Wupun/Warrgadi: Ngan’gi fibre and the art of Peppimenarti

By
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This thesis is dedicated to
Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Patsy Marfura, Annunciata Nunuk Wilson
and Stephen Moore
ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the history and contemporary artistic practice of the Ngan’gi language groups of the Peppimenarti community (NT), within the greater context of Indigenous Top-End fibre art and acrylic painting. The dissertation endeavours to answer the question: “How does Ngan’gi fibre design and pattern construction reconceptualise cultural significance?” The research traces a ‘traffic’ of historical and contemporary Ngan’gi objects, and the succession of significances they have held for colonial and/or Indigenous makers, collectors and audiences. The dissertation also investigates cognate practices within Indigenous Australian textile and fibre art, illuminating the processes behind the construction of designs and the cultural, social and historical meanings they communicate. Finally, this study acts as a repositioning of the prevailing theories of significance within contemporary Indigenous art, arguing for a re-evaluation of pattern design within the woven and painted forms of the Ngan’gi.
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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted material, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is an examination of the historical and contemporary art practices – fibrecraft, painting and printmaking – of the Indigenous Australian Ngan’gi language group of the community of Peppimenarti, Northern Territory. The purpose of such an examination is to present the first comprehensive account and analysis of Ngan’gi art, and by doing so investigate the relationship between repetition, pattern, fibre and body painting design, illuminating the processes behind the artists’ re-conceptualisation of culture. To date, Ngan’gi art has been perceived as ‘peripheral’, geographically on the edge of renowned regions such as central Arnhem Land, Warlpiri country and the Kimberley, and theoretically falling between the dominant ‘schools’ of bark painting, ochre and desert acrylic painting. As this dissertation will demonstrate, the art produced by Ngan’gi practitioners rewrites the perception of visual cultural significance within contemporary Indigenous art.

The artists of Peppimenarti (or ‘Peppi’, as it is commonly known) have presented an alternative expression of Indigenous culture and experience via the depiction of ‘woven’ designs and body designs, largely devoid of legible signs and symbols directly relating to dreaming or ancestral stories. Since the introduction of acrylic painting in 2001, Peppi art has emerged as one of a handful of small community and studio cooperatives (including The Lockhart River Gang and Tiwi Design, amongst others), which initiated micro-movements within the larger scene, diversifying the production and presentation of cultural information. Ngan’gi artists, however, were the only group to do so predominantly via the medium of ‘weaving’, or, more accurately, ‘weaving’ patterns and designs. Objects formerly viewed through the lens of utility or craft were recast by the Ngan’gi artists as articles embodying ceremonial, ancestral, experiential and personal resonances; these baskets, bags and mats were effectively chosen by the artists to best represent their culture to the non-Indigenous world.

This dissertation will focus on the country in and around the community of Peppimenarti and the region from which its population migrated, Nauiyu (Daly River settlement). Today, the two communities are united by their common
language Ngan’gi, and differentiated by the Ngan’gi language varieties Ngan’gikurunggurr (Peppimenarti) and Ngen’giwumirri (Nauiyu). Previously, the unifying language name was identified as Ngan’gityemerri, however linguists Nicholas Reid and Patricia Marfurra McTaggart have since articulated the more accurate term Ngan’gi. In this dissertation, the artists discussed include both Ngan’gikurunggurr and Ngen’giwumirri speakers, thus Ngan’gi will be predominantly used. However, specific language varieties will be identified when relevant. However, English is widely used in Peppimenarti, and was the language in which almost all the interviews were conducted. Where an artist chose to speak in Ngan’gi language, a translator of their choosing was present.

Working within the discipline of art history, and given the Anglophone abilities of my informants, it was not necessary for me to learn Ngan’gi language. That is, this thesis should not be understood as a contribution to ethnography or anthropology, but as an attempt to write a history of art for this community which takes advantage of the research and writing of certain anthropologists, and indeed certain fieldwork protocols that reflect the long history of ethnographic research in this country.

‘Ngan’gi’ translates as story/word/language; ‘kurunggurr’ as a specific billabong west of Peppimenarti, as well as a general term for deep, dark water. There are approximately 150-220 Ngan’gi speakers in Peppimenarti and Nauiyu, as well as outstation communities such as Nganambala, Merrepen and Wudigapildhiyerr. Ngan’gikurunggurr is classified by UNESCO as ‘severely endangered’ – that is, the language is predominantly spoken by older generations, and younger generations generally do not speak in language amongst themselves or to their children. However, I have observed that the interviewees overwhelmingly chose Ngan’gi to discuss research questions amongst themselves, including in the presence of younger artists or participants. I believe that the daily use of Ngan’gikurunggurr in Peppimenarti is healthier than the official UNESCO classification suggests.

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2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
Other language groups, past and present, in the Daly River / Fitzmaurice River region include Madngella, Malak Malak, Maranunggu, Marramaninjsji, Marringarr, Marrithiyel, Moiil, Murrinh-patha, Ponga Ponga, Wagiman and Woolwonga. It is one of the most complex Indigenous language regions in Australia. Boundaries and borders have been indefinite throughout history, thus I will refer to historically and recently surveyed maps, to give the reader a sense of the shifting confines and changing profile of the region. The names and spelling of many of these groups have altered over time, and in this dissertation contemporary spelling will be used unless an historical name or spelling is more appropriate.

Whilst the research will focus on Ngan’gi country, studies of surrounding language groups will be discussed where none on the Ngan’gi exist. The anthropologist William Edward Hanley Stanner, for example, did not specifically identify the language group Ngan’gikurungurr, and thus the Ngen’giwumirri and Malak Malak are the primary focus for research in the early to mid twentieth century. The published history of the region examines Nauiyu - between 1664 and 1975 there are few observations of Ngan’gikurungurr country - thus Chapter One relies upon the nearby European activity on the Daly River. This activity, however, had a significant impact upon the Ngan’gi groups and the establishment of the Peppimenarti settlement in 1975-76. There is also very little evidence with which to construct a portrait of a pre-contact existence, but we can draw from Stanner’s cultural observations from the 1930s, the landscape and its effect upon lifestyle and above all the inheritance of stories and living memory amongst the Ngan’gi interviewees.

The Peppimenarti/Daly River region, its fibre and painted designs, and the relationship they hold with immediate and greater regions of the Northern Territory are all under-researched fields within Indigenous Australian art. The majority of Indigenous Australian art research has been in central and western desert painting, and the bark paintings of central and eastern Arnhem Land. The focus of this research has been to translate the symbols and imagery used in these paintings, and to trace the emergence of the contemporary art movements in these regions. The Ngan’gi concept of overall, repetitive pattern in fibre and
textile art as a significant visual language has not been explored in great detail to date.

The region falls between Larrakia land around Darwin to the North, the Kimberley to the South West, Katherine to the East, and Arnhem Land to the North East. It is bordered by figurative bark painting, Kimberley ochres, Tiwi design and the acrylic movement of the Tanami Desert communities. As has been stated of the nearby township Wadeye (Port Keats) ‘...located on the western part of the whole northern region it forms a cultural frontier between two distinctive regions: to the south ‘the desert cultures’ and to the east and north the core ‘Arnhemland culture.’’5 Similarly, it has been stated that the ‘Daly-Fitzmaurice Rivers region seldom has been central to discussions of Indigenous Australian painting.’6

There has been substantial study in the history and range of fibre art in Western Arnhem Land, by Louise Hamby, author of *Twined together = kunmadj njalehnjaleken* and *Containers of Power: Women with clever hands.*7 Similarly, the history of coiled fibre art has been well researched by Margie West in exhibitions and publications such as *ReCoil: change & exchange in coiled fibre art.*8 Textile practices in central and western desert communities, particularly batik, have been covered by scholars such as Judith Ryan and Louise Partos.9 James Bennett has conducted fieldwork and research in the silkscreen printed designs of the Tiwi Islands.10 The only scholarship on the fibre art of the Daly River region to date is Robin Hodgson’s 1988 *Peppimenarti Basketmakers*, an illustrated research

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essay on the history of the community and its fibre practice. Although a comprehensive paper on the variety and techniques of Ngan’gi fibrecraft, Hodgson’s research took place prior to the establishment of Ngan’gi painting practice. Thus, this dissertation aims to act as a contemporary revision and update of Hodgson’s paper.

Within other disciplines, there has been excellent research into the Ngan’gi language by University of New England researcher Nicholas Reid and Naiyu community linguist Patricia Marrfurra McTaggart, resulting in the publication of the *Ngan’gi Dictionary* in 2008. This dictionary has been instrumental to this dissertation, providing the ability to confirm both the existence and appropriate spelling of Ngan’gi words when interviewing artists, ensuring more accurate archival accounts. At times, the artists would refer to the dictionary to check on words they would like to use when answering queries. Marrfurra McTaggart has also conducted ethnobotanical research of the region.

Although extensive research into the Macassan trade routes on the Northern coast of Australia exists, the implications of these exchanges upon artistic practice, particularly in the region surrounding Peppimenarti, is still unclear. This dissertation set out to discover any influences or residual traces of Macassan culture and visual imagery on the Ngan’gi language groups, however no clear evidence of such an impact was uncovered.

The dissertation began with three principal research objectives. The first was to identify the range of ‘woven’ patterns – both in a fibre and painted form – of a specific group of artists from the Ngan’gikurrungurr and Ngen’giwumirri Indigenous language groups, working through the Durrmu Arts centre, Peppimenarti. These art forms would then be placed within a greater Top End context, forging links with

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surrounding regions and groups and investigating potential parallel patterns in textile and fibre media. Finally, an examination of the translation of these Ngan’gi patterns from a three to a two-dimensional design system would be addressed.

It is important to explain the use of the term ‘weaving’, or ‘woven’ in this dissertation. Technically, these terms refer to the manipulation of a warp and weft on a loom. The fibrecraft of the Ngan’gi involves looping, coiling and twining. However, the use of the term ‘weaving’, although inaccurate, has become ubiquitous in the discussion around Indigenous fibrecraft. The artists themselves may use the term ‘weaving’ and ‘woven’ when describing both their fibre and painted practice, alongside more specific fibrecraft terms. The term will be used at times, alongside the more appropriate ‘fibrecraft’, particularly when referencing the act of construction, when reflecting the artists’ own use of the term (for example, ‘weaving sessions’), or in relation to the abstraction of fibre design, in the case of Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Patsy Marfura’s painting practice (‘weaving designs’).

This research grew out of my time as Art Coordinator of the Peppimenarti art program and centre, Durrmu Arts. This came from an Art History and Museum Studies background, in September 2007 I was hired to coordinate the visual and performing arts component of the Peppimenarti Cultural Open Day, and was asked to assist with the establishment of the Durrmu Arts centre shortly after. The program, then part of the Peppimenarti Community Council, had recently received FACSHIA (Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) funding for an art studio and housing. Anastasia Moore, a Peppimenarti Community Council employee, had overseen the development of this infrastructure during 2007, and requested that a qualified arts administrator be hired to assist with the strategic development of the program. The artists had been painting independently, often in the community library or in their homes, since 2001, and viewed the new art centre as a studio space or collective, rather than a retail outlet. Hence, the role of Durrmu Arts Coordinator revolved around exhibition development, marketing, sales and training, with less emphasis on the overseeing of production or visual practice.

15 See Appendix 2 for timeline of the development of Durrmu Arts.
Due to the artists’ independence and ability and desire to self-manage the space, I worked variously as a freelance contractor, part-time and, at times, full-time Coordinator between September 2007 and February 2013. This arrangement was a reflection of the self-determination of the Durrmu artists, and was unorthodox at the time. Yet, as of 2013, the ‘fly in-fly out’ Art Coordinator concept has risen in popularity as other remote, small centres and community organisations, and peak advocacy groups such as ANKAAA recognise its benefits to Indigenous artworker training and employment.

From 2008-11, Durrmu Arts came under the Peppimenarti Association, and all employees during this time, including myself, were answerable to the Association’s Board. In 2011, Durrmu Arts was separately incorporated under the Corporations (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander) Act 2006. Board members were made up of 35 Peppimenarti residents, with senior artist Regina Pilawuk Wilson16 as Chairperson. Structurally, the Art Coordinator (later renamed as Art Centre Manager), Assistant Manager (Indigenous employee) and Cultural Support Officer again came under the Board, and thus the nature of my work and research since 2011 has been subject to the approval and support of Durrmu Arts committee members.

During the course of my professional work with Durrmu Arts, it became evident that there had been no research, aside from Hodgson’s Peppimenarti Basketmakers17, on Ngan’gi artists and art forms. As part of my job description, I initiated and managed a number of research projects at the art centre, including the ‘Airbell Project’ – a series of workshops investigating the lost Ngan’gi technique of twined conical basketry – and decided that a doctoral dissertation would be an ideal format in which to document these projects, and collate as much information on Ngan’gi historical and contemporary practice as possible. Following consultation with Durrmu Arts and community representatives, and the drafting of a Conduct of Research Agreement and Letter of Support, I began my

16 Regina Pilawuk Wilson has chosen to use her ‘Christian’ name, Regina, and ‘Aboriginal’ name Pilawuk with her married surname Wilson; as such, this full name will be used throughout the dissertation, and at times shortened to just ‘Wilson.’
17 R. Hodgson, op. cit.
research under the supervision of Professor Roger Benjamin in the Art History and Film Studies Department, University of Sydney, in semester two, 2009.

The dissertation’s research falls into two modes: the field and the archive. For the former, empirical research has been applied to the observation, recording, classification and analysis of Ngan’gi fibre art practices though interviews and visual recording on site at Peppimenarti, Northern Territory. As their history and culture is orally imparted, interviews with the Ngan’gi artists and custodians of the community have enabled the collection of authentic primary material. A number of interviews were conducted during what the community calls ‘bush trips’ enabling the artists to discuss their botanical material and methods, as well as stories relating to country, in situ.

Some of the methodological problems of obtaining accurate oral histories were avoided through a number of means, including the utilisation of group conferences – to allow communal storytelling, flexibility with recording techniques - the use of handwritten note-taking or digital recording devices, as per the preference of the interviewee - and a clarity of questioning and use of a local translator where necessary. I have developed a positive working and personal relationship with all interviewees over approximately four years, thus allowing the interview process to be one based on mutual trust, respect and familiarity.

Louise Hamby has stated that ‘being objective in the field is in theory commendable but in reality not possible.’ An outsider in a community is bound to ‘cause reactions’, such as the increased production of objects relating to research. This is an accurate assessment of community fieldwork. My time spent working with Durrmu Arts resulted in particular relationships being established, and a partiality to working with specific individuals. As both an employee of Durrmu Arts and external researcher, I held a series of meetings with the Board and broader community representatives to explain the nature of the dissertation’s research at its inception, and communicate that all Peppimenarti residents were welcome to participate. Whilst the wider community remained

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19 Ibid.
interested in the research’s progress throughout, the active participants remained limited to the small group of approximately 8 artists working at the centre. I pursued my research after the art centre closed at 4pm, or on weekends, depending on the artists’ availability.

The majority of interviews were conducted with artist Regina Pilawuk Wilson. As a custodian of Ngan’gikurunggurr country and leader within the Peppimenarti community, Wilson was both willing to provide information, and also informally elected by her fellow artists as a spokesperson for the research project. Many of the interviews were conducted in a group environment at the art centre. The women would often confer on questions and responses and talk amongst themselves in Ngan’gi language before Wilson would reply in English. Although all the words printed here are her own, they reflect a communal response, and the involvement of artists and family members Margaret Kundu, Dianne Hodgson, Patsy Marfura, Mabel Jimarin, Anastasia Naiya Wilson and Annunciata Nunuk Wilson. This group of artists is closely interrelated: Margaret Kundu is Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s elder sister, as is Mabel Jimarin. Anastasia Naiya Wilson and Annunciata Nunuk Wilson are Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s two eldest daughters, and Patsy Marfura, the only Ngen’giwumiri artist at Durrmu Arts, is her cousin.

All research has been conducted according to a Conduct of Research Agreement, signed by all participants at the inception of the dissertation’s fieldwork. The agreement’s structure and content was drawn from the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies’ Guidelines for Ethical Research in Indigenous Studies. The principles of ethical research – ‘consultation, negotiation and mutual understanding, respect, recognition and involvement and benefits, outcomes and agreement’ – were upheld through this Agreement.

This dissertation has its limits; it is composed on the basis of as much research, data and theoretical application as was possible in the three years of sporadic fieldwork sessions. For example, the paper would have perhaps benefited from a chapter dedicated to the song cycles, dances and ceremonies conducted by the

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artists involved. However, the interviewees chose not to divulge the cultural information relating to such material. This was not necessarily due to cultural codes and formal constraints regarding restriction, but is more a reflection of what the artists wanted to discuss in relation to their practice. The research thus took its cues from the interviewees in terms of content and subject; as members of Durrmu Arts, there was a natural propensity to discuss visual practice. At times, ancestral and ceremonial content is touched upon, but by and large the interviewees focused upon the fibre objects themselves, their technical schemata and importance to communal practice, ritual and country.

Furthermore, as the interviewees and their forebears have been subjected to consistent European contact, the verbal transmission of ancestral stories has, to an extent, been suppressed. The stories and associated cultural information have not themselves been diluted, but rather they now occupy a more concealed space in Ngan’gi culture. Again, this is not necessarily due to their restricted nature, but a natural reticence to continually share such information with non-Indigenous researchers, residents and general enquirers. This lack of ancestral/dreaming narrative data reflects the perception of Peppi art as purely visual abstractions of utilitarian objects. Art critic John McDonald’s statement, that the Durrmu artists’ ‘strategy was simple: to make pictures that used the same form and colours as the fibre works’ – encapsulates this view. This dissertation seeks to challenge this reading of Peppi painting, investigating the embodiment and investment of ancestral presence within the physical construction of both fibre and painted objects.

The collation of primary oral and visual material has been contextualised by historical secondary research. Comparative analyses of historical and contemporary fibre and textile objects, sourced from the community and museum collections has been carried out, alongside secondary published scholarship. The original aim of the dissertation was to empirically investigate the origins or historical timeline of Ngan’gi artistic expression, in order to determine potential relationships to contemporary practice. However, although the paper surveys ancient rock art from the region, and the ‘earliest’ fibre articles, I aim to illuminate as much of Ngan’gi artistic expression as possible, rather than proving a series of
clear, linear developments over time. The intention is to form a sense of the variety of interactions and movements within and without the Ngan’gi people and their art, focusing on a number of key examples and encounters in historical and contemporary contexts.

The physical qualities and methods for particular fibrecrafts have also been detailed, in order to set out the technical parameters for Ngan’gi looping, twining and coiling: aside from some detail in Hodgson’s publication, this has not been achieved to date. Similarly, some visual analysis of historical and contemporary fibre vessels is used to establish comparative studies with the fibrecraft of surrounding regions. However, this dissertation’s objective is not to compile a compendium of objects, and their visual, technical and aesthetic qualities; I aim instead to enmesh these objects within a broader cultural realm of ritual, performance, ceremony and country and by doing so, form a more meaningful portrait of Ngan’gi culture.

The ‘portrait’ is organised in two parts: ‘Historical Encounters’ and ‘Contemporary Transformations.’ This bifurcation has been drawn from Nicholas Thomas’s *Tattoo: Bodies, Art and Exchange in the Pacific and the West*.22 The division allowed the research to be broken, broadly speaking, into the archive and the field, and historical and contemporary practice, both equally crucial to an understanding of the subject. An investigation of historical relationships, exchanges and events provides necessary context to the contemporary components, as the contemporary Ngan’gi work recapitulates its own history.

As mentioned above, although this study is embedded in an art historical discipline, it also draws upon related disciplines of visual anthropology and anthropology, particularly the work of Alfred Gell and his theory of captivation, as well as the haptic reading of contemporary Indigenous painting, as developed by Dr Jennifer Biddle in *Breasts, Canvas, Bodies: central desert art as experience*.23 The relationship between ethnography, anthropology and art history is fraught and

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at times opaque, and this thesis attempts to utilise each discipline discretely, yet form a synthesis of approaches, in order to better understand the historical and contemporary resonances of objects. Biddle’s approach, eschewing a reliance upon ‘subject-centric analyses (anthropology)’ and ‘object-focused chronologies (art history)’, preferring to ‘keep the art . . . alive in the terms it presents itself’ has informed the theoretical methodology of the thesis. The concept of objects having ‘social lives’ and biographies has also motivated its interdisciplinary approach, owing much to the work of Gell, along with Arjun Appadurai and Igor Kopytoff. Anthropologists such as Jane Schneider and Annette B. Weiner have further expanded upon the treatment of textile and fibre as objects with memory and embodied experience.

