

# *Tjakangka Malu Ngalkuntjikitja:* Celebrating the Kangaroo According to the Law

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## ABSTRACT

*The hunting, killing, cooking and sharing of kangaroo among aboriginal people of the Great Victorian Desert is described. Complex rituals related to kinship and initiation status dictate people's rights and obligations. The law that rules their lives is rooted in the songs and tales that incorporate their mythology and world view. Animal flesh is thus ritually converted to human flesh.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The data presented here was gathered during my fieldwork among the Aboriginal population of the Great Victoria Desert of Australia in 1997 and 1998. This population, known as the Pitjantjatjara and Yankuntjatjara is also called Anangu to unite them under a common name. Their languages

have been given a written form mainly through the work of Ron Trudinger (1936) and more recently of Cliff Goddard (1996).

Some years ago Richard Gould (1967) published a paper on cooking techniques of kangaroo meat among the Ngatatjara inhabitants of the Warburton Ranges, nearly 1000 kilometres away from the Everard Ranges in South Australia where I carried out my research; so naturally there are notable differences between his findings and mine on this same topic. During field work I was invited on many occasions to take an active part in hunting parties of the Mimili community, in north western South Australia. For my informants, I was a classificatory brother, nephew or grandson and sometimes even father and, thanks to these privileged relations, these men and women taught me some crucial rules of their way of life.

If the residents of the community sometimes use different terms to indicate the objects which surround them, these linguistic differences express the diversity of their origins depending on their membership of the Pitjantjatjara or the Yankuntjatjara group. These two groups belong to the vast community of the Aborigines of the Great Victoria desert, dispersed over almost the whole south-western quarter of Australia. Their cultures are very closely related and codified by cycles of songs (*Tjukurpa*) constituting their mythologies. These songs tell of the actions of ancestral creatures having existed under animal, or human forms; or even under atmospheric phenomena like winds. Rules of life and rituals are very carefully detailed and esoterically illustrated in these songs, and are sometimes directly established by mythical heroes or told as secondary elements of the main story.

Very few adult Australian Aborigines know the totality of these songs. Rather, each one of them has memorised some verses of several songs. However they all know the right attitudes which should be observed, as well as the specific techniques and methods established by their civilization. These are taught, and the knowledge is given to the men and women who underwent initiation ceremonies. These rituals in which in the course of their life they take part as initiates, are occasions to control and acquire new knowledge in order to fulfil one's human condition. It is the custom as a whole, and more generally the culture which warrant this condition. The custom is a Law by all possible reckoning, observing it confers authority (*tjukaruru nyinapai*, "this who remains in the right way"), and breaking it

can lead to the most extreme sanctions. It is also a law to be compared with western scientific laws: it expresses constant ratios which allow the living creatures and the natural phenomena to exist and reproduce. Consequently not following the law endangers not only Man, but also the world as a whole. To live accordingly to the custom, *tjakangka*, gives the keys of existence to all the aborigines of the Pitjantjatjara culture. The possession of such “keys” confers particular status, allotting rights and obligations.

### HUNTING

In the past, the mode of subsistence was based on hunting and gathering, characteristic of their semi-nomadic life. The paths followed by the Aborigines when they travel through their desert realm are based on those of mythical heroes who, during their wanderings, dug water holes and modelled the geographical terrain. Thus, each Aborigine, by memorizing the myths and remembering them, can stay alive in the critical living conditions of the desert. Staying alive as a human being is only possible if the rules of that particular way of existence, that of mankind, are followed, and mankind is conceived as a whole made up of several human “patterns” named “ways” by the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunitjatjara . To survive in the desert the men have to become *Kukaputju*, prolific hunters, opposed to *Tjami* or poor hunters. Hunting is essential to the men, as this activity can provide meat for the hunter’s whole family. Before being considered as food or because it is a food, meat represents first of all a type of good which can be exchanged between persons or between groups. Exchange is the core of the whole Pitjantjatjara and Yankunitjatjara society’s structure. Thus, bringing meat to the family after a successful hunting party ensures that they would have something to exchange with another family and as a consequence maintain their “place” in society. This particular role of meat is the reason why the main purpose of hunting is not just catching a kangaroo. In Pitjantjatjara there is no specific word meaning “to hunt”, a man just says that he is going for meat “*Kukaku ananyi*”. But hunting has its own rituals, prohibitions and obligations, for the important element is to treat the kangaroo according to the Law in order to stay in full agreement

and harmony with the logic of the world from which the hunters have killed one of the beings.

