics of the UFOs that were clearly discernible were metal and lights. Nevertheless, residents uniformly assumed that UFOs were spaceships. These ships were thought to be from outer space and capable of travelling extensive distances. The exact origin of the UFOs, such as planet, star, or galaxy, was never discussed. Despite the lack of data, it was generally assumed that UFOs were piloted by intelligent superhuman beings from outer space. Steven (38), having never sighted a UFO himself, said, 'They are smarter than we are though – smarter than any human. [Non-Aboriginal people] think they are smart because they went to the moon, but these aliens they travel all across the universe.' Like Steven, others also assumed that it was the alien's intellect and use of advanced technology that allowed them to voyage through space.

Encounters between Aboriginal people and UFOs were never considered to result in either injury or abduction, although witnesses reported that seeing a UFO caused them to experience feelings of terror, fear, and panic. Liddy (22) described her brief encounter as 'scary', remarking that she wished never to see another UFO again. Every Aboriginal resident with whom I spoke stated that they would prefer to avoid UFOs, and those who had not sighted a UFO did not express a desire to do so. Harry (19) commented that he believed that he would be too scared to move if he ever saw an alien spaceship. No one reported purposely seeking out a UFO or wishing to encounter one. Although people admitted to being frightened, however, UFOs were not seriously threatening. Neither did sighting a UFO convey any special status on individuals, nor did people believe that the UFOs would bring either material or spiritual benefit.

### **Aliens, water, and rainbow serpents**

Although Warlpiri people described their personal experiences with UFOs in terms of brief sightings devoid of physical contact, the aliens were thought to be able to impact upon the physical environment of the Tanami Desert. Aboriginal residents asserted that the aliens were capable of finding and removing large quantities of water from rivers, rock pools, and, in some instances, rain clouds. Of eighteen witnesses, six claimed that

neighbouring water sources, which should have been full, were depleted after the departure of the UFO. For instance, while at a rock pool, Geoffrey recounted how several months earlier he had seen a UFO fly near the sight, only to discover the next day that the pool was dry. Geoffrey concluded that the UFO had taken the water. Like the other five witnesses, Geoffrey did not express annoyance at the behaviour of the UFOs. None of the individuals accused the aliens of taking a resource to which they were not entitled, nor did they express a desire to stop or alter UFO activities in the desert.

While Warlpiri residents often asserted that evidence from UFO sightings substantiated the claim that the aliens removed water, not a single individual professed to have witnessed, or even to know anyone who witnessed, a flying saucer physically transferring water onboard. Instead I was told a number of theories explaining how a spaceship could take water without being directly observed. James concluded that UFOs were capable of 'beaming up' water once they were in close proximity to it. Mark (33), on the other hand, claimed that the skin of the alien ship he saw was built to absorb water: once the craft even briefly touched a water source, it would be transferred into the ship. In this way, he believed, the aliens were able to procure water simply by flying through rain clouds. In both cases, the lack of direct visual evidence was explained and dismissed by advanced alien equipment. The superior intellect and technology of the aliens was also occasionally used to provide an explanation for their search for water in a desert. On two separate occasions, people surmised that water was required to run their machines, but, when asked, most residents claimed not to know why exactly the aliens needed water.

UFOs, and encounters with them, were often associated with creeks, springs, rain clouds, and water holes. As a result, alien spacecraft were considered to be more prevalent in specific geographical areas and at a specific time of the year. For instance, one region not far from the community, which contains numerous springs and water holes, was also said to have one of the highest frequencies of UFO sightings for just this reason. Upon learning that I planned to drive to an outstation in the region, one woman cautioned me, '[Poor thing.] Big mob aliens.' While I was at the outstation, three of the five adults present recounted encounters with UFOs in the surrounding area. I recorded more UFO sightings occurring here than in any other area, including the community. James and Mark each had encounters with UFOs in this region. Mark commented that the number of encounters was higher here because 'the aliens want [water]. There is a lot of [water] in [the region]'. UFO encounters were also thought to be more prevalent during the wet season, when creeks and water holes were full. David (44) remarked, 'When the rain comes so do many alien spaceships. That is when you have to be careful.' As a result, during the wet season, Aboriginal residents would caution others not to drive to or from the community at night, when most encounters occurred.