To appreciate the artistic expression of the Ngan’gi artists, it is important to establish an historical and geographical portrait of country. Chapter 1 of this thesis, Ngan’gi Country, provides a chronological overview of the region, from a pre-contact era to the homeland movement of the 1970s. The social, political and historical context of the country and community in and around Peppimenarti, and nearby Nauiyu, is laid out within an explanation of its physical characteristics, including rak (estate) organisation. The chapter draws from a number of first hand accounts, and government reports, from explorer Philip Parker King’s 1819 journal, to Owen Stanley’s economic study of the ‘the two Daly River communities’, 1980. It is research of W. E. H. Stanner, however, that forms the greater part of the chapter. Stanner was the preeminent anthropologist working in the region in the twentieth century, and conducted several research projects on the Daly River, and neighbouring Port Keats (Wadeye), in the 1930s. An assessment of his material, as well as that of the various missionaries of the region (1881 – 1956), is followed by an account of the establishment of the Peppimenarti community in 1976, part of a wider homeland movement in Indigenous Australia. Through a

25 A. Gell, op. cit., p17.
27 Phillip Parker King, Narrative of a survey of the intertropical and western coasts of Australia, performed between the years 1818 and 1822, by Phillip P. King, with an appendix containing various subjects relating to hydrography and natural history, John Murray, London, 1827; Owen Stanley, The Mission and Peppimenarti: An economic study of two Daly River Aboriginal communities, Australian National University North Australia Research Unit, Canberra, 1985.
review of these historical developments, the chapter endeavours to give rise to issues of authenticity, social agency and notions of belonging relating to country, and the construction of the ‘frontier.’

Chapter 2, *Figures & Fibre*, examines the relationship between rock art imagery and fibre: two of the earliest forms of Ngan’gi artistic expression. A discussion of painted ochre schemata in and around Peppimenarti is contextualised within a greater survey of fibre imagery in the rock art of Western Arnhem Land, demonstrating the significant cultural connections between painted figures and fibre vessels. This further allows a discussion of the ancestral narratives relating to fibre to emerge. The union of figure and fibre extends to the ritual and cultural significance of Ngan’gi hand-wrought string figures, allowing the dissertation’s argument surrounding the circularity of fibre, object and ancestral presence to be further developed.

A collection search of Ngan’gi fibrecraft in Australian institutions is outlined in Chapter 3, *Warrgadi (string dilly bag): early collected objects*. The objects provide an opportunity to investigate modes of Indigenous object collecting at the turn of the 20th century. In the case of the Daly River region, most collectors were ethnobotanists and ‘casual collectors’, roles that often conflated natural and cultural material, reflecting the Darwinist evolutionary theory and associated social hierarchies. The chapter also introduces the Ngan’gi warrgadi (string dilly bag) technique and outlines Durrmu Arts’s ‘airbell’ project: a recent research initiative to rediscover the now-extinct Ngan’gi practice of twining, through historical examples. The role of a public institution in cultural reconceptualization is addressed with further comparative examples, including the work of contemporary Yindinyji artist Michael Boiyool Anning (from the Atherton region in Queensland).

The final ‘historical encounter’ Chapter 4, *Wupun (coiling): Mission and Market*, presents the popular Ngan’gi coiled basket/mat practice and its missionary and market-motivated origins. Coiling in the Top End was originally introduced by the Methodist missionary Margaret ‘Gretta’ Matthews on Goulburn Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria, and then travelled across Arnhem Land and down to the Daly
River by familial connections. The notion of these baskets as being ‘empty’ due to their introduced and controlled mission derivations is challenged when applied to Ngan’gi weavers, who view them as much part of their fibrecraft culture as other, older techniques. The chapter argues that these baskets are objects of hybridity and rapprochement, a theory that is expanded in the second half of the dissertation, when addressing Ngan’gi painted design and pattern construction.

Part II, ‘Contemporary Transformations’, begins in Chapter 5 with a consideration of the syaw (fish net) design, composed and painted in an acrylic on linen medium by Ngan’gikurunggurr artist Regina Pilawuk Wilson. The design – also based on a ‘lost’ technique that was practiced by the artist’s male forebears – is a painted testament, or elegy, to cultural erosion. The process of conscious recollection through the (absent) object is embodied in the syaw paintings, and has altered its status: once a utilitarian object, it is now a symbol for personal and collective identity, informing new interpretations of Ngan’gi culture. It was a Regina Pilawuk Wilson syaw design that received the General Painting prize of the National Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Art Award in 2003, and thus also provides an opportunity to examine the reception and criticism of ‘Peppi’ art in Australian art markets, journalism and academia. The design, neither purely abstract nor a direct representation of material culture, fell between established categories of value, contributing to the re-writing of the parameters of contemporary Indigenous painting.

Chapter 6, Fi / Warrgadi Paintings, is the culmination of this dissertation’s arguments on the cultural significance of repetitive pattern. The looping of sand-palm twine (fi) in both three and two dimensions embodies concepts of ancestral tracing, cultural synaesthesia, performance and ritual. The chapter focuses on the work of warrgadi weaver and artist Patsy Marfura, who paints lines of fi, akin to desert hair string designs, and Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s looped warrgadi designs. The performativity of both looping and ceremony are held within such designs, giving rise to physical embodiments of ancestral presence. The works are examined within a broader discussion on the changing perception of the significance of repetitive pattern – as opposed to symbology – within contemporary Indigenous art.
The final chapter, *Further Developments: Printmaking and Textile Design*, provides an overview of transformations achieved through introduced media at Durrmu Arts. Printmaking workshops, conducted at Peppimenarti from 2007-2010, have seen the artists modify and transform their fibre and *durrmu* designs; modifications that were then carried through to painted practice. Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s composition of textile designs, in collaboration with Sydney design firm Koskela, saw ‘Peppi’ art’s relationship between two and three dimensions come full circle; from fibre to painted pattern, and back to textured fabric object. This study rounds out what is a central tenet of the dissertation: the movements between motif/object and overall pattern/painting, and the cultural conversions or reforms within.

The thesis’s approach to the objects owes something to Louise Hamby’s interest in ‘how does it [the object] mean’ rather than ‘what does it mean.’ As opposed to purely analysing the visual and cultural components of a historical Ngan’gi vessel, the research is broadened beyond the object’s physical parameters, to the attitudes of its makers, collectors and curators. Similarly, the activity surrounding the object, in this case the ritual of gathering and weaving, or painting and storytelling, alters the physicality of the object, and thus the reading of its qualities. John Carty similarly argues that Ngaanyatjarra carving and weaving provide ‘a renewed framework through which we can better appreciate’ painting and ‘the historical and conceptual foundations’ upon which the painting is understood. This notion, that painting has a relational dialogue with other media, is central to this thesis’ contention.

The defining power of the visual in contemporary cultural theory has been broken down, opening up avenues for the sensory perception of objects, particularly the notion of embodiment and subject-hood. Indeed I actively seek out the relational characteristics of these objects. The understanding of a basket is subject to the sensory perception of its maker, user, collector and viewer. They are vessels

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enveloped in systems of value and exchange. The notion, carried through the study, is indebted to Nicholas Thomas’s *Entangled Objects*.30

The thesis also rests upon a fundamental acknowledgement of colonialism’s ‘profoundly material’ quality.31 The research has followed a ‘traffic’ of collecting, or tracking of objects through the hands of makers, collectors and commentators; from their transformation into objects of captivation under the gaze of the ‘casual’ collectors and ethnobotanists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, to items of intense desire within the contemporary market for Indigenous art. The thesis aims to trace the series of interactions between the objects and thus the succession of meanings within and without the objects. From a 1912 example of a knotless, netted fish net to a contemporary acrylic painting, they communicate manifold meanings, forging insights into simultaneous colonial and Ngan’gi worldviews. This study acts as a repositioning of prevailing theories of significance within contemporary Indigenous art, arguing for a re-evaluation of pattern construction found in the fibre and painted forms of Ngan’gi artists.

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1. NGAN’GI COUNTRY

PRE-CONTACT: LANDSCAPE, KINSHIP & TRADE

This chapter aims to portray the Ngan’gi people and their country, through pre-settlement to the establishment of the homeland community in 1976. It is an historical sketch of the Ngan’gi: their land, kinship, trade, social forms and languages, all of which are interdependent, and their history of contact, from seventeenth-century exploration by Europeans to the establishment and development of Peppimenarti. The chapter centres on the Daly River settlement site of Nauiyu, as this was the most populated site prior to the homeland movement of the 1970s.

Nauiyu, on the Daly River, is located 200 kilometres south west of Darwin. Peppimenarti country is a further 100 kilometres south west, situated on Tom Turner’s Creek and at the base of a large rock formation (Peppimenarti translates as ‘large rock’ in Ngan’gikurunggurr). The nearby Moyle River originates from the Wingate Mountains escarpment, and flows westward toward the coast, which it reaches 60 kilometres south of Anson Bay. The Daly River rises near Katherine and flows in a north-westerly direction to the Timor Sea at Anson Bay. In this heavily watered, monsoonal region, the two dominant rivers – the Daly and the Moyle – have six tributaries: Katherine, Fish, Douglass and King Rivers off the Daly, and Tom Turner’s and Docherty Creeks off the Moyle. Beyond those are innumerable smaller creeks and waterholes, often grouped at the base of rocky escarpments and hills.

Ngan’gi country is divided into inherited land areas called rak (translating as ‘patrician estate’ in Ngan’gi). The Ngen’giwumirri estates include rak-Merren (rak and rak-Lafruganying) within the Wingate Mountain range, characterised by its deep gorges and sandstone mesas.¹ To the west of the Wingate lies rak-Nudik, rak-Tyingirim, rak-Nanganamba, rak-Maltyin and rak-Papangala, all found in a

sandstone escarpment that splits the country into two distinct geographic zones. The Moyle runs through this escarpment, winding 35 kilometres westward to the Timor Sea. The Ngan’gikurunggurr estates of rak-Fepiminati, rak-NgambuNgambu, rak-NintyiNintyi, rak-Merrepen, rak-Nerintyi and rak-Ngulfe, lie on the southern and eastern side of the Ngen’giwumirri estates. The former two are to the north, and the latter four lie to the south west, on the flood plain, on the outskirts of present day Peppimenarti.

Figure 1 Peppimenarti community from the air, dry season, July 2007. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

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1 Ibid.
For the Ngan’gi groups, language and totemic inheritance determine ones country. A person may determine a Ngan’gi speaker’s country by their use of Ngan’gikurunggurr or Ngen’giwumirri words. The inheritance of country is primarily patrilineal, but strong connections may exist with the estate of the mother’s, mother’s mother’s or husband’s country:

Each family group has a special place and our dreamings are there. We may share our language with our neighbours and we may marry those from another country but dreamings are always our own. They come to us through our fathers.⁴

Country is further linked to totems; land ownership is articulated through a series of totemic sites. All ‘estate members’ jointly own these sites and share the same patrilineal totems.\(^5\) All children of the same father will share, for example, an eagle dreaming/totem, which indicates a tract of land by the Moyle River.\(^6\) There may be some affection and affiliation with the mother’s totem but it is an unofficial, secondary connection.\(^7\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson states of the Ngan’gikurunggurr totems:

> For Peppi, the main one is that water python. Also we’ve got plover, ashara (willy wagtail). It’s sort of like representing the group that comes from Peppi.
>
> Rak peppi is where you come from; wy emmera meaning you’re the snake; you’re from that group. Another one is Dirrin, that moon.\(^8\)

The water snake or python lineage ‘occupy a privileged position’ at Peppimenarti, denoting country custodianship and forming ‘the nucleus’ of the community.\(^9\)

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\(^5\) N. Reid and P. Marrfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p363.
\(^6\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 29, 2009.
\(^7\) N. Reid and P. Marrfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p363.
\(^8\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 29, 2009.
\(^9\) Martin J. Wilson, *Genealogies: the Moyle River people, especially those residing at Peppimenarti*, manuscript, 1980.
The country is dry monsoonal, characterised by its seasonal rainfall and year round warm temperatures. Seasonal floodplains, surrounded by paperbark forests, are scattered amidst low-lying open forests, savannah grasslands and large sandstone mesas and gorges. The binary wet and dry seasons dictate daily life, however the terms belie the complexity of seasonal variation and transformations. Wet seasons may arrive early, heralded by the arrival of wild horses in the community: this is referred to as ngunguwe (*build up time*). The early dry period is *wirirr marrgu*. A 'second wet' will affect the availability of long-neck turtle, altering hunting activity. Generally, however, the *fuke* (dry season) is marked by *minimindi* (waterlilies), *miwulgnini* (lotus flower), *anganni* (magpie goose), *malarrgu* (turtle) and *merrepen* (sand-palm fibre), whereas the wet supports *miwermsisyey* (red plum), *miwisamuy* (white berry), *mimeli* (plum), *midilmi* (pea), *mikumulerrk* (edible root) and *mudityi* (sweet grass). Other atmospheric events that are considered culturally significant are the *dagum* (fog) that appears in the cooler months, and the *wangi* (sea breeze) from the coast.
Today the region’s topography is little changed from that of the pre-settlement era. The country would be classified as a savannah, with low-lying, alluvial flats, grasses, scrub and clusters of eucalyptus, planchonia, buchania, brachychiton, xanthostamen, grevillea, banksia, livistona, cycad and pandanus species, interspersed with rocky outcrops and a myriad of water courses. A vast array of bush tucker – roots, berries, native yams, lilies, fish, turtle, snakes, goanna, wallaby, echidna and bandicoot - are supported during both the wet and dry seasons, and flowing water courses provide a year round source of fresh water. The Daly and Moyle rivers and their tributaries, such as Tom Turner Creek, formed a fertile, sheltered landscape for the population and prevented more expansive migration from the region. William Edward Hanley Stanner notes that there was more communal ceremonial practice and food gathering between the ‘river tribes’.10 During the wet season, two or three family groups made a common camping ground in the one area, where food was plentiful and where the flood water could not reach.11 In contrast, the dry season forced the population around permanent sources of water. The dichotomy of wet and dry was reflected in the social life of the region. This heightened contact resulted in uncertain boundaries between tribal country, which were ‘not as rigidly observed as seems to have usually been the case in Australia.’12

Similarly, kinship relationships in this region did not follow the complex sectional, subsectional or moiety system of greater indigenous Australia. The Ngan’gi groups essentially follow the Kariera type. Spencer and Gillen made a cursory study of the region’s social organisation in 1904 and Radcliffe Brown and Elkin went on to further articulate the dominant Kariera and Aranda systems in the 1930s.13 The Kariera system was named after the Kariera of De Grey, Western Australia. It

11 Ibid., p404.
12 Ibid., p385.
13 Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown articulated the Kariera and Aranda systems in his series of articles for Oceania 1930-31.
prescribes marriage with mother’s brother’s daughter who, at the same time, is father’s sister’s daughter. Descent is traced through two lines only. Such a system only requires fourteen kinship terms. Stanner didn’t study the social organisation of the Ngan’gikurunggurr, having either placed them amongst other groups such as the Ngen’giwumirri or missing their presence altogether, however he did note the post 1900 evolution of the Ngen’giwumirri Kariera system during his field work, which will be discussed alongside other post-contact developments later in the chapter. Nonetheless, he did report the general river tribes as being Kariera, without moieties, sections or subsections, including some small divergences from the Kariera norm amongst the Mallak Mallak and Madgnella. Presently the kinship system of Ngan’gi is described as four generational. Thus the kinship terms for two generations above the speaker will be the same for two generations below.

Ngan’gi kinship is inherently tied to social function. The social organisation of the ‘river tribes’ prior to European settlement was defined by the dirawur. Dirawur is a Madngella word (the Ngan’gi term would be dede), recorded by Stanner, used to describe the camp unit, formed in the evenings during a nomadic existence. Prior to European influence the dirawur had the status and social authority of family. The ‘diffused day patterns of behaviour’ were converted at night in the dirawur. A group of families would camp in a circle, each separated from the next by a fire. The intricacies of kinship relations were visually displayed in these dirawur circles. However, Stanner observes that this pattern is far from simple; the bonds do not stop at the boundaries of the dirawur or tribe, but beyond into the inter-tribal structure, not dissimilar to a series of overlapping Venn diagrammatic circles.

Trade routes were another manifestation of kinship systems. Nicolas Reid argues that pre-settlement relationships ‘between the Ngan’gikurunggurr and

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15 Ibid., p389.
16 N. Reid and P. Marrfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p363.
18 Ibid., p494.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
Ngen’giwumirri and their surrounding neighbours are less readily distinguishable from modern ties and hence less re-constructible.\textsuperscript{21} Genealogical evidence suggests that exogamy with ‘virtually all neighbouring groups’ was the normal marriage pattern.\textsuperscript{22} However, trade routes suggest strong links between people north of the Moyle River and those South of the Moyle, leading down into Kimberley country. The present Port Keats Road that links Daly River to Port Keats, with Peppimenarti half way along, follows the pre-settlement walking track.\textsuperscript{23} The Ngen’giwumirri often speak of historical ties with the Wagiman people, located south east of Peppimenarti. Wagiman researcher Antony Cook implies that the Wagiman make the same claim.\textsuperscript{24} These ties were disrupted at the turn of the twentieth century, as the Ngen’giwumirri and Wagiman were drawn to the Daly and Pine Creek settlements, respectively.\textsuperscript{25}

The strongest evidence of southern trade is the \textit{Biyawuul ⇔ Bingarawal} trading route.\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Biyawuul} and \textit{Bingarawal}, translating as ‘northerners’ and ‘southerners’ are two patrimoieties through which ritual trade was arbitrated. The route extended from the Daly region southward through Timber Creek, Kununurra and Balgo. From the south, the route reached up through Timber Creek to Port Keats (Wadeye) then forked with one branch going northwards to Belyuen, near Darwin, and other going eastward to Peppimenarti, to Daly River (Nauiyu) and onwards to Baranga.\textsuperscript{27} An East Kimberley man described the trade routes as follows:

\begin{quote}
And you know those big shells? We sold them. The Miriwung people sold them this was [north] up through Gadjerung country. We called it \textit{djaguling}. My father always sold it any way from Port Keats you know. They sold it to Port Keats way and we got that bamboo from the Port Keats fellers, \textit{milinyin}, for spears. They call it a different name in Darwin. They sold the shells from here to Legune Station, round Legune Station going to Bradshaw or to Port Keats. The shells came from the Wyndham way
\end{quote}

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[21]{N. Reid and P. Marrfurra McTaggart, \textit{op. cit.}, p360.}
\footnotetext[22]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[23]{Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 27, 2009.}
\footnotetext[25]{N. Reid and P. Marrfurra McTaggart, \textit{op. cit.}, p360.}
\footnotetext[26]{Ibid.}
\footnotetext[27]{Ibid.}
\end{footnotes}
and before they got there from Kalumburu way. I don’t know where from, from Kalumburu, they came. In Port Keats everyone called the bamboo daamul.28

Anthropologist Frederick D. McCarthy, who composed ‘Trade in Aboriginal Australia’ for *Oceania* in 1939, presents a map that shows another southern-northern trade route from Arrernte country in central Australia, up through Tennant Creek, Daly Waters and Mataranka to the Daly region, on which people traded spear throwers, shields and boomerangs.29 Similarly, boomerangs went from south to north along the *Biyawuul ↔ Bingarawal* route, whilst bamboo for making the spears left the Daly region, headed south. Regina Pilawuk Wilson explains:

Trade ties: still happening. That’s that message stick. They used to walk, all the way to Balgo. Not only Balgo. Our mob used to travel to Elliott, to Beswick mob. They used to trade spear from bamboo. Rolls and rolls of them. Hundreds. they’d give us boomerangs.30

Ochres, resin, dilly bags, pearl shell, armbands and European-sourced bolts of fabric were also sourced from the Daly.31 Stanner similarly observed of the Mulluk Mulluk and Madngella:

A long tradition associates certain articles with certain directions. The inter tribal economy draws certain articles in one direction, from which there comes a demand for them, and to send other articles back as compensation. Thus, bamboo travels south-west and south of the Daly River and does not return unless in spear form... a certain massive type of reddish granite spearhead is sent from Nangiomeri country, where the granite outcrops occur, to all tribes to the north and north east.32

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30 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 27, 2009.

31 N. Reid P. Marrfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p360.

Stanner identified this process as the *merbok* system of trading relations within the Madgnella and Malak Malak.

