

‘Men’s business’ – ‘Women’s business’

Two stories from Aboriginal culture

Rosemary Crumlin

Christianity and television have broken into Aboriginal culture and affected its sacred myths and codes. Silences have been broken.

FOR MANY ABORIGINAL PEOPLE TODAY PAINTING is the face of respectability they present to the world. Paintings are bought from Aboriginal communities by city art-dealers and sold to collectors and corporations throughout the world. Books are written and the original works have become a new and much desired currency. The works of traditional elders, those who have never learnt to read or write, are especially sought. These carry layers of meaning, they hold stories from a culture deeply spiritual and marked by rituals as alive as the ancestors who still, they believe, dwell in the land. But the use of materials like canvas and acrylic paints comes with the ‘whitefella’, and it is the buyer who, in some real way, influences what is told, seen and paid for. The elders in the communities try to hold their silences about what is secret and sacred and then to decide what layers of meaning in the works can be spoken about, and to whom. Inevitably, as younger generations become educated in the linear ways of white society and are taught in it to covet and value what it holds dear, they move away from the ancient ways of seeing, speaking, dancing and singing and towards the culture of those who seek to colonize both spiritually and materially.

This short article is an attempt to allow the voices of two traditional elders, a man and a woman, to be heard in the way that belongs to them – through their stories and paintings as I have had them passed to me. The stories, and the paintings, can be like a mini-initiation into the spirituality of these ancient people. Yet even within these two works and the stories which accompany them, the creeping influence of ‘white’ art, ‘white’ religion and ‘white’ values can be discerned. Much that was previously not generally known about ancestor spirits, their journey across the country and the hidden rituals of maturation is told in the subject matter of the Balgo painting. The other painting from

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Turkey Creek in Western Australia treats of the advent of Christianity and the way the artist, Hector Sundaloo, now presents images for the Christian God and the incarnation, not as something new, but within his religious system. Both stories in their richness function against any simplistic reductionism – they raise questions about these ancient people, particularly about their spirituality and its relationship to the land, or about the influence of the Christian story on their traditional myths and rituals. And in doing this they invite the beholder to reflect also on her own story and spirituality.

I acknowledge those people in the Aboriginal communities of Warmun and Balgo who continue to make such encounters possible.

HECTOR'S STORY

*He was a two way man
he was a very clever man for the Dreaming.*

Hector Sundaloo (Jandany), Aboriginal elder from the Warmun Community at Turkey Creek, spoke these words about George Mung Mung (Mukung) as he told me that George had died from a chest infection while away on 'men's business' – an initiation ceremony – in the remote beaches of the Bungle Bungles in Western Australia. Of course, he could not utter George's name until the period of grieving was over (a period lasting many months in this case, as George was a significant leader) and George's spirit had time to return to its spirit home deep within his country.

In the tiny Warmun Community Hector and George were the driving force in bringing Christianity to the group, yet in seeing that it came married to their ancient Aboriginal religion. Each day the two of them would make their way to the little school to be with the children, telling them stories of how their ancestors made their way through this country, singing and dancing, confronting evil, being naughty as well as good, and then entering into the rocks, the waterholes, the hills (Bungles), the animals, the birds and the snakes so that today their spirits still live. Gradually these two old men were preparing the children for the ultimate responsibility: to care for and keep a right relationship to this land. 'The land is me and I am it. I belong to this land.' They would tell stories and dance them into life, paint and carry the finished boards on their shoulders at ritual times, so that the spirit of the ancestors came to be woven into the lives of their people.

This is what is meant by the term 'Dreaming'. It is an all-encompassing word, first used by white people as they struggled to come to

terms with the cluster of myths, laws, history and stories which form the fabric of Aboriginal society. Today the term is also used by Aborigines themselves. It has nothing to do with what happens when a person is asleep but everything to do with right living as it has been handed down from elder to younger over more than forty thousand years. It is the lore, and the law of the land.

