**Politics of Representations: Making Indigenous paintings for sale in Central Australia.**

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In this very short paper, I highlight briefly how and why Warlpiri artists at Yuendumu, an Aboriginal settlement north of Alice Springs in Central Australia, have developed and produced narratives of identities and accountabilities around their visual cultures by producing artworks sold by an art cooperative created almost 40 years ago by elders and non-Indigenous individuals (anthropologist, adult educator). Over the past four decades Warlpiri artists and their families have conceptualized and reconceptualized their artworks for sale, imagined and reimagined their place in the global art market, and their reasons to engage or to disengage with the process. Understanding this historical conjecture helps us shed light on politics of representation and relatedness.

As I and others (Morphy 1991, Myers 2002) have shown the production of indigenous artworks for sale cannot be understood without careful analysis of its complex entanglements with neocolonial Australia and its local negotiations processes. Such understanding can help us explore the changing nature of what it means and how it means to be “indigenous”, as well as the shifting values and expectations associated with the production of artworks grounded in ontological knowledge, savoir faire and pragmatism dialogue with broader transformations in the life of Indigenous people who live in so-called remote Central Australia. In other words, dialogues amongst Warlpiri painters, and amongst painters, non-indigenous art coordinators and buyers about producing Warlpiri artworks for sale emphasize selected cultural, generational, and gendered attributes while affirming different paths to Warlpirinesses—representation, accountability and recognition— locally constituted and globally framed by colonial and neo-colonial politics over time.

The group of Warlpiri people I started to work with in 1983 were forced to sedentarize just after WWII and many were sent to a ration-depot run by the government in 1946 called Yuendumu. Today about 800 people live at Yuendumu and are for the large majority Warlpiri and speak Warlpiri as their first language. They have seen most of their lands returned to them through successful land claims procedures under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act (1976) and under the Native Title (1993) legislations.

As in most Aboriginal art from Central Australia, the main graphic symbols used by painters include circles, semi-circles, lines, meanders, dots, animal and human footprints. These symbols are combined to tell ritual and non-ritual stories. Traditionally, the ritual designs are applied to wooden objects, the human body, and to the ground. Accompanied by sacred songs and dances, ritual designs connect people to their kin, their land, and the Ancestral Beings. Rituals designs from these surfaces have now been recombined on painted canvasses and are bought by tourists, art galleries, and museums. Most paintings are grounded in geo-specific cosmological stories celebrating Ancestral Beings in *Jukurrpa—*the Ancestral Present— also known in English as the Dreaming.

At Yuendumu, painting with acrylics on canvases for sale began in earnest in 1983, when some thirty older women (over thirty-five years old) decided to raise money for a Toyota. Previously, these women tightly connected through kinship and friendship bonds had had access to a vehicle that they used for hunting, visiting sacred sites, and other visits to neighbor communities for ritual activities which was then beyond repairs. By the end of 1984, they were able to buy the Toyota with revenues gained from painting sales. This experience underlined the pragmatic value of paintings as a source of revenue in a place plagued by lack of jobs and a place where Indigenous people rely mostly on welfare payments. Men soon joined in. Interest in the acrylic paintings was immediate and intense partly because of their ‘recognition’ as ‘authentically Indigenous’. As I have shown elsewhere such explosion of interests occurred at a moment that valued multifaceted efforts to nurture Indigenous self-reliance in Australia in the 1980s. After more than three decades of ‘sedentarized’ oppression, Indigenous and non-Indigenous residents at Yuendumu made countless efforts to encourage a sense of Indigenous cultural pride and self-reliance, as well as help the world beyond the settlement to appreciate and recognize Warlpiri knowledges and claims. It is never surprising to them that the world is interested in their art and worldviews, as they are imbued with power of the Dreaming.

Men and women involved in the early stages of the so-called acrylic movement were all over 40 and held expertise and knowledge and were very active in the ritual domain. Acrylic painting mirrored from the start the geroncratic rules around production, performance and transmission of ritual knowledge. With declining ritual activities painting for sale has become since a site where knowledge can be transmitted to younger individuals interested in learning. An art cooperative was incorporated in 1985 and has since become one of the most successful Aboriginally-owned businesses run in collaboration since its inception with non-Indigenous art coordinators at Yuendumu. The art cooperative counts today over 300 individual painters painting on and off. This art cooperative is called Warlukurlangu and is what Mario Blaser called a “life-project” (2004:26). In other words, the artworks are about Indigenous knowledges and skills, they are the deeds to their lands, they provide an idiom for action and ways for the painters —as individuals and members of kin/family groups associated to territories and Dreaming-stories— to project themselves into a future. I want to make clear here that the early efforts to make the art cooperative viable were tethered to specific families’ efforts. These families did not see themselves as a “community” (i.e. Yuendumu) or as a “collective”, but rather as small social units formed through residency, the bonds of kinship, and post-colonial social realignment (Dussart 2000). Today, rights to paint acrylics for sale have become even more circumscribed to individuals within family groups.

