

Fine art to the rescue: Kuninjku modernism

Biography:

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Dedicated to all those who believe that art can change the world

Like living things, cultures survive by adaptation. Adaptation is not simply the triumph of the strongest: it is a subtle strategy of resistance and accommodation to competitors in new environments. In the case of cultures, threatened practices survive if they can integrate with the dominant habitus – either by finding a niche or a more central role. Cultures survive when they have something valued by others and a mechanism of trade or communication with which to exchange it.

The Indigenous art boom that began in the 1980s provided Indigenous communities with a potent strategy for not just survival but also revival - or so thought the Koori artist, activist and administrator, Lin Onus, in 1988:

Consider the situation of people driven from their homelands or confined to areas in which any hope of economic survival is effectively denied them, then 'Art' becomes a viable and important way of breaking the nexus of poverty. In some areas this new found economic independence has brought with it a resurgence in cultural affairs and ceremony.

This cultural resurgence has been the key to remote Indigenous communities pulling back from the brink of extinction. The relentless advance of colonialism had eroded the power of Indigenous Elders and cultural traditions within their own communities – a process anthropologists call ethnocide. Its cancer continues, but the art boom provided some remission because its principle beneficiaries were the Elders. The money they brought into the community through the sale of their art and their growing respect in the wider world enhanced their power in the local community and with it the importance of ceremony and traditional cultural values. In the midst of social ruin and unprecedented health decline has, paradoxically, been a profound cultural revival. This paper discusses how and why this occurred in relation to one small community in Western Arnhem Land: the Kuninjku.

The Kuninjku community is remote and small: about 400 people, of which about 100 are practicing artists. Along with several other dialects, they are part of the Bininj Kunwok language, which comprises nearly 2000 speakers in Western Arnhem Land. The Kuninjku enjoy such close relations with their neighbours that, until a few years ago, anthropologists did not distinguish them from the Kunwinjku to the west. This very recent revival of Kuninjku identity has largely been due to the success of their artists.

During the twentieth century the Kuninjku community became part of an ever-widening but exotic and threatening habitus. Today this larger habitus reaches well beyond the territory of the Bininj and even of the Australian nation. The health, even survival, of the small Kuninjku community depends on how well it integrates and hence communicates with this new all-pervasive environment that we Balanda¹ call modernity.

Such transactions between cultures, between inner and outer worlds, are hardly new, for they are the lifeblood of identity. Humans are well equipped to mediate such transactions through their propensity for aesthetic expression. Art both encodes the traditional discourses of identity that form communities, and shapes their adaptation to new economies. In short art mediates tradition and change, identity and difference. A good historical example of this in Arnhem Land was the extensive contact with Macassan fishermen for many hundreds of years before the British colonised the area. According to archaeologists and anthropologists, this contact shaped the art, ceremony and language of this period, creating a distinctive Aboriginal culture.² By incorporating elements of Macassan culture into their own beliefs and religious/aesthetic practices, Arnhem Land communities were able to make the most of the Macassan trade. Likewise, British colonialism reshaped Arnhem Land art in the twentieth century.

One hundred years ago the British colonists stopped the Macassan trade, creating havoc with an economy and culture that had become essential to the wellbeing of Arnhem Landers. When traditions are upturned radical stylistic shifts occur in art as the community struggles to adapt. We Balanda call this modernism because we relate it to the modernity that devastated our traditional cultures. So profound were these changes that modernism has become for us an aesthetic norm, and the only viable path through the maelstrom of modernity. I believe we should also be describing twentieth-century Kuninjku bark painting as a type of modernism³ because its stylistic shifts were a response to the unprecedented social stress caused by modernity. As Eric Michaels insisted some twenty years ago: wherever modernity goes modernism is sure to follow.

Only by understanding bark painting as a modernism will we appreciate its full social and political significance. However, while the West controlled and profited from the destruction they wrought on their traditions, the Kuninjku did not. Arguably Western modernism serves modernity by both defining and legitimising its leviathan thirst for change. Kuninjku modernism has a very different task; its job is to serve and sustain a subaltern and traditional community and, at the same time, integrate it with the economy and culture of modernity that penetrates the globe at an increasingly microscopic scale. We might call it postcolonial modernism.