The manner of killing an animal has its importance: for example in order to kill a small varan lizard, the hunter must hit it on the nape of the neck and break it with a single blow; if using a rifle he has to shoot it in the head which is no larger than a tennis ball.

In the past, big game was hunted with spears (*Kulata, Kantji...*) and dogs (*Papa*). Today, hunters use modern techniques, relying on rifles and motor vehicles. Sometimes even motorcycles are used to chase kangaroos through the bush in order to strike them down.

Hunting seasons are always preceded by ceremonies in order to “give birth” to the game. The Songs explain why it is unwise to kill a Kangaroo (*Malu*) during the rainy season, since at that period it feeds on grasses (*ukiri*) which make it thin. On the other hand it is the time to look for another kind of kangaroo, the *Euro*, locally known as *Kanyala*, which grows fat thanks to these same grasses.

Before starting a hunt custom requires one to consult a *Ngankari*, or *medicine man* in order to find out if the hunt will be good and if it is worth the while going on it. During the hunt “magic” rituals can be performed in order to increase the good luck of the hunters or the bad luck of the game. For example, one can strike the tracks left by an animal with a stick and leave it on the tracks to weaken (*Ngarakantuni*) the prey. Once the animal is dead, every gesture around its body is important: a kangaroo was shot down during a hunting party, we were out in the bush and had shoved it in the boot of the four wheel drive, but unfortunately the animal was not completely dead and was still stirring. As I was insisting for someone to put an end to its agony, one of my “step-brothers” (*marutju*) explained to me that if such an act were perpetrated, the old men of the community (*tjilpi*) could make us undergo reprisals as only one shot must be fired to kill an animal according to the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunitjatjara law. And incidentally, let me stress here the fact that those who make a mistake or break the law are under the threat of being reduced to “meat” status, that is to be cooked like a kangaroo. The preparation and all the gestures surrounding dead game are of the highest significance for the Aborigines.

What follows is the example of the preparation of a kangaroo or, in other words, of the law attached to that animal and taught to the initiates.

#### PRELIMINARIES AND PREPARATIONS

When a kangaroo is killed, the offal is immediately removed before the hunters are allowed to carry and cook it. But before that, a four inch incision is performed on the animal's belly (*wila alanyi* = to open the belly), incision through which the hunter checks if the animal can be consumed by looking for fat inside the abdomen. The Aborigines refuse to eat the meat of a kangaroo with no fat, which they call "a skinny one", *nyurka*, and the hunters will leave this type of game to the dogs. Fat, *ngatinpa*, is normally found in abundance in the groin, abdomen and around the kidneys. Having checked the presence of fat, the hunter can then proceed to remove the offal. He then takes grass (*pilki*) to fill the emptied belly and closes the slit by maintaining the two edges together with a small stick (*Tipiny: Tipinytjunanyi* = to insert the *tipiny*). The stick is then twisted so that the interior membranes of the skin intertwine in a kind of knot which looks like a protuberant navel.

The entrails are of two types: the large bowel, *murunpa*, and the intestines themselves called *tjuni*. Once these are withdrawn from the animal, the hunter leaves the kangaroo on the ground and in the same spot he proceeds with the scraping out of the entrails: standing up and turning on his left, holding the intestines, he presses them in his hand so the contents can drop onto a bed of branches previously set on the ground. A mass of undigested grass and excrements falls and intestinal worms (*ararinpa*) are generally present. Custom strictly forbids to touch these worms or the excrement, and during my investigation, pointing to these worms to know how they were called, one of my *Kamuru* (classificatory mother's brother) told me sternly "*Wanti, pampuntjia... milmilpa*" ("Stop, don't touch it, it is sacred"). These worms are sometimes likened to small poisonous snakes such as *Katjanpa* and *Kuyi*.

