Katie Glaskin - Dreams and memory

**Dreams and memory: accessing metaphysical realms in the northwest Kimberley**

Katie Glaskin  
University of Western Australia

**Abstract**

Persons having special powers to heal or perform sorcery have been reported in many societies around the world. Often referred to as shamans, their abilities are usually contingent on their capacity to access various kinds of altered states of consciousness. Amongst Bardi and Jawi of northwest Western Australia, such persons are referred to as *jarlingungurr*. Bardi and Jawi conceptualisation of *jarlingungurr* reflects an ontology and epistemology in which dreams are regarded as an important dimension of engagement with the world, and with other beings considered to populate it. Through dreams, *jarlingungurr* are able to access powerful metaphysical realms usually understood to be beyond the reach of ordinary humans. Although frequently taken for granted, an essential aspect of a dream is the capacity to 'retrieve' it: to remember the experience in order to share it with others. Drawing on literature concerning the relationship between dreams and memory, I argue that memory, associated with dream recall and subsequent elaboration, comprises a significant dimension of a *jarlingungurr*'s knowledge and power.

**Introduction**

Ethnography from around Australia indicates that many Indigenous Australian societies identify, or identified, a category of persons with different qualities and powers to those possessed by ordinary humans (e.g., Berndt & Vogelsang 1941; Coate 1966; Elkin 1980; Howitt 1996: 355-425; Spencer & Gillen 1968: 522-560). In the Australian literature, they have been variously referred to in English as ‘native doctors,’ ‘magicians’, ‘magic’ or
'clever men', 'sorcerers', 'men of high degree' and so on (see Elkin 1980). The concept of 'shaman' has been criticised as a Western category (Taussig 1989) and for stressing similarities between shamans in different contexts (Kendall 1988; Atkinson 1992:307-8). Notwithstanding these criticisms – and the fact that persons considered to have special powers have rarely been referred to as 'shamans' in the Australian context– they do appear to share a number of characteristics with those persons referred to as shamans in other societies around the world (e.g., see Ohnuki-Tierney 1981; Eliade 1989; Atkinson 1992). This includes 'that he or she employs altered states of consciousness in performing healing and obtaining advice and guidance from the supernatural realm' (Stephen & Suryani 2000:7). In Australia as elsewhere, such persons are held to have special abilities of various kinds: to heal, to perform sorcery, to 'see' things that ordinary humans cannot, and to mediate between humans and the spirit world (indeed, in effect, to mediate between humans and other humans). The source of a shaman's power is conceptualised according to the cosmology, ontology and epistemology in their particular societies. As many ethnographers have described, a shaman's ability to access altered states of consciousness - 'to penetrate the unseen world by employing modes of knowledge and perception not usually available in ordinary waking consciousness, and not readily available to ordinary people' (Stephen & Suryani 2000:10) - may be a fundamental aspect of their 'power', if not solely reducible to it (see Atkinson 1992:310-11). In the Australian literature, such persons typically rely on information gained while dreaming (e.g., see Berndt & Berndt 1970:146; Elkin 1984:283), even though, as Keen says, 'the significance of dreams was a matter of negotiation' (2003:129). Bardi and Jawi of northwest Western Australia refer to such persons, who may be male or female, as **jarlingungurr** (alternatively **jarlgangurr** or **jarlgangurr**) (Bagshaw 1999:37; Glaskin 2005:311). Bardi and Jawi conceptualisation of **jarlingungurr** reflects an ontology and epistemology in which dreams are regarded as an important dimension of engagement with the world, and with other-than-human beings also considered to populate it (Glaskin 2005). Through dreams, **jarlingungurr** are able to access powerful metaphysical realms, to dream travel to locations considered to be beyond the reach of ordinary humans. Although frequently taken for granted, an essential aspect of a dream is the capacity to 'retrieve' it: to remember the experience in order to share it with others. Drawing on literature concerning the relationship between dreams and memory, I argue that memory, associated with dream recall and subsequent elaboration, comprises a significant dimension of a **jarlingungurr**'s knowledge and power. **Bardi and Jawi** Bardi country lies on the northern tip of the Dampierland Peninsula in the northwest Kimberley region of Western Australia, and includes some offshore islands. To its east lies Jawi country, made up of islands in the King Sound region. The ethnographic evidence demonstrates that Bardi and Jawi have long intermarried and shared important aspects of their ritual and cosmology. As saltwater people, they also share a
maritime orientation: amongst other things, this means that the sea is an important economic resource and, like land, is considered mythologically inscribed country.