While UFOs were explicitly associated with the presence of water, so were *warnayarra*, giant multi-coloured snakes that are often referred to as rainbow serpents in anthropological literature (Buchler & Maddock 1978; Merlan 2000; Munn 1973; Radcliffe-Brown 1926; Rose 1992). Community residents stated that rainbow serpents inhabited water sources such as rivers, water holes, underground soaks, rain clouds, and seasonal creeks, such as the one running beside the community. During the wet season, the presence of water in the creek signalled the tangible presence of the *warnayarra* that inhabited it. As the rains stopped and the creek became dry, the *warnayarra* was thought to move underground, only to re-emerge when the water returned.

In some instances, it was possible to attribute an event to either the aliens or *warnayarra*. For example, when a group of men were discussing why the creek had suddenly lost most of its water despite good rains, John (52) believed that the *warnayarra* had moved underground, taking the water with it. However, not everyone present shared this view. Michael (29), a tradesman's assistant, stated that the aliens were responsible. After sighting a UFO over the community the night before, he attributed the water loss to the flying saucer. Of the four other men present, three agreed with his assessment. Billy (early 30s) stated that he also saw the UFO and concurred with Michael's explanation. Although George had not observed the UFO, he sided with the other two men. John (early 50s) remained adamant that it was the *warnayarra* and that a belief in UFOs was 'rubbish'. Nevertheless, by the following day, two individuals who had not seen the UFO told me that the aliens were responsible for the water loss.

*Warnayarra* were thought to be capable of causing serious harm to Aboriginal people. John said, 'Warnayarra can be quiet one, leave you. Other *warnayarra* is maybe cheeky one and kill you.' *Warnayarra* were believed to be able to recognize individuals as 'belonging' in the area of land in which they reside and injuring those people who were identified as strangers. For instance, the *warnayarra* in the creek was able to recognize community residents: Maisy (48) stated that if children who were not from the community swam in the creek, the *warnayarra* that lived there could kill them. Similarly, a *warnayarra* inhabiting a water hole on traditional land was able to recognize the owners of that land. While visiting a large salt lake, several men expressed fear of being punished by the *warnayarra* because they were not traditional owners. Even though the lakebed was dry, it was assumed that numerous *warnayarra* were living under the surface and capable of causing harm to trespassers.

A *warnayarra* is not the only type of being that inhabits traditional land and is capable of recognizing and harming trespassers. Ghosts, such as *milalpa*, and other ancestral forces are also present.<sup>3</sup> Consequently, travelling through foreign land can be dangerous for Warlpiri individuals. These hazards can be mitigated when a traditional owner and sponsor 'introduces' a stranger to country. This act bestows protection upon the guest, which beings such as *warnayarra* honour. I was 'introduced' to *warnayarra* on a number of occasions while I was visiting rock pools. In each instance, a senior man, who was the acknowledged owner of the site, placed a small amount of water on my head while telling the *warnayarra* that I should not be injured. Once this procedure was completed, I was told that I could walk around the area without fear of being harmed or killed by the *warnayarra*. As Myers notes (1986: 151) among the Pintupi, it is only on one's own country that an individual can feel safe from dangerous forces, while the act of bestowing protection also acknowledges the dependency that a visitor has on his or her sponsor. The recognition and punishment of strangers, as well as the ability to obtain protection from these forces, are also themes in Warlpiri UFO narratives.

Although Warlpiri people might debate the cause of an event, such as the water level in the creek dropping, the aliens were never incorporated into discussions of ancestral forces. For instance, none of the men present suggested that either the *warnayarra* or the aliens had any interaction with one another. *Warnayarra* were not believed to punish the UFOs or in any way harm them. Likewise the aliens were not thought to remove the *warnayarra* with the water that they procured. Furthermore, I was never told of the aliens having any interaction with the ancestral spirits that guarded country. UFOs neither owned nor had any special privileges at the water sources at which they were sighted. While Warlpiri people recounted stories of Dreamings, both terrestrial

and celestial, UFOs were never integrated into these narratives. I have never heard anyone state that the phenomenon referred to as UFOs originated in or was part of the Dreaming.