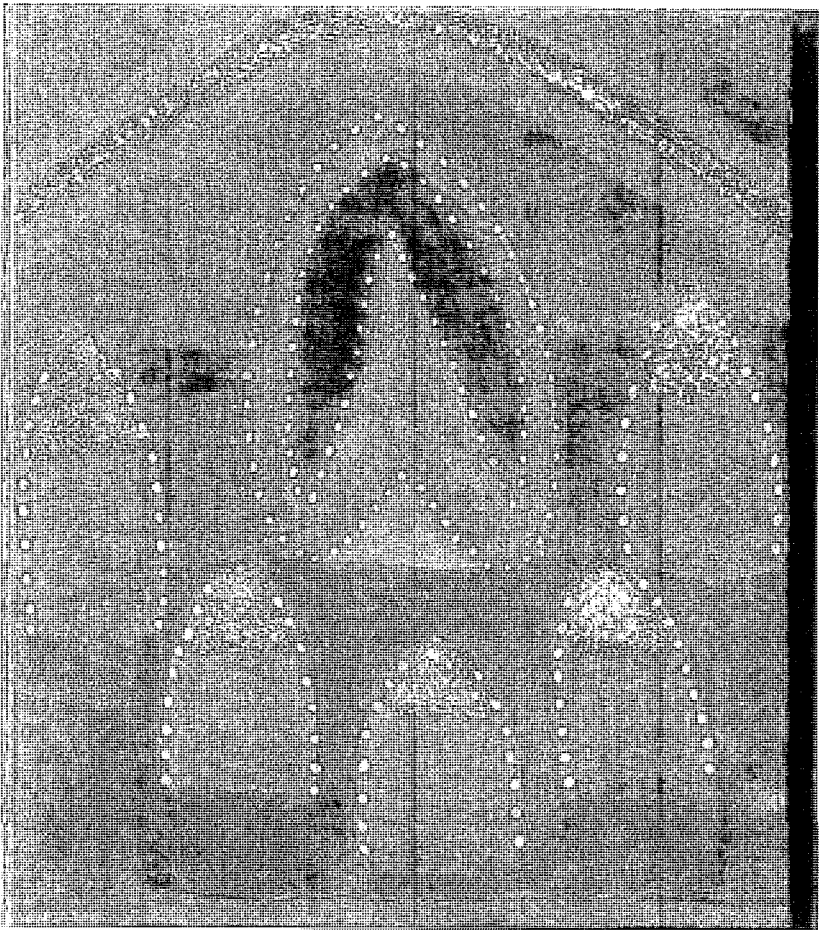
At the heart of this spirituality is the land from which the spirit of a particular group has come, and in which the ancestors still dwell – in a waterhole, a rock, a hill, a snake, an animal. ‘And that is where they still are today,’ is like a refrain in the creation stories often told.

But Hector and George were Christians, and the little school is Catholic. Hector is still alive. He is highly respected and revered in the community as a traditional leader. He is ‘Ngapuny man’, ‘God man’. He is also a great artist so the stories he tells are often his paintings. At Easter and Pentecost he is the sacred storyteller, the leader, the priest whom others follow. There is also an ordained Catholic priest at these times but the liturgy belongs to the community; they have painted the boards, the elders tell the stories and chant the songs, and Hector – tall and straight with his snowy white hair and thick glasses – is the storyteller. Often he leads the processions, stopping by this rock or that landform or tree and pointing out the tracks and traces of the ancestors and the markings of Ngapuny. (‘We always knew about Ngapuny and the Holy Spirit,’ he said to me one day, ‘but youse fellas had to tell us of Jesus.’)

The day I went to Frog Hollow it was about 40 degrees centigrade and very sticky. I came because I was hoping to speak with Hector about an exhibition I was curating, but I wasn’t sure there would be any of the community there. For someone had died in Frog Hollow and it had been smoked and abandoned to allow the spirit of the deceased to make its way back into its own country. We parked the big four-wheel drive under a tree. I waited, for I had not been invited into the space of the community. After a while Hector came out of one of the huts, a bandana around his forehead. He moved in my direction, not yet looking at me. He was carrying a small canvas in his long skinny fingers. ‘This is for you,’ he said as he placed it in my hands. I stood looking at it for some time, knowing the specialness of the moment, but not being able to ‘read’ the work.

‘Tell me about it, Hector,’ I said. He pointed to the top of the work and ran his finger around the arc. ‘That’s Milky Way.’ I knew the constellation of stars held for Aboriginal people many stories of the Dreaming. ‘And this?’ I said, pointing to the mysterious shape that

hovered beneath the stars, half heart, womb-like, an arms-outstretched gesture. He looked at me quizzically. 'That's Ngapuny.' He waited for the truth to dawn. Here in this one figure the old man, the Aboriginal elder who had never been to school and who could neither read nor write English (why should he, when he spoke four or five Aboriginal languages?) had created (found? made? invented?) a new symbol that pointed to multiple meanings and layers of meaning for the godhead. Here was no triangle or third eye or old man in the sky. Here was God, Ngapuny – earth, mother, father, heart, embrace. 'And these?' Pointing to the shapes like the Bungle Bungle rock formations in the landscape behind me. 'Them's Jesus, Mary, Joseph,' and his eyes twinkled, 'and you and me.'