The group of hunters must then proceed somewhere close to a water hole or "rock hole" (*Tjukula*) to cut up the kangaroo and cook it. To carry the animal, the hunter must tie its limbs by dislocating the hind legs in order to bring them forward towards the front ones. He starts by putting a hand on

the kangaroo's throat and, one after the other pulls back the hind legs until the articulation breaks (*Karulytjinganyi*). He then dislocates the forefeet, twisting them with several circular motions (*Ulutjunanyi*). The dislocation of the four members is to be associated with the incision of the belly. The Anangu people (i.e. the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunitjatjara) consider that the body has five "souls": one under the solar plexus, two under each knee, two in each elbow (Berndt & Harvey Johnston, 1942: 207). These rituals are performed to release the souls of the animal. The hunter then binds the legs together (*Karpini*) with a small length of the gut. If the animal is large, a wooden stick is punched through the end of its tail (*nginti wipu*) to attach it to the limbs already bound together. He then carries the kangaroo on the nape of his neck and shoulders (*Nguntipali*) while passing his own head between its legs. Today, if the use of vehicles saves the hunters from carrying the animal, the limbs of the animal are dislocated anyway even if they are no longer bound together. The hunters move then towards the nearest rock hole.

Once there, they dig (*Tjararpunganyi*) what will become the oven (*Takul-takulpa / tjarar-tjararpa*). Traditionally, the hunters carried sticks or kinds of wooden plates with which to dig the hole. While waiting for the digging to be completed, one of the hunters leaves his companions to seek fire wood. Meanwhile the animal is placed on the fork of a nearby tree, (*Tjarapakutjara*) to preserve it of any profanation by insects or other animals.

The hunter who went for fire wood (*Waru*) collects mainly whole dry trunks which he brings back where the kangaroo is being prepared. Once the wood is piled up, he holds the trunks at one end and strikes them violently on the ground to expel the sand they might contain and breaks them in small pieces. When the hole reaches one meter in length, forty centimetres in width and thirty or forty centimetres in depth, one of the men collects the small pieces of wood and builds at the bottom of the hole (*Kurultjunanyi*) a little pile, *kurulpa*, in the shape of a tent facing the wind and under which straw will be placed. Today, a lighter or matches are used to light the fire. I once saw a clever means of producing embers by creating a short-circuit with a battery: having found a piece of wire one of the men rolled it up around a piece of wood with forked ends, leaving free the two extremities. The whole device looked like some kind of a plug. The two

“stems” were put on the poles of the battery and they waited until the wire reddened with heat and used it to light the fire.

Traditionally, the Pitjantjatjara hunters used the spear thrower (*Miru*) to make fire. The men put one of the dry trunks on the ground and one of them stood on it while two others seized a spear thrower by its two extremities, set it between the feet of the man on the trunk and started a sawing motion with all their might. When the wood of the trunk started to warm up, one of the hunters placed on it dried straw of spinifex (*Tjampji*), which grows in round solid and massive tufts. He kept adding grass until it became a consumed mass. Then taking dried kangaroo dung ground into powder, he spread it on the smoking straw. Meanwhile, another man took some straw which he slipped under the ashes and standing up, back to the wind, holding fanwise in his hands the smoking straw, he swung it from left to right, helping it to catch fire properly. He then set it under the little pile of wood into the “oven” hole. The reason for that ritual is that it is strictly forbidden to blow on fire. To place the smoking straw under the wood, the man had to kneel facing to the *kurulpa* (the pile of wood) by drawing aside his legs folded as flat as possible on the ground to make a wind break of his body. Then, when all the straw started to smoke, he moved aside to let the wind (*Walpa*) blow. Fire should not be produced by anything other than dead wood, most generally wood from a tree called *mulga* in Australia, but the varieties of which have tens of different names given by the people of Mimili. There is a very deep association between this particular wood and fire. The two have the same name, *waru*, whereas wood used for other purposes is called *punu*. An Aborigine will feel offended if a fire is lit in his presence using plastic fuel or other unusual materials, and even if these materials are thrown in a fire already lit.