### Abductions

While conversations of *warnayarra* and ancestral beings were often confined almost exclusively to the Aboriginal population of the community, this was not true of the aliens. Non-Aboriginal residents often engaged in discussions regarding UFOs, sharing their own beliefs and experiences while also being told those of Warlpiri residents. Four non-Aboriginal individuals claimed to have sighted UFOs. None of them had seen a flying saucer prior to coming to the community. Non-Aboriginal descriptions of UFOs closely matched Warlpiri reports and also resembled the popular conception of flying saucers: large, disc-shaped, and fast-moving. Mary (late 30s) claimed to have 'surprised' a resting craft while driving to town with three Aboriginal women for a workshop. Barry (42), a council worker, reported having seen a UFO soar over the community late one evening.

Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descriptions of UFO sightings might have been similar, but there was not agreement regarding the behaviour of the aliens. For instance, when Gina (27), a teacher, recounted how both she and her partner, a mechanic (29), had seen the UFO quickly fly over their car one evening while driving back to the community from Alice Springs, a group of Aboriginal people were attentively listening to her tale. Gina sighted the UFO in an area known for its water sources and one Aboriginal person present commented that the aliens were clearly there seeking water. Gina disagreed, saying that there was no way to know for sure why UFOs were frequenting this particular area. Whereas both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal residents described their encounters with UFOs as similar, non-Aboriginal residents often discounted the belief that the aliens sought and removed water from the environment.

Aboriginal people stated that while the aliens never harmed them, UFOs could abduct 'white' people or *kardiya*. Jason (22) told me, 'You *kardiya* have to be careful because the aliens might get you.' Jason reported that once an individual was 'taken', the word most commonly used to refer to abductions, he or she would not return. Although there was no speculation as to the events that occurred once the individual boarded a flying saucer, abductions were considered to be a horrific experience because individuals would be permanently separated from their homes and families. Abductees were assumed to be unwilling victims. Jason advised me to take particular care not to drive alone at night especially during the wet season. These were the times when most abductions were thought to take place. Jason's warning was repeated to me on a number of different occasions by a number of different people.

Other non-Aboriginal residents had a similar experience. Ian (39), a medical researcher who spent only three months in the community, stated that he had been warned repeatedly about the risk of alien abduction. Like Aboriginal notions linking UFOs to water depletion, many non-Aboriginal residents were initially unfamiliar with this claim and often disputed it. Although *kardiya* residents were cautioned, few took heed of these warnings. However, after spending longer periods of time living in the community, some non-Aboriginal individuals began to re-evaluate their earlier beliefs. For instance, a non-Aboriginal teacher, who had resided for over a year in the

community and heard a number of stories regarding UFOs from Aboriginal people, confessed to becoming gradually more hesitant to drive long distances at night during the wet season.

Although non-Aboriginal people recounted anecdotes of UFO sightings, they never circulated tales of alien abductions. Instead, it was Warlpiri residents who related these stories. For instance, Ronald (48), an Aboriginal council employee, told how Bill, a non-Aboriginal allied health service provider, visited the community for little over a day. Four days passed since Bill left for town but he had not contacted the community council. Ronald claimed that both Bill's supervisor and the police had been notified but neither knew his whereabouts. Ronald explained Bill's disappearance by claiming that he had been abducted while driving at night. Ronald had never seen a UFO himself, yet he was certain that the aliens were responsible. Expressing regret and sorrow that he would never see Bill again, Ronald added that he, as an Aboriginal man, was safe from alien abduction, whereas non-Aboriginal people were not.

It was possible for non-Aboriginal visitors to the community to avoid being abducted by aliens. David explained that I could drive through the desert safely at night by having Warlpiri people in the car with me. He stated that it was only when non-Aboriginal people were travelling alone or with other non-Aboriginal people that they were abducted. Even if a UFO appeared, David said that I would not be taken as long as an Aboriginal person was present. He reassured me by saying, 'Don't worry. We will look after you.' Once, when driving at night with a group of Aboriginal people to town, I was asked if I felt safe from the aliens. After replying that I was not sure, I was immediately told that my fellow passengers would protect me from the aliens. Ian also reported being told that he would be safe from abductions only if he was travelling with Aboriginal people.

