



## Uluru Inverted

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### **Abstract**

*Uluru is an Australian 'icon', an impressively huge red boulder located centrally in the arid continent and tapping deeply into the indigenous past. Often seen as the paramount sacred site of the Aboriginal Dreaming, it is a focal point for many Dreaming 'tracks' of the people of the Western Desert 'bloc' who are its 'traditional owners'. Endless busloads of tourists are taken on walks around the base by Aboriginal guides and exhorted not to show disrespect by climbing to the peak. In a country as divided about indigenous issues as Australia, this is a site that, for once, unambiguously presents a positive and unified face, a space where 'things Aboriginal' are held up and admired for their richness and sublimity. A space where a serious attitude is appropriate. While the occasional young tourist plays pranks foolishly flouting this, who would imagine that some Aboriginal people from the same cultural group as the owners are willing to have a good laugh at themselves over the whole Uluru phenomenon? Yet so it is. Men whom I have known for nearly thirty years suddenly told me about a commercial film they said they had once watched together, involving a whitefella who constructed an elaborate and clever joke puncturing the seriousness that envelops Aboriginal Uluru, and about how it had them in stitches. This paper relates my search for the film, and explores the many factors that led to the surprising inversion that my friends' telling of the story expresses.*

### **Keywords**

*Uluru, Australian Aboriginal, storytelling, ethnography*

Recently, after nearly thirty years working with Australia's desert people and having heard many narratives of all kinds, I was told a remarkable story, so unlike any other that when I have recounted it to friends and colleagues, most have pronounced it 'wild'. It has 'shock value' and is hard to interpret – qualities that make it a compelling subject to explore and unpick.

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The story concerns Uluru, that famous Australian monolith and ‘icon’ which stands starkly in a flat sandy landscape, instantly recognisable by its much-photographed profile against the wide desert sky. Located plumb in the middle of this most arid of continents, its fascination lies in the way it projects an image of a bold and brash Australia, yet is simultaneously so redolent of the Aboriginal culture of this land. Here, far from the populated coastal fringe, the Aboriginal people can still be seen as owners and masters of the country, and practitioners of their ancient culture. This Rock, the tourist literature justifiably claims, symbolises the spiritual connectedness to country that is at the heart of Aboriginal religion, and is the actual repository of some of the key mysteries of this culture. Against the compromised background of race relations in Australia, it is a unifying and positive presence.

Nowadays Uluru is a well-organised international tourist destination where visitors are wished smoothly around to designated viewing points. But forty years ago the arrangements were far more haphazard and down-to-earth. This was the setting for our story, which was related to me by an Aboriginal friend of mine, a man of the same desert culture and essentially the same contemporary circumstances as the indigenous group attached to the Uluru area itself, but who is from another community named Mulgaton, several hundred kilometres further west. While this man, Yultu Palmer, is the storyteller as such, I have had to adapt his words and the flow of his narrative to provide necessary explanations and context.

In the unplanned milieu of the Uluru of forty years ago, Yultu Palmer explained to me, there used to be a senior desert man who would meet tourist parties as they arrived at the Rock. Cordially enough, but in a way that brooked no demur, this man would inform the visitor that his name was ‘Mr Uluru’ and that he was to be regarded as the authority figure here. The Rock was his birth-place and birth-right, and the visitor would hear the Dreamtime stories from him, and him only. Negotiations about level of service and price would then follow.

One day, a person made a visit to the Rock who turned out to be right outside the mould of the average tourist. About his identity, I have only been able to confirm from Yultu that he was a ‘whitefella’ and a filmmaker. Yultu can shed no further light on him. The important point for the story is that this man, the film-maker, paid a visit to the Rock and saw Mr Uluru in action with the tourists. Though he revealed nothing at the time, what he saw must have intrigued him greatly, for it caused him to devise and carry out a very complex scheme.