While the fire is being lit, the last preparations are carried out. The game will be cooked by the elder brother (*Kuta*) or the mother’s brother (*Kamuru*) of the one who killed the animal. He skins the hind legs up to the heel, and dislocates the articulation. When the fire produces large flames (*Kurkalpa*), taking the animal by the legs he throws it on its back in the fire in order to burn the pelt (*Witani*). Once burned, he catches the left hind leg to turn the animal on its right side, then on its left (*Unmi*). Once the pelt is entirely burned, one of the hunters takes the animal off the fire and lets the

burning wood turn to embers. The cook inserts a stick between the tendon and the bone of the legs. He slides the stick until it reaches the knee, near a point called *Munngu*. In the past, more often than nowadays, the hunters preserved the tendons which were dried and rolled up into a ball to be used as ties for various purposes. Once the tendons (*Marpanpa, pulku*) removed, the cook breaks the feet off and puts them aside to later break the bones (*tarka*) to suck the marrow (*Nyuntjunpa*).

#### COOKING AND CARVING

When the wood has finished burning, one of the hunters carefully draws aside the last blazing pieces to collect the embers with a stick called *Warika*. The kangaroo must not cook over fire but under embers. The only contact tolerated with fire is for the burning of the pelt so it will not catch fire later. Having drawn the embers aside, the man places the kangaroo in the hole and covers it with the embers using the same *Warika* stick. The only visible thing is a mini smoking inferno with four sticks pointing to the sky: the animal's limbs. This slow cooking technique is called *Malykunyarinyi*.

The innards, including heart and lungs which had been kept high on a branch are placed in hot ashes (*ipa or Kulku*) for quick cooking. After ten minutes, the hunter's mother's brother (*Kamuru*) or one of his elder brothers (*Kuta*) takes them smoking out of the ashes. Having made a small litter of branches, he lays them out and separates them in small pieces which he distributes to the young. If among them there are men of same kinship statute, i.e. brothers, those help themselves to a portion of intestine, which having been rather roughly emptied have a very strong taste. To finish emptying them, one has to tear the piece and press it between the fingers to cool and finish cleaning it. One never blows on food when it is hot: it is seized and gently tapped with the fingers. The sharing of the intestines is the occasion to gather around the food and start discussions. The topics discussed are of a broadly political nature: one discusses then subjects relevant to the community and everyone checks alliances by revealing details of events one has lived through, as do all the other male members of the community. This time of sharing is a privileged moment in which the only men taking part are those having reached a social status linked to



coagulated blood which has become a sort of jelly filled with nutritional energy. Each of the two sections is divided in four parts. One is called *Katawaraka* and includes the head (*Kata*) and the nape of the neck, the back which goes from the nape of the neck to the coccyx (*Witapi*) and finally the chest and ribs representing the part called *Kantilypa*.

The breast piece is split into two (*Karpapunganyi* or *Walytjarpunganyi*) and each of these two parts (*Karpa* = side) can also be divided in two. The part with the forefoot is called *Kantilypa pilpirtjara* (*pilpirpa* indicating the chest above the diaphragm). The other part including the incision for the withdrawal of the offal is called *Kantilypa tipinytjara* from the name *tipin* given to the stick used to close the incision (see above). In this higher part (*Katawaraka*), the back itself can be divided into two pieces: *Witapi Kanytja*, the higher half from the back and the neck to the middle of the backbone, and *Witapi Warupuyu* which includes the lower half of the back with the section of the tail. *Kanytja* means “beard” and refers to the fur at the higher part of the back; *Warupuyu* means “the smoke from the fire” and refers to the only part of the flesh which was directly in contact with the fire after the tail had been removed before cooking. The head is not divided. The lower half (*karilpa*) includes the pelvis (*angkalpa*), the tail (*wipu*) and the hind legs (*tjunta* or *wiluru*).

The two legs can be divided into two pieces: *multilyangka* or *wintjilyiwata*, i.e. the fleshy part going from hip to knee (*multi* meaning knee) and *walanypa* i.e. the tibia with the flesh from the back muscle of the thigh to the back of the knee.

The trunk or *angkalpa* can also be divided in two pieces, the lower part, towards the tail, is called *angkalpa mana* because it includes the buttocks of the animal (*mana*). The higher part of the belly, less fleshy, is named *angkalpa tjampu*. Finally the tail is only exceptionally cut in two and most of the time remains whole. All these pieces (*itjilyi*) are placed on a bed of branches before being shared.