*Merbok* was organised via a three-person pattern: the individual stands between two exchange partners, who may be in his tribe or in another tribe. He/she gives and receives alternatively to both. An article received by one man is held for a period of time before being passed onto one of the exchange partners. Objects could pass in one direction and do not come back the way they came. Partners were always related, and the kinship system played an integral role in determining partnerships. Articles exchanged were all material goods with intrinsic value, and included ochres, kaolin, belts, boomerangs, spears, beeswax, tree gums, shell ornaments, dilly bags, string work, stone axes, knives and small ornamental objects.33 Items were offered during ceremonial events, but played a secondary role to ceremony. The *merbok* paths were north easterly and south easterly, roughly following the coastline. Items such as pearl shell pubic coverings would reach the Daly from as far away as present-day Broome.34 Cultural influences were disseminated by *merbok*, or as Stanner explains, ‘*merbok* paths have become highroads of cultural influence…(it) is par excellence the medium of material culture transmission.’35

**POST-CONTACT: TASMAN TO STANNER**

By the time Stanner began his anthropological studies in the region - the first and only comprehensive report completed - extensive migration from traditional lands had changed the demographic face of the country. Early European agricultural attempts in the 1870s altered the economic character of the region, luring people toward the riverbank activity. As Owen Stanley has observed, ‘there is considerable confusion in literature over the boundaries…and whether groups named are appropriate divisions or whether more or less aggregation is warranted.’36 Early reports of the area by explorers and anthropologists can be

33 Ibid., p161.  
34 Ibid., p162.  
conflicting, and to this day interviews with different language group representatives may result in contradictory information regarding land claims and population distribution.

The age of European contact commenced with the arrival of the Dutchman Abel Tasman in Anson Bay, the mouth of the Daly River, in 1644. The British officer Matthew Flinders repeated his navigation of this stretch of coast in 1803. Flinders revealed not only the coast of the top end, but also its existing Macassan-Aboriginal trading patterns:

In Arnhem Bay (the indigenous commander) Pobasso told Flinders that 60 praus, containing 1000 men, had come to this part of the coast from Macassar in December, and that they had been doing so for 20 years. The fleet then scattered along the north coast and into the Gulf to seek trepang.37

The Indonesian commercial trepang trade, although concentrated on the stretch of coast from Melville and Bathurst Islands in the west to the Edward Pellew Island group in the east, also operated between Darwin and the Kimberley. Macassan, or Marege, vessels from the kingdom of Macassar in southern Sulawesi would use the shallow, protected waters to harvest trepang (sea cucumber) for the Chinese market. The Bugis or Macassarese, the professional seaman, became particularly familiar with the coastal Arnhem Land Indigenous populations, and we can assume to an extent, with the salt-water people of the Daly region. French explorer Nicholas Baudin noted the presence of several vessels off the Kimberley coast in April 1803. Stanley states that Macassans ‘may have visited near the mouth of the Moyle’ but notes the lack of conclusive evidence.38

Macknight believes that Aboriginal people were attracted to Macassan camps in the hope of acquiring useful, tradeable items.39 The appeal of a reliable supply of liquor, food and material goods, combined with the ‘more intangible benefits of

37 F. H. Bauer, Historical Geography of white settlement in part of the Northern Territory, Part 2 The Katherine-Darwin Region, Divisional Report np. 64/1, Division of Land Research and Regional Survey, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, Canberra, April 1964.
38 O. Stanley, op. cit., p3.
travel and prestige’ were great.\textsuperscript{40} Trade was conducted during the wet season, with the Macassans offering metal hatchets, knives, glass, cloth, rice, tobacco and alcohol in return for turtle shell, buffalo horn and occasionally cypress pine logs for construction use. Macknight proposes that, although the concept of barter throughout the top end was overlain with ceremonial connotations, its basic premise was adapted for the Macassan patterns of interchange.\textsuperscript{41} Cloth, to a limited extent, was brought in the form of calico and blankets, some originally Indian or European. There is a record of Arnhem Land people wearing sarongs when greeting Europeans.\textsuperscript{42} Donald Thomson also claimed that the Macassans delivered beads, belts and string.\textsuperscript{43}

Each prau sailing vessel carried dug out canoes that were at some point obtained by local Indigenous populations, through trade or theft, eventually leading to their own production. This had a profound impact upon social mobility, hunting techniques and the status of saltwater people. There is evidence of Indigenous men voyaging with Macassans around the coast, and back to Macassar.\textsuperscript{44} Macknight argues that the success of the ‘golden age’ of Macassan trade relied upon its sustainable, benign nature, as well as a sense of equality between the two parties. He states, ‘the picture is of two cultures existing side by side involved neither in major cooperation or competition’.\textsuperscript{45} Robin Hodgson cites the tamarind trees that line the Moyle River as evidence of Ngan’gi-Macassan contact – a tree they planted on their travels.\textsuperscript{46} By the early twentieth century, the government had seized greater control of the marine activity in northern Australia waters, contributing to the decline in Macassan seasonal contact.\textsuperscript{47}

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p286.
\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., p308.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., p306.
\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} F. D. McCarthy notes that ‘many of the black men of Australia went back to the Malay country with the returning fleets and stayed throughout the intervening season’, in, ‘Trade in Aboriginal Australia and Trade relationships with Torres-Strait, New Guinea and Malaya’, \textit{Oceania}, vol. 10, no. 2, December 1939, p192.
\textsuperscript{45} C. C. Macknight, op. cit., p290.
Early exploration of the region’s coastline also included Philip Parker King’s survey of the Top End in September 1819. He described the Daly region’s coast as being ‘of moderate height, and thickly wooded to the brink of a range of dark red cliffs, two miles in length, rising immediately from the beach; upon which eight natives and a child were observed watching our movements.’\textsuperscript{48} In 1839 Wickham and Stokes captained The Beagle and ‘discovered’ the Victoria and Fitzmaurice Rivers, however they too missed the entrance to the Daly.

The first known presence of a European explorer inland was in 1861, when John McDouall Stuart’s sixth expedition opened up the region to settlement:

\begin{quote}
I believe this country to be well adapted for the settlement of a European population...the country is intersected with numerous springs and watercourses...if this country is settled, it will be one of the finest colonies under the Crown, suitable for the growth of any and everything – what a splendid country for producing cotton!\textsuperscript{49}
\end{quote}

Thus began the desire to turn the Northern Territory into Australia’s agricultural paradise, or, as Bauer states Stuart’s ‘favorable reports...impressed everyone, particularly the South Australians, whose eyes were already turning to the north.\textsuperscript{50} South Australian Governor Sir Dominick Daly petitioned the Colonial Office for the annexation of the Northern Territory to South Australia, and this was granted in 1863.\textsuperscript{51}

It was Lt. Colonel Boyle Travis Finniss, however, who first mapped the estuary of the Daly River in 1865 and named it after Governor Daly. Finniss was the First Premier of South Australia and Government Resident of the Northern Territory. The South Australian government began a search for a suitable Northern capital, commissioning well-known explorer McKinlay to navigate potential settlement sites, including the Daly River, where he noted it as ‘the best land he saw

\textsuperscript{48} Philip Parker King, \textit{Narrative of a survey of the intertropical and western coasts of Australia, performed between the years 1818 and 1822 vol. 1, by Phillip P. King, with an appendix containing various subjects relating to hydrography and natural history}, John Murray, London, 1827.
\textsuperscript{49} John McDouall Stuart, cited in, \textit{Historical geography of white settlement}, op. cit., p44.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{51} On May 26, 1863, the Duke of Newcastle announced the annexation of ‘the territory north of South Australia, and lying between the 129\textdegree and 138\textdegree degrees of east longitude’ to South Australia, as reported in \textit{The Maitland Mercury & Hunter River General Advertiser}, August 8, 1863, p3.
anywhere, as well as the unmistakable signs that the river flooded extensively and that the natives were unfriendly.\textsuperscript{52} Surveys were then conducted by McMinn, Saunders and Sergison (1877), Hingston, Kelsey et al (1882) and Carrington (1884). Sergison, in contrast to fellow surveyor McMinn, was optimistic about the pastoral potential of the Daly region and on his return to Darwin, encouraged southern pastoralists C. B. Fisher, M. Lyons and R. Travers to invest in northern land.\textsuperscript{53}

In the late 1877 these southern interests occupied 2, 100 square miles of territory land, a portion of which was by the Daly River. Sergison led his own party between the Daly and Victoria Rivers (possibly passing through Peppimenarti country) and continued his settlement campaign through a pamphlet published in 1878.\textsuperscript{54} However the region remained relatively ignored by Europeans until the pastoral boom of 1880-82. Applications for pastoral leases exploded due to propaganda, and talk of a transcontinental railway. In 1881, for example, E. M. Ebsworth applied for a lease for the land from Anson Bay, in the north, to the Fitzmaurice River in the south and Daly settlement to the East.\textsuperscript{55} In the same year W. Owston established a sugar farm near Wooliana and the region’s first cattle enterprise emerged at the mouth of the river. The latter, owned by W. J. Browne, ran 4,000 cattle between 1883-86 but failed in 1890.\textsuperscript{56} Pastoral settlement at this time in the Northern Territory was unstable, as farmers struggled to understand the landscape and extreme seasonal variation. The boom was short lived, as many of the leases were speculative and land was often forfeited.\textsuperscript{57}

During this period, explorers Parsons, Biddles and Holtze reported meeting ‘150 Aborigines’ at the present site of Wooliana, 20 kilometres from the Daly River settlement, in 1884, which indicated healthy population in the area.\textsuperscript{58} The population increase was, in part, a result of the establishment of a copper mine at Mount Haywood in the same year that employed Woolwonga Aboriginal men from

\textsuperscript{52} F. H. Bauer, op. cit., p56.
\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p109.
\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., p109.
\textsuperscript{55} Map 7: Lessee in the Far North, 1881, National Library Archives, Canberra, cited in, Historical geography of white settlement, op. cit., p112.
\textsuperscript{56} O. Stanley, op. cit., p5.
\textsuperscript{57} F. H. Bauer, op. cit., p113.
\textsuperscript{58} O. Stanley, op. cit, p1.
country north-east of Daly River, around Pine Creek. The equilibrium of the region was forever altered in 1884 when four German-born miners were killed by one or more Woolwonga men. The recriminations were swift and harsh: Stanley notes the elimination of the Woolwonga group due to punitive action, and at least 200 Indigenous river people were killed as a result of skirmishes in the two years following the mine murders. In his report of the punitive action, Corporal George Montagu stated:

I believe the natives have received such a lesson this time as will exercise a salutary effect over the survivors in time to come. One result of this expedition has been to convince me of the superiority of the Martin-Henry rifle, both for accuracy of aim and quickness of action.

The Malak Malak group, despite apparent lack of involvement in the miner killings, original inhabitants of the Daly settlement area, were also attacked, and greatly reduced in number.

As a result of the conflict, Jesuits, who had been expelled from the Austrian Empire in 1848 and resettled in Australia, were attracted to the region. In February 1881 Pope Leo XVIII authorised the Australian Jesuits to control mission activity in the Northern Territory. They established the mission ‘Old Uniya’ in 1886 with the aim of alleviating discord on the river. At attempt was made to resettle the Indigenous population into reduction villages, based upon models developed in Paraguay. The reduction model created self-sustaining ‘native villages’, surveyed along tribal boundaries. Jesuit missionary Father Donald Mackillop (Mary McKillop’s brother) stated that:

Our aim and our hope is to reproduce on the banks of the Daly and among the western tribes those Reductions – triumphs of humanity even Voltaire called them – which, as Henry George writes, ‘to their eternal honour the Jesuits instituted and so long maintained Paraguay.’ If only South Australia would allow us room we would

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59 Ibid., p5.
have no difficulty to overcome that which our fathers of old did not master in South America.\textsuperscript{61}

The Jesuit aim was to phase out the Indigenous hunter-gatherer lifestyle as Christianity could only be embraced through a settled, pastoral existence. From 1882 to 1891 the Jesuits built and developed four Northern Territory missions. Rapid Creek in Palmerston (now Darwin) was the first and ran from 1882 to 1891, when it closed as a result of inter-tribal conflict and the ‘corrupting’ influence of the emerging city of Palmerston.\textsuperscript{62} Soon after, the Daly River region was chosen as an ideal location due to the large, warring river population and the distance from a large township. The aforementioned Old Uniya was built on the western bank of the river, a site believed to be a tribal border between the Malak Malaks, Woolwongas and Agaquillas, however the focus of their work was the Malak Malaks. The rest of the Indigenous population settled on the eastern bank, and the population grew by 30 multi-tribal families in 1888.\textsuperscript{63} The Mission had 50 permanent residents, 40 employees and 3 apprentices by this time.\textsuperscript{64} In 1890 malaria, whooping cough and influenza killed many residents and the remaining were sent to the second mission, Sacred Heart, at Serpentine Lagoon or Kumoerrke, located on higher ground twenty miles from Old Uniya. Sacred Heart had greater access to bush tucker, thus the mission residents resisted the pastoral path, ultimately leading to Sacred Heart’s closure in 1891.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{62} O. Stanley, op. cit., p7.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
Figure 5 Jesuit missionaries and Indigenous children, Old Uniya, Daly River, date unknown. Image sourced from the Australian and New Zealand Environmental History Network.

Figure 6 ‘A beautiful beach on the Daly River’, c. 1900, photographer unknown, Northern Territory Collection, State Library of South Australia.
Figure 7 Father Donald MacKillop and Indigenous residents of Old Uniya, Daly River, date unknown. Image sourced from www.MaryMackillop.org.

The South Australian government granted the Jesuits 300 acres in 1891 for a new attempt at a reduction mission - New Uniya. The site, twenty miles downstream from Old Uniya, at the present-day Wooliana, attracted 50 permanent residents.\(^66\) Father MacKillop wrote in 1893:

> Religion is primary in our intention but in a manner secondary in our practice, because we recognise that we must first civilise the blacks before we can Christianize them...it is a kind of socialism but one that will work well, for there is true religion and self-reliance at the bottom of it.\(^67\)

Initial success was squandered by the onset of the depression, and influenza outbreaks. By 1894 the Depression had driven all European farmers back to Darwin. As a result, the Jesuits purchased the abandoned pastoral land of over 1,\(^68\)

\(^{66}\) O. Stanley, op. cit., p8.

500 acres.\textsuperscript{68} Stanley believes that in the years leading up to 1900, the mission resembled a ‘Reduction ideal.’\textsuperscript{69} Up to twenty Aboriginal houses were built, as well as a granary, church, school, boiler, underground aqueducts, forge and extensive livestock and crop programs. From 1895 to 1899 there were 70 to 80 Indigenous residents and 20 to 30 children at the local school (which switched from Malak Malak to English in 1895).\textsuperscript{70} Anthropologist Ronald. M. Berndt viewed the Mission as reflecting:

> a period of tolerance and sympathy toward the oppressed Aborigines: the station served primarily as a buffer between the Aborigines on the one hand and the European settlers on the other. Present native informants credit the Mission authorities with clearing away certain “white” persons who had molested womenfolk and indiscriminately shot them down... primarily a haven in which Aborigines could seek refuge.\textsuperscript{71}

Berndt also notes that Stanner described the mission as ‘an agricultural success but an ethical failure’.\textsuperscript{72}

The Jesuits were withdrawn from the Northern Territory by Rome in 1899 for a number of reasons, the most compelling being that New Uniya had failed to be financially self-sustaining and was a strain on the church. The most significant legacy of the mission was its effect on inter-tribal boundaries. The Malak Malak, Woolwonga, Wagiman, Ponga Ponga, Maranunggu and Djerait people continued to reside on the mission site, where they had formerly sought employment and found a permanent source of food, comfort and relative safety. The original inhabitants, the Malak Malak were left to defend their land for many years.\textsuperscript{73} The attitude of the European population of the Northern Territory toward Missions such as New Uniya was expressed in \textit{The Northern Territory Times and Gazette}, Friday 14 July, 1899:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{70} O. Stanley, op. cit., p9. \\
\textsuperscript{71} Ronald M. Berndt, \textit{Surviving influence of Mission contact on the Daly River, Northern Territory of Australia}, Walter de Gruyter, 1952, Berlin, p2. \\
\textsuperscript{72} W. E. H. Stanner, quoted in, Ronald M. Berndt, \textit{Surviving influence of Mission contact}, p2. \\
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
If anyone took the impression from our last week’s remarks that the Daly Mission was being abandoned because of the inability of the Mission to obtain satisfactory results from the blacks it was a mistaken interpretation. The Rev. Father Conrad, who has, perhaps, the greater experience of all members of the Mission, is of the opinion that the work of Christianising the natives will have to be extended over several generations before any permanent results can be expected. He has studied the language, the manners and customs, and the general disposition of the Blacks very closely, and in his daily intercourse with both young and old at the Mission he has had ample opportunity of delineating their character. Little or nothing can be done with the old people, except to ameliorate their lot by the gifts of the good things provided by the Mission, and it is the influence of the elders that makes it so difficult for the Mission to secure desired results with the children. The development of the juvenile brain into channels of thought superior to native intelligence would be sooner achieved if the parents of the children would leave them at school instead of taking them into the bush periodically and returning them as dense as ever.

This is true crux of the whole question. The Fathers are prepared to admit that the measure of success achieved by them during a term of nearly 20 years is not so substantial as they could wish, but, as Father Conrad confidently puts it, the labours of the present Mission will be entitled to respect if they have the effect of turning the minds of the younger natives, even in the smallest degree, towards a better and nobler existence than is now lived by the Australian savage. The missionaries are quite content to continue their Christianising efforts, but the late inundation rendered it impossible for them to remain where they were, risking every year the loss of their stock, the ruin of their gardens and their own lives by floods.74

The ‘crux of the whole question’, being the separation of children for salvation and education, is a strong reflection of the ‘stolen generation’ policy that was emerging within the Territory.

Deborah Bird-Rose examines the notion of the frontier as a dual, double-sided phenomenon, encompassing presence and absence, imposition and forfeiture. The missionaries (and anthropologists that followed) were interested in an absence, a clean slate upon which to inscribe their agenda.75 This was a process

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74 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, Friday 14 July 1899, p8.
of inscription, rather than replacement. The assumption was that there was no existing civilization or culture to replace:

‘The complete absence of the white man on the left bank of the Daly River, wrote Mackillop, ‘is the greatest blessing to our mission.’ ‘The uninviting character of the soil may prevent the only thing we fear: the occupation of the country by our white brethren.’

Bird-Rose argues that whilst the missionaries were attempting to civilise the Aboriginal population, they in turn were informed by Aboriginal ways of doing things. The missionaries became reliant upon the local populations for assistance with bush tucker hunting and gathering, when crops failed. And Knut Dahl, an explorer who stayed at the mission for several months in 1894, suggested that the mission’s gardening program was used by the Indigenous residents to gain greater access to tobacco. An 1888 report also suggested that mission residents fled in times of food shortages. Bird-Rose proposes that the contradictory nature of their work was lost on the missionaries, ‘until, perhaps, the very end.’ The situation repeated itself thirty years later, with the arrival of anthropologists such as Stanner. Rather than encountering ‘untainted’ Indigenous populations, researchers found a people completely cognizant of European ambitions. Jeremy Beckett notes how Stanner, after viewing a tribal skirmish on the banks of the Daly, was asked by a ‘noble savage’ whether he ‘enjoyed the show.’

Explorer J. C. de Lancourt’s experience of the region in 1926 was similarly ‘familiar’:

Here I found a large number of natives camped. At first they were frightened, thinking we were policemen, but when we made no move to molest them they gained confidence. Before long they were all round us – all anxious to show us the best camp, and willing to help us unpack and all vociferously begging tobacco.

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76 J. W. Harris, op. cit., p466.
79 Peter Forrest, The Spirit of the Daly, Daly River Community Development Corporation, Daly River, 1994, p25.
80 D. Bird-Rose, ‘Signs of Life’, p228.
The closure of the Mission coincided with a dramatic decrease in economic activity on the river. Mining had been abandoned in 1894, and the main cattle station ceased activity in 1890. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, there were only a few European entrepreneurs, including Mr Neimann, who took over the New Uniya land and employed locals to hunt game, and farm tobacco and sugar. The Indigenous population was paid in kind. In 1911 the Commonwealth launched a series of experimental farms just north of the crossing, employing 35 locals in 1935. Baldwin Spencer photographed the development of this project, on his 1912 visit as Chief Protector of Aborigines. His accompanying notes state:

At 3pm we came to a clearing on one side of a fine reach in the river that indicated the position of the future settlement, and the lugger was made fast to the bank because, as yet, there was no such thing as a jetty, and we were met by a small mob of natives, who gathered together, having heard afar off the sound of the launch. Unloading began at once, to the accompaniment of much noise on the part of the natives, who enjoyed everything, most of all they were pleased when a box of tinned meats broke and the contents emptied themselves out into the water, from which they were doubtless privately retrieved when we had left.