Map 1 - General Location Map Kimberley Region

The King Sound region has the third largest tides in the world (Garrow 2002:12). The 'principal determinants' of the enormous tides in the Kimberley are 'the shape and depth of the sea floor in the Timor Sea to the north and west of the Kimberley coast, and the shape of the continental shelf', and the effect of the tides in the Kimberley region is most pronounced in the 'shallow enclosed waters of the King Sound and between the islands of the Kimberley archipelago' (ibid.: 11, 13). The numerous islands at the mouth of the King Sound, along with the vast array of other marine features – islets, rocks, sandbanks and reefs – provide obstacles that the incoming and outgoing tides swirl around, dividing tidal currents, creating eddies and counter currents. The seabed in this region is of varying depths, in some areas dropping sharply from very shallow to deep water. Where the strong tidal currents meet, or where they flow over submarine ridges, tidal overfalls and whirlpools are created. The nautical chart of the area is resplendent with areas such as these, marked as 'dangerous overfalls'. Bardi and Jawi are very familiar with these marine features: their ancestors used mangrove log rafts and their knowledge of the tides to traverse these waters, and today's travel on small outboard dinghies still requires such intimate knowledge of the marine environment. This is encapsulated in the extensive naming of these features: all currents are named, and significant rocks, sandbanks and whirlpools are also named, and are understood as having cosmological significance (Bagshaw & Glaskin 2000).

For Bardi and Jawi, sustained contact with non-Indigenous people effectively began in the 1880s, with the advent of the pearling industry in this region (see Glaskin 2002 for further exploration of this). This led to the establishment of missions in the region, ostensibly to 'protect' Bardi and Jawi from the pearlers – the non-denominational Protestant mission at Sunday Island in 1899, and the Catholic Pallottine mission at Lombadina in 1910. The establishment of Sunday Island mission on the Jawi island of Iwanyi (Sunday Island) led to large numbers of Bardi people being drawn to the mission there, and to the intensification of interaction between Bardi
and Jawi peoples. Most Bardi and Jawi people today live in the major communities and smaller outstations of the northern Dampierland Peninsula; many others also live in the nearest major towns, Broome and Derby.

Along with my colleague, Geoff Bagshaw, I began working with Bardi and Jawi people on their native title claim in 1994, and have continued intermittently to be involved with aspects of the claim up to their Federal Court Appeal hearing in 2007. Fieldwork with them for my doctoral thesis, during 1997 and 1998, focused on the consequences of engaging with native title and its associated processes (Glaskin 2002). During this research, although dreams had not been my priority, I recorded numerous instances in which people referred to their dreams, to the revelation of new ilma (a public genre of song, dance and associated design) in dreams, and to the role of dreams in conception totemism, amongst other things.

In April 2003, I returned to the Kimberley to conduct research explicitly focussing on the topic of dreams. When I explained to people that I was interested in specifically doing dream research, it produced a variety of responses, with some people spontaneously telling me of significant dreams that they remembered, others making various comments about dreams, but all those I spoke with urging me, on this topic of dreams, to speak with jarlungungurr. While I had already recorded a lot of information about dreams in the course of other research, I was struck by the degree to which, when dreams were the explicit topic of inquiry, jarngungurr were invoked, indicating that it was jarngungurr who were the most authoritative persons to speak about dreams — or at least, certain kinds of dreams (I return to this below).

At this time there were, to my knowledge, three acknowledged jarlungungurr (all men). There were no publicly identified female jarlungungurr. Notwithstanding this, male jarlungungurr made it clear to me that this did not preclude the possibility of female jarlungungurr emerging in the future. Nor did the fact that there were no currently identified female jarlungungurr necessarily mean that there were no contemporary female jarlungungurr. This is because, as one jarlungungurr put it, there could be other jarlungungurr in the community who had not yet been publicly recognised, because they hadn’t ‘shown themselves’ yet; or disclosed ‘what they can do’. In other words, while such persons might exist, they may not yet have revealed themselves as people with special powers.

**Persons and powers**

Bardi and Jawi conceptualisation of a jarlungungurr’s powers is fundamentally linked with their concept of personhood, and integral to this are understandings encapsulated under the rubric of raya (or rai), nina nggar, and jarlng (see also Glaskin 2005, 2006 for a more extended discussion of these). Briefly stated, rai or raya are pre-existing spirit children who, through the actions of ancestral beings in the creative period (generally glossed as ‘the Dreaming’ amongst English speakers), were deposited in country (land and sea) at various locations. A belief in such pre-existing beings, associated with conception, is fairly widespread around Australia (e.g., see Merlan 1986). Raya first reveal themselves in dreams to their future father;
the child that is born is considered to be a human instantiation of that particular *raya*, or pre-existing spirit being. Thus, humans are conceptualised as having an existence that precedes birth. Humans also are considered to have an existence that continues after death; after a period of some instability when the ghost of the deceased person is both ontologically ambiguous (not quite departed from the living, not quite amalgamated into the realm of the dead), and hence inherently ‘dangerous’, the deceased person will ultimately become assimilated into the country amongst the spirits of the ‘old people’, which continue to inhabit and animate the country (Glaskin 2006). Spirits of the deceased, like *raya* and other spirit beings, communicate with humans: in waking life, such communication is often manifest through signs that need to be recognised and understood, but such beings may also appear directly to persons, occasionally as daytime visions (or waking dreams), but more frequently in nocturnal dreams.