When asked to explain why non-Aboriginal people were invariably the victims of abductions, I was told that the aliens were able to recognize Aboriginal people as belonging in the area. David stated that *yapa*, a word that refers to both Warlpiri and other Aboriginal people, were not abducted because, 'They know us. This is our land.' After recounting the details of his sighting, Mark asserted that while he was scared at the sight of the ship, he was not worried about being abducted because the desert was 'his country'. When asked if he was referring to a specific site or area, he replied that the aliens knew that *yapa* belonged in the Tanami Desert so they had nothing to fear. The same was said of the community. Alan claimed that *yapa* would never be taken because the aliens had seen them 'sit down' in the community for years.

### Close encounters

Examining Warlpiri UFO narratives reveals a number of similarities with both popular media portrayals of extraterrestrials and local cosmological beliefs. For instance, television programmes and movies often depict UFOs as flying saucers that are piloted by intelligent beings from outer space, as do Warlpiri people. Other statements made by residents, such as James's claim that the aliens could 'beam up' water, reflect the way in which science fiction representations are echoed in local ideas regarding the aliens. Like other Warlpiri people, Geoffrey discussed media portrayals of UFOs and Warlpiri ideas regarding the aliens as comparable. After watching an episode of *The X-Files*, he commented that the programme reflected similar conceptions of extraterrestrials to those in the community.

Despite its geographic remoteness, the community and its residents are not isolated from international representations of UFOs. Television was one popular form of entertainment, which many residents watched for extended periods. Video players were common and tapes of movies could be bought on trips to town or locally at the 'video store'. Once obtained, individuals exchanged VHS tapes, which were often viewed repeatedly. Young unemployed men would often sit in front of the television at my home watching movies for hours. Many of the television programmes and movies that Warlpiri people viewed included depictions of UFOs. Television programmes such as *The X-Files* and *Stargate* were popular, while the *Star Trek* movies and *Independence Day* were seen over and over again.

While researchers in the United States suggest that film and television directly impacts attitudes and conceptions of UFOs (Bullard 1989; Newman & Baumeister 1996; Saler, Ziegler & Moore 1997; Sparks, Sparks & Gray 1995; Sparks, Pellechia & Irvine 1998), the exact way in which media are interpreted by viewers has been a topic of anthropological debate for a considerable period (Spitulnik 1993). Media can be employed to both construct and mediate meaning within and between societies (Ginsburg 1994: 13). For instance, after watching the film *ET* over twenty times, Linda Syddick (Tjungkaya Napaltjarri) painted a number of canvases depicting the alien using local designs (Myers 2003). Myers writes that the film evoked feelings of 'homesickness, pining, grief, loss – that Central Desert Aborigines articulate in song and ceremony' (2003: 309). Consequently, Aboriginal individuals are capable of identifying with themes from media, borrowing images, and situating them within a local context.

Warlpiri people no doubt glean ideas and notions regarding UFOs from television and movies, but the way in which they are employed and understood can vary. Examining Warlpiri narratives of UFOs reveals that the aliens possess a number of characteristics that differ from popular media portrayals. Michaels comments that Warlpiri people produced 'remarkable readings of Hollywood videos, best explained with reference to traditional oral performances and inscriptive practices' (1990: 22). Narratives concerning the aliens are also able to incorporate other facets of Warlpiri life and experience, including an involvement with the environment, a resemblance to local cosmological themes, and recognition of the engagement between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Ideas of UFOs are not simply the product of watching too much television.

Like Warlpiri people and ancestral beings, the aliens are connected to the landscape and noticeably exert an impact upon it. The search for and removal of water associates UFOs with an important aspect of the natural world. A concern with water and water sources is one way in which Aboriginal people demonstrate the link between humans and their environment (Toussaint, Sullivan & Yu 2005). Furthermore, the search for water has played an important part in the lives of Warlpiri people. Prior to settlement, Warlpiri people walked between water sources, whereas today the aliens fly in their spaceships between these same locations. Although historically there was conflict with white settlers over the use of these resources, Warlpiri people do not express anger or resentment at the behaviour of the aliens or their impact on the environment. I believe that one reason for this response is that unlike discussions of non-Aboriginal settlers, Aboriginal residents would often speak of the aliens as a natural component of the landscape, resembling other cosmological beings. For instance, visits to water holes can be punctuated with stories of both their formation by ancestral forces and their depletion by the aliens.