Hector always uses clays from the earth ground up with gum from a bloodwood tree as a binder. Earlier, as was common in the area, he painted on anything he could find: flat pieces of wood from packing crates, old doors, even fly screens. These would be carried on the shoulders in procession and ritual movement. More recently canvas is used but the Warmun Community still holds a wonderful collection of ritual boards. Many carry Christian symbolism, all rethought and redolent with the layered symbolism of both Aboriginal and Christian ancestry. 'Two way', as he said of George Mung Mung, but it seems to me 'one way' – an in-depth meditation on the meaning of God, redemption and resurrection at the end of a millennium.

TJEMMA'S STORY

Woman's law, woman's culture
Yawulu – we hold really hard
We don't lose or leave in
This culture for woman
This is very strong, this law for all
The woman
*The Woman's Law.*¹

Like Hector Jandany, Tjemma Napanangka is a law person, responsible for ritual. Tjemma's responsibility is with 'women's business' (law/Dreaming) in the small Aboriginal community of Balgo Hills in the Kutjungka Region at the edge of the Great Sandy Desert in Western Australia, about five hundred kilometres south of Turkey Creek.

The earth is flat and red in Balgo but beyond the settlement lies 'the pound', a stunningly beautiful country which stretches for hundreds of kilometres and is striped in soft pinks, greens, blues and reds depending on the time of day and whether it has rained.

As a law woman, Tjemma often talks about her responsibility to 'grow up the land and to grow up the children'. Men's business might be steeped in rituals of initiation and law but women's business is almost always about nurturing the land and caring for children. Women's paintings frequently contain images of country and food – bush tomato, wild carrots and other bush 'tucker' as well as waterholes and the sacred places where ancestor spirits reside. If these are not cared for, the culture will die. Like that of the men, theirs is the responsibility for country. 'The land owns you and you have to look after it. And that just goes on for generations. It's passed on. And it's in your heart. It's in every Aboriginal person's heart.'²

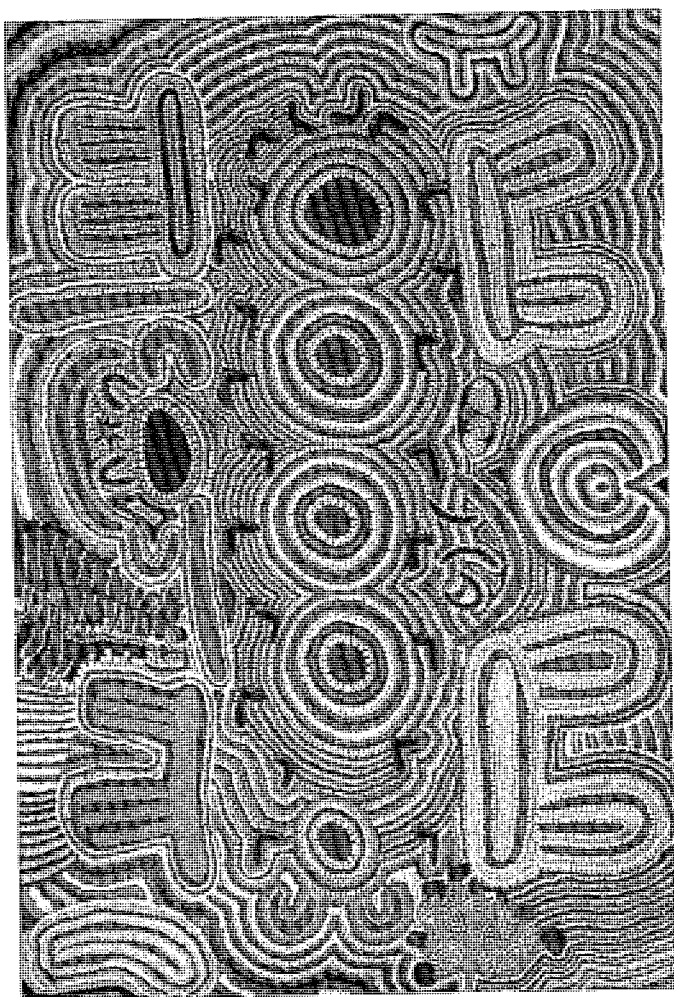
Anything that threatens the land threatens the survival of the culture, for without those links the ancestor spirits would die and the people would be orphaned.

I have written elsewhere more fully of the threat to traditional ways and beliefs that came with the advent of television in the eighties. The children were more interested in the magic box and its stories and people than in standing by while the elders painted about the Two Man Dreaming or the Tingari Cycle or Wanayara, the Rainbow Serpent who dwelt in the waterhole. Yet the future of the community and its country depended on the young being initiated into eventual adult responsibility for its myths, beliefs and land. 'What shall we tell our children so that they will know who we are?' the adults asked each other. Four Yagga Yagga women, who lived in an out-station south of Balgo, decided to paint together one of the key myths and then to sing and dance it into life. Surely then, they said to each other, all will be better and our ancestors will be well.