*Nimanggar* is an invisible substance within a person; this is described as their ‘shadow’ (Glaskin 2005:303), or as part of their ‘soul’ (Petri 1938-40: 227). A person may experience temporary separation from their *nimanggar* under specific circumstances. As I have written elsewhere (Glaskin 2006), when a person is sick, by virtue of their capacity to see things that ordinary humans cannot, a *jarlingungurr* can ‘see’ that person’s *nimanggar* begin to move away from their body. If they can bring it back in time, the person will be healed, but death comes when a person is permanently separated from their *nimanggar*. Young men going through Law (initiation) are also temporarily separated from their *nimanggar*, during an element of public ritual performed during *Njuril*, which occurs at the end of the *Irrganj rite* (Bagshaw 1999:31). In this segment of the ritual, the new initiate throws a stick (covered in ochre) and the initiate’s *nimanggar* (‘shadow’) is symbolically ‘projected’ from his body: ‘their shadow flies with that thing’. As the stick travels through the air, parts of the ochre fall from it. The *jarlingungurr* alone has the power to pick up the stick, any pieces of the stick and the ochre that has fallen from it. As one *jarlingungurr* described this to me, the reason that *jarlingungurr* are the ones who retrieve the projected *nimanggar* is because only they can ‘see’ it – by virtue of their special vision (and visionary) capacity. The *jarlingungurr* then returns the *nimanggar* to the initiate’s body, placing the stick at right angles to the initiate’s stomach with one hand, and putting his other hand on the head of the initiate to seal the returned *nimanggar* back inside the initiate’s body, so that ‘the spirit goes back in’.

As well as *raya* and *nimanggar*, persons also have *jarln* (or *barnman*), which is a totemic entity (either a personal totem, or a patrilineally inherited estate-based one), intrinsically associated with their *raya*.

The term *djalne* (*jarln*) cannot be separated from *rai*. *Djalne* means dream, is the capability to dream as well as a soul-substance which enters the human through *rai*. Maybe *djalne* can be understood as a continuance of *rai* inside the physically alive human being. *Djalne* has an important role because it helps and warns you. If you dream about certain things which are geographically far away, about the destinies of friends or relatives or incidents which will happen
in the future then this is\textit{ djalne}. Besides this \textit{djalne} also means an animal or plant species which may neither be killed nor eaten because it is a totem (Petri 1938-40:227).

The word \textit{jarlungurr} is derived from the word \textit{jarlng} or \textit{jarlna}. An important culture hero\textsuperscript{3} is the source of the \textit{jarlungurr}’s ‘power’, and makes their \textit{jarlng}, \textit{raya} and \textit{ni manggar} ‘stronger’ than those of ordinary individuals (Petri 1938-40:227). It is by using their \textit{jarlng} (a concept that includes the capacity to dream and the ‘soul-substance’ of a person) that \textit{jarlungurr} exercise powers and abilities that are considered to be beyond the capacity of ordinary Bardi and Jawi men and women. Thus, a \textit{jarlungurr}’s power – which is said to include the ability to bodily transform themselves – is conceptually and fundamentally associated with their capacity to dream (Glaskin 2005:303).

Many societies view dreams as a key to gaining knowledge about the metaphysical world, and hence as a means of acquiring knowledge and power (e.g., see Tedlock 1992a; Lohmann 2003). Before further examining this relationship with dreams, I first explore some dimensions of a \textit{jarlungurr}’s power.

\textbf{Perceptions and power}

While male \textit{jarlungurr} may be healers and sorcerers, women \textit{jarlungurr} have been primarily described to me as healers.\textsuperscript{4} At least one female \textit{jarlungurr} I was told about was also noted for having received, in dreams, ritual components that were subsequently incorporated into an important ritual corpus. Women of such powers are not reported as widely in the Australian ethnography as are men.\textsuperscript{5} Amongst Bardi, the existence of female \textit{jarlungurr} has been referred to in a number of ethnographic accounts (Bagshaw 1999:37; Coates 1966:98; Glaskin 2002:94, 2005:311). Notwithstanding this, the following discussion primarily relates to male \textit{jarngurr}, as during most of the time of my involvement with Bardi and Jawi people, female \textit{jarlungurr} have not been publicly identified in the community.\textsuperscript{6} Like female \textit{jarngurr}, a male \textit{jarlungurr}’s power, at the benevolent end of the spectrum of his powers, also includes the power to heal. Ordinary people remain cautious about a \textit{jarlungurr}’spower, largely because of their potential to commit sorcery (such caution evidenced in, for example, the guarding of stray hairs, see Glaskin 2006).

From discussions I have had with them, it is evident that \textit{jarlungurr} do not hold a unanimous view about the extent of each other’s respective powers, and this is additionally complicated since a \textit{jarlungurr}’s powers are not necessarily considered stable. As one man told me, the powers themselves may fluctuate: he felt that his own powers had waned, and saw this as the metaphysical consequence of some of his own actions. In this regard, although a \textit{jarlungurr} is powerful, they remain more broadly accountable within their society, since any ‘waning’ of their power will be understood as having metaphysical origins reflective of a \textit{jarlungurr}’s own (mis)deemeanour. I was told that a \textit{jarlungurr} with depleted power might consult another about this, though such actions were dependent on the personalities concerned, and the current politics that may (or may not be) at play between them at that point in time.
Competitive status relations are not unknown amongst jarlingungurr, and a jarlingungurr may not always wish to concede that they have diminished powers, or draw on another for assistance. In this regard, it is not only other jarlingungurr from within one’s own group with whom a jarlingungurr is concerned, but includes other powerful ‘magic men’ (often referred to more generally in the Kimberley and beyond as mabarn) from a much wider regional domain.