What Mr Film-maker did was to go back to his home in one of Australia’s coastal cities, remaining there for a period long enough for him to produce a movie. He then returned to the Rock and the real action of the story begins.

On the day of his arrival he made it known to everyone in town that a ‘premiere’ showing of his latest movie – featuring Uluru - was about to occur in a public spot near the base of the Rock. As part of his preparations he lured Mr Uluru to the event, promoting him as guest of honour.

Having welcomed the guests and done his preliminary patter, the film-maker turned to Mr Uluru and asked him to introduce himself for the benefit of the cameras that he had set up to record the proceedings.

In both English and his own language, Pitjantjatjara, the old man said 'My name is Mr Uluru. I am the owner of this place, this rock Uluru.'

The film-maker then asked him 'Sir, how do you come to get that name and why are you the owner of this place?'

Mr Uluru explained 'I was born here, and because of that this Rock is part of me, as I am part of it. That is why I am the owner and why I have that name.'

While this exchange was occurring, the film-maker had set the movie to play. An image of the Rock appeared on the screen.

He asked, 'Can you show us exactly where you were born, sir?'

At this, the old man lifted the stick that he carried and pointed to the southern side of the Rock. 'I was born at the waterhole on that side.'

The film cameras had moved in closer to the monolith, focussing on its southern side. A small party of Aboriginal people came into view, standing near the waterhole at the base. There was a man alongside a woman who held a baby. There were no buildings or anything else of a modern nature to be seen – the setting was clearly the pre-contact past.

The film-maker said 'What we are looking at there, sir, is you as a baby, with your mother and father. And I think that these pictures prove that your statement about having been born at this place is true.'

Mr Uluru beamed and nodded.

'However,' the film-maker went on, 'Unfortunately, sir, these facts do not mean that you are entitled to call yourself Mr Uluru or to claim to be the owner of this Rock.'

As Mr Uluru's smile began to fade, the film-maker held up his hand, saying, 'Please just look at the screen for a few moments and you will understand what I am saying! Now we go back further in time...'

The camera was zooming out now, and for the first time offered a prolonged shot of the whole Rock. It now became apparent that the monolith, while having its familiar outline, was strangely smooth, lacking the many gouged indents that are a feature of the real thing. But before the audience had time to react to this discrepancy, the sky in the movie turned dark, a howling wind came up, thunder boomed and lightning flashed. The Rock shook violently, and with this, boulders large and small were thrown out from its giant bulk to the ground below, so that the familiar irregular shape of Uluru appeared. Then, fantastically, as the storm abated, the monolith split open, from the top, like an egg – and out stepped human figures. It was a little family group, like that of the family in the earlier shot, except that this time the characters were white people. For a moment the figures were illuminated by a last flash of lightning, standing in the foreground of the picture, as the Rock closed up again behind them.

'Those people,' said the film-maker in the pause that followed, 'were my mother and father, and me as a baby. That scene shows the time and circumstances of my birth. As that proves, sir, I was born within this Rock, Uluru. While you were born close by, at

that waterhole you pointed to, that is not quite the same thing, as I'm sure you must agree. The Rock only took its real form with my birth, and so it is I who am truly part of its essence, not you. I am from the inside, while you are only from the outside. And because of this I must tell you that I, not you, have the right to be called Uluru and to be known as the real owner of this place'.

My narrator Yultu did not attempt to describe what happened next. For one thing, he was too busy laughing at his story and at the stunned expression on my face. My first question to him, once I had digested the story a little, was about whether he had actually seen these events for himself. 'No', he admitted. 'I saw it in a movie at Mulgaton, with my friends. We all killed ourselves laughing at it.' I clarified that what he meant was he had seen the whole thing in a movie – the scene of the 'premiere' showing at the Rock, with its 'film within a film' of the birth scenes, the storm and so forth. Also, I established that it was many years ago – apparently 30 or 40 years - when he and his friends saw it.