Many cultures, especially tradition-orientated ones, do not survive modernity. The Kuninjku have only survived thus far because they were among the last to directly experience the cutting edge of colonialism, primarily because of their 'isolation from distant colonial and mission outposts.'⁴ They were lucky enough to largely avoid the large-scale massacres and murderous relations that occurred east, west and south of them during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Even the missions, established in the early to mid-twentieth century, were situated well away from Kuninjku homelands. 'Considerable numbers of Kuninjku people lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers until 1963, when a track was blazed from Kunbarlanja to Maningrida'⁵ – though the community was by then fragmented, with many living on the missions at Kunbarlanja and Minjilang. Nevertheless, it was on the missions that Kuninjku modernism first emerged though the demands of an art market, and especially through the efforts of anthropologists such as Elkin and the Berndts to develop a fine art market for bark painting.

When the Bininj began returning to Maningrida in the 1960s they were at least closer to their homelands. However, their survival has probably never been so tenuousness as it is now. If Richard Trudgen's analyses of the neighbouring Yolgnu⁶ also holds true of the Kuninjku, the previous thirty years have been increasingly desperate times. The professionalisation and bureaucratisation of Indigenous affairs under the policy of self-determination and Land Rights resulted in the loss of community control – with even the most mundane jobs being lost to Balanda. Literacy and health indicators have been in decline. Not only do those who came of

age during the mission era have higher literacy levels than their children educated in the 1980s and 90s but they also outlive them. This is despite enormous resources being invested in Indigenous communities. The reason, says Trudgen, is not due to the infrastructure itself, but to its delivery in ways that alienate rather than resonate with traditional Indigenous community structures. In short, the era of self-determination inaugurated by the Whitlam government has, despite its best intentions, unleashed an unprecedented ethnocide that makes the previous mission era appear like a Golden Age.

Some have even argued that the success of Indigenous art is itself a symptom of this ethnocide. After all, its transformation into fine art occurred at the same time as the professionalisation of Indigenous affairs, and its effect, it has been argued, aestheticised essential religious practices thus robbing Indigenous people of their last lifeline to tradition.⁷ This argument does not bear scrutiny. The devastation of modern bureaucracy has been most acutely felt in the new administrative centres initially created during the assimilationist period of the 1960s – Papunya in the Centre, Kunbarlanja and Maningrida in Western Arnhem Land. However, another initiative of this period was the outstation movement, which was led by Elders and senior artists. They have been centres of community and cultural revival: the increase of traditional ceremony and fine art practice has gone hand in hand.

How did fine art, an invention of Enlightenment Europe and the mainframe of modernism, protect traditional Indigenous religious beliefs? The reason is partly due to modernism's fetishisation of tribal art as authentic art. But more importantly, it was also due to traditional Indigenous strategies of dealing with outside and alien worlds. These had always been a subtle dialect of openness and secrecy, of dialogue and resistance. If the Aborigines closely guarded their identity, they readily sought out things that could be translated, assimilated and used. One of these was fine art. Many Balanda critics are fearful of assimilating classical Indigenous art into Eurocentric conventions, but Indigenous people have rarely hesitated to appropriate modern European technologies and discourses for their own ends.

In the nineteenth century the Balanda sometimes collected Aboriginal adornments on bark sheets used to make shelters. Because these adornments were made for either fun or for pedagogical purposes, and were not part of religious ceremonies, they could be readily exchanged with the Balanda. Further, they provided opportunities for trade and communication. The anthropologist Baldwin Spencer, a talented artist and collector of European modernist art, had not been very impressed by the aesthetic capabilities of Australians. But he changed his mind with the barks he collected at Kunbarlanja (Oenpelli) just before World War One. Thus began the era of Kuninjku modernism.

In bending traditional Indigenous designs towards the protocols of modernist fine art, bark painting became a type of second language (a concept embedded in classical Indigenous cultures) whose express purpose was to communicate something important to the Balanda. In this the West Arnhem Land painters were successful early on. Western critics immediately recognised their modernism. A reviewer of the first substantial exhibition of bark paintings (collected by Spencer from Kunbaralanja), in Melbourne in 1929, wrote: 'many of these [bark paintings] are the works of the fierce Alligator River tribes, whose artists evidently included cubists and impressionists.'⁸ He was, of course, being facetious – though the joke was as much on modernism as on the bark painters. However Herbert Read meant what he said when, in a book on Arnhem Land art published in 1954, he wrote: 'As the cultured reader turns these pages his delight in the paintings will be expressed in wondering evocations of the names of modern artists – now Braque, now Klee, now Giacometti, now Wilfredo Lam.'⁹

Such translation was possible because there are real affinities between tribal designs and European modernism, as if each could read the other's language. Indeed, we might be better to focus on the

similarities between Indigenous and European modernisms than overly worry about the differences. And there are plenty of similarities. European modernists are characterised by their restless innovativeness, and their attraction to tribal art was, in large part, predicated on it seeming so much more innovative than their own heritage. Contrary to what some believe, innovation and originality are not foreign to tribal art practices,¹⁰ and certainly this is the case with the bark painting movement.¹¹