This point is well illustrated by one story a jarlingungurr told me concerning a large meeting of elders held in relation to a serious incident that had taken place. The meeting involved senior men from numerous places: Mulan, Bililuna, Strelley, along with other parts of the northern Pilbara and southern Kimberley (that is to say, from places as far as 1000km or more from each other). The jarlingungurr who told me of this event said that there were a number of powerful men present at the meeting, men who were mabarn ‘in their own right’. Jarlingungurr who have not ‘met’ each other before, he told me, are able to ‘recognise’ each other; they ‘feel’ their power. He could feel the resistance of these men to him, and to some of the views that he was expressing. He told me that while they were discussing things, one of these mabarn made smoke ‘come up’ from a bit of hair lying on the ground, and then a lightning strike. In response, to demonstrate his power, my informant said he made a shooting star, which they saw travelling across the horizon. He ‘cut the tail’ off and it fell and burned up. He had therefore shown them what he could do, that he was powerful too. Following this demonstration of power, he wasn’t ‘bothered by anyone’. He told me that jarlingungurr often want to test each other’s powers (in such contexts) to see who is the most powerful, and in that sense, jarlingungurr are wary of each other, as they are likely to target each other with their power.

Thus, how much power an individual jarlingungurr has may be the subject of private commentary and debate, both from other jarlingungurr and from others.7 One woman (now deceased), used to express her skepticism (but also her wariness) about one jarlingungurr’s power by privately referring to him as ‘Mr Telescope’, a reference to the capacity jarlingungurr are said to have to ‘see’ distant or invisible things that most people cannot. Some jarlingungurr elicit more fear than others, and, at least in the contemporary context, this seems to be as much about personality as it is about power. So, for example, I have heard a mother use the name of another jarlingungurr with a more frightening reputation as a means of exercising social control over her children, along the lines of ‘if you don’t behave, X will come and get you in the night’. The reputation of the individual concerned arguably springs from his interpersonal demeanour — in other words, from everyday expressions of his powerful personality. This in turn serves to consolidate fear and apprehension about more extraordinary forms of power he might wield. Many of those people who Bardi and Jawi consider to have been ‘leaders’ of their people in the past have also been jarlingungurr, and the blending of skepticism and wariness revealed in the nickname ‘Mr Telescope’ is, I suggest, commensurate with the kinds of responses persons considered to have such powers may engender — to be powerful is necessarily to assert power at
some level, and is frequently, perhaps inevitably, productive of such human responses, especially where the powers concerned are considered to be both restorative and destructive.

A Bardi man told me that during the mission days at Sunday Island, when access to tobacco was difficult, a certain jarlingungurr would produce tobacco they had hidden away, saying that they had gone to Derby – via dream-travel – to obtain the tobacco (Glaskin 2002:94). As I have argued, this served to consolidate ‘their positions within the community as people with special powers’ (ibid), but it is also apparent from this account that some people, at least, held some skepticism about the tobacco’s real provenance. Notwithstanding that my informant saw this jarlingungurr as actively engaged in ‘building up’ a reputation as a person of power using ordinary human means, in other conversations, it was also evident that he did not doubt the capacity of jarlingungurr to dream travel. It is this dimension of a jarlingungurr’s experience, and indeed power, to which I now turn.

**Becoming jarlingungurr**

The pre-eminently shamanic technique is the passage from one cosmic region to another – from earth to sky or from earth to underworld (Eliade 1989:259).

Among Bardi and Jawi, a person is said to become jarlingungurr by having powers passed on to them from another jarlingungurr. Only suitable candidates are chosen as recipients: those who are responsive, who are interested, who show aptitude — those who dream. On the basis of the available evidence about who has been identified as jarlingungurr over time, three main things emerge: firstly, that jarlingungurr powers are usually passed on to close kin, and more than one member of a family may be jarlingungurr. Secondly, there only appears to have been a handful of jarlingungurr present in the community at any one time. Thirdly, those who are jarlingungurr are noted for their capacity to dream. Indeed, it may even be that a person becomes jarlingungurr through experiences that they have while dreaming. A case in point is that of J, whose experience I describe – with his permission – below.

J told me that the first time he travelled (‘flew’) in a dream was when he was living on Sunday Island, aged about 23 or 24. At this time, his father had been deceased for many years. His father came to him in a dream, took him by the hand, and, saying ‘let’s go’, took him flying. They flew out over the Sunday Strait, over the top of the powerful whirlpool Jindirrabalgun. J’s father let go of his hand then, told him that he was ‘right’, that he could do it by himself. Letting go of his hand, he dropped him into the centre of the whirlpool.