Between 1913-1914, 12 blocks of land (7, 071 acres) had been taken up in the Daly as part of the Commonwealth scheme. Peanut farming arrived at the Daly with European farmer James Parry in 1914 (Parry fathered Marathiel children, one of whom, Bill Parry, went on to found Wudigapildhiyerr community for the Marathiel people on the Daly River Aboriginal Reserve). The government withdrew its support of the experimental farms in 1915, and they did not survive. The farmland was converted to an ‘Aboriginal Station’ in 1920. In 1915, 80 whites and 20 Chinese farmers resided on the river and by 1920 the white farmers had dwindled to 5. A police station opened at Wooliana in 1915, most likely as a result of escalating violence. Between 1898 and 1911 the police inquired into 73

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84 Ibid.
87 O. Stanley, op. cit., p11.
sudden deaths in the region, 62 of them Chinese.\textsuperscript{89} We assume scores more Indigenous people died but went unrecorded. By 1923 only Parry and Hill remained. The government had officially abandoned the region, and condemned it as unsuitable for white settlement. The peanut boom of the late 20s attracted further farmers, but a fall in prices left a ‘very poor European community with an even poorer Aboriginal community substantially dependent upon it for the next decade.’\textsuperscript{90}

Figure 8 Scenes on Thomas and Roberts’ tobacco plantation on the Daly River, 1912, National Library of Australia collection.

W.E.H. STANNER

When W. E. H. Stanner arrived in 1935 he encountered ‘a barbarous frontier – more, a rotted frontier, with a smell of old failure, vice and decadence...enterprise after enterprise had failed.’\textsuperscript{91} On ‘the fringe of the last unknown part of the North’ his hopes of an uncontaminated field of study were frustrated by the river economy.\textsuperscript{92} Stanner felt that the ‘river tribes’ had been experiencing ‘an acute and corrosive’ form of cultural contact since 1890, ‘if not many years before.’\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{90} O. Stanley, op. cit., p14.
\textsuperscript{91} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p82.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} W. E. H Stanner, ‘The Daly River Tribes’, p377.
He had been attracted by the area’s long-held reputation as an anthropologist’s dream site. F.J. Gillen, in a letter to Baldwin Spencer, dated April 1896, had referred to ‘an old friend of mine, Revd D. MacKillop SJ, who is head of the Jesuit mission Stn on the Daly River NT...and although he has been some years amongst the blacks there he knows nothing of their class and marriage system.’94 A year later he states that ‘the thought of being able to spend a month with McKillop on the Daly makes me tingle like a thoroughbred at the starting post.’95 These comments exemplify the River’s reputation as an ideal site of study at the turn of the century.

95 Ibid., p163.
Figure 9 W. E. H. Stanner’s sketch map of the Daly River region, indicating ‘settled’ and ‘unsettled’ areas, as well as ‘tribes’. The highlighted area indicates present-day Peppimenarti; from ‘The Daly River Tribes: A report of field work in north Australia’, W. E. H. Stanner, in, Oceania, vol. 3, no. 4, Sydney, 1933, p382.
Stanner spent seven months in the Daly River region in 1932, on behalf of the Australian National Research Council. His studies centred on the Marithiel and Nangiomeri with some exposure to the Mulluk Mulluk and Madngella (Stanner’s spelling). We can assume that Stanner’s brief mentions of the Moiil people are actually Ngan’gikurunggurr, as the term Moiil or Moil has historically been used for this group. He states that the Moiil and Marathiel ‘belong to the country between the Daly and Fitzmaurice rivers’, which would loosely fit with Ngan’gikurunggurr country, and his hand-drawn map (fig. 3) identifies the location of present-day Peppimenarti as Moiil country.

On the banks of the Daly, Stanner found a population drawn from surrounding country, up to 100km away. He lists members of the Mulluk Mulluk, Madngella, Maranunggo, Ngangiomeri, Marithiel, Moiil, Maringar, Wagaman, Nangor, Marimanindji and Ponga Ponga. Stanner doubted that the area between the white settlements of the Daly and Victoria Rivers, from which the Daly population had been drawn, was ‘dense with Aborigines’ as previously claimed. In *White Man Got No Dreaming*, written twenty-seven years after his first visit, Stanner exclaims

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that large tracts of Daly country ‘had been emptied decades before the authorities knew anything about it’.\textsuperscript{97} Stanley quotes Stanner’s report that the country between the Daly and Fitzmaurice Rivers was empty in 1935, apart from 100 to 200 Moiils.\textsuperscript{98} The small proportion of Indigenous people who managed to stay away from the settlement were still profoundly affected by contact. The trade of white man’s goods – tobacco, iron, tea, sugar and clothes – had reached them long before many set eyes upon a European.\textsuperscript{99} If not killed by disease, alcohol or conflict, members had been dispersed, or ‘absorbed into larger tribes on which they had claims of kinship, affinity friendship.’\textsuperscript{100}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure11.jpg}
\caption{Malak Malak fathers and sons, Daly River, c.1935. Photo by W. E. H. Stanner, W. E. H. Stanner collection, AIATSIS.}
\end{figure}

Whilst intertribal tensions of varying degrees existed amongst the population in 1932, the conflict of the Nangiomeri and Marithiel was ‘a state of terror’ with ‘weapons held at all times.’\textsuperscript{101} In greater Indigenous Australia, the period between

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{97} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p81.
\item \textsuperscript{98} O. Stanley, op. cit., p14.
\item \textsuperscript{99} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p81.
\item \textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{101} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p88.
\end{itemize}
1920 and 1940 was marked by ‘clashes...atrocities...and court trials in which procedure and assumptions seemed likely to deny justice to the Aborigines concerned’.\textsuperscript{102} Naturalist Charles Barrett visited the Daly in the late 30s, and described his experience with ‘Moiil’ people as follows:

...he offered to show me a Moiil camp in the bamboo jungle on the western bank...’don’t let one of them walk behind you with a shovel-nosed spear. Sometimes an abo gets the urge to kill, and he’ll stick you without meaning to be unfriendly!”\textsuperscript{103}

One of Stanner’s primary informants, the Ngen’iwumirri man Durmugan spoke of his childhood memories (at the turn of nineteenth century) of ‘endless bloody fights between the river and the back country tribes and drink sodden aborigines lying out in the rain.’\textsuperscript{104} The pattern of conflict between ‘river’ and ‘inland’ tribes is a common memory for the Ngan’gikurunggurr at Peppimenarti:

Our tribe had fights with that other tribe. That other clan used to go and steal other people’s wife, all the tribes used to follow tracks where they were going, then there would be war.\textsuperscript{105}

Durmugan, an imposing and much-feared figure in the region, spoke of his absolute hatred of ‘those damn moiils’, particularly toward the end of the life. The antagonism between the Ngen’giwumirri and Ngan’gikurunggurr is outlined by his stories of wife abduction, offences to ceremonial ritual and subsequent maiming or murder as punishment.\textsuperscript{106} Durmugan was Peppimenarti resident Therese Daly’s grandfather. Regina Wilson states that:

He was famous and many murders. That Ngen’giwumirri and Malak Malak, always payback, dangerous. They used to paint up, fight with spear.

There was a big fight at the Moyle. Mum’s grandmother was involved and got speared through the arm. Big trees there now.

\textsuperscript{102} A. P. Elkin, \textit{The Australian Aborigines}, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1974, p64.
\textsuperscript{104} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p82.
\textsuperscript{105} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 29, 2010.
\textsuperscript{106} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p91.
The sisters and cousins of fighters would run in and stop the fight. We’re proud of that story.107

Figure 12 Durmugan boiling the billy, Daly River, c. 1935. Photo by W. E. H. Stanner, W. E. H. Stanner collection, AIATSIS.

The disintegration of territorial and tribal affiliations was due, in part, to the two white settlements. Drawn to the Victoria and Daly River for employment, goods and relief from a nomadic existence, the Daly River groups thus experienced an extreme degree of ‘internationalism’.108 Patterns of social organisation, kinship, totems and ritual concerns seemed to have travelled up from the Victoria and Fitzmaurice Rivers groups to the Daly, the most obvious being the amendment to kinship within the Ngen’giwumirri.

Despite the broad use of the Kariera system, as previously discussed, during his six-month study Stanner observed that the Ngan’giwumirri had adopted a subsectional system of the Arandic type, in recent history.109 Stanner suggested that the merbok system of exchange brought this cultural shift up from central Australia.110 However, Nicholas Reid suggests that the group were a buffer between southern influence and the other Daly language groups, as the system

107 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, 29th March, 2012.
was embraced by no other group to the north. The Ngan’giwumirri are traditionally from country just north of the Fitzmaurice River, sixty miles south west of the Daly River settlement area and thus closest to southern influence. Elkin supported the claim, stating that the system was adopted from neighbouring ‘tribes who practise cross-cousin marriage.’ Stanner had noted the alteration to the basic Kariera system in 1932, and believed it was a recent development.

The Kariera type, within the Ngen’giwumirri and Marathiel, was modified to include marriage with the sister’s son’s daughter in addition to bilateral cross-cultural marriage. As Elkin explains:

> ‘these tribes have found that if cross cousin marriage is practised regularly, a man’s descendant in the male line will not be his own subsection group until the generation of his son’s son’s son’s son has been reached, that is, two generations farther off than in most tribes.’

More recently, Nicholas Reid has explained the subsection as ‘reorganised into two parallel cycles of matrilineal descent.’ He uses Ngan’gi names to construct this example:

> Tyulama and Nawula are brother and sister. Tyulama marries Nanagu, and their children are Nimara and Tyabada. Nawula marries Tyanama and their children are Tyangari and Nangari, and so on. The cycle is four generational, whereby a man’s father’s father and son’s son fall into same subsection.

The adaptation was believed to be related to the Aranda system from Arrernte country around Alice Springs. The Ngen’giwumirri refer to the additional subsection as finy or kin, derived from the English word ‘skin.’ Stanner and Elkin refer to the amendment as ingenious, as the strict matrilineal determination of subsection ultimately prevents a man marrying his daughter’s daughter.

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111 N. Reid and P. Marfurra McTaggart, op. cit., 360.
112 A. P. Elkin, op. cit., p64.
114 A. P. Elkin, op. cit., p64.
115 N. Reid and P. Marfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p361.
116 Ibid.
finy system, whilst still functioning, is marginal to the Kariera.\textsuperscript{118} Reid and McTaggart assert that the Ngen’giwumirri ‘were the only Daly group’ to adopt the Arandic subsection system, most probably sometime in the first two decades of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{119} However Regina Pilawuk Wilson asserts that ‘all groups around here’ had the finy system.\textsuperscript{120} Finy also determined matrilineal totemism, although Stanner observed traces of former patrilineal totemism.\textsuperscript{121} The present Ngangikurunggurr people describe their totemic system as patrilineal, so we must assume that this was historically the case; Stanner did not study the totemic system of the ‘Moil.’

By the 1920s, ritual and religion in the Daly had been reduced to male initiation and the emerging cult of the Kunabibi-Karwardi or ‘all mother.’ The first decades of the twentieth century saw the river groups settle into ‘a protracted phase of adaptation’ and ‘systematic effort to turn to their greater advantage the more or less stable routines imposed on them once the primary phase of contact was over.’\textsuperscript{122} The prevailing belief in the ‘all father’ (angamunggi) had dwindled due to the effect of sexually transmitted disease upon fertility and reduced game in the region. Stanner proposes that the cult of the ‘all mother’ spread from the south, taking the place of the fallen ‘all father’.\textsuperscript{123} The long and consistent history of European contact had essentially forced out all ‘high culture’ from the Daly, forcing the tribes to appropriate that of the Victorian River tribes. The cult was concerned with the preservation of life, with an emphasis on fertility, however the cult was exclusively the domain of men. The bullroarer was its sacred symbol. Durmugan recalls women being murdered for having sighted the bullroarer.

Despite his investigations into religion, kinship, ceremony and cultural life, Stanner ultimately felt that he had merely traced the dilution of culture and the blurring of tribal boundaries and beliefs:

\textsuperscript{118} N. Reid and P. Marfurra McTaggart, op. cit., p363.  
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., p361.  
\textsuperscript{120} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, May 16, 2010.  
\textsuperscript{121} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘The Daly River Tribes’, p398.  
\textsuperscript{122} W. E. H. Stanner, ‘Durmugam’, p83.  
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
Whatever it was, the effective local organisation of Daly River tribes has long since perished. The reason is clear. Those tribes which drifted to the settlement and stayed were aliens in a foreign country.

This ‘loss of confident knowledge’ hindered his reconstruction of the lives of the Daly River people.124

William Edward Harney, a Protector of Aborigines for the Native Affairs Branch of the Federal government, 1940-47, recounted his experience of the Daly River community in *Life Among the Aborigines*, providing a rare insight into the region between Stanner’s fieldwork and the establishment of a new mission in 1956. He states that the ‘Riverite’ residents relied solely on barter to survive, with chief ‘tycoons’ being Brother Woods and ‘his mate Tom Vegar.’125 The system relied upon ‘black people’ catching ‘the standard value and out of that the barter industry begins.’126 Harney was there, in part, to investigate a murder, and declared that the ‘Daly River’s past is full of incident: murders, mines and missionaries whose hopes were washed away in floods of water and vice.’127 His principle research, however, centred on the importation of a ‘cargo cult’ called Big Sunday. According to his findings, the Brinken (a collective word for the groups that lived in and around Daly, based on the brinkin sticks used as spear throwers) had ‘simple’ beliefs until the ‘cult of Kunapippi’ moved up from the southern Wardaman group.128 The cult involved sacred bull-roarers, another southern import, and was named ‘Big Sunday’, as this translated to ‘very sacred’ for the river language groups. Much of the ensuing warfare between groups has been attributed to this development, as aspects of it permitted wife stealing. Harney recounted:

After our visit to the Riverites, Constable Tom Turner led us to Brown’s Lagoon, the site of the “Sunday business” killing affray, and there, on the spot, we visualised the crime and heard the tale from one, old Matthew, who claimed he had been baptized by the Fathers of the long-deserted Mission:

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126 Ibid., p48.
127 Ibid., p46.
128 Ibid., p40.
There were four lads in the crime – mere youths who had been sold the “magic” of “Big Sunday” by “Big-foot Paddy” – and with this new-found power they believed they were “strong” in hunting and love. One of the lads was a sweetheart of an old man’s wife, and had tried his magic on her and it has failed to attract her. The women – so they said – had sheltered under the white man’s law and defied them by tramping (against the warning of the old men) over the taboo ground. Then came death. Not savage and secretly as in a brutal crime, but by spears thrown at one who would profane the sacred laws of the “Old woman.”

A NEW MISSION & PEPPIMENARTI

By the 1950s, the situation on the Daly settlement was largely unimproved: residents Joe and Bill Parry, Harold Wilson and John Chapman became increasingly concerned over the state of the community – fighting, health concerns, lack of education and employment – and approached the Bishop of Darwin, JP O’Loughlin, MSC, and the Native Affairs Branch in 1952 to campaign for the establishment of a school. These men were children of Indigenous and white parents, and had received a western education as ‘stolen generation’ children. They were too young to have experienced the former Jesuit missions in the area. The Mission of the Sacred Heart had founded a Mission at Port Keats in 1935 at the mouth of the Fitzmaurice River, and this would have served as their example. The MSC granted a mission, to be built with government funds just north of the Daly River’s crossing, to be called Nauiyu Nambiyu. It opened on 28th October 1956, with the aim of being a resource centre for the labouring Indigenous population and school for children.

The mission expanded from 943 acres in 1956 to 10,252 acres in 1973. The land upon which it stood was an agricultural lease, converted to freehold in 1981, however it was traditionally Malak Malak land, which would lead to their land claim in 1982. An infirmary, kitchen/dining room, school, girls’ and boys’ dormitory, convent, presbytery, recreation centre, garage, workshop and airstrip were completed by 1956, followed soon after by two houses for Aboriginal employees. As Stanley notes, ‘this commenced the establishment of a resident

129 Ibid., p49.
130 O. Stanley, op. cit., p17.
131 Ibid.
Aboriginal population.' A *NT Welfare Branch Annual Report* from 1959 states that Brinkin, Malak Malak, Moiil, Nangiomeri and Wagiman were living on the mission. The resident population continued to grow, echoing the character of the former mission, or a Jesuit reduction. Gardens and some agriculture were developed and by 1959 native game, fish, fowl, clothing and stockfeed were all being produced and sold in Darwin. By 1964, 23 Aboriginal men were employed in areas such as brickmaking, hygiene, gardening, fencing, pastoral work, building, machinery, kitchen work and hunting whilst the women conducted craft work, teaching, baking, sewing, laundering, gardening and kitchen and hospital work.

Catholicism was adopted by many mission residents and surrounding station workers. *NT Welfare Report*, 1964-65, noted that stockmen were contributing to the costs of the clergymen’s trips to the stations. The success of the church relied upon its acceptance of Indigenous custom, and flexibility with tribal law. Marriages were only approved by the church if they adhered to local kinship allowances. Polygamy, however, was not tolerated. Reverend Father J. Leary discussed the aims of the mission as introducing:

> the concept of home, family-life related to the home (as against the tribal concept), status in the community, responsibility (individual rather than tribal)... whereas with the old life he faced it more as a group, the new life he must face more as an individual.

The Mission successfully encouraged the integration of Christianity with existing Indigenous belief systems, many of which survive today. In 2003, Daly River residents were asked to narrate and explain the conflation of Indigenous and Catholic ‘stories’ for the book *Dadirri*. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr states:

> Christianity is new for us. After more than one hundred years, the Jesuits had long been forgotten. In 1936 a Mission was set up at Port Keats (Wadeye), 200km away...
on the shores of Joseph Bonaparte Gulf. We are related to the people there and as travellers moved between homelands they talked about some of the things the Missionaries were saying. Then our own Mission was built. In our own way we understood what the Fathers and Sisters were telling us about Jesus, but He lived in a far-away country and moved among white people dressed in strange clothes. That was what we saw in pictures, in books and in statues in the Church. Why couldn’t He be like us? Why couldn’t His country be our country?  

A ‘new process of funeral ceremony grieving exemplified the cultural and spiritual changes wrought by the Mission. Rose Ungunmerr explains that:

Nowadays a burial takes place in our Community cemetery...it was not like that in the past. A body might be wrapped in paperbark and placed in a tree to protect it from animals. Months later the bones would be collected and placed in a hollow log or buried. Another way was to place the body on a platform with a fire underneath until there was only dried skin and bones. The skin would be peeled off, wrapped and kept. The bones would be put in a hollow log or buried.

During the first Mission’s tenure, the adoption of Christianity was manifested, in part, in ‘cargo cults.’ Bird-Rose argues that cults (such as one known as tyaboī) acted as devices for the incorporation of unfamiliar systems and experiences within Indigenous cosmology. In 1899, Father Kristen stated that ‘Tyaboī... Benbenyaga (blacks), Chinese garden, Chinese, Coppermines, all mixed up in it.’ The practice involved rituals that also mimicked the missionaries, in an attempt to make sense of their teachings and thus ‘tame punitive practices of the cross.’ Christian and Indigenous stories ran parallel within such cults. By the time the second Mission was well established, however, the stories had fused. Miriam Rose Ungunmerr states that:

The sign of the Fish represents Christians to me. That is like Aboriginal people belonging to animals or a fish. God also has good spirits that look after His Kingdom. Aboriginal people, too, belong to spirit people who, in their country, look after the dead.

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139 M. Rose Ungunmerr, op. cit., p8.
140 Ibid.
143 M. Rose Ungunmerr, op. cit., p6.
The Daly River mission thrived as an economic and social centre throughout the 60s and 70s. By 1975 it employed 52 residents. In the same year the mission changed its name to Nauiyu and, in keeping with contemporary Indigenous policy – including the abolition of the wardship system in the Northern Territory in 1964, establishment of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1972 and Woodward commission on Land Rights in 1973 - an Aboriginal council of residents was formed. The powers of this council were hindered by the fact that the community was on land leased to the Catholic Church. The day-to-day running of Nauiyu was carried out by the council, and Stanley asserts that the Church was happy to hand over these responsibilities to the residents ‘providing that does not jeopardise their control of the land.’ By 1979, the mission had full employment, and even some labour shortages. Missionary John Pye M.S.C recalled that:

...in the 1940s Braken pushed remaining Mulluk Mullus to the east side of river. There are some 30 of them at present living at Woolianna and their children, as well as the children of their former enemies, the Brinkens, sit side by side in the Mission school.