Such is the Uluru Inverted story. It was told to me completely unsolicited, during a period when I was working intensively with Yultu on matters entirely unconnected with Uluru. I assume he told it with the hope of getting a reaction – and he certainly did get one. I didn't find the story funny. Rather, it both shocked and perplexed me. Frankly, I didn't get the point of it. The fact that the point was obviously so self-evident to Yultu himself didn't help my equanimity.

What stands out as shocking is the story's apparent intrusion into the very sensitive territory of race. Uluru is not the setting where one would expect to find challenges to Aboriginal authority and primacy. Yet a white man is depicted here as claiming ownership – worse, of stripping ownership away from its Aboriginal custodian. Yet to take this apparent message at face value would be to overlook a key fact, which is that essentially we are looking not at historical events here, but at a story.

But is there any historical substance to the story at all? My answer is that, beyond the fact that someone like 'Mr Uluru' did exist, there is no evidence that any of it happened. I have searched high and low in the annals of Australian film for the movie, but without success. There are in fact many reasons to doubt the existence of the whitefella protagonist of the story. There are not so many film-makers in Australia, and it is highly unlikely that there would be one both so knowledgeable about desert notions of ownership of place, and so ready to be a renegade in the field of race relations, as the one in the story. All the films that I have found that have dealt at any length with Uluru have shown the conventional and expected respect for its Aboriginal status and associations. On the other hand, there are several films containing brief shots and passing references to Uluru, some of them in the genre of outlandish or 'quirky' film that is quite popular in Australia. It is my hypothesis that one of these latter sorts of films provided a fragment from which the entirely fictional *Uluru Inverted* story was constructed. Who did this constructing? As I explain below, I believe that it was none other than Yultu Palmer himself, with contributions from several of his peers and kinsmen.

In a 2009 article titled '*Hearing Stories, Telling Stories*', anthropologist Paige West noted that:

When anthropologists hear a story ..., they strive to understand ... what [it] says about the world –... The events recounted in the story, however interesting, are often secondary. We don't always try to find out if the story is true or false. Rather we take the story itself as something that can tell us about the social world of the person telling it... [Stories] create relationships between the person telling the story and the person or people hearing the story. They allow the storyteller to craft a unique version ...; in other words, they telegraph and produce identity...

With these observations in mind, an understanding of *Uluru Inverted* as a story may best proceed from the starting point that it is a story told not by 'anyone' but specifically by an Aboriginal man – in fact a man who is almost a local of the Uluru group.

Why would such a person tell a story that, whatever else it may do, appears to make fun of essentially his own people – again bearing in mind the context of Australian race relations? And why would he find such a story so amusing?

I do not have the space to explain this in detail, but the apparent slight to or repudiation of Aboriginal hegemony at Uluru that would be part and parcel of such a story if it came from some sources is actually absent, given the authorship. Yultu is no 'sell-out' to his people. He and his peers have had a different historical experience than many other Aboriginal people across the continent, as a result of which they can take in their stride the idea that a whitefella played a successful con trick on an Aboriginal man. The focus is not on the racial contrast but on the cleverness and devastating effect of the trick, as played by one man on another. This is what Yultu and his fellows find humorous. Having said this, Yultu was obviously aware that the story 'inverts' relations in the racial domain and knew that this would carry 'shock value' for someone like me.

But what was it that made this con trick something to savour so avidly? Here we need to be aware of the potency in Australia of the so-called 'tall poppy syndrome'. Interestingly, the desire to 'cut down to size' people who elevate themselves above the crowd is one of the values that is actually shared between the worldviews of Australian Aboriginal people on the one hand and the largely Anglo derived dominant culture on the other. But the particular inflection of the tall poppy idea for desert Aboriginal men is informed by the idea that a man should be reticent about and economical with his knowledge. He should not boast about such things as his entitlement to have special knowledge and his right to speak about things of value. Nor should he divulge valued knowledge indiscriminately. That Yultu regarded Mr Uluru as guilty of offending against this code was clearly apparent to me during his narration. Thus, I would argue that the *Uluru Inverted* story represents a way that Mr Uluru's peers subtly brought him down to size, while insulating themselves from the charge of having done anything of the sort by putting the blame on a whitefella.