From the point of views of their makers, paintings for sale should be straightforwardly translated into efficient, economic and political action: i.e. making sure that White people 1. understand the power/value of the Dreaming and buy the paintings, and 2. cannot dispossess families/kin groups again of their lands. Acrylic paintings for sale tell stories of struggle, resistance, connectedness, appropriation, entanglement, and change. Acrylics play a role in managing claims to places (rituals and other political and economic issues surrounded the area) and social positions. They also represent moments of individual pride when they are sold and appreciated by national and international buyers. In short, they play a role in the enactment of identities —often contested outside as well as within—in a neo-colonial world. (see Dussart 2007, 2012; Carty 2011). Through their engagements with the art cooperative, individuals and families have interpreted and reinterpreted modernity, as well as their places within the Australian settler state. More recently, during the pandemic and long periods of lockdowns, the sale of their acrylic paintings has also become the most substantial and visible links to the outside world.

As social and cultural shifts have intensified in the last couple of decades, the painting of acrylics has also become a discursive field in expression of ontological and cosmological knowledges, of kin ownership of territories and associated myths, of Warlpiri law, and of identity. Painters’ accountabilities to their kincentric ontolology remain strongly tied to delineating identity. Today, bottom line, from a Warlpiri perspective, if you are not from a specific place, if your relatives do not teach you, you cannot paint the geo-specific ritual designs narrating the marvelous acts performed by the Ancestral Beings in the *Jukurrpa* (Dreaming), and in the process maintain and nurture both land and its people physically and spiritually. As performances of Warlpirinesses, acrylic paintings, from the perspective of their makers, are authoritative messages about rights and responsibilities to the land and the individuals and families who live on and with it. These experiences are also at times quite stressful in recent years. A young painter explained to a buyer in 2019 that he paints only his Dreaming story tied to specific territories for fear of reprisals: “We are scared of being sung[[1]](#footnote-1) if we paint other people’s places, people can get really mean and dangerous. I am a young man, I do not want to be sung [ie.die]”.

Negotiations around designs and what to paint for sale have recently further delineated, limiting and circumscribed the rights of specific individuals within family groups. In other words, certain portions of Dreaming-stories which in the past could be told and painted by many different individuals connected through bonds of kinship and experiences are now the exclusive property of certain individuals and families. In some cases, such realignments have motivated some painters to disengage and stop painting to avoid conflicts and stress. Others for other motives—religious, disenchanted with mainstream politics towards Indigenous people, resisting geroncratic relationships so they can learn about their Dreaming-stories, or refusing to be perceived as an “authentic” Warlpiri person by the world beyond the settlement only if they painted acrylics, to name just a few— rarely engage with acrylic painting for sale. In other words, engaging or disengaging from painting have become ways to constitute oneself as a Warlpiri person and a kin. I have not time to discuss the fact that this is happening as well in other Indigenous communities involved in art production for sale.

As I have discussed elsewhere the diversity of motives and methods behind producing, disengaging, reengaging, or not producing artworks for sale at Yuendumu manifests and contributes to the intensely heterogenous nature of neo-colonial Aboriginal settlement life today. For young and old, men and women, participating in the production of acrylic paintings (or not) shows how their understanding of belonging has pivoted upon the complexities for Warlpiri individuals and families who live at Yuendumu to place themselves within their own shifting historical context and within a settler-nation relentlessly modifying its policies about sovereignty and rights. Their understandings of Warlpiri difference engage with the complex political exigencies of forms of relatedness of the past, the present and the future, and their endeavor may well lead to a new deployment of more exclusive forms of knowledge combined with inclusive Indigenous forms of representation, recognition and accountabilities and non-Indigenous forms of recognitions, and their entanglements. The production of acrylics for sale as performances and displays of identity have come to serve as a catalyst for thinking about what it means to be Warlpiri through the prisms of local forms relatedness and social change, making us question what we mean as anthropologists by ‘communal and community processes’.

References

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1. The fear of sorcery is ever present at Yuendumu. Spells are cast on individuals through the act of ‘singing’ them and can result in their death. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)