Jindirrabalgun is an extremely powerful place. In purely physical terms, the whirlpool is of such magnitude that the sound of it (locally described as durdurdurdur) can be heard at Nilagun on Sunday Island (approximately eleven kilometres away). The whirlpool is especially powerful when the tides are going out of the King Sound: of all the whirlpools created by the ingoing and outgoing tides in the King Sound, Jindirrabalgun is the largest and most feared. Bardi and Jawi people tell a
number of stories about boats that have been sucked down into the whirlpool. J’s own father was once on a boat that was sucked into Jindirrabalgun:

Once, my father was skipper on a lugger going for trochus. Chinese there too, and another Aboriginal bloke, name was Gogo. They got caught in the tide going out, there wasn’t strong enough breeze to take them across, and they got caught in the current. The current was taking them straight to Jindirrabalgun, the whirlpool, they were all panicking and jumping overboard. Jindirrabalgun makes the noise of a 747 taking off. The boat and everyone went in there. My father and this old fella got caught there. What he did was grab this other old fella, grab hands, spread their legs out and went down, right down, hit the bottom, came up, it threw him a few metres out towards the island. They started swimming from island to island. Everyone else disappeared.

J has also said on numerous occasions that the reason his father managed to survive was because he was jarngungurr. Having been sucked down into the whirlpool, his special abilities enabled him to surface safely some distance away, from whence he was ultimately carried by the tides to Belayn (West Roe Island).

Jindirrabalgun is also considered to be extremely powerful in metaphysical terms. The whirlpool has an ‘inside’ story restricted to men, and is known to other Aboriginal people in the Kimberley well beyond the immediate Dampierland environs. In early 1995, the town of Derby at the mouth of the King Sound had a Category Four tropical cyclone bearing down upon it (meaning the cyclone had winds gusting at between 225-280km/hr). When this subsequently turned into a tropical low, Ngarinyin and Worrora peoples were reportedly of the view that it was Jindirrabalgun that had kept the cyclone away. I have heard non-Bardi Aboriginal people in Broome refer to the whirlpool as a powerful entity with a restricted ‘inside’ story; and Bardi have told me that people at Balgo know of its existence through a connection they say it has with Lake Gregory, a huge inland saltwater lake over a thousand kilometres away.

Jindirrabalgun then is a highly significant place for J’s father to have brought him in his dream, both because of its metaphysical power, and because of his own father’s experience of having been sucked down into the whirlpool. That J’s father was jarngungurr is also important, for in most cases it appears that the powers of jarngungurr are ‘passed on’, if not necessarily from biological father to son, certainly among close kin. J’s father revealed to him that he had the powers of a jarngungurr by taking him to Jindirrabalgun, flying there with him and holding his hand, and then letting him fall into the centre of the whirlpool. Significantly, this occurred in a dream.

When his father let him go, J began to put his hands and feet into the same splayed position as his father had done previously, on the occasion when he had miraculously escaped the whirlpool after his boat went down. The imagery of this dream is striking for its strong resonance with J’s memory of his father’s experience. In the dream, J’s father told him, no, you don’t need to do that, and J dropped into the centre of Jindirrabalgun and went right to the bottom. He told
me that there was a cave there at the bottom of Jindirrabalgun, and that he crouched in the cave watching the *lu* (currents) swirling around above him.

This was the occasion when J’s father passed on his powers to him, and it was also the first time J went ‘flying’ or dream-travelling. Following this, he said that he was flying around ‘all over the place’. J says that he can direct where he will go – that he can make the decision about where he will go before he goes to sleep, and then go there. I asked him whether those people whom he visited when he was flying around saw him when they were awake or asleep, and he said it could be either. Similarly, he might appear as himself (as he does) or in another form. I asked J what aspect of himself travels (i.e., ‘flies around’) in dreams. He said it was he, himself, all of him – bodily. That what was left when he went travelling like this was just his image. I asked him what that image was, and he told me it was his *nimangarr* (shadow). I asked J what would happen if someone attacked his *nimangarr* while he was flying around: I wondered if this would make him especially vulnerable and place him in danger. His response to this was to say, ‘well I would know it, and I would come back’.

**Dream-travel**

The *jarlunggurr*’s ability to ‘effect dream travel’ (Bagshaw 1999:38), and to dream travel to places that ordinary people are not usually able or permitted to access (Glaskin 2005:304), is a significant capacity that sets them apart from ordinary persons. According to J, *jarlunggurr* leave their *nimangarr* (shadow) as they do so: that they can ‘separate’ from their *nimangarr*, without resultant death, serves to corroborate and reinforce perceptions of their power. *Umbarda* (‘ordinary’ persons, those not having these special capabilities and powers) may dream, but they cannot direct their dreams or effect dream travel. With the exception of a brief moment in the public ritual context described above, nor, presumably, can they separate from their *nimangarr* (shadow), unless they are approaching death.