Alongside council, an Aboriginal organisation called Unia was established in 1972, with the aim of ‘assisting civic and community development.’ By the second half of the 1970s, Unia had become primarily concerned with the campaign for a new community, approximately 100km away from Nauiyu, on the Daly River Aboriginal Reserve. The homelands movement of the 1970s saw hundreds of outstations emerge on traditional lands throughout the Northern Territory. Federal and territory government policy supported the movement from the late 70s. As the mission was made up of migrants from the Daly Aboriginal Reserve, it made sense for them to attempt a return to country as it became a political and financial possibility. The country was a dreaming site, and thus a centre for meeting, ceremony, disputes and punishment. Ngan’gikurunggurr people living at the mission returned to country for these reasons, as well as for ‘bush holiday’

145 Ibid., p28.
147 O. Stanley, op. cit., p27.
trips, where Ngan’gikurrunggurr would set up semi-permanent camps on country during the dry season.

In 1969 Harold Wilson, his wife Regina, their children and two traditional owners of the Peppimenarti site attempted to set up a permanent camp there, at the base of Peppi hill, amongst the paperbark forests. A bush fire swept through the region shortly after and the group was forced to return to the mission. Regina Wilson states:

I came here with my husband many years ago and we built Peppimenarti.
First we settled near the river, over near the flood plain, but a fire burnt our camp so we had to start again, in another place. All my wedding things were lost.148

Harold Wilson’s father was a European Daly River farmer and his mother a Ngen’giwumirri woman from the Moyle River, south west of Peppimenarti. He was born in 1938 at Peppimenarti but taken, age 7, to the Roman Catholic Convent School in Darwin, just after Word War II. From there, he was sent to Garden Point, ‘where mobs of part-Aboriginals were sent.’149 He then ‘went ringing’ as a stockman throughout the Territory, including the Tiwi Islands, Port Keats and Daly River. He met and married Regina Pilawuk in 1966, then a young woman living at the Daly River mission.

In February 1971 Nauiyu residents Charles Disbil, Billy Malbin and Martin Ngirnitj initiated a second attempt to a ‘homeland’ return by applying for a pastoral lease for the land bordered by Tom Turner’s Creek in the south and the wildlife reserve in the north, an area of approximately 1,126 square miles. Aside from a return to country, Wilson and his associates were keen to establish a cattle station, to be owned and run by the Ngan’gikurunggurr people. Harold Wilson stated in 1976:

‘first we want a good life on our land and to live that good life, we want to run our cattle station as a way of living... we want as many homes to be built in 1976 for the people who wish to live there.’150

148 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 27, 2009.
Wilson used his Aboriginal and European heritage to negotiate the ‘translation of Aboriginal needs into European contexts while preserving authentic Aboriginal voices in the decision making process’. Relations between the mission and Peppimenarti were initially close – Harold Wilson remarked that:

‘we would like our school children to stay at the mission ... we would like a priest to live with us if possible...we would like to give land to the church for church buildings, Presbytery, Convent for the sisters, if at a later time we are able to have a school and hospital.’

At a Mission Conference at the Daly River in August 1975, attended by the anthropologist Father Martin Wilson MSC, the following statement was made regarding Harry Wilson’s mission statement:

...these breakaway movements where they occur, can constitute a second start – a chance to do what we were unable to do at the beginning of the missions... what people like the Peppimenarti group are saying to us is like: We now accept the goals of socio-economic development you have been holding up before us, but, respectfully, we do not accept your programme. We want to leave the artificial mission centre which saved us and gave us new vitality; we want to go back to our country and do it our way.

By 1977 population of Peppimenarti was 210, 80 of them children. Some were still sent to the Mission for schooling but this practice was on the wane, as tensions developed between the Church and the new, increasingly empowered community. The Mission felt Peppimenarti was ‘un-Christian’ and the residents at Peppimenarti were increasingly resentful toward their former landlords. The women of Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s generation speak of their Mission childhood with sadness:

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152 H. Wilson, cited in, O. Stanley, op. cit., p32.
We were locked up at night in dormitories. There was a big door and key and they locked us up, those nuns.154

The newfound autonomy gave these women the physical and emotional space in which to reflect upon their Mission experience. Regular visits by the Daly priest stopped, and a church was never constructed. Further tensions arose from the reallocation of funds from the Mission to Peppimenarti, via the Unia Association, of which Harold Wilson was President from 1975. In 1979, members of the Mission petitioned the government for the closure of Unia, however assets developed under its guise were simply transferred into the new Peppimenarti Association in 1981.

Prior to 1976, Peppimenarti residents were living in humpies. The Peppimenarti Housing Association, incorporated as part of Unia, was granted government funds to build three houses. The chosen site for the houses, and thus the permanent community, was alongside the Northern bank of Tom Turner’s Creek, opposite the base of Peppi hill. Brandy Mingun, Harold Wilson’s uncle, was the traditional owner of this land, and his close relationship with Wilson would have steered the approval of the site. Wilson, whilst not a traditional owner due to his patrilineal heritage, nonetheless had ‘substantial traditional power by virtue of his relationship with Brandy.’155 According to John Pye M.S.C., the construction of houses, septic tanks, fencing and the cattle station infrastructure ‘has been as a result of their own labour.’156

Harold Wilson wrote an essay titled Peppimenarti: Big Rock: we are going home: what we want with our land, published in Pye’s Daly River Story, and as a pamphlet in 1976.157 In it, he outlines the reasons for, and planning of, the establishment of the homeland community:

154 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 27, 2009.
155 O. Stanley, op. cit., p32.
156 J. Pye, op. cit., p41.
We are told that this is the time of Self-Determination for us Aboriginals. It seems that everyone is telling us what we can do with our land. No one is asking us what we want to do with our land. We want our land and we want to live on it.

First we want a good life on our land and to live that good life, we want to run our cattle station as a way of living.

We want as many homes to be built in 1976 for the people who wish to live there. The people intend living in humpies until such time as houses are available.

...We want all our people on this land, not just a few to run a cattle station while all the others stay around Daly River getting drunk. For too many years we have lived this way, we now have a chance to change our way of living, we want to do this now.

...We would like a priest to visit us sometimes. We will teach our small children the things they should know about our faith. We would like our school children to stay at the Mission as many already do. Later, when all our people are living together on our land, we would like a priest to live with us if possible... or to ‘give land to Church for church buildings, Presbytery, Convent for the Sisters, if at a later time we are able to have a school and hospital.

...the land would not be ours now if not for the work of Father Docherty who brought the Government to declare this whole area an aboriginal reserve. We are very grateful to the Mission for all it has done for us, but we want to move to our real home.158

In the same publication, Pye notes that the fledgling community was a ‘hive of industry; the women, making mats, dilly bags, gathering bush tucker.’159

As the community slowly developed during the 70s and 80s, life for its residents was hard. Regina recalls:

We had freedom from Catholic mob, white man. At the Mission we were locked up in a big dormitory.

But life at Peppi back then was hard. We had no toilet, only bucket. Girls would take turns cleaning the bucket. No proper houses. Nothing.

We had some help – Phil Kenyon came to help with bookwork after two years.

Wilhemina had the nursing job. The clinic was a caravan.

We relied on hunting more.

Blood, sweat and tears we started this place.

158 Ibid.
159 Ibid., p41.
I worked at the shop, club, generator, teaching the kids, giving out medicine, bush radio. My husband would go for months mustering and I would have to do all the work.

They built an airstrip out near Pandella waterfalls. I would ring Daly River Health and get the plane out here when we needed it.

School came by barge to the Chindi barge landing and then down here.

There was a big garden. Mabel’s husband and my uncle looked after it. They also looked after the water tank.¹⁶⁰

Figure 13 Peppimenarti village area, 1978. Photo by Bob Woodward.

In 1979, *Land Rights News* featured a Peppimenarti ceremony on its front page (fig. 13), with an accompanying article ‘Western ritual renascence Peppimenarti.’¹⁶¹ The article profiled the men’s initiation and merbok ceremonies between Ngan’gikurunggurr, Miriwung (Kununurra), Ngarinman (Auvergne), Mudbara (Montjinni), Kurintji (Daguragu), Walpiri (Hooker Creek) and Muluk Muluk, Murinbata and Marindjabin (Port Keats) men. Stanner and N.L.C field officer Arthur Palmer were invited to attend, with the aim of producing a ‘responsible and receptive (European) confidant who may more clearly understand the obligations due to the people in this area.’¹⁶² The article’s aim, however, was to express Peppimenarti’s leading role in the resurrection of exchange systems and traditional ceremony in the region, stating that the Peppimenarti ceremonies promise to be ‘the observable beginning of a vast unity movement and ritual renascence in the western area of the Northern Territory.’¹⁶³ The feature is a testament to the pioneering role Peppimenarti played in the homeland movement.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.
¹⁶² Ibid., p3.
¹⁶³ Ibid., p4.
Anthropologist Andrew McWilliam argues that the redistribution of Aboriginal people into mission settlements resulted in traditional country being transformed
into a frontier for its original inhabitants.164 Certainly once Peppimenarti had been established, Harold Wilson would navigate the region on horseback, citing mustering routes and totemic sites:

My old man knew the country for mustering and led the way to outstation places.165

McWilliam observed the opening up of a mustering access track in the Fitzmaurice region in early 90s, leading to the Bele (Majalindi valley). It presented a ‘belated opportunity to reacquaint themselves’ with country, and fill the holes in the largely unmapped region. McWilliam calls this ‘cultural mapping.’166

Bird-Rose’s notions of frontiers and emptiness are here turned on their head; instead of the coloniser seeking to fill an ‘empty’ landscape and people with their presence, the frontier is instead a site of reconstituted culture. The Mission produced absence through the processes of presence – the imposition of education, imposed tribal groupings, religion and the resulting rise of conflict. Mackillop articulated the frontier’s absence by declaring that ‘the complete absence of the white man on the left bank of the Daly River (is) the greatest blessing to our mission’.167 The empty frontier story continued in the face of settlers and farmers in the twentieth century; literature from the period refers to the ‘taming’ or ‘conquest of the wilderness’.168 Yet, Harney noted that resistance to the ‘conquest’ emerged in significant ways, as exemplified by the following anecdote:

‘as a wise missionary said to me when I asked him about an old man who sat outside his church as others of his tribe prayed inside, “He does not wish to be a Christian because he has too much tribal lore to lose by going inside.”’169

This holding back of culture further contributed to the frontier’s perceived emptiness as the Ngan’gi speakers on the Daly River had continued to preserve

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165 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 27, 2009.
166 A. William, op. cit., p3.
167 Father D. Mackillop, Government Resident’s Report on Northern Territory for the Year 1887, South Australia, p16.
168 Peter Forrest, op. cit., p4.
cultural experiences, beyond the frontier, well before the establishment of a homeland. For them, the unconquered space was not empty. Whereas the Missionaries reflected the paradox of attempting to fill emptiness with culture, and resulting in ‘the creation of emptiness’, the new homeland frontier became the definition of cultural fulfilment. ¹⁷⁰

¹⁷⁰ D. Bird-Rose, ‘Signs of Life’, p239.
2. FIGURES AND FIBRE

Woven fibre objects are a tangible, continuous connection to ancient Indigenous traditions, society and economy. Julie Ewington observes the ‘persistence of culture’ inherent in woven vessels.¹ They are signifiers of country, a way of life and beliefs. A bag or basket points to the exact location of fibre and pigment flora, and an accumulated knowledge of manipulating and designing these materials for aesthetic and utilitarian gain. When viewing a bag or basket, the ritual of collecting and preparing fibre, the social interaction of a group weaving session and the sense of pride a community and language group holds for the finished object, is also present. As Veronica Strang notes, for productive communities, the making of bags is seen as providing a particular kind of nurture, part of which lies in the holding and transmission of knowledge.³

Ancestral stories, historical economies and cultural expressions are brought forward to the present, through a basket. They are three-dimensional embodiments of belief. Pandanus, for example, is a dominant feature in the ancestral stories of the Ngan’gi people. The following chapters will explore the cultural, social and religious connotations of Ngan’gi fibre vessels and their role as ‘containers of power’.⁴ As Kim Akerman states:

> Superb botanists, Aborigines knew what types of wood or bark or fibre could be provided by a particular tree or plant during a particular season and in just what localities these were available... Each micro-locality was intimately known, not only for its material products but also for its particular mytho-religious associations.⁵

The two dominant fibrecraft techniques – looping and twining, and coiling – indicate different points in the history of the Ngan’gi people. Looping and twining

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hark back to the earliest records of human life in Australia, and thus signify a continuum of culture. Coiling was re-introduced to the top end region in the 1930s by Goulburn Island missionary Gretta Matthews and traveled down from central Arnhem Land via family networks. The technique carries associations and memories of a mission education and lifestyle as well as the earliest commercial market for Indigenous woven objects in the 1960s and 70s. Finally, this dissertation will assert the existence of twined vessels in Ngan’gi country – a technique that, until now, has been solely associated with Central and Western Arnhem Land - prior to the expansion of coiling.

The bags and baskets of Ngan’gi country have experienced a series of contextual shifts: from utilitarian and spiritual objects, to anthropological, craft and fine art items. Social and cultural influences, often viewed as breaking down authenticity, can be seen in the case of fibrecraft to have reinvigorated and secured the survival of weaving traditions.6 This chapter will establish their origins and provide a historical context for the art of the Ngan’gi people. By tracking the development of their fibrecraft, from rock art imagery to objects collected at the turn of the century, the foundations of their contemporary practice may be better understood. Furthermore, I will draw from the artistic expression of surrounding regions such as western Arnhem Land, the Victoria/Fitzmaurice Rivers region and the Kimberley, for comparative purposes.

FIBRE IN OCHRE

The earliest images of fibrecraft in Australia appear in rock paintings in Arnhem Land, dated from the last Ice Age, around 25,000 years ago. The imagery not only allows us to analyse the objects themselves, but also reflect upon their ancient ceremonial, spiritual and utilitarian functions. The rock art of the Arnhem Land Plateau – 34, 000 square kilometres of sandstone edifice in Western Arnhem Land - is believed to be up to 40, 000 years old. George Chaloupka identified the fibrecraft paintings in his series of expeditions in 1980.7 His research placed

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them into a chronological timeline, from the ‘pre-estuarine’ period to ‘estuarine’, ‘freshwater’ and ‘contact’ periods. The pre-estuarine period – approximately 50,000 to 8,000 years ago – saw the development of aesthetic expression through imprints, markings and paintings on rock. Chaloupka suggests even older imagery may exist in the now-submerged continental shelf that once joined Australia with New Guinea. During this period, which ended with seas rising after the last Ice Age, artists depicted human figures, terrestrial animals, freshwater fish, weapons, implements, dress and cosmogony. A pre-estuarine practice was to coat objects with ochre and impress them upon the rock surface. Skeins of bush or hair string have been found at the Gunbilngmurrung site, clearly showing the ‘individual loops and twined nature.’

Dynamic figures from the period are shown in poses of expressive movement, with articles relating to their economic, social and cultural lives. Dynamic figure styles have been recorded in 350 rock shelters, from the Wellington Ranges to the Cadell River on the Arnhem Land plateau. Male figures are depicted wearing hair belts, elaborate headdresses and pubic aprons. Chaloupka states of the male fibre adornments:

The headdresses were possibly made by inserting the hair into a cone of paperbark bound with string or by binding hair with fibre or cane. Decorations and extensions of the hairpiece, made from cane and prepared pandanus leaves, have also been recorded in the Asmat region of Irian Jaya. The long netted and fringed aprons and bustles, the knotted string, woven and tasselled pubic fringes, as well as the pads of leaves, grass and feathers beneath bustles are very similar to the traditional dress worn by adult males there and elsewhere in New Guinea.

Female figures are not adorned, but rather adopt a food-gathering role, carrying digging sticks, and baskets. Conical twined baskets, expandable, large dilly bags and smaller dilly bags are worn over the arm or in the hand by the women or anthropomorphic figures. In the Arnhem Plateau rock paintings, a dilly bag is

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8 Ibid., p92.
9 Ibid., p91.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., p92.
12 Ibid., p110.
13 Ibid., p110.
carried on the back by a total of twenty figures, over the shoulder by eleven and around the neck by nine.\textsuperscript{14} Anthropomorphic figures, often based on a flying fox, wear similar attire to that of the men, whilst two wear dilly bags. In one painting, a thylacine carries a dilly bag, indicating the ‘carrying of rituals’, according to present day interpretation.\textsuperscript{15}

There is an clear relationship between this cosmological schemata and material culture. The region’s rock imagery reflects the story of Warramurrungundji, the ‘principal ancestor’ or ‘fertility mother’, and creator of fibre craft. According to Gunwinggu oral history, Warramurrungundji wore a series of dilly baskets, hanging from her forehead, as she emerged from the sea to create life on the land. The baskets contained yams and other food sources to ensure the continuation of life. When her life ended, and she became ‘dreaming’, her baskets were left lying around her. A hill on the East Alligator River named Bulbbe Djang (Dilly Bag Dreaming) appears in the shape of a basket and is a site of one of Warramurrungundji’s baskets. A painting of Warramurrungundji at Injalak Hill depicts a human figure with fifteen baskets radiating around her body, from her neck (fig. 1). The bags themselves are cylindrical in shape and decorated in bands of ochre painted colour. Their outlines are marked with white ochre colour and in-filled with red and yellow ochre, creating strong striped designs. They are varied in shape; some with a flattened base, others a pointed apex. The bags animate the simplified rectilinear human figure. Their radiating form renders Warramurrungundji more prominent and powerful. Her arms and hands are stretched out and up from the torso, framing the array of bags and heightening their significance. However, it is the bags that are the central message in the image: she is only there seemingly to indicate their importance. The overall composition confirms the all-encompassing command of the ancestral figure and her bags of creation. Chaloupka and Guiliani argue that it is through these rock art images that we learn most about the oldest forms of fibre craft, as the original objects degrade in acidic soil within decades.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p115.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p118.
Nagorrho was the next dominant dreaming figure, responsible for establishing religion, culture and social systems for the ‘first people.’ Like Warramurrunggundji, Nagorrho was carrying dilly bags on his arrival, filled with ceremonies. He planted pandanus around the Wuymul waterhole, one for every person of the Arnhem Land Plateau and planted according to clan and language groups. At Ubirr, in the Kakadu National Park, a large Freshwater-era frieze of dynamic figures also provides an insight into the antiquity of twined baskets. In the frieze, ‘a file of seven spirit men’, as described by Fredrick D. McCarthy, are depicted with many articles and adornments, including a long (up to half a metre), thin basket with geometric, triangular markings. Hamby states that the baskets ‘give us indications of the types of geometric patterning and form baskets had at the time.’

In addition to ancestral connotations, the ancient depiction of fibre baskets and

18 G. Chaloupka, op. cit., p55.
bags carries strong associations of fertility. MacKenzie illustrates this highly
gendered symbolic content in her description of the multi-functional string bags
(bilum) used by the Telefol in Papua New Guinea.\textsuperscript{21} Citing Brumbaugh, MacKenzie
notes that these play a vital role in Telefol cosmology: Afek, the mother of
everyone, is said to have had a bilum and everything important ‘fell’ or ‘dropped
out of’ this string bag, portraying it as the creative womb of all aspects of Telefol
life.\textsuperscript{22}

Gender domains are described in detail through the actions of the ancestral
beings and their use of material culture. In this narrative blueprint, the ancestors
demonstrate how, and by whom, these objects are made and used. Veronica
Strang investigates the role of femininity and fertility in the woven traditions of
Kowanyama, a community on the western coast of the Cape York Peninsula. The
YirYoront, Kokobera and Kunjen people of Kowanyama tell of female ancestors
who wove cabbage-palm string and dilly bags and, in performing these tasks, the
ancestors and their material objects underwent transformations: they ‘became’
rock or creeks, and their spears became trees or their humpies sand ridges, thus
providing a tangible mnemonic of their actions.\textsuperscript{23} Material culture interacts with
these cultural forms, mediating the process of cultural adaptation and providing
what Miller calls ‘vehicles of meaning.’\textsuperscript{24}

Fibre vessels may be viewed as symbolic containers of life, and thus fertility.
Louise Hamby has researched the relation between object and body names,
arguing that bathi (baskets) are strong metaphors for body, kin, plant, land and
objects.\textsuperscript{25} In Arnhem Land, fibre objects are annunciated using the feminine ‘jin’;
the string bag jin-jerk translates as both ‘baby net’ and womb.\textsuperscript{26} Hamby also
relates the production of a basket to the development of life: the preparation of
materials is akin to gestation, the feathered string a representation of the

\textsuperscript{21} Maureen MacKenzie, \textit{Androgynous objects: string bags and gender in central New Guinea},
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p33.
\textsuperscript{23} Veronica Strang, op. cit., p84.
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25} Louise Hamby, \textit{Containers of Power: Women with Clever Hands}, p68.
\textsuperscript{26} Margie West, ‘Ceci n’est pas un basket’, paper presented at \textit{Interact: contemporary craft in a digital
Djan’kawu Sisters story. The Sisters carried their children in a mat, and the strings of the yam plant are umbilical cords. The opening of the mats symbolises birth.