The association with water and water sources is also a trait of both UFOs and *warnayarra*. However, narratives of the aliens seem to invert many of the relationships that exist between *warnayarra* and water. For instance, *warnayarra* are primarily terrestrial beings, dwelling either on the surface of the earth in rivers and rock holes or underneath it in groundwater. Water from the heavens in the form of rain falls onto the earth and accumulates. However, it is possible for a *warnayarra* to move underground, taking this water with it. In contrast, the aliens inhabit the sky. Reversing the process of precipitation, UFOs move water from the earth to the heavens. Whereas *warnayarra* are capable of taking Aboriginal people deep into the earth, the aliens can abduct non-Aboriginal people, transporting them into outer space. Although both are associated with water, *warnayarra* and UFOs exemplify inverse relationships between the heavens, earth, and precipitation.

The actions of the aliens towards humans are also analogous to those of other beings, such as *warnayarra* and ancestral spirits, yet they too differ in crucial respects. Themes of belonging, trespass, punishment, and protection suffuse both narratives. Just as *warnayarra* and *milalpa* are capable of recognizing individual owners of country, so are the aliens. Warlpiri people, such as Alan and David, stated that the aliens recognized *yapa* as belonging. Because this was not true of non-Aboriginal people, they were in danger of abduction. Narratives of abductions mirrored those of punishment by ancestral forces for trespass. Children from other communities could be killed by the *warnayarra* in the creek just as *kardiya* from elsewhere in Australia could be abducted by aliens. Furthermore, the manner in which protection was bestowed upon me at water holes inhabited by hostile *warnayarra* resembles the way in which protection from abduction could also be obtained through the agency of Aboriginal people. An important difference is that whereas tales of *warnayarra* punishing trespassers almost exclusively involved only Aboriginal people, alien abduction narratives focused on non-Aboriginal people. Stories of UFOs incorporated non-Aboriginal people, both as a subject and as an audience, in a way that accounts of *warnayarra* generally did not.

Tales of the aliens are not only given in contexts introduced as the result of colonialism, such as the presence of a non-Aboriginal population, but are also used as explanations of natural phenomena. Michael disagreed with John, stating that it was not the rainbow serpent but rather the aliens that caused the loss of water in the creek. But in other contexts, Warlpiri people are also capable of utilizing familiar concepts such as the Dreaming and ancestral forces to reinterpret new situations, for instance attributing the recurrent symptoms of an unfamiliar chronic disease to sorcery (Saethre 2007). In the case of UFOs, it seems as if the opposite is occurring. Aboriginal people are using a new type of account – extraterrestrials – to explain an incident – the change of water level – that was formerly attributed to *warnayarra*.

Warlpiri tales regarding the aliens appear to combine elements from both popular media and local cosmology while reproducing neither entirely. UFOs are described as resembling ‘Western’ concepts of flying saucers and extraterrestrials, yet other popularized themes such as reports of government cover-ups and painful medical experiments on abductees are absent. In addition to these traits, stories of the aliens encompass themes of the environment, trespass, belonging, and protection that are present in Warlpiri cosmology, yet tales of UFOs have not been incorporated into those of the Dreaming and ancestral spirits. UFOs appear to be neither ‘Western’ nor ‘Aboriginal’ and consequently they can be used to explore the assumed borders and relationships between these two categories.

UFOs create a sort of parity between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal 'worlds'. Elements of 'science' and 'indigenous belief' are integrated on a par with one another. Beckett writes that one result of the colonial encounter in Australia is that 'Indigenous knowledge is no longer self-evident; it must be assessed relative to the knowledge of the colonizers, if it is not to be abandoned as worthless, it must either be consigned to a separate domain or made commensurate with the knowledge of the other through some kinds of articulation' (1993: 691). I believe that the aliens are one way in which Warlpiri ideas of the world are incorporated into and 'made commensurate' with both national and international narratives. Through conversations with non-Aboriginal people concerning UFO sightings and alien abductions, Warlpiri residents share and perpetuate local themes of belonging and punishment through a subject – extraterrestrials – that is familiar to non-Aboriginal people.