In the last couple of paragraphs I have begun to allude to a category of desert men and peers as part of the context for an understanding of our story. It is time to make it clear that it would be misleading to envision Yultu in the role of a purely individual story-teller, inventing a tale for an anonymous public. In the desert context in which this

story arose, there are always multiple, but particular, tellers and audiences. Whenever I hear a new story I have learned to fully expect to soon hear it, or references to it, from other sources. Stories arise mercurially and as mercurially they 'fly around' the desert communities. They are shared creations and shared products. But there are always specific circumstances as well, and in this case I knew what some of these were.

At the time Yultu told me the story I was undertaking a spell of concentrated fieldwork with him and several other senior men of the Mulgaton area. The activities had to do with discussing and establishing individual relationships to land, including documenting stories about connectedness to country – the same kinds of ingredients that appear in the Uluru Inverted story. Yultu is in the category of a senior man and is articulate and ambitious, but he was far from the most senior or knowledgeable man within our party. Nor had he been a regular participant in such work with me in the past, as the others had. He had quite a lot to prove.

In between the bouts of work we were doing, particularly as we drove the sometimes long distances to and from our base camp to field sites each morning and evening, I found Yultu telling me several extended narratives, including one about his teen years in the 1970s. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he had ventured far from the home territory of the desert before completing his initiation to manhood. He had several random encounters with white people in the process. I realised that he was reliving and perhaps reconstructing aspects of his life history at this time, in the context of the engrossing work in which we were all engaged. I also knew that a lot of discussions were going on among the men in the evenings, often out of my hearing. It was towards the end of this time together that he suddenly told me the *Uluru Inverted* story. We were alone in the car at the time, but the fact that it was not purely his own story was made plain when I asked him to clarify a point, and he replied 'Ask Mr Johnson about it, if you can get him to stop laughing' – referring to one of our companions. From such indications I gleaned that the story had been told, and no doubt shaped into its current form, in this very period of our collaborative work.

Thus I believe that the story emerged in the context of, and as a vehicle for, some reinvention and re-negotiation of identity that was happening within this small group. This is a society in which everyone has known one another all their lives, and thus in which everybody's place is well-known. This can be very constraining for a person, like Yultu, who might like to make changes in how he or she is perceived. Producing a new story may be a way to do some reconstructing. As Michael Jackson (2013, p. 17) put it, we may 'tell stories as a way of transforming our sense of who we are, recovering a sense of ourselves as actors and agents'. But there are some conditions. A story in the desert must be understood to be about events that have happened – no credence is given to mere figments of someone's imagination. Thus I suggest that Yultu's mind worked away on a fragment of a movie he had seen decades before, and built it into the elaborate *Uluru Inverted* story. This narrative provided a way for him to indicate to his fellows in our work group, who were all more senior to him in the hierarchy of desert life, that his horizons were in some ways broader than theirs, that he was something of a 'man of the world', and thus that he was eligible for a rise in status. Although he was ostensibly

relating the plot of a movie, the sub-text would necessarily be that he could not think his way around the events and themes of this plot without such ‘man of the world’ understandings. In this project he drew on the excursions to far-away places of his earlier years and the encounters that he had experienced. The story gets ‘bite’ from the aspects alluded to earlier and from the diabolical manipulation by ‘Mr Film-maker’ of desert beliefs around ownership of places. The beauty of it all, if my hypothesis is correct, is that by working with a story whose content had nothing to do with him, Yultu could refashion his identity without appearing to do so. But success also depended on whether the men he was trying to impress would actually engage with the story. Apparently they did, if they found it as funny as Yultu indicated.

#### REFERENCES

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