European modernists and tribal artists also share an ambivalent attitude towards modernity, and both resist it through recourse to outmoded or traditional art forms. European modernism is, after all, predominantly an archaic style that sought inspiration in the very traditions that modernity eroded, vandalised or pillaged. Like European modernism, bark painting is innovative and uses tradition to negotiate a position of strength within its ambivalent feelings towards modernity. 'The mistake', write Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher, '... is to interpret signs of tradition in a culture as conservatism and resistance to "progress".' The question that needs to be asked today, they assert, is 'where and how may tradition manifest itself in contemporary artistic and critical practice?'¹² This has been particularly obvious with the Pintubi in the Centre and the Kuninjku in the North.

In our own rush towards the contemporary – our affirmation of modernity – we Balanda often forget the necessity of criticism (or resistance) in successful adaptation, and the potential of tradition as a site of resistance. This potential is clearly evident in the postcolonial modernism of remote Indigenous communities. Nigel Lendon has aptly called it 'radical neo-traditionalism' – though it could also be applied to European modernism. However, rather than being a desperate tactic forced on Indigenous artists by the Balanda, it was intrinsic to traditional Indigenous art practice well before colonisation. This is why Kuninjku bark painting remains a community art rather than a commercial production line for global markets.

The market demand for bark painting strengthened traditional practices because it affirmed the function of art in Kuninjku society (and arguably all societies), which is to broker the outside and the inside. Indeed these are the very terms anthropologists coined in their explanation of the traditional Kuninjku practice of dividing their traditional art into two basic types: 'inside' (*djamun*: sacred) and 'outside' (*yarlang*: unrestricted, not sacred, open). The former is abstract and iconic. As in a holy icon, the design is directly or metonymically 'connected' to its source in the Dreamtime (*djang*), and so is too powerful for ordinary (uninitiated) people. The latter is realistic (though often stylised), representational and narrative in structure. It is representational not just because of its realism but also because of its semiotic structure in which meaning is encoded rather than revelatory. That is, its meaning is read. In this way the direct connection between the design and its inner meaning is occluded or 'smudged', so that ordinary people are protected from the power of *djang*.¹³

While some Kuninjku objects and designs are only seen in secret sacred ceremonies (i.e. are inside), all designs have an inside and an outside. This is because in the Kuninjku world all things have an inside and outside: like a door, one side faces out (to the secular world) and the other in (to the sacred). Critical theory would recognise a Platonic metaphysics: inside are Platonic forms that generate the many different but lesser and imperfect copies of the outside. The value of these outside forms is pedagogical: they are analogies or shadows of inside truths that point to *djang*. Thus, if fine art bark paintings always face out, they are but a heartbeat away from the secret sacred. The outside, in its very structure, gestures to the inside.

While fine art bark painting is outsider art, unlike traditional outsider art it is painted for a particular outside: the Balanda art market. Since the 1970s it has also tended to more directly use the traditional metonymic ancestral patterns once reserved for insider art. This is due to the demands of the market for sacred art,¹⁴ to modernist taste for abstract designs, and also to the interests of the artists, who use the art to communicate to Balanda the importance of their religious beliefs.

The Indigenous desire to communicate their spiritual beliefs to Balanda has been evident since contact time. The first recorded instance of this occurring with the Bininj was in 1912, when the economic and cultural effects of the British closing down the Macassan trade and introducing their own economy was being severely felt. Then Elders secretly gave the anthropologist Baldwin Spencer about eighty secret sacred objects associated with the Mardayin ceremony.¹⁵ This would have been a grave and difficult step to take. Undoubtedly they recognised him as a Balanda Elder and expected him to honour the insider status of these objects (i.e. not show women, children or uninitiated men). The development of fine art bark painting can be considered a more satisfactory way of communicating important business to the Balanda because it translates 'inside' meaning into a language that the Kuninjku control and the Balanda seem to understand, aesthetically at least. Arguably, this aestheticisation of bark painting is a means of simultaneously revealing and concealing secret knowledge and so is in accord with traditional Kuninjku beliefs. Like many modernist artists interested in the spiritual, Kuninjku artists have found abstraction an ideal format because it is a foil that keeps the invisible invisible.