#### SHARING (INTJANI)

The hunter himself will not take any valuable part of the kangaroo he killed. The cook will give him the heart and the liver which, if of high

symbolical value, have only a very little nutritional value. If at the time of the sharing the number of hunters is small, the hunter can be given the head. However, there is little flesh on this piece and nothing of use. The hunter is not the owner of the animal he killed, although he was the one who had the right to kill it. Normally the one who first spots the animal will have the right to shoot it. And the cook will be determined *de facto* according to his kinship relation with the killer of the kangaroo. He must be a man who has passed through a number of initiation stages and has taken part in numerous ceremonies. He will be either the elder brother (*kuta*) of the shooter or a mother's brother (*kamuru*), who can be, on some occasions, the father of the shooter's wife (*waputju*). Although any relation between them is prohibited in that particular case, the kangaroo may have been carried to him by the hunter's brothers in order for him to proceed with the cooking.

During the sharing the paramount rule is to expose the pieces on a bed of branches to offer them to each person attending the occasion. The indigenous groups of the Australian desert, to which the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara of the Mimili community belong, are founded on social relations organized around the status of each person, recognized according to the relationship and status linked to the ceremonial cycles. Everyone will act according to his status without having to mention his particular position; since it is an obligation, without exception, every Aborigine recognises the right status of all the people he meets. As a consequence, every adult shows respect to everyone he encounters, particularly away from home, for fear of making a mistake. Thus according to their social and kinship status, the members of the hunting party will take pieces of the meat. These pieces (*itjili*) being exposed in front of the hunter's relatives, the first to take their share will be the allies. The father and classificatory fathers (*waputju*) of the wife and their spouses (*umari*) and the wife's mother's brothers (*kamuru*), one of them being the cook, take the pieces they want. The brothers of the wife (*marutju*) follow. And finally, the hunter's brothers help themselves to the remaining parts according to their age, starting with the eldest. The hunter is then authorized to take the remaining pieces unless his children are present in which case these help themselves. Although there is no really specific part of the cooked kangaroo allotted to each, it is easy to understand that the *waputju* and the *kamuru* will more often take

*angkalpa mana* and *tjunta* if they are present at the sharing, as these are the meatiest parts. If the hunters are far away in the bush and are cooking for themselves, they may eat the *angkalpa mana* while carving the animal. The *marutju* of the hunter, his brother in law, will choose more readily *karpa*, if the other pieces have already been taken by the *kamuru*; the brothers generally take *witapi* and *wipu*. Generally, the group of hunters is composed of four men and as the animal is mostly divided in nine pieces, each person, excepting the hunter, will have two or three of them. For a higher number of hunters, eleven pieces in all are to be distributed.

If the hunters start to eat some meat during the sharing, they will quickly stop after a couple of bites by ritually saying “*taldu*”, “(I am) full”, meaning they are satisfied that they have been able to eat and able to bring back food to their family. This “*taldu*” is extremely gratifying for the one who killed the animal.

Generally, when the hunter returns to his own hearth, the first ones to help themselves are his children who take the piece that their father holds out to them. As soon as they have had their share, around each fire (each hearth), the observer can witness the strange ritual of food redistribution as Elkin (1936) has commented in Oceania.

According to a custom called *ngarpartji-ngarpartji*, meaning something like “tit for tat”, during his initiation to manhood a man commits himself to become the provider of food for another man in exchange of his sister or daughter, so she can then become the mother of his children. Having children is very important for a man; it enables him to take an active part in the social and cultural exchange network. The exchanges between the two men are then codified according to a system of obligations and prohibitions. Thus, a man will give part of the meat which he brings back to his hearth to his *waputju* (wife’s father) which will surely divide it with his wife or who will give it to one of his sons (*marutju* of the hunter). But, as any relation is generally prohibited between a man and its initiator/provider of wives (*waputju*), he cannot personally give his meat portion to his wife’s father. In the same way, a man cannot either sit down close to his wife’s mother, nor meet and pass her on his way. If this case arises, he must deliberately change direction. Thus, it is in fact his wife who will be an intermediary with his parents-in-law, illustrating the complexity of the subtle network of social links of the aboriginal cultures.

Indeed, as a reciprocal exchange network, any wife has as an obligation to give a part of the meat which she has been given or that she obtained in hunting small game, to her parents-in-law. Their relations are partly prohibited. Partly indeed, for most of the time the woman does not have any intermediary means to communicate with her husband's parents. Those intermediaries are logically the husband and the children who bring to her parents-in-law their part of the wife's tribute. Thus, when a husband gives a piece of meat to his wife, she will make him divide it in two pieces, if it has not already been divided, and will take one of them to her parents. A father generally gives his children the meat he receives, but then he is also free to carry the food left to another appropriate person or to take it for his direct consumption. This system of reciprocal exchange ensures even distribution of food within each family.