A *jarlunggurr* is able to dream travel to locations that may include places considered to be physically and metaphysically distant, normally inaccessible, and dangerous (such as the centre of Jindirrabalgun). Amongst Bardi and Jawi, who are saltwater people, many of these physically and metaphysically dangerous places are located offshore, and include, for example, *nimirr* (‘holes in the sea’ [bed]) and *jididi* (whirlpools) (Bagshaw & Glaskin 2000:12). Such locations are vested with power and are known to exist in a public sense, but they are also repositories of ‘inside’ (gender-restricted, male-only) knowledge concerning the activities of powerful ancestral beings. Thus the *jarlunggurr*’s capacity to ‘visit’ these locations through dreams is a significant indication of the power that *jarlunggurr* are believed to hold. In some of these offshore locations, various spirit beings may be encountered, and reveal ritual components (songs, designs and dances) to a *jarlunggurr*, who is then vested with the responsibility to ‘bring them out’ to the broader Bardi and Jawi public. Epistemologically, it is significant that song and ritual material gained in this way is not considered to be ‘new’, rather to have always existed, having been revealed through these
communications (Glaskin 2005:299; and see Dussart 2000:147; Poirer 2005:231). This is illustrative of the ‘epistemic openness’ Merlan (1998) has discussed as a feature of Indigenous Australian epistemology.

Jarlngungurr may also visit such metaphysically powerful places in order to ‘heal’ someone, and indeed, in dreams, may travel to the ill person and take them to such locations (to which they would not ordinarily be able to ‘go’). The persons whom I know of who have had this experience — of being ‘taken’ to such locations for healing — have been reluctant to speak about it, largely, it seems, because of the dangerous metaphysical elements (and ‘inside’, restricted aspects) associated with them. For present purposes, the salient point is that jarlngungurr, because of their supernaturally endowed powers, are the only persons said to be able (and legitimately so) to visit such normally inaccessible, metaphysically dangerous offshore places (in dreams). While many Bardi and Jawi acquire general geographical knowledge of these places through oral transmission or experientially (for example, when travelling through the region nowadays in dinghies, and previously, on mangrove log rafts), it is primarily through jarlngungurr that metaphysical, ‘inside’ knowledge of these places is gained. Although this knowledge is vested in a small number of individuals, others gain access to certain aspects of this knowledge, albeit in accordance with, and subject to, various restrictions including those of gender and initiation. Beckett (1980:xii) has written that:

Although the medicine men are few in any community and stand apart from ordinary men…

they are part of the means by which the community maintains its connection with the powers that created the world and which continue to sustain it. They are, as Elkin puts it, “a channel of life” (1980:xii).

The ‘office’ of jarlngungurr is embedded within a corpus of tradition, and must remain so in order for the clever person’s knowledge and practice to have ongoing salience and efficacy within the society; the role is a socially constituted one.

In 2003, amongst Bardi and Jawi, there were three known jarlngungurr. One of these persons has sadly passed away since that time. When I spoke with two of these three men about other jarlngungurr at that time, they had indicated that, like female jarlngungurr, there might also be male jarlngungurr in the community who had yet to reveal themselves. There was some speculation on their part about two individuals in particular, one male, and one female, both of whom were known to have ‘cooling hands’ (indicating their capacity to heal). In particular, it was thought that a certain man might emerge as jarlngungurr, given that he was beginning to display some of these kinds of powers. However, I was told that he could not yet ‘fly around’ (travel in dreams), which was clearly viewed as an important power. Subsequently, this individual has emerged as a person who frequently receives nocturnal visits from deceased ancestors, who reveal to him certain things in dreams. The talk concerning this individual’s power — and his status as jarlngungurr — has increased considerably since that time.
The capacity to dream, to effect dream travel, and to communicate with spirit beings in dreams, is, as I discovered when asking people specifically about dreams, notably associated with jarngungurr. Hence, the real measure of a jarngungurr’s emergence is a demonstrable capacity to ‘fly around’ (to travel in dreams, and communicate with spirit beings in the course of doing so). The recollection and dissemination of such dreamt experience is one way that these dream travels become ‘demonstrable’. It is through dreams that jarngungurr exercise many of their powers, and it is through traversing (and disseminating the knowledge gained through such a consciously retained traversal of) the threshold between waking and dreams that their power is made manifest. Thus it was that when I explicitly asked Bardi about dreams, I was repeatedly told I should speak with jarngungurr about this.17

**Dreams, knowledge and memory**

J’s account of becoming jarngungurr relies on an epistemology in which dreams constitute a valid source of knowledge, not only about physical places, but also about the metaphysical beings that inhabit these. Thus events that occur in dreams are not things that occur ‘in the mind’, but are understood to be events that actually occurred. Through dream travel, jarngungurr can access metaphysical dimensions of the real world that others cannot so readily access, and it is this capacity that lies at the core of their power. In dreams, they can communicate with powerful beings who gave form and shape to country, who gave Bardi and Jawi Law to follow; or with raya, which may one day be instantiated in human form; or with the old people, who ultimately will become assimilated into the ancestral past. Most of the ancestral revelations of new ritual components that I have been able to track as occurring amongst Bardi and Jawi over time have come to those persons identified as jarngungurr (Glaskin 2005:305). This is not to say that ordinary people cannot receive such revelations, or have encounters with spirit beings, in dreams – but rather, that jarngungurr are ‘considered more likely to have spirit visitations and revelations’ than others (ibid.).