If for Balanda modernists the authenticity or spirituality that they sensed in tribal art was lost in theirs, in Kuninjku modernism it has not been foreclosed. The secret of their art's authenticity is its success in glossing the power of traditional ceremonies while simultaneously guarding their sacred secrets that are the spiritual basis of Kuninjku community. In this Kuninjku bark painting has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of all the experts. In 1928 Spencer predicted that 'in the course of only a very few short years ... all such ceremonies as the Maraian [Mardayin] will be forgotten and neglected.'¹⁶ If only he could return from the dead and see how wrong he was. However the triumph of Kuninjku modernism is not just measured by the survival of Kuninjku traditions, ceremonies and so community, but also by its ability to shape Balanda attitudes to Indigenous cultures. In this respect the significance of Kuninjku bark paintings are not archaeological, anthropological or aesthetic, but spiritual, historical and political: the community they address is not just the Kuninjku but also the wider global community into which they must integrate.

The market success of bark painting is ultimately measured by what it does for the spirit of both Indigenous communities and the wider world (rather than the dollars it earns or its aesthetic achievements). Hence the outstations on which the best art is produced are a potent example of the efficacy of fine art in the positive development of remote Indigenous communities no matter how oppressed they are. The outstation movement got underway in the 1970s but Elders/artists empowered by the fine art bark painting movement of the mission period laid its foundation in the previous decade. Yirawala, the most famous Kuninjku painter of this time, dreamed of returning to live in his homeland at Marugulidban on the Liverpool River (about 65 kilometres from Maningrida), but on the eve of moving back he died at the mission in Minjilang where he had lived most of his painting life. He had devoted the last years of his life to painting what he called his 'big book' – an Indigenous bible for cultural revival. In 1976, a few months after his death, these 139 paintings, the only complete Mardayin cycle of paintings to exist, were bequeathed to the National Gallery of Australia – where the significance is yet to be fully appreciated by the artworld.

The Kuninjku outstation movement was well established by the end of the 1970s and in the 1980s the amount of art produced increased enormously. In 1988 the Kuninjku artist John Mawurndjul was invited to exhibit in the Magicians of the Earth exhibition in Paris. It was developments such as this that led Lin Onus to think he could finally 'see a light at the end of the tunnel'.¹⁷ And you can't imagine how good that light looked and the hope it instilled. Seventeen years later Mawurndjul is the most celebrated living Arnhem Land painter and the Kuninjku rival the Pintubi in reputation as artists. However they are not out of the tunnel. Art cannot change the world on its own. It is just a means for ideological control, and a utopian one at that. Fine art has changed things for remote Indigenous communities, but it is still too early to know if it has been

enough. This is why Onus, when he saw that light at the end of the tunnel, prayed that it wasn't 'a cigarette butt that someone dropped.'

¹ As we Balanda do not yet have an accepted name for ourselves, in this essay I have adopted the Arnhem Land term for non-Aboriginal people: 'Balanda'.

² See Ronald M. and Catherine H. Berndt, *Arnhem Land its history and people*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1954.

³ Ian McLean, 'Kuninjku Modernism', *Artlink*, 25, 2, 2005, pp.48-51 . A more extensive article will be published in *Third Text* shortly.

⁴ Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, 'The social universe of Kuninjku trucks', unpublished papers, p1.

⁵ Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, 'The social universe of Kuninjku trucks', unpublished papers, p1.

⁶ Richard Trudgen, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, Aboriginal Resource and Development Services Inc., Darwin, 2003.

⁷ For example, see Tony Fry and Anne-Marie Willis, 'Aboriginal Art: Symptom or Success', *Art in America*, 77, 7, July 1989, pp. 109-116, 159-160, 163.

⁸ 'Aboriginal Art Show Opened', *The Herald*, 09.07.1929. Quoted in Jones, p. 167.

⁹ Herbert Read, 'Introduction', *Australia Aboriginal Paintings – Arnhem Land*, UNESCO, Paris, 1954, pp. 5-6., Rubin, p. 4.

¹⁰ Luke Taylor, *Seeing the Inside Bark Painting in Western Arnhem Land*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996, pp. 46, 73-4.

¹¹ Jean Fisher and Gerardo Mosquera, 'Introduction', *Over Here international perspectives on art and culture*, Gerardo Mosquera and Jean Fisher (eds.), The New Museum of Contemporary art, New York and The MIT Press, Cambridge, 2004, pp. 5-6.

¹² See Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1991, pp. 189-190; and for a fuller discussion see pp. 78-83; 181-193. Although Morphy is discussing the neighbouring Yolgnu, his analysis of inside and outside is subtle and informative.

¹³ See Taylor, pp. 28-9; 43.

¹⁴ See Baldwin Spencer, *Wanderings in Wild Australia*, Volume 2, Macmillan, London, 1928, pp. 779, 830.

¹⁵ Spencer, pp. 838-9.

¹⁶ Lin Onus, 'On the location of Aboriginal art', *Agenda*, 1, 2, 1988, pp. 29-30