Strang also explains that the cabbage palm, creator of the dilly bag, is associated with water holes: sites crucial for sustenance, and thus reproduction. Furthermore, these water sources are major conception sites, where baby spirits jump out of the water and into the wombs of women. Thus the cabbage palm and its location are ‘concentrations of ancestral power.’ In more recent history, the cabbage palm signifies protection from the wet season as humpies and shelters could be constructed from their fan shaped leaves. They provided protection from not only the wet, but also the mission life. Groups of Ngan’gi people would often spend long periods of time in their country during the wet season, as a way of maintaining contact with country and escaping the schedules of a mission lifestyle. Regina Pilawuk Wilson states:

They used to leave, come and go. They used to make shelter with paperbark; we call it kari. We had that when we first came to Peppi.

The ‘Two Girl Story Place’ (Molorr ampungk) tells of two ancestral women who turn into cabbage palms: ‘them two young girls, they’re in there...You see two tree there, date tree you know, cabbage palm tree: they still there...That’s where they finished up.’ Strang postulates that stories such as these have formulated notions of gender identity. For the Ngan’gi, the merrepen (sand-palm), used to weave dilly bags and fish-nets, is an important ‘totem’:

It’s that merrepen dreaming. There is one important merrepen tree with twenty branches, all hanging down like an umbrella. Peppi got big mob dreaming, like plover dreaming.

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28 M. West, ‘Ceci n’est pas un basket’ , op. cit.
29 V. Strang, ‘Familiar Forms’, p86.
30 Ibid.
31 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, March 30, 2009.
33 The word ‘totem’ is used by Ngan’gi speakers when referencing significant cultural flora and fauna.
34 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, March 30, 2009.
Artist Theresa Lemon has stated of the ‘merrepen dreaming’ site:

Merrepen Dreaming - this dreaming is based on these two big palm trees - they’ve got twenty branches. They’re really beautiful. The shape is really beautiful. This tree is found at Merrepan, a place not far from Peppimenarti, on the Moyle River. The place of Ngangikurrungurr people. This palm tree is my totem.35

When constructing warrgadi (string dilly bag) or wullipun (fish-net), the Ngan’gi women recall the merrepen site and its ancestral connotations. The ‘widespread presence of ancestral beings in the landscape... form an important background to cultural constructions of gender.’36

Other Ngan’gikurrunggurr ancestral stories aligned with rock sites and flora include the ‘green plum’ and ‘devil-devil’:

Lots of people went to collect green plum. They were throwing the seeds or cracking them, and a big rock come and squash them all. Apparently they’re still underneath there. That green plum tree is Near Tom Turner’s. We’re not supposed to touch them seeds. And that rock is still there. Midirri Dreaming it’s called, that green plum.

Peppimenarti rock the devil-devil put it there stood on the rock and left his footprint there and jumped to next hill place called Umwitjirim. And he stayed there. That’s his home. Nearby there’s an old lady and old man stopped there. Near the Wuddi turn off.37

Evidence of dreaming stories and figures may be found in the rock art of the region. Rock paintings and imprints exist in an ‘unbroken arc’ from the Pilbara, through the Kimberley, Victoria River region and the Arnhem Land Plateau, across to the Cape York Peninsula.38 Ngan’gi country, north of Victoria River, and referred to archeologically as ‘Daly-/Fitzmaurice’ region, seems to be relatively under-explored in terms of its rock art, particularly when compared to Western Arnhem Land. As Lewis and Rose state, ‘the Victoria River district is bordered by three other major art regions – the Kimberleys to the west, the desert to the south and

35 Theresa Lemon, statement accompanying finalist entry Merrepen Dreaming, in the 2008 National Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory.
36 Ibid.
37 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, June 23, 2011.
38 G. Chaloupka, op. cit., p53.
Arnhem Land to the north-east.’ The sense of an ‘arc’ is strengthened by the visual connections between the regions, as explored by W. E. H. Stanner. The geographically closest rock art sites to Ng’ang’i country – including only those that have been discovered and researched - are found in the Fitzmaurice/Port Keats region. For comparative purposes, the art of the Northern Kimberley and Victoria River will also be profiled.

Figure 2 Stanner’s photograph of rock art at Providence Hill, from Melinda Hinkson, ‘Journey to the Source: In pursuit of Fitzmaurice rock art and the High Culture’, see footnote 42.

The Daly/Fitzmaurice landscape - coastal beaches, riverine lagoons and swamps to ‘rugged uplands with concordant changes to vegetation and fauna’ would have contributed to the development of rock art painting. The upland formations

40 W. E. H. Stanner, field diaries held at AIATSIS: MS 845 (2), MS 845 (9) and ‘The Fitzmaurice River rock paintings’, talk delivered at University of Sydney, 30 September, 1958: MS 845 (11).
present the opportunity for excellent wet-season shelters and the associated painting activity. As Ward and Crocombe note in their survey of Port Keats rock and bark paintings, the best of these shelters are ‘replete’ with rock-markings. Stanner travelled five times in the 1950s to Port Keats to ‘revive relationships he had established in 1934-35’ and investigate the rock art of the area south of Port Keats, along the Fitzmaurice River. Stanner oversaw the excavation of the first archaeological site in the north-west of the Northern Territory in 1958-59 – the Yarar rock shelter, situated eleven kilometres from the Port Keats (present day Wadeye) mission. He excavated many rounded lumps of ochre from all strata at the painted Yarar site, the lower levels of which were dated to about 3400 years BP. Images in rock-shelters in the region have been dated to several thousand years ago. The shelter houses a large number of paintings, many of which are layered and over-painted. The imagery is difficult to decipher ‘but the majority seem to be highly abstracted designs of a geometric style with very few human figures, and some stenciled handprints.’ No other site in the area has a comparable number of superimposed paintings nor the density and complexity of Yarar art, indicating a long period of occupation and/or the site’s ceremonial significance. Flood argues that the disruption of a traditional way of life - the adoption of new kinship and marriage systems from neighbouring tribes in the thirties and the influence of the mission in post war years – has resulted in little knowledge of traditional material culture and economy with which to compare the archaeological evidence at Yarar. Apart from Yarar, there are few rock shelters in the Fitzmaurice area, the others being Ngude, Nyik, Providence Hill and Purmi.

Stanner and his Murrinh-patha guides from Port Keats came across a rock shelter upriver from the mouth of the Fitzmaurice on April 23, 1958. The site contained a large, stylised wondjina figure. Identified by the guides as Purmi, a resting place for the Rainbow Serpent, Stanner suggested that this site was the cosmological

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44 Ibid.
centre of the Rainbow Serpent myth that dominated the dreaming of the people of northwestern Australia.\(^{47}\) Stanner’s preoccupation with the correlation between wondjinas, the Rainbow Serpent and Aboriginal religion is evidenced by his address to University House, University of Sydney, September 1958:

> Part of my task is to go along the whole of the sacred path made by the dying Rainbow serpent to find the nature of the marks he (sic) left at each resting place. In this way I may be able to link up and correlate different uses of different kinds of signs and symbols. It seems to me reasonably possible . . . to find out how the myths and correlated art (whether of painting on rock, or on the body, or in the arrangements of stones) vary over space and time.\(^{48}\)

Louise Hamby also addresses the relationships between the regions by examining a figure at Injalak Hill:

> It is the only figure that I have seen that carries such a large number of bags, each clearly defined in stripe patterns. This post-dynamic sexless figure is approx. 45cm tall painted in red ochre with a white outline. The face is featureless except for very large round eyes . . . This aspect of the figure has visual references to the Wandjina figures found further west in the Northern Territory.\(^{49}\)

The presence of wondjinas, as well as anthropomorphic x-ray figures in the Victoria/Daly, orientates the region as a fascinating transitional ground between Arnhem Land and the Kimberley. D. Lewis and D. Rose conducted research into the rock art of the Victoria River valley, south of Ngan’gi country, in the early 1980s.\(^{50}\) Like its neighbours, the Victoria River region is strewn with mesas and flat-topped ranges of broken sandstone and limestone, whilst monoliths, rock pavements and shelters that lie at the base of gorges provide a ‘canvas’ for rock imagery.\(^{51}\) The human, anthropomorphic and material culture imagery of northern Victoria River has been compared to the ‘north Australian’ art province, notably Arnhem Land ‘Mimi’ paintings, and is therefore approximately three thousand

\(^{47}\) M. Hinkson, op. cit., p104.  
\(^{50}\) D. Lewis and D. Rose, op. cit., p44.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid., p6.
years old.\textsuperscript{52} The influence of Arnhem Land on Victoria River art can be seen in the occurrence of motifs with x-ray features on the eastern fringe of the area. Anthropomorphic imagery includes that of the black-headed python, who travelled in the shape of a gigantic snake, ‘carving valleys, splitting cliffs faces and forming the sinuous curves of ranges’ and was also depicted as a woman, carrying a coolamon and a dilly bag.\textsuperscript{53} Josephine Flood argues that the rock art of this region is a hybrid of the Kimberley 	extit{wondjinas} and the x-ray style to the north.\textsuperscript{54} However Lewis and Rose caution against a clear correlation with the Kimberley, stating that though there is a ‘relationship’ between the regions’ iconography, a convincing link is yet to be determined.\textsuperscript{55}

Furthermore, Daniel Sutherland Davidson, who first recorded the Lightning Brothers site at Delamere, Victoria River, in 1953, stated that ‘the style of portrayal has many similarities with the 	extit{wondjina} paintings of the Kimberley region . . . The Wardaman, like the Kimberley tribes also associate closely the Lightning and Rain totems.’\textsuperscript{56} The Lightning Brothers are two male figures depicted in red, white, yellow and black pigments and surrounded by animals and anthropomorphic figures. McCarthy notes that ‘native informants’ explain the site as one of a rain totem: the lightning brothers would visit the site during the wet season and introduce initiation rites to the Wardaman clan.\textsuperscript{57} W. E. Harney came across another depiction of the brothers, another 200km southwest, in the Victoria River gorge. In this scene, they wear elaborate headdresses.

In the Kimberleys, the rock paintings known as the Bradshaw figures, after the explorer Joseph Bradshaw who discovered them in 1891, display similar patterns in the depiction of human figures and their accessories to that of the Arnhem Plateau dynamic figures. They are considered the western-most variant of the pre-
estuarine rock imagery. Tassels hang from the neck, hair, waist, arms and legs. David Welch discusses the material culture of the Bradshaw figures, noting that:

There is an enormous amount of material culture items seen associated with the early human figures, and here can be found the strongest link between cultures of those early artists and Aboriginal people today . . . Much of the material culture is to be found surviving among the people of Arnhem Land.

Walsh argues that although the regalia of the figures are foreign to contemporary Kimberley people, the items are all currently used in other Indigenous language groups. For example, a painting of an isolated bag in the north-western area of the Kimberley is ‘a type of bag not known to be made in historic times in the area . . . perhaps the bags were traded from the east’ or are evidence of a lost craft. The bag appears to be looped, with a loose, flexible form and a series of short dashes in vertical columns to represent its weave.

The rock art site on the outskirts of the Peppimenarti flood plain has not been investigated to date. The site, a rock shelter that would have provided protection during the wet season, is an elevated sandstone rock overhang, set amongst a paper bark forest. The markings have deteriorated and are currently obscured by fallen rocks and tree growth. In response to a question regarding the rock art site, Regina Pilawuk Wilson states:

There are drawings of animals, people paintings, durmu, a picture of a man with a dilly bag, fish. They used to live there when the wet season come. Kids, they used to put their hand down on that red ochre and then put it on the wall. There’s one (rock art site) at Mulflyan. One at Poppolanga and three at Wuddi – that cave.

In 2010, Regina Pilawuk Wilson led a small group, myself included, through a rock art shelter named Pinnipih near the outstation community of

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60 Ibid.
61 see fig. 16 in D. M. Welch, op. cit., p116.
62 author visited the site to assess its condition, May 2009.
63 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
Wudigapildhiyerr. Wilson wanted to point out a particular painting, which she felt would be useful for this dissertation. The large, low overhang is dominated by stenciled handprints, punctuated by a small number of symbolic designs. Wilson indicated a rectangular image, approximately thirty centimetres high and stated that it was ‘a bag.’\(^{64}\) The drawing resembles a warrgadi (string dilly bag), with its flat base and right-angled corners, however horizontal line work also indicates the traditional ochre patterning of a twined vessel. Wilson was unsure which it might be, but its presence was, for her, a strong mark of the importance of fibrecraft to the history and culture of the region.

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\(^{64}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at rock art site outside Wudigapildhiyerr, June 22, 2010.
Figure 4 Bag/basket amongst handprints, Pinnipih rock shelter on the outskirts of the Wudigapildhiyerr community. Photo by Harriet Fesq.
BARK AND HAIR

The oldest known fibre vessels in the Top End were single fibre baskets fashioned from softened bark and, to a lesser extent, animal sinew. The inner bark layers of the Melaleuca tree would be chewed, soaked in water and beaten until soft. The bark basket was a folded single piece of bark, or sometimes palm leaf, moulded
into a rounded oval form and its ends ‘pleated and bound with string.’\textsuperscript{65} On the Tiwi Islands, bark bags were made from two slabs of bark stitched together with pandanus fibre or gummed and then painted with ochres and clays, usually by the men.\textsuperscript{66} As Kim Akerman explains of the Kimberley tradition, ‘receptacles were made from pleated bark which was sewn or tied...pleated and tied bark carry-alls are still made and used in Kulumbaru and Mowanjum.’\textsuperscript{67} Robin Hodgson attests that this technique was also used to construct baby and water carriers in Ngan’gi country in pre-settlement times.\textsuperscript{68} Regina Wilson states:

\begin{quote}
We used the bark for carrying water. They used to carry water. They used to walk from here to Daly. Tie a knot two ends, carry it like a fruit basket.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

Animal sinew and fur were also used in pre-contact times to fashion carry baskets and garments. Sinew from wallaby and kangaroo was used as a binding agent, whilst the fur and hair were spun on a spindle, then either plaited, knotted, bound, twined or coiled to make belts, ligatures, head bands, ceremonial objects, bags, nets, baskets and mats.\textsuperscript{70} Feathers and ochres were used to decorate, and in more recent twentieth-century history, natural dyes. Walter E. Roth, the author of the North Queensland Ethnography Bulletin, confirmed that animal fibre string was constructed using either a spindle or the thigh in 1901.\textsuperscript{71} An entry in the 1878 Museum catalogue of the Trustees of the Public Library and Museums states that animal fur was ‘worked into twine by rubbing it with the hands on the inside of the thigh.’\textsuperscript{72} Donald Thompson’s photographs taken on his 1937 field trip to Arnhem Land show Yolngu men making possum string with a spindle. Possum string, less common than vegetable or human hair string, was used for ‘pendants of the totemic emblems and upon men’s baskets...and men and

\begin{itemize}
\item[65] Robin Hodgson, \textit{Peppimenarti Basketmakers}, Nakara, NT, 1988, p34.
\item[66] Ibid.
\item[68] R. Hodgson, op. cit.
\item[69] Interview with Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
\item[70] Ibid.
\item[72] Alan L. West, \textit{Aboriginal String Bags, Nets and Cordage}, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 2006, p12.
\end{itemize}
women’s pubic aprons’. In North Eastern Arnhem Land, Warner lists the uses of human hair string as ‘fringe on a man’s basket or for forming a geometrical design upon it, cord on a bull roarer, hair string belts, string to tie around the ailing member of the sick and the tassel on a cylindrical spear thrower’. Regina Pilawuk Wilson states that Ngan’gi weavers ‘used to put a little hair in (the airbell basket) and hair belts. They used to cut Nunuk’s hair when it was long’. Nunuk is Annunciata Nunuk Wilson, Regina’s eldest daughter.

BARK & PALM

More common than both animal and human fibre was that of plants, most notably the cabbage and sand palm. Imprints of vegetable string dating back to the pre-estuarine period have been located at the Burrungui-Nourlangie Rock site in Western Arnhem Land. Thirty-five pieces of string in two, three and four ply, were made from both plant tissue and human hair, with some evidence of knotting and tying. In Princess Charlotte Bay, Roth observed the use of Livistonia australis (cabbage palm) as follows:

‘the as yet unopened leaf sheet is cut off as low down and as cleanly as possible, and then smartly tapped upon a piece of log; the shoot thus becomes unfolded and can be conversely split along natural folds. The outer cortex is next stripped off from each septum of leaf, by means of a finely pointed ironwood pointer or pin...these are subsequently rolled in the dry after exposure to the sun, neither sputum nor water being used.’

Roth explains how the manufacture of fibre twine ‘consists of two processes – the actual preparation of the fibre shred and its subsequent manipulation into twine.’ Alan West further discusses the use of Livistonia australis in Arakun and Edward River. Although a common string fibre in Arnhem and Darwin regions, Regina Pilawuk Wilson states that the Ngan’gi weavers ‘have no cabbage palm

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73 Ibid., p15.
75 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 18, 2011.
76 G. Chaloupka, op. cit.
78 W. Roth, op. cit., p9.
79 Ibid., p10.
80 Alan L. West, Aboriginal String Bags, Nets and Cordage, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 2006, p5.
string.'

Cordage was also fashioned from bark fibre. Roth recorded bark-derived twine in 1901 in the Middle Palmer River, Pennefeather River, Cloncurry and Cairns, Queensland. His notes state that the inner bark of *Ficus orbicularis* and *Ficus hispida* was used to produce white string on the Pennefeather River. For the Ngan’gi, the fibre of the *Cochlospermum fraseri* was once harvested for its string-like fibre:

*Migenbi*, we call it. They used to strip it like the way we strip yerrgi. Strip it and get the long vine and tie the paperbark together to carry water.

In her 1953 Report on the ‘native arts’ of the Cape York Peninsula, Queensland anthropologist Ursula McConnel found that the most common string fibre was *Ficus virens*. Similarly, Louise Hamby notes the popularity of bark string among the Galiwin’ku people, Elcho Island. There, the basic working string (*rawu*) is produced from the inner bark of *balgurr* (*Brachychiton paradoxis*). The dyed bark fibre and a shuttle wound with two-ply string spun from a similar fibre. *Ficus virens* was also traditionally harvested for string in Ngan’gi country. Known as *finyi*, or commonly as a Banyan tree, the tree has a soft, dense bark that may be peeled when wet and rolled into twine:

You can peel the bark of the banyan tree while its wet. Then twist it into string to make netting and dilly bags. People used to tie this string around their forehead to cure headaches, and also used it to attach spearheads. It’s very strong.

Regina Wilson adds:

They used string off a fig tree. We call it *finyi*. The tree with the string hanging down.