This epistemology, in which metaphysical agents communicate with humans in dreams, in turn, relies on certain conceptions of personhood. For many in the Western world, dreams are also a source of knowledge, but this may be conceptualised, rather, as knowledge of the subconscious and hidden self. Where dreams are interpreted according to psychoanalytic theories, for example, such analyses also rely on a particular conceptualisation of persons. As Poirier says:

To the extent that dreams are capable of informing us about local notions of the person, local theories of human and non-human action, the cultural construction of experience, and the status of the imaginary – in short, about specific modes of being-in-the-world, dreams are of interest to anthropology. I think then that dreams and dreaming can be approached as a “royal road,” not, as Freud would have it, to the unconscious, but to cultural ontology and epistemology, including those dominant in Western cultures (2003:108).
As I have demonstrated, then, the capacity to dream is considered an important dimension of a jarlingungurr’s power. Amongst Bardi and Jawi, jarlingungurr also emerge as persons with innovative and creative capacities, as evidenced in their reception of ritual innovation in dreams: and, in relation to more overtly conceived artistic pursuits (see Glaskin 2008). Yet without the capacity to remember their dreams, a person could not convey to others the memories and images of their dreamt experience.

A number of ethnographers have specifically commented on the relationship between dreams and memory (e.g. see Hollan 2003; Poirier 2003, 2005; Glaskin 2007). Hollan, for example, has made the point that ‘the remembrance and reporting of dreams is a complex communicative act that may express concerns and preoccupations from both past and present’ (2003:183). Lohmann has argued that:

It is in dreams, the most unreal of experiential venues, that the spirit beings posited by religions become the most real in immediate experience. And the memories of these experiences shape expectations for waking life in the form of night residues, bringing the supernatural world more vividly into waking life as well (2003:208).

Many researchers have argued that memory is ‘fragile’, particularly when it comes to remembering dreams (e.g., see Koulack 1991; Hobson 2002). Hobson explains this fragility in memory as being related to the shut down of ‘chemical systems that are responsible for recent memory’ (2002:11). Since experiences that evoke strong emotions are those we are most likely to remember (Milton 2005:34), the dreams most likely to be recalled are those having strong emotional salience (and see Glaskin 2007). Memories of dreams are not the same as the dreams themselves: memories are likely to be fragmentary, and upon waking, primarily visual images are ‘filter[ed] through language-centred thought processes’ (Kracke 1992:36). This conscious elaboration of dreamt material is shaped and formed by the dreamer’s experience and understandings of the world in which they are socially embedded (Glaskin 2007). Anthropologists such as Dussart (2000) and Poirier (2005), and ethnomusicologist Marett (2005), have shown how dreamt material is consciously elaborated and integrated into existing ritual forms in a number of different Aboriginal societies. But the catalyst for this is the experience, the dream: and the dream as it is relationally rendered to others - the memory of the dream. It is this memory that forms the basis upon which knowledge gained is subsequently elaborated and integrated into the wider cultural domain. Given the importance of dreams in relation to a jarlingungurr’s experience, then, it seems reasonable to argue that they are ‘good dreamers’ (to use Poirier’s 2003 phrase). To be a ‘good dreamer’, is, I argue, to have good dream recall, whether such memories are of lucid dreams, in which the dreamer’s experience is directed by maintaining ‘consciousness during the transition from waking to sleeping’ (Tedlock 1992b:18), or non-lucid dreams. Those cases in which the jarlingungurr decides where they will travel in dreams, and who they will see when they do, may be understood as instances of lucid dreaming. Whether lucid or non-lucid dreaming is involved, though, these dreamt
experiences are also reliant on memory, in the first instance, before they can be conveyed to others.

In the Federal Court hearing of the Bardi and Jawi native title claim during 2001, a Bardi man gave evidence about an underground passage called Gurrngygalal, which emerges into the sea. He said that fresh water flows through this passage, like an ‘underground stream’; the place where the passage emerges into the sea is readily visible, since it is distinguished from the surrounding seascape at the surface by a permanent ‘rough’ patch of water (approximately one kilometre offshore). Having given evidence-in-chief about Gurrngygalal, he was cross-examined by counsel for the Commonwealth as to how he knew that it was fresh water:

Q: How do you know the fresh water comes out at that point?
A: Well, it's very hard for you to understand. It's the spirit man, like you know witchdoctor. In their dream they go, visit there and see the well. They tell us, us ordinary people, there's a well up, that line is going - like say like technologies, that where the oil runs in a stream. It's like them, just like that.

His response explicitly affirmed the role of jarlingungurr as persons able to visit normally inaccessible places, and to convey important physical and metaphysical information about them. Bardi and Jawi ontology allows for the recognition and legitimation of such knowledge. This may eventually become socially-held knowledge, part of the corpus of a society’s ever-evolving ‘tradition,’ which in turn shapes the epistemology of its members.