Warlpiri UFO narratives not only reflect the interactions between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ideas, they are also capable of echoing relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people themselves. Stories of abductions affirm that Aboriginal people are at home and make a home in both the community and Tanami Desert in a way that non-Aboriginal people do not. Not only are Aboriginal people protected from the aliens because they are recognized as 'belonging', but tales of abductions can also reflect the mobility and impermanence of most non-Aboriginal residents. For instance, Bill's abduction is illustrative of the current state of service provision in many remote Aboriginal communities where allied health workers provided services on a sporadic basis. Like other health care professionals, Bill visited the community for a very short period of time and left never to be heard from again. While other non-Aboriginal residents worked and lived in the community for longer periods, none believed that it would be a permanent home. After a few months or years, non-Aboriginal workers left the community, often never to return. Stories of Aboriginal abductions portray the tendency of non-Aboriginal residents to vanish from communities metaphorically, depicting social relations between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.

## Conclusion

There has been a tendency in Australia to cast Aboriginal practices and beliefs concerning health, law, education, economics, and cosmology as incommensurable or at odds with those of non-Aboriginal people. For instance, words and phrases such as 'vastly different' (Nathan & Leichleitner 1983: 72), 'cultural gap' (Eastwell 1973: 1012), 'poor compatibility' (Maher 1999: 234), and 'clash' (Sutton 2005: 1) are used to describe the relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal health traditions. However, it is possible to demonstrate ways in which these boundaries can be indistinct and permeable. Examining a tale of bulldozers driven by non-Aboriginal workers unearthing a rainbow serpent, Merlan observes: 'Despite local perceptions and the objectively great degree of segregation of Aborigines in many aspects of daily life from whites, one is not justified in assuming radical boundedness between black and white "worlds"' (2005: 173).

Warlpiri narratives of aliens from outer space are not simply a faithful restatement of ideas gleaned from Hollywood movies but are situated in, and reflect the close encounters between, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. UFOs are one way to understand 'engagement across forms of difference that nevertheless do not imply complete boundedness, and also deal with issues of change in such a context' (Merlan

2005: 180). By echoing themes from the daily experiences of Warlpiri people – including watching television, discussing ancestral beings, and interacting with non-Aboriginal workers – stories of UFOs reveal that a ubiquitous, discrete, and immutable separation between non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal domains does not always exist. Local realities can and do transcend the realms of white and black.

While Warlpiri descriptions of the aliens incorporate themes from local cosmology and experience, so too do many of the indigenous UFO narratives that exist around the world. Stories of Star People and *tokoloshe* are merged with those of extraterrestrials. In many cases, indigenous groups willingly share these ideas in both national and international UFO forums. At the Star Knowledge Conference in 1996 Sioux, Hopi, Iroquois, Choctaw, Oneida, Seneca, Yaqui, Maori, and Saami individuals conveyed their knowledge of extraterrestrials to non-indigenous UFO enthusiasts (Boylan 1996). Through forums such as the Star Knowledge Conference, relationships between indigenous and non-indigenous people can be recast. Consequently, I believe that indigenous UFO narratives around the world are capable of providing a unique insight into the borders and engagements between indigenous and non-indigenous people.

#### NOTES

I would like to thank the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies for assisting in the funding of my field research.

<sup>1</sup> Although in the United States, UFO beliefs have been viewed as emblematic of the tensions between settler societies and the indigenous people whom they colonized (Panay 2004; Pfitzer 1995; Sturma 2000; 2002; Whitmore 1995), these approaches focus on the perspectives of non-indigenous people.

<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used, and, when possible, the age of individuals has been included.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on spirit beings and their ability to recognize and harm outsiders, see Cawte (1974), Meggitt (1962), Peile (1997), Reid (1983), Rose (1992), and Tonkinson (1978).