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81 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
82 W. Roth, op. cit.
83 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
86 Ibid.
They used to make *warrgadi* (string dilly bag) bag long time ago. Thousands of years ago.\footnote{Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010; see fig 6.}

Figure 6 Regina Pilawuk Wilson harvesting *finyi* fibre, Peppimenarti, May 2010. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Spencer conducted a research report on the Australian ethnological collection of the National Museum of Victoria in 1922, including a number of items from the Daly River region. He noted a ‘small bag in course of manufacture from bark string and string of pandanus’ from the Daly River region.\footnote{Baldwin Spencer, *Guide to the Australian Ethnological Collection in the National Museum of Victoria*, 1922.} Another object is
described as:

Pandanus leaf used in manufacture of string, in raw and prepared states; and bag in
course of making. Daly River, Northern Territory. It will be noted that native string is
invariably two-ply.\textsuperscript{90}

Roth also noted the use of pandanus string in necklace, three strand plaits and
dilly bag handles.\textsuperscript{91} He also listed a ‘pandanus compound amulet’ on the Embley
River. According to an interview conducted with the artists on November 12, 2010,
there is no knowledge of any \textit{yerrgi} (pandanus) string construction within the
Ngan’gi language group.\textsuperscript{92}

\textit{FI (STRING)}

These bark and palm fibres are fashioned into cordage, the definition and
classification of which has been outlined by Douglas and Carolyn Osborne.\textsuperscript{93} The
hierarchic system designed by the Osbornes organises cordage into stages I to IV.
Stage I is classified as ‘yarn’ or a bundle of fibres spun or twisted in an ‘S or Z’
direction to give continuity; the direction of twist is determined by S or Z,
‘according to the shape the spun element makes to the central portion.\textsuperscript{94} Stage II
is a ‘strand’, being two or more yarns twisted together. Stage III, ‘rope’, is two or
more strands twisted together. And stage IV, ‘cable’, two or more ropes twisted
together. Yarn is the most common structure in ancient cultures, including that of
Indigenous Australians. ‘Twine’, ‘string’ and ‘thread’ are qualitative terms,
referring to use or size, rather than structure.\textsuperscript{95} The term twine refers to a yarn
constructed from medium-twist single yarns with ply twist in the opposite direction.
This is also the definition of cordage and the terms are interchangeable. For the
purposes of this dissertation, I will use the term ‘string’ as it is used by Ngan’gi
weavers. When asked to define ‘string’, Regina Pilawuk Wilson replies: ‘bush

\begin{footnotes}
\item 90 Victoria, Albert J. Mullet Government Printer, Melbourne, 1922, p49.
\item 91 Ibid.
\item 92 W. Roth, op. cit., p11.
\item 93 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
\item 97 Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
string, that one you make from merrepen or finyi to weave dilly bag, net.’

According to the Osbornes, the term for a continuous strand of textile fibres or filaments in a form suitable for knitting or weaving to form a textile fabric is yarn. Yarn is most commonly achieved by twisting filaments. In a Ngan’gi context, fibres are ‘given a preliminary assemblage by thigh rolling.’ Generally, when two or more single ply yarns are twisted together to form a plied yarn, the slope of the second twist is opposite from the single twist; thus, a two-ply S yarn will ordinarily have single yarns of Z twist. This change in slope makes for greater ease in handling, and the finished plied yarn is stronger. The angle of twist of yarns seems to be determined by the culture they are constructed in.

Fi is the Ngan’gi word for string, specifically string of merrepen (sand-palm) fibre. The merrepen is first stripped and prepared for use. Each sheaf of palm is separated. The weaver then bends the upper end of the epidermis over onto itself and pulls sharply upwards, creating a sharp, high-pitched sound, and pulling away the tip of the sheaf, leaving a feathered, jagged point. This is then flicked once or twice with the fingers, further feathering the tip and revealing the layers of fibre, encouraging them away from the sheaf’s spine. The fibre is then stripped away from either side of the spine in one long, steady motion, leaving the dry, stiff spine ‘empty’ of fibre. The stripped fibre is initially moist and silken to touch, however it dries and curls upon itself within minutes. Approximately eight strands of fibre are laid out together and grouped into hanks or skeins by taking the group and rolling the uppermost end together on the thigh, essentially twining the end to bind them together temporarily.

Two filaments from the skein are the laid on the thigh and rolled forward together ‘but separately by the outstretched palm of the right hand to form two separate twisted threads.’ These threads are then rolled back toward the weaver. The

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96 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 12, 2010.
98 Ibid.
99 D. and C. Osborne, op. cit. 1099.
100 The preparation of merrepen by Regina Pilawuk Wilson may be viewed in video 1.
101 This process may also be viewed in video 1.
102 R. Hodgson, op. cit., p45.
left hand then releases its grip, joining the two filaments into a two-ply string.\textsuperscript{103}

To construct continuous \textit{fi}, the frayed end of one twine length is rolled into a new string length.

![Figure 7 Margaret Kundu rolling \textit{fi} from dyed \textit{merrep}en (sand-palm) fibre, Peppimenarti, September 2007. Photo by Vanessa Bellemore.](image)

**STRING FIGURES**

Ngan’gi weavers’ introduction to the manipulation of \textit{fi} is through string figures. As Robin Hodgson discovered, ‘the children are taught a variety of plant and animal inspired constructions, which also reflect the daily life, earthly elements and ancestral significance of culture.’\textsuperscript{105} A length of \textit{fi} is tied in a loop and then made into any number of designs relating to everyday objects, flora, fauna and ancestral stories. Hodgson documented string figures for the \textit{artyinditye} (the short-necked turtle), \textit{malarrgu} (long-necked turtle), \textit{yawul} (the spear), the same design as the \textit{midamudi} (bush banana), \textit{aire} (water python), \textit{awuyi} (possum), same design as

\textsuperscript{103} See fig. 7
\textsuperscript{105} R. Hodgson, op. cit., p47, see fig 9.
artyikatakarak (plover), yeninggisyi (canoe), wuke (storm clouds), midawuk (wind) and awuyi damuy (possum’s eye).106

Figure 8 Ngarrawu Mununggurr making ‘Bapa: Lightning’ string figure, Yirrkala, 7 Sept, 1948. Photo by F. D. McCarthy. ©Australian Museum.

Daniel Sutherland Davidson researched the variety and distribution of Aboriginal Australian string figures in 1930 for the University of Pennsylvania.107 Davidson defines string figures as:

...intertwining on the figures a closed loop of string for the purpose of producing some pleasing pattern or orderly arrangement. If for want of a better name we may speak of them collectively as string games, three main classes can be recognized:

106 Ibid., p46.
(1) String tricks and catches, (2) cat's cradle, and (3) string figures.\textsuperscript{108}

Davidson argues that the string figures were comparatively recent introductions from Melanesian societies, based on the similarities between Melanesian and North Queensland designs. Pinpointing the centre of diffusion as far North Queensland, due to the number and variety of figures found there, Davidson suggests that the figures spread across the north, to the northwest, and then into Western Australia.\textsuperscript{109} Davidson recorded fifty-nine string figures in the ‘Katherine River – Daly River – Victoria River district’, forty-one from the ‘Wardaman’, thirteen from the ‘Ngainman’, four from ‘Wagoman’ and one from ‘Tagoman’.\textsuperscript{110} One ‘string trick’ was found each in the ‘Mullik Mullik’, ‘Marithiel (Brinken)’ and ‘Tagoman’ ‘tribes.’\textsuperscript{111} However Davidson explains that:

Since it appears likely that all tribes in a particular district are acquainted with more or less the same figures it would seem that a more intensive survey would reveal that the North Australian Wagoman, Tagoman, Marithiel and Mullik-Mullik tribes, represented on the list by so few figures, actually know a great many.\textsuperscript{112}

Davidson attributes the ‘Dilly Bag’ string figure to the ‘Wardaman’ and ‘Ngainman’ language groups as follows:

1. Both hands. First position. 2. Right hand. Place loop over head and withdraw hand. Bend index finger over left palm string. Draw out and place in mouth. Withdraw index finger. 3. Left hand. Bend thumb over far thumb string and pick up from below on its back the near little finger string. Extend. Left hand. Proceed with left index finger as in Pindiki and turn the left hand palm downward. 4. Right hand. With the thumb and index finger pick up at their intersection the two strings which pass over the back of the left thumb. 5. Left hand. Withdraw hand from all strings. There are now two loops held by the right thumb and index finger. Hold left hand with fingers upward and insert the left thumb into the near loop (left loop) and the little finger into the far loop (right loop). 6. Repeat Movements 3, 4 and 5. 7. Repeat again Movements 3, 4 and 5. 8. Left hand. Repeat Movement 3. Drop string from teeth...\textsuperscript{113}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., p765.
\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., p780.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., p772.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{112} Ibid., p776.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid.
The resulting structure mimics the soft, malleable qualities of a string dilly bag, and the way it may be worn around the neck. It is an indication of how ingrained the bag was in society that a game would mimic its form and role. The Ng’angī string figure of a dilly bag is called *dumurri*. *Dumurri* refers to the base of a dilly bag, as this is the form created by the figure.
Regina Pilawuk Wilson states that the figures go back ‘100,000 years’ and the other artists agree that they’ve been ‘going for a long, long time.’

Annunciata Nunuk Wilson states:

They learn that when they’re little. Way for them to learn culture. When you’re teaching someone, you tell the story at the same time.

Damurri means that dilly bag. Name of the beginning of the dilly bag.

Wilson then looked over Hodgson’s diagrams, recalling which figures she was taught or could remember. In video 2, she is shown displaying the string figure configuration for the awuji (possum). Annunciata first learnt the figures at age 5. She agrees that the figures were a primary way for the transmission of totemic knowledge and ancestral stories.

Another major study of string figures took place during the American-Australian Expedition to Arnhem Land by F. D. McCarthy, Yirrkala, 1948. McCarthy oversaw 196 string figures’ construction and documented their finished forms by mounting them upon sheets of cardboard. The collection ended up at the Australian Museum, however was not registered until 1988, perhaps an indication of the perceived minor cultural value of the figures, as compared to the bark paintings collected during the expedition. McCarthy also documented a ‘dilly bag’ string figure, which appears, through field notes and figure images, to be identical to that of Davidson’s.

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114 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 18, 2011; Annunciata Nunuk Wilson interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 20, 2011.
115 Annunciata Nunuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 20, 2011.
116 See video 2.
117 Annunciata Nunuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 20, 2011.
Robyn McKenzie is currently researching the McCarthy collection in the context of the pictorial language of string figures and their place in Yirrkala society. Citing diffusionist theory, McKenzie notes that string figures were used by anthropologists such as McCarthy to ‘plot cultural development across time in different areas’ and track the transmission of contact. McKenzie uses the experience of McCarthy in Yirrkala to explore the simultaneous materiality and transience of string figures. The figures are both performance pieces and mute objects. When recording the figures, action is transformed into inanimate items.

Figure 10 ‘Dilly bag’ string figure, F. D. McCarthy collection, Australian Museum. ©Australian Museum.

String figures are not only games, but are also representations of ancestral stories and ceremonial content. McCarthy recorded a creation story relating to string figures: that of the yagalug sisters. In the story, string was first made by the two yagalug sisters. They made a record in string of all the animals, plants and material culture, as well as their own activities. Yet, as McKenzie argues, the figures, once recorded on board, are removed from their everyday and higher purposes. Furthermore, once they were mounted, they seemed to lose their perceived cultural value and significance. Mackenzie notes that McCarthy ‘did not access them when he returned to the Museum as he did the other.

120 Ibid.
121 Ibid.
122 Ibid.
Küchler suggests that a linguistic model replaced an interest in the visualising of spatial cognition in anthropology in the 1950s, contributing to the devaluing of objects such as string figures.

Similar questions of de-contextualisation emerge from the A. C. Haddon collection of Torres-Strait Islander string figures, collected in 1888, and published as *A method for recording string figures and tricks* in 1902. The string figures were collected by the British Museum in 1889. Similarly to McCarthy’s methods, Haddon secured the final designs to sheets of card. Textile historian Dinah Eastop has examined the transformative properties of the figures: their ability to be at once an object, figure and performance. As performance, the figures are both physical action and a form of embodied knowledge. By their nature, the performance of a string figure is a relaying of information, a demonstration to others. Rivers and Haddon emphasised the difficulty of learning string figures, and thus the ability to complete or record them relied upon this ‘embodied knowledge’ imbued through performance. They also noted that ‘certain sentences are spoken or muttered either during the manipulation of string figure or trick, or on its completion.’ Furthermore, extra movements would be made, appropriate to the animal or objects being constructed, and at times songs ‘sung in a low tone’ would provide accompaniment. Thus, it could be argued that string figures only truly exist in the process of making them. Eastop applies Alfred Gell’s analogy of design or graphics being the ‘frozen residue’ left by a ‘manual ballet’ of dancing to the eight Haddon figures in the British Museum, further confusing artefact, figure and performance.

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123 Ibid.  
127 Ibid., pp.190-205.  
130 Ibid., p147.  
131 Ibid., p321.  
ANCESTRAL STRING

McKenzie’s unpublished research discusses the role of string figures during ceremony at Yirrkala.\textsuperscript{133} This is one of many examples of the ancestral significance of string. Louise Hamby has highlighted another, that of the Mukarr ancestor story of Galiwin’ku (Elcho Island). Documented by John Rudder in 1980, the story states:

Those Mukarr were sitting facing each other with the first strands of the fibre tied to an upright forked stick. They sit facing each other with the three strands, passing them from hand to hand, twisting each strand they pass, causing each to bind close to the others, twisting into a single strong rope. They twist and pass, adding new strands as the rope grows.\textsuperscript{134}

As Hamby states, ‘fibre plays an important role in the spiritual and everyday lives of the people from Galiwin’ku.’\textsuperscript{135} There, ceremonial feathered string (used to make armbands, waistbands and headbands) is made from \textit{Manununyu (Ficus virens)}.\textsuperscript{136} For the Ngan’gi, string is associated with adornment in ceremony:

It’s special decoration for women in ceremony. Arm bands, head bands, waist band, wrist bands. Wusye means hair belt. \textit{Pinbin}, necklace, with colour, red, yellow, white. That women’s ceremony, they dressed up really nice. We’ve been doing it with that \textit{merrepen} at the string festival time. It’s a different stitch, like a macramé stitch. They used to do pattern too, in the band, really neat one, that pattern, my uncle used to do it, my uncle, my mother’s brother.\textsuperscript{137}

For the Ngan’gi weavers, the making of \textit{fi} marks the beginning of a ceremony, just as much as the preparation of ochre body paint. The process of construction and its performative qualities will be addressed in chapter six of the dissertation. The presence of string around a young woman’s head, upper arm, wrist and waist transforms her for ceremony. Once adorned, the string allows an embodiment of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{133} Biography on Australian National University website, \texttt{<http://archanth.anu.edu.au/staff/ms-robyn-mckenzie>}, accessed June 14, 2010.
  \item \textsuperscript{135} Ibid., p23.
  \item \textsuperscript{136} Ibid., p28.
  \item \textsuperscript{137} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 1, 2009.
\end{itemize}
ancestral presence in the participants. Louise Hamby notes that Yolngu *djali* (ceremonial string) similarly brings to life the *rangga* (sacred object) for ceremony. In fig. 11, two Ngan’gi girls are shown ready for ceremony, wearing armbands constructed using macramé knotting, as well as skirts looped with *fi*.

![Figure 11 Girls at Peppimenarti wearing merrepen skirts, arm bands and head bands for ceremony, circa 1980. Image courtesy Durmu Arts.](image)

In an interview with Margie West, Yolngu artist Minni Marabachiba stated:

> When I make a mat it reminds me of my grandfather, great grandmother, my mother and father and the old people. I remember. I will keep doing it until I pass away. I know this is true because of my ancestors the *wanggar* (Creator Beings). I still remember. It's like the same thing a man does with his bark paintings - about the first creation. I do the same thing that my ancestors have given me. I've got that from
Fibre objects provide a connection to the ancestral world in two ways: via their presence in significant dreaming site stories, and the reanimation of those stories through their weaving and use. As Margie West notes, ‘the material items that people make, are attributed to the agency of particular creative being . . . whose activities are celebrated and reaffirmed during the performance of rituals or even in the act of manufacture.’

For the Ngan’gi, the unbroken connection between fibre and ancestral phenomena remains strong, despite a long and continuous history of European contact. The presence of fibre within ancestral sites, rock shelters and ceremony place it as a central cultural, social and religious force within the life of the Ngan’gi people. Ancestral agency is activated or animated via the depiction, creation and utilization of string, baskets, nets and bags. The original creator, their ‘presence’ in the country (the merrepen site), and the material evidence of their power (the merrepen fibre) are all felt and animated through the processes of collection, preparation and creation of fibre objects. The significances of these processes will be discussed in chapter six, Fi (string), but this chapter serves as an explanation and introduction to the powerful role that fibre and its many forms play in Ngan’gi culture.

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139 Margie West, ibid.
3. WARRGADI (STRING DILLY BAG): EARLY COLLECTED OBJECTS

Every . . . addition to the cabinet of the virtuosi from this country had wrung a tear from the plundered Indian.¹

Warrgadi - the Ngan’gi word for both looping and string dilly bag - is arguably the most pervasive fibrecraft in Ngan’gi culture. As the oldest surviving fibrecraft technique, it is acknowledged as a principal form of cultural expression. Being a predominantly utilitarian object, relatively untouched by market forces and anthropological intervention, the bag occupies a revered space in the Ngan’gi world. More than any other fibrecraft tradition, it embodies the repetitive, rhythmic motion aligned with storytelling, communal experience and cultural transmission. Physically, a warrgadi is laterally expansive and thus differentiated from a basket. It is used not only to carry food and personal items, but also to collect and hold the materials required for creating all other fibrecraft objects. In this way, it sits at the centre of the production and activity of both culture and being. The roles, properties and auras these bags possess will be discussed via early twentieth-century collected objects, held in the Australian Museum and Museum of Victoria. An examination of historical examples of the twined vessel known to Ngan’gi weavers as the ‘airbell’ basket – a technique no longer actively practiced - prompt further questions over the role of collections and museums in the formation (and reformation) of culture.

WARRGADI

Alan West, author of Aboriginal String Bags, Nets and Cordage, is the primary researcher of techniques relating to string dilly bags, a pre-missionary fibrecraft.³ West utilizes the Emery system of textile classification, whereby inter-worked structures’ involve (1) loose fibres, which are composed into (2) elements that are in turn interworked to form the (3) fabric.⁴ Emery classifies string bags as single

³ Alan L. West, Aboriginal String Bags, Nets and Cordage, Museum Victoria, Melbourne, 2006.
element structures, coiled baskets as ‘two single element structures’, plaiting as ‘one set of element structures’ and warp and weft textiles as ‘two or more set of elements’. Single element fabrics are defined as artefacts made by looping or knotted looping with a single element that interworks with itself. The fabric structure is constructed by ‘the repeated interworking of a single continuous element with itself’, forming ‘rows of stitches into which successive rows are worked’, all of which is classified ‘according to type of connection that the element makes with the previous row.’

Figure 1 Ngan’gi undyed warrgadi bag with ‘crochet’ style handle, artist and date unknown. Collection of Annunciata Nunuk Wilson. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Emery divides the single element looping into simple looping, interconnected looping and knotted looping. As West explains, the former two were identified by Daniel Sutherland Davidson as knotless netting and the latter as knotted netting. Knotted netting is thought to be the oldest string fibrecraft. The knotting prevented string structure from slipping and was particularly effective when used

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5 Ibid., p9.
6 A. L. West, op. cit., p47.
7 Ibid.
to trap big game. Knotted netting has been found in all parts of Australia except Tasmania and the South Western corner of Western Australia. The technique travelled from the north over the eastern half of the continent, from Wyndham in the northwest, in an arc down through Victoria.

Knotless netting, or simple looping, is ‘so widespread chronologically and geographically that it would not be an exaggeration to call it universal.’ According to Davidson, there are three basic patterns from which all others are derived, and of those three, one, the ‘simple loop’, is fundamental to the other two. All knotless netting techniques, therefore, seemed derived from one basic pattern. Davidson, and subsequently West, classified the varieties under the three-fold division of type I, ‘simple loop’; type II, ‘loop and twist’; and type III, ‘hourglass’.