While dreams are intrinsic to a jarlingungurr’s power, I have argued here that the memory of the dream is an essential dimension of this. With respect to Balinese shamans, Stephen and Suryani have argued that becoming a shaman involves the ‘integration into consciousness of a special capacity for imagery thought’ (2000:6), which Stephen refers as the ‘autonomous imagination’ (e.g., see Stephen 1989). By ‘autonomous imagination’, Stephen means ‘a continuous stream of imagery taking place in the mind, although mostly outside conscious awareness’, ‘spontaneously’ entering consciousness in nocturnal dreams, but sometimes in ‘waking visions and other hallucinations’ (1997:337-8). I would argue that memory is an essential component of the capacity for the imagery thought to which Stephen and Suryani refer, for without it, the products of the ‘autonomous imagination’ – in this case, the jarlingungurr’s dreamt experiences – would remain unknown.

Acknowledgements
The research on which this article is based would not have been possible without the support at various times of the Kimberley Land Council, the Australian National University, the Berndt Foundation at the University of Western Australia, and the many Bardi and Jawi persons who have so generously shared so much with me over many years. I am especially grateful to Paul Sampi for sharing many insights with me, and to Geoff Bagshaw, Kim McCaul and an anonymous reviewer for their comments on an earlier draft of this article.
Notes

2. Unless otherwise specified, all terms given here are given in Bardi, which became the dominant language spoken by Bardi and Jawi.
3. This being’s name is gender-restricted.
4. Kaberry similarly reported that in the East Kimberley, the baramambil (medicine woman) possesses the powers to heal and communicate with the spirits of the dead, but sorcery is considered the work of baramambin, the medicine men (Elkin 1980:124).
5. Elkin identified just two contexts in which women occupied such roles (1980:115; 124), although such women are more widely identified in other ethnographic accounts (e.g., see Berndt & Vogelsang 1941:373; Berndt & Berndt 1993:193; Poirier 2001:126-30; Spencer & Gillen 1968[1899]:526).
6. This said, I have recently heard from a middle-aged woman that she and a relative of hers, himself a jarlingungurr, have had discussions about him passing his powers on to her. The woman told me this in February 2008: I have not had the opportunity to discuss this with her ‘uncle’, the jarlingungurr concerned.
7. Referring to Gunwinggu Aborigines of western Arnhem Land, Berndt and Berndt similarly say in relation to margidbu, ‘a native doctor or “clever” man’, that ‘some of them had very localized or fluctuating reputations, and there was uncertainty or disagreement on others − whether they “really had power”’ (1970:145).
8. For example, Bardi and Jawi have often told me that Imbirribirr (recorded as ‘Imbirbêr’ in Elkin’s genealogies), along with her brothers Jambu, Paddy Ibarr and Agamo, were jarlingungurr (see Genealogy 9, ‘Jumbo [Terbanbor’], in Notebook III, Item 1/1/20, Genealogy Notebooks 1927-28, Elkin Archives, Fischer Library, University of Sydney, Sydney). These siblings were Jawi from Umbinarrburu (East Sunday Island).
9. For reasons of privacy, I refer to this man by the initial of his Aboriginal name.
10. This statement was contained in J’s substance of evidence submitted to the Federal Court in October 2000.
13. Elsewhere, I have considered this dream as consistent with those characteristics generally described for REM (rapid eye movement) dream reports (Glaskin 2007).
14. J said he would visit me, and to look out for... (and here he decided how he would appear to me) a blue light (first he said ‘light’, then ‘blue’, before adding ‘the colour of the sea’). J said I might see him when I was awake or asleep, maybe at night, that light would be following me.
15. See also Glaskin (2005:311, footnote 17); and cf. Petri (1938-40:227), who says that this is ‘the part of the soul which leaves the body with the help of djalne, in order to see things and to have experiences that are impossible in the every day state of awareness’. One explanation for the disparity between Petri’s information concerning nimangarr (i.e., that this is part of the person that travels in dreams), versus what jarlingungurr told me (that this is the part of the person that remains), may be that jarlingungurr are considered to have the capacity to separate from their nimangarr while ordinary people are not: such that when ordinary people are ‘taken’ to places in dreams, their nimangarr is considered to be a part of them that ‘travels’. This should be considered speculative, however, as it has not been possible to clarify this further at the present time.
16. This has resulted in an efflorescence of his production of engraved pearl shells, called riji, which are sold in art galleries.
17. It was precisely for this reason that I sought out J, who told me of how he had become jarlingungurr, as described above. This conversation occurred at his outstation, on April 23". 2003: I spoke with fellow anthropologist Geoff Bagshaw at length about this conversation later that same day. It is important to note − as one would expect, given my gender − that this conversation did not include any gender-restricted information. J and I had spoken about dreams and about his status as jarlingungurr on many previous occasions over the preceding nine years. Significant among these was when I had sought treatment from him concerning a problem with my eye, in 1997.
18. Federal Court Transcript WAG49/98 15/5/01, T.581.35 – 582.05.
References


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