The painting, *Tjibari*, tells the story of two young ancestor girls and their adventures as they go from waterhole to waterhole up through the country, painting their bodies, dancing and singing and naming each spot. Eventually they come to the 'Living Water'. Aboriginal people have always called a fresh-water stream which never dries up 'Living Water', and they go underground ('and that is where they still are today'). This is the first and evident layer of the story – it is a journey of discovery where the explorers name each landmark and celebrate its existence before they move on.

But there is another layer to the story and the painting, available only to those who are initiated into its deeper meaning. 'Tjibari' is a traditional healing song that celebrates the moment of maturation of young girls. Along the way the two ancestor girls become women. This is 'women's business' and when this work was painted in 1989, this layer was 'closed' or secret, and not easily spoken about. Those who had passed through the ritual and so had sung the story, recognized the sacredness of the work. The women artists, Tjemma Napanangka, Millie Nampitjinpa, Kunintji Nampitjinda and Bai Bai Napangarti must have talked about this layer as they dotted in the complex rhythms and the older Aboriginal women who watched them dance it into life recognized it, but that was all. This is the layer of silence.

Because the Tjibari story is so powerful and so common in this area, I often refer to it and show a slide of this painting when I work with non-indigenous women as they explore their own spirituality. All the other paintings I use in this face-to-face work are originals, so that



people can encounter the power of the original art, as well as simply hearing about them or seeing them in reproductions. So a couple of months ago I contacted Tjemma Napanangka in Balgo to see if she and Bai Bai Napangarti (the only two left of the original four) would create for me another Tjibari painting. I knew that it would, like any great myth, change in the retelling, be different, yet the same. Ten years had passed since the first work and much had changed in Balgo, so I waited in some expectation and trepidation for this second version to arrive. What now would they be willing to reveal? How would they tell this living myth now that TV is a part of daily life and the community is dealing with isolation, violence and petrol-sniffing as well as with great and diverse forms of poverty?

This is the painting that came. I ask you to imagine its bright yellows, oranges, greens and browns; and to see these two elders, Bai Bai and Tjemma, sitting in the red earth patiently dotting in the major features of the story as they talk and chant the story.³ I ask you, too, to imagine this frail woman, Tjemma Napanangka, as she tells the story and points out the different features in the painting. This version too recounts the journey of two Nangala sisters as they travel across the country from south to north along a songline:⁴

These two girls are sitting close to a soak (waterhole) called Mulara Yurrupungu; they dance up to Ngamalu south of Yagga Yagga, singing and dancing all the way. Next is Marka Tjarringtjaja where they sing and dance and make a windbreak and dig for water in the dry soak; they gather bush tomatoes and seeds in their coolamon, all the time singing and dancing; next to Pindi Soak then on to Kapulu Lungu, a very big soak. After that they see big smoke from bushfire. 'Which way we go, we can't see; go back to Kapulu Lungu.' The two on the left are the young sisters; the ones on the right are women. Along the way the younger sister says to the older 'My sister, I'm proper woman now, just like you'. All the way up, singing with the land and dancing for culture.

So in this version, after the advent of TV, after years of watching popular shows in the heat of Balgo nights, after many visits into 'white fella' country of the major Australian cities and many appearances at art exhibitions and interviews with the media, the journey is no longer overtly in search for 'living water', nor is it clear that the two sisters go underground, and 'are still there today' as in the earlier version. Perhaps, most significantly, what was 'closed' to men and to uninitiated women in the 1989 painting is now 'open'. 'My sister, I'm proper woman now, just like you.' Women's business revealed to any viewer.

Silence broken.

Rosemary Crumlin RSM is an art curator and art historian. Relevant exhibitions and books include *Aboriginal art and spirituality* (Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1991) and *Beyond belief: modern art and the religious imagination* (National Gallery of Victoria, Australia, 1998).

NOTES

1 Tjemma Napanangka to Crumlin, 1991.

2 Mary Darkie Napurrula in *Lore of the land* (Melbourne: Fraynetworks Multimedia, 1999).

3 There are more than 24,000 dots of colour in this one painting. The rough structure of the painting is drawn in first with a stick dipped in acrylic paint, then each dot is added with the rhythm of the story.

4 The term popularized by Bruce Chatwin for the Dreaming tracks of ancestors. Aboriginal people call these 'strings'. They criss-cross this great land and traditional people recognize and revere them.

THE PAINTINGS

Ngapuny 1991

Hector Sundaloo

Warmun Community, Western Australia

Earth ochres on canvas

560 × 470 mm

Private collection, Melbourne

Tjibari – a woman's healing song 1999

Tjemma Napanangka and Bai Bai Napangarti

Balgo Hills, Western Australia

Acrylics on canvas

1200 × 800 mm

Private collection, Melbourne