#### REFERENCES

- AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS 2001. Population characteristics, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, Northern Territory. Canberra: Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- BECKETT, J. 1993. Walter Newton's history of the world – or Australia. *American Ethnologist* 20, 675-95.
- BOYLAN, R.J. 1996. Native elders reveal centuries of ET contact lore. *Contact Forum* 4, 1-6.
- BUCHLER, I. & K. MADDOCK (eds) 1978. *The rainbow serpent: a chromatic piece*. The Hague: Mouton.
- BULLARD, T.E. 1989. UFO abduction reports: the supernatural kidnap narrative returns in technological guise. *Journal of American Folklore* 102, 147-70.
- CARNEGIE, D. 1898. *Spinifex and sand*. London: Arthur Pearson.
- CAWTE, J. 1974. *Medicine is the law: studies in the psychiatric anthropology of Australian tribal societies*. Adelaide: Rigby Press.
- CHALKER, B. 1996. *The Oz files: the Australian UFO story*. Potts Point, NSW: Duffy & Snellgrove.
- CURRAN, D. 1985. *In advance of the landing: folk concepts of outer space*. New York: Abbeville Press.
- EASTWELL, H. 1973. The traditional healer in modern Arnhem Land. *Medical Journal of Australia* 2, 1011-17.
- GALLUP, G. & F. NEWPORT 1991. Belief in paranormal phenomena among adult Americans. *Skeptical Inquirer* 15, 137-46.
- GILES, E. 1889. *Australia twice traversed*. London: Sampson, Low, Marston and Rivington.
- GINSBURG, F. 1994. Culture/media: a (mild) polemic. *Anthropology Today* 10, 5-15.
- HIND, C. 1987. UFOs and the African tribal system. In *UFOs 1947-1987: the 40-year search for an explanation* (eds) H. Evans & J. Spencer, 93-6. London: Fortean Tomes.
- MACK, J.E. 1994. *Abduction: human encounters with aliens*. New York: Macmillan.
- 1999. *Passport to the cosmos: human transformation and alien encounters*. New York: Crown.
- MAHER, P. 1999. A review of 'traditional' Aboriginal health beliefs. *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 7, 229-36.
- MARRS, J. 2000. *Alien agenda: investigating the extraterrestrial presence among us*. New York: HarperCollins.