A man therefore has interest in having several girls who become wives, as they represent providers of goods and food. From his "richness" a more or less significant group of people will benefit, depending on the number of sons-in-law he has. When anyone eats game meat with the Pitjantjatjara, it is formally forbidden to consume any other unspecified food, such as vegetables, bread or salt for example. If drinking water is permitted, no vegetable food (*may*) is allowed to accompany the meat (*chukka*). This vegetable food consists of several small berries and a kind of bread, formerly prepared using seeds of graminaceae, collected by the women. This is of paramount importance for the diet of the people of Mimili and to their ceremonial life, as many of the rituals are connected with this vegetable food, its gathering and preparation. The technique of preparation is very elaborate and represents a unique *savoir-faire* of the *yankunitjatjara* women, and this gives them undeniable prestige among the populations of the area. The system of distribution as it functions for the meat, also applies to vegetable food, but without the same prohibitions.

Thus, a man's parents can give meat to their son, but his wife will not take her share of it. If the husband has received such a quantity that he has some left over after having given their share to his parents-in-law, the woman could help herself to some, it being understood that in fact she partakes of her father's share. On the other hand, a wife will eat vegetable

food that her husband's parents have sent him. In the same way, a man will not eat meat which has been given to his wife by her parents, but will eat the vegetable food they have sent her. Interestingly a woman will only accept vegetable food from her daughter if it has not been cooked. In this case only, she can prepare, cook and eat it, proclaiming her womanhood in showing she fully remembers and still possesses the woman's knowledge taught her during her own initiation.

The meal and preparation of food thus constitute a whole ceremony, the complexity of which reflects that of the social relationships of aboriginal cultures from this part of Australia. The relationships human beings share together are sometimes obvious to observe. But in this case, through the preparation of the kangaroo and the way its meat is shared, actions which literally bind the whole society in a commitment, a particular relationship is drawn between the animal and the human being. This relationship is a ritualisation of the transformation of the living creature's flesh into edible meat (*kukaringanyi* = to turn into meat). As there is no term to discriminate the "animal" from the "human", there is thus recognition of an existential equality between all creatures. What can appear scandalous, the putting to death and consumption of a live being, is then compensated by a ritual complexity which joins together the quasi-totality of the community in collusion in murder. Indeed each aborigine, by his statute, will play a role in the transformation of the *malu* (the kangaroo) flesh into meat. All the members of a community being in some way accessories to that transformation, justifying the death: everyone is responsible. Consequently nobody can formulate any reproach and even more important, no sensation of guilt can be enshrined in their minds, because the whole society needs physically to master this kind of death to enable the feeding of its members. That is why the disharmony caused by the killing of a living creature may be balanced by rituals and profane ceremonies in order not to let this necessity be scandalous and as such, a reason for oblivion. Indeed what would be the sense of a society and culture which requires humans to ritually increase the number of creatures by performing painful ceremonies, and yet which would not pay any attention to the killing of those same creatures? Such a society would make no sense. As the ceremonies for insuring plentiful game and its killing take place in hidden spots away in

the bush and are only performed by authorized persons, what better mark of social and cultural significance can be given to such acts? The law thus has an assuaging aspect by the training it presupposes. It requires members of society to undergo several stages of initiation. Those stages place the initiate in a role which enables him to achieve certain actions within a framework defined by custom. It thus alleviates the spirit and mind, while presenting the killing of a live being as the realization of a ritual obligation, whose nebulous origin releases one from any possible moral taint. It is surprising that the word used to indicate the action to nourish oneself, to eat, is the verb *ngalkunyi*, also used to express the idea of celebration, in particular applied to the festivities of Christmas in those populations aware of Christianity through the work of missionaries. Thus *tjakangka malu ngalkuntjikitja* confers an aura of celebration on the consumption of kangaroo flesh. Its sharing can be analysed through economic aspects, but it is also based on elements from the imagination of aboriginal cultures, as yet not deteriorated by current transformations of their way of life.

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