- MARTIN, R. 1999. Great Zulu shaman and elder Credo Mutwa on alien abductions & reptilians: a rare, astonishing conversation. *The Spectrum* 1: 1, 17-31 (available on-line: [http://www.v72.org/PDF/reptilian\\_credo\\_1.pdf](http://www.v72.org/PDF/reptilian_credo_1.pdf); [http://www.v72.org/PDF/reptilian\\_credo\\_2.pdf](http://www.v72.org/PDF/reptilian_credo_2.pdf), accessed 16 August 2007).
- MEGGITT, M. 1962. *Desert people: a study of the Walbiri Aborigines of Central Australia*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson.
- MERLAN, F. 2000. Representing the rainbow: Aboriginal culture in an interconnected world. *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 1/2, 20-6.
- 2005. Explorations towards intercultural accounts of socio-cultural reproduction and change. *Oceania* 75, 167-82.
- MICHAELS, E. 1990. A model of teleported texts (with reference to Aboriginal television). *Continuum* 3, 8-31.
- MUNN, N. 1973. *Walbiri iconography: graphic representation and cultural symbolism in a Central Australian society*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- MYERS, F. 1986. *Pintupi country, Pintupi self: sentiment, place, and politics among Western Desert Aborigines*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- 2003. *Painting culture: the making of Aboriginal high art*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- NATHAN, P. & D. LEICHLITNER. 1983. *Health business*. Victoria: Heinemann Educational Australia.
- NEWMAN, L.S. & R.F. BAUMEISTER 1996. Toward an explanation of the UFO abduction phenomenon: hypnotic elaboration, extraterrestrial sadomasochism, and spurious memories. *Psychological Inquiry* 7, 99-126.
- PANAY, A. 2004. From *Little big man* to little green men: the captivity scenario in American culture. *European Journal of American Culture* 23, 201-16.
- PEILE, A.R. 1997. *Body and soul: an Aboriginal view*. Carlisle: Hesperian Press.
- PETERSON, N., P. McCONVELL, S. WILD & R. HAGEN 1978. *A claim to areas of traditional land by the Warlpiri and Kartangaruru-Kurintji*. Central Land Council.
- PFITZER, G.M. 1995. The only good alien is a dead alien: science fiction and the metaphysics of Indian-hating on the high frontier. *Journal of American Culture* 18, 51-67.
- RADCLIFFE-BROWN, A. 1926. The rainbow serpent myth of Australia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 56, 19-25.
- RANDLES, J. 1988. *Alien abductions: the mystery solved*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Inner Light.
- RAYNES, B. 2004. *Visitors from hidden realms: the origin and destiny of humanity as told by star elders, shamens, and UFO visitors*. Memphis, TN: Eagle Wing Books Incorporated.
- RED STAR, N. 2000. *Star ancestors: Indian wisdomkeepers share the teachings of the extraterrestrials*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International.
- 2002. *Legends of the star ancestors: Stories of extraterrestrial contact from wisdomkeepers around the world*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International.
- REID, J. 1983. *Sorcerers and healing spirits: continuity and change in an Aboriginal medical system*. Canberra: Australian National Press.
- ROSE, D.B. 1992. *Dingo makes us human: life and land in an Aboriginal Australian culture*. Cambridge: University Press.
- ROTHSTEIN, M. 2003. UFO beliefs as syncretistic components. In *UFO religions* (ed.) C. Partridge, 256-73. New York: Routledge.
- SAETHRE, E.J. 2007. Conflicting traditions, concurrent treatment: medical pluralism in Aboriginal Australia. *Oceania* 77, 95-110.
- SALER, B., C. ZIEGLER & C. MOORE 1997. *UFO crash at Roswell: the genesis of a modern myth*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- SPARKS, G., M. PELLECHIA & C. IRVINE 1998. Does television news about UFOs affect viewers' UFO beliefs? An experimental investigation. *Communication Quarterly* 46, 1-9.
- SPARKS, G., C.W. SPARKS & K. GRAY 1995. Media impact on fright reactions and belief in UFOs: the potential role of mental imagery. *Communication Research* 22, 3-23.
- SPITULNIK, D. 1993. Anthropology and mass media. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 22, 293-315.
- STURMA, M. 2000. Alien abductions. *History Today* 50, 14-15.
- 2002. Aliens and Indians: a comparison of abduction and captivity narratives. *Journal of Popular Culture* 36, 318-35.
- SUTTON, P. 2005. The politicisation of disease and the disease of politicisation: causal theories and the Indigenous health differential. Paper presented to the National Rural Health Conference, Alice Springs, Northern Territory, March (available on-line: <http://www.ling.arts.kuleuven.be/fll/eldp/sutton/2005NRH.pdf>, accessed 16 August 2007).

- TONKINSON, R. 1978. *The Mardudjarra Aborigines: living the dream in Australia's desert*. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- TOUSSAINT, S., P. SULLIVAN & S. YU 2005. Water way in Aboriginal Australia: an interconnected analysis. *Anthropological Forum* 15, 61-74.
- WHITMORE, J. 1995. Religious dimensions of the UFO abductee experience. In *The gods have landed: new religions from other worlds* (ed.) J. LEWIS, 65-84. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press.

## **Ceux qui les ont vus : Croyances relatives aux OVNI d'une communauté aborigène australienne isolée**

### *Résumé*

Alors que les soucoupes volantes et les extraterrestres sont habituellement considérés comme des concepts « occidentaux », ils ne sont pas complètement inconnus des peuples indigènes. Les membres de la communauté aborigène de Warlpiri, isolée dans le centre de l'Australie, voient régulièrement des ovnis et en discutent. Tout en reproduisant les attributs des « aliens » tels que les représentent le cinéma et la télévision, les descriptions des Warlpiri expriment aussi un intérêt pour l'environnement, les thèmes cosmologiques locaux et la relation entre Australiens aborigènes et non aborigènes. Les récits de visions d'ovnis des Warlpiri constituent donc un moyen d'explorer les délimitations des sphères aborigène et non aborigène et les interactions entre celles-ci.

Eirik Saethre completed his Ph.D. at the Australian National University. His thesis examines responses to chronic and lifestyle illnesses in an Australian Aboriginal community. He is currently completing a post-doctoral fellowship at the University of Pretoria, researching the social life of a microbicide trial in a peri-urban South African township.

*Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of Pretoria, Pretoria 0002, South Africa. eirik.saethre@up.ac.za*