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
The ‘simple loop’ has been considered the foundation for all the varieties of knotless netting in the Australasian region. In Oceania it is found throughout eastern Australia, in the regions occupied by the ‘loop and twist’ and the ‘hourglass’ patterns, as well as areas peripheral to them. It is also found in a large but sporadic distribution in New Guinea and the Gilbert Islands.\textsuperscript{14} By reaching the Gilbert Islands, the ‘simple loop’ has been carried farther east than any of the later varieties.\textsuperscript{15} As Davidson asserted in \textit{Knotless Netting}, ‘such a distribution is consistent with the material we have already surveyed which showed that

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., p131.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., p119.
knotless netting has been in the process of invading the western pacific.’\textsuperscript{16} Davidson concludes that knotless netting was followed independently in Oceania and the Americas through parallel development.\textsuperscript{17} The ‘simple loop’, identified as the looping technique of the Ngan’gi, is also found in North and South American and Melanesia, making it the most widespread knotless netting technique.\textsuperscript{18} West counters that Davidson’s diffusionist approach overshadowed his analysis of netting and basketry and that his assertions often lack tangible evidence to support them.\textsuperscript{19} Radcliffe-Brown also criticised Davidson’s reliance on cultural diffusion and historical reconstruction.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., p132.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} A. L. West, op. cit., p53.
Walter Roth described the ‘simple loop’ in his *North Queensland Ethnography Bulletin* thus:

the weaver fixes a continuous strand of the extreme left of the straight basal strand and working left to right starts in pl. VIII (see fig. X). So soon as the right hand limit of the basal strand has been reached, the continuous is fixed in a loop. Then either sticks are taken up bodily with attached crosstie and turned right round, ie the right one made the left and vice versa, or the sticks are left in position, while basal strand is slipped off and tied on again in reverse position. In either case, the same object is obtained. The operator can, without shifting her position, start again from left to right at the point where she had just left off, these two rows ultimately constitute the
bottom of the bag. When the operator again reaches extreme right hand limit of basal strand, this or the stick are again reversed... thus by a continuous repetition of the process the weaving of the one continuous strand into the horizontal row of loops immediately above may be continued until desired depth of bag is attained. The basal strand is ultimately withdrawn.21

Figure 4 Margaret Kundu looping a *warrgadi*, Peppimenarti, 2007. Photo by Vanessa Bellemore.

As a comparison, the process of looping *fi* to weave a *warrgadi* is described by Regina Pilawuk Wilson as:

Put a bit of water on it. You need water in the dry season, when the wind blows. You get two strips and then you roll it on the leg. We call it ‘up’, ‘down.’ More water. The two strips roll together. Then join another two piece. One there, one there. And when its dry, if you don’t put water it make you sore leg. You have to wet it. It’s alright when wet season, easy. If you want another colour, you get orange, two piece again. Join them. When you make long string, really long. Hold it, make a knot. That’s how to start the dilly bag, bottom of the dilly bag. Loop one, two. You turn it around, turn ‘em like that. One, one side. And you turn it around and put it in this other hole. You don’t do two. You turn ’em around. Hold it on the toe or stick. Then you tie a knot. There.

You put sticks or when it’s a big dilly bag, you put it on your toe.
When you get to the end, you turn it over.\textsuperscript{22}

The two accounts allow a reflection upon the attitudes of the anthropologist/collector, and maker. In Wilson’s account, the use of ‘you’ relates the object to the subject. The description is intimate, tangible and immediate. The positioning and placement of object and subject emerges in the Ngan’gi fibre objects found in collections.

![Figure 5 Margaret Kundu rolling $fi$ string on the thigh, Peppimenarti, 2007. Photo by Vanessa Bellemore.](image)

**HISTORICAL COLLECTIONS**

Examples of material culture, including fibre objects, from the Daly River region are subsidiary to the more dominant collecting regions of eastern, central and Western Arnhem Land. Despite a continuous history of white contact, comparable to that of Arnhem Land, it was not deemed to be a major area of interest to collectors, anthropologists and enthusiasts. Researchers such as Stanner limited

\textsuperscript{22} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 20, 2011.
their interest to human anthropology, and official material culture collecting expeditions rarely traversed Ngan’gi country. However, a number of government plant collectors, ethno-robots, and ‘casual collectors’ were drawn to the region, often in a leisure capacity, from their posts in Darwin. The collection of fibre material culture in the aforementioned institutions is a result of these collectors’ activity. Thus the items aren’t comprehensive examples, and appear as an afterthought of a greater botanical project.

As discussed in *Figures and Fibre*, rock art evidence of looping and twining techniques dates back as far as 40,000 years. However, the oldest collected examples are items dated from 1860, held in the Museum of Victoria’s collection, followed by a collection of nets, bags, headbands and a sash from Victoria, 1878, in the lower Murray region.23 According to Carol Cooper’s *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Collections in overseas museums*, published 1989, items from the Daly River region are held in the Manchester Museum, Pitts Rivers Museum, Illinois State Museum, Cambridge Museum of Anthropology, Bristol City Museum, Geneva Museum of Ethnography, Oslo University Ethnography Museum, Royal Institute of the Tropics, the Netherlands, and the Museum of Ethnography, Vienna.24 The most significant collections of Ngan’gi or Daly River region fibre objects are held in the Australian Museum, the Museum of Victoria and South Australian Museum.25

The context surrounding the collection of these objects may well be as significant as the items themselves. According to Pomian, objects within a collection of curiosities or a natural history museum act as intermediaries between those who can physically see them and, and the invisible stories or myths behind them.26 The collecting tells a parallel story to that of the Ngan’gi people; the other side of a history. From the way in which collectors procured these objects, to the attitudes of researchers working with them, and their reception by the broader

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25 See Appendix 1: Collection Search.
audience destined to view them in public spaces, this story is largely foreign to the original creators and custodians. Ngan’gi fibre artists have had little opportunity to examine the objects of their forebears; there is very limited knowledge of fibrecraft beyond that of their grandmothers. In this chapter, the original objects will be reintroduced to their maker’s descendants, allowing them to be reanimated through contemporary contact. As Nicholas Thomas argues, in some cases ‘the meanings of artefacts derive from these processes of recontextualisation, rather than from their origins as indigenous products’.\(^{27}\)

Initial recontextualisation, being the displacement of an object through acquisition and donation, is relevant when discussing the first collected Ngan’gi objects – looped string dilly bags.

James Clifford asserts that collecting ‘implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss . . . artefacts and customs are saved out of time.’\(^{28}\) The Ngan’gi objects play with time; some are identical to those produced today, whilst others signify techniques and aesthetics that have disappeared in the intervening hundred years. As Geoffrey Gray notes ‘how many visitors to museums have read any of the articles and books of the collecting anthropologists which set out the lives of people from whom these artefacts were collected?’\(^{29}\) Gray expresses a concern that anthropological research, despite covering kinship, totemic and cultural data, does not address the mechanics of collecting. There is scant information provided alongside collected objects, save occasionally for a neat, handwritten label. In the event of accompanying field notes, Gray notes that:

> It is not always clear from whom the objects were purchased, how the purchase was understood by the various parties in the transaction, the actual items of exchange, the nature of the exchange, and so on.\(^{30}\)

\(^{27}\) Nicholas Thomas, ‘Material Culture and Colonial Power: Ethnological collecting and the establishment of colonial rule in Fiji’, *Man*, vol. 24, no. 1, March 1989, p41.


\(^{30}\) G. Gray, ibid.
Collections of Indigenous objects often exist in their own hermetic world. As Susan Stewart explains, ‘The collection seeks a form of self-enclosure which is possible because of its ahistoricism.’\textsuperscript{31} Taxonomy and classification replace historical context, disassociating the objects from temporality. ‘Functionless-ness’ is imposed.\textsuperscript{32} Although objects are removed from their original circuit of production and trade, they are still commodified within a new form of museological commercial exchange.\textsuperscript{33}

The agency these bags employed as collected objects placed them in a different ‘frame’ or cultural construct. As Morphy has argued, an object can exist within multiple frames, each indicating its own set of cultural expectations, impositions and emotions.\textsuperscript{34} Thomas expands on this notion, explaining that artworks may move between frames or exist simultaneously in a series of overlapping defining sets of cultural practices.\textsuperscript{35} These frames define the meaning of an object to a particular audience. The conflation of frames is exemplified by the collectors’ interest in the indigeneity of the object, whilst simultaneously already foreseeing its place within a European institution and academic framework. Referring to Haddon in the Torres-Strait, Martin Nakata argues that, despite the lack of existing research on the Torres-Strait people, ‘there were plenty of theoretical frameworks into which to mount the images they were collecting.’\textsuperscript{36}

A late nineteenth century photograph of the Northern Territory mounted policeman Paul Foelsche’s collection of Aboriginal artefacts illustrates this displacement, or effacement of temporal, social and cultural context. In the photograph, taken by Foelsche c. 1877-85, the objects are displayed, salon style, for the viewer.\textsuperscript{37} Twined dilly baskets and body adornment objects surround a

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item[37] Photograph by Paul Foelsche, c. 1877–85, Port Darwin or Port Essington, Northern Territory
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bark painting. Foelsche has put some thought into the arrangement of the items: they are ordered according to aesthetic concerns, each framing one another. The overall image supersedes the individual histories behind each item. An autonomous world, in this case illustrating Foelsche’s time spent in the Northern Territory, and his interaction with its Indigenous residents, is the primary message from this image, rather than its collecting context. Via classification, the collection presents the ‘illusion of adequate representation of a world’, removing specific histories of an object’s production, utilisation, appropriation and display.

Figure 6 Photograph by Paul Foelsche, c. 1877–85, Port Darwin or Port Essington, Northern Territory (courtesy of the Archives, South Australian Museum, AA96). The bark painting in the lower left corner is the same as that illustrated by Basedow (1907:58, fig. 72), who stated that it was ‘found by Mr P. Foelsche at Port Essington’, photo from Aboriginal Plant Collectors, p109.

(courtesy of the Archives, South Australian Museum, AA96), fig. 1. The bark painting in the lower left corner is the same as that illustrated by Basedow (1907:58, fig. 72), who stated that it was ‘found by Mr P. Foelsche at Port Essington’, Aboriginal Plant Collectors: Botanists and Australian Aboriginal People in the Nineteenth Century, Philip A. Clarke, Rosenberg Publishing, Dural, 2008, p109, see fig. 1.

38 S. Stewart, ibid., p153.
The collected Ngan’gi objects present a comparable experience, existing somewhere between collected, taxonomically ordered objects and the realm of the souvenir. Whilst predominantly collected by Ethnobotanists and Government officials, the objects fall outside the vocational mission of the collectors, and were possibly supplementary pieces, desired as curios or mementos of an expedition. ‘Ethnobotany’ was the term articulated in 1895 by American botanist John W. Harshberger to describe the study of plants used by indigenous populations. Where anthropologists used Ethnobotany to illuminate the meaning of flora in a society, ethnobotanists studied the society’s treatment of the same flora.40

A twined conical basket from the ‘Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)’ was collected in 1902 by naturalist ‘C. French Jnr’, and is now held in the Museum of Victoria’s collection.41 Charles French Jnr. (1868-1950) was an entomologist and naturalist, and colleague of Baldwin Spencer through the Field Naturalists’ Club of Victoria. French originally assisted his father, Charles French (1842-1933), in his role as Victorian Government Entomologist. Father and son embarked on expeditions around Australia, identifying and collecting plants, birds, insects, reptiles and Aboriginal artefacts.42 In an issue of the Northern Territory Gazette, August 23, 1879, an advertisement stated:

Beetles! Beetles!

THE HIGHEST PRICE (cash) given for
Northern Territory BEETLES, preserved in spirits. Address, starting price, to
"CHARLES FRENCH, Naturalist, Botanic Garden, Melbourne, Victoria."

Beetles purchased from all parts of Australia.43

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41 Item number X10165, Twined conical basket. Multi-strand string handle, collected 13 October 1902, Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice), Acquired from C French Junior, 170 x 340 x 200mm, collection of Museum of Victoria, see fig. 2.
43 Classified Advertising, Northern Territory Gazette, August 23, 1879.
As stated of French Jnr in his official biography ‘his association through the (Field Naturalists) club, with Sir Baldwin Spencer, led to a large collection of Aboriginal artefacts and skulls going to the National Museum.’

Figure 7 Item number X10165, Twined conical basket. Multi-strand string handle, collected 13 October 1902, Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice), Acquired from C French Junior, 170 x 340 x 200mm, collection of Museum of Victoria.

As a discipline, the natural science of ethnobotany was used to bolster Darwinist evolutionary theory, visually enhancing the positioning of Indigenous peoples at the bottom of the *homo sapien* hierarchy. In the introduction to his *Guide to the Australian Ethnological Collection*, Baldwin Spencer concluded:

> The Australian aboriginal may be regarded as a relic of the early childhood of mankind left stranded in a part of the world where he has, without the impetus of derived from competition, remained in a low condition of savagery.

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44 R. T. M. Pescott, ibid.
A new value system was placed upon collected colonial trophies: these specimens acted as scientific aids and educational props, reflecting the rise in schools of Anthropology and Ethnography in the late nineteenth century. The embracing of a Darwinist strategy for identifying, collecting and displaying objects ‘rendered the task of museum ethnologists as unproblematic’ as they could fill in the gaps of an internationally recognized hierarchy.\footnote{Ibid.} The taxonomic schemata was articulated by E. B. Taylor and A. Lane Fox and put into practice at the Great Exhibitions of the 1850s, 60s and 70s. Similarly, the Pitt Rivers Museum’s displays under its first curator Henry Balfour, from 1891 to 1939, drew upon an array of artefacts to make comparative visual arguments about evolution and ethnology.\footnote{Julia Kelly, \textit{Art, Ethnography and the Life of Objects}, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 2007, p67.} Baldwin Spencer was a second-generation Darwinist evolutionary biologist and, though known for his collection of material culture, also collected and donated over 780 animal specimens. The Horn Expedition, led by South Australian Museum Director Edward C. Stirling and Spencer, collected mammal, bird and reptile matter that were subsequently split between the British Museum and Museum of Victoria.\footnote{John Mulvaney, ‘‘Annexing All I Can Lay Hands On’: Baldwin Spencer as Ethnographic Collector’, in, \textit{The Makers and Making of Indigenous Australian Museum Collections}, Nicholas Peterson, Lindy Allen and Louise Hamby, Melbourne University Press, 2008, p157.}

This mode of collection, marked by its scientific, systematic and classificatory emphases, existed alongside ‘casual’ collecting. In 1923, at the height of the botanical and anthropological collecting in the Northern Territory, \textit{The collection of curios and the Preservation of Native Culture F. E. Williams, Territory of Papua Native Taxes Ordinance 1917-1922} was published.\footnote{Edward George Basker, \textit{The collection of curios and the Preservation of Native Culture F. E. Williams, Territory of Papua Native Taxes Ordinance 1917-1922}, Government Printer, 1923.} The publication aimed to educate the ‘casual collectors’ - European government workers, researchers and traders working in Papua New Guinea - in the correct approach to collecting artefacts. It stated that ‘Scientific Anthropology should not be confused with mere curio collecting or even with the collection of artistic objects’.\footnote{Ibid., p1.} Without the use of ethnographic, technological and psychological analysis, the objects ‘sink to the level of mere curio.’\footnote{Ibid., p4.} The ‘art interest’ of an object was acknowledged: ‘as the
actual utility of a purely native article is as a rule no temptation to a European, the intrinsic value usually consists in its art.\textsuperscript{52} Notions of desire and domination were caught up within colonial natural sciences. This resulted in a conflict between ‘the scientifically controlled interest in knowledge’ and the ‘unstable curiosity’, grounded in passion and fetishism.\textsuperscript{53} Colonial curiosity consisted of a relationship between desired object and knowing subject. The collecting of exotica thus relied upon a collector’s licentious desire, above their commercial or scientific incentive.\textsuperscript{54} Objects acted as trophies of conquest, communicating the knowledge, courage and glamour of their owners. These relations of power and knowledge were implicit within the act of exploration, colonisation and later anthropological study.\textsuperscript{55}

In \textit{The Barrier Miner} newspaper, June 20, 1934, the headline ‘Naturalists Meet. Varied Exhibits Displayed’ described an exhibition of ‘Solomon Islanders’, ‘Butterflies and Birds’ and ‘Aboriginal Curios’.\textsuperscript{56} It states that ‘Mr E. B. Dow exhibited a number of Aboriginal curios and implements . . . axes, stone chips and an inscribed brass plate which bore the inscription “presented to the King of the Nocatunga for good and faithful service.”’ The journalist proceeds to describe the ‘floral exhibits’ of ‘Eucalypt Largiflorens (Black Box) by Mr. A. Orman’ and ‘Wattle’ (\textit{Acacia Glandiformis})’ by Mr. A. Morris.’ The article exemplifies the easy, equal status conferred upon science and curiosity.

In \textit{In Oceania}, Thomas examines the seventeenth and eighteenth century engravings of J. R. Smith and George French Angas in light of these theories of decontextualisation and dehumanisation. Despite acting as, or standing for, accurate, objective depictions, the ‘truth’ of these engravings emerges from:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ibid., p1.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{56} \textit{Barrier Miner}, Broken Hill, NSW, Wednesday 20 June, 1934.
\end{itemize}
their capacity to anticipate and immediately resonate with truths perceived by a viewing public, an audience that has prior interests and preoccupations yet may be refashioned as it consumes visual representations and self-representations.\textsuperscript{64}

Thomas notes that engravings were viewed as representational truth, and ‘possessed an indexical relation to what was depicted.’\textsuperscript{65} It could be argued that Foelsche’s images of Indigenous material culture, despite being produced via the medium of photography, are no less misleading. As vehicles of representation they are definitive in nature. Whilst sold as ‘rigorously objective’, they weren’t subjected to scientific scrutiny, and thus their power and value were unchallenged.\textsuperscript{66} Thomas argues that, rather than forming part of a larger imperial interest in, and power over, ‘other’, they are instead vague, unsatisfyingly opaque images.\textsuperscript{67}

Thomas examines, in particular, J. R. Smith’s c. 1772 mezzotint portrait of Banks, surrounded by curiosities.\textsuperscript{68} The sense of ‘personal acquisitiveness’ that the objects impart is offset by the accompanying folio of botanical prints. The science of botany, and Banks’ life work, literally frames the curiosity for curios depicted in the portrait.\textsuperscript{69} This recalls Basker’s \textit{The Collection of Curios}’ carefully elucidated disparities between ‘casual’ and ‘scientific’ collecting. Thomas suggests that, rather than differentiated, they were conflated in images such as Smith’s. He states:

\begin{quote}
The evocation of ‘specimenicity’ affirms the vacuity, the dispassionate character, of a natural history that was striving to differentiate itself from commercial collecting, and inconsequential ‘fly catching’ at the same time.\textsuperscript{70}
\end{quote}

The curios’ absorption into the space of the specimen licenced the curiosity of their collectors.\textsuperscript{71}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{64} N. Thomas, \textit{In Oceania}, p94
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., p95.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., p100.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., p100.
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., p111.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., p113.
\end{flushleft}
Lithographer George French Angas arrived in Australia from Britain in 1844, and took part in a series of expeditions around southeastern Australia, including Sir George Grey’s tour of the south east coast of South Australia in the same year. His resulting lithographs *South Australia Illustrated* 1847 and published journal *Savage Life and Scenes in Australia and New Zealand*, 1847 embody similarities to the aforementioned eighteenth century lithographs of ethnographic specimens, the most obvious difference being Angas’s inclusion of human activity vignettes. 72

In *Aboriginal Inhabitants – Ornaments and Utensils*, 1847 73, a single Aboriginal man is shown starting a fire using fire sticks. He is surrounded by a carefully arranged display of cultural articles and fibre objects. Thomas argues that although the central activity seems to re-humanise the scene, in fact the activity is relegated to the arrangement of objects, reduced to the status of something collected. I would add that the scale of the activity compared to the larger surrounding images renders it secondary to the importance of the collected object. The dilly baskets on either side of the individual frame him, and the three are rendered into a balanced array of the largest objects in the engraving. As if to underline them, a series of clubs and spears are depicted horizontally beneath. The more delicate articles, being hair string, ornaments and spindles, float in the space above.

The consideration of composition recalls Foelsche’s late nineteenth century photograph. They are both composed according to aesthetic concerns, resulting in a neat array of floating objects, devoid of contextual space. In the case of Angas, there is a hesitancy to impose narrative associations. Thomas observes that in the second half of the nineteenth century objects were arranged on walls in a ‘fashion reminiscent of the printed images of that period’ ... ‘but the prints presuppose an abstract, non-spatial field in which weightless things might equally be standing vertically or laid out on a surface.’ Aboriginal artefacts in eighteenth century, colonial scientific illustrations were marked by an absence of the human culture that produced them. By framing the objects within a neutral, white space, and arranging them according to aesthetic sensibilities, they were

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74 N. Thomas, *In Oceania*, p100.
75 Ibid., p105.
76 N. Thomas, ‘Licenced Curiosity’, p121.
dehumanised. Differentiation between the nature of each item wasn’t observed, conflating weapons, domestic tools and ornaments into a homogenous assemblage of ‘otherness’. In this form of documentation, the ‘shadows of a people did not disturb the unrelenting drive of colonisation.’

Angas held a steadfast belief in the ‘ethnological project and the peculiar temporality it imposed.’ He states in his notes, ‘a British civilisation is daily spreading over the Australian continent, so the degraded natives of the soil are fast disappearing.’ The recording of a vanishing people allowed him to treat the present with nostalgia. This reminds us of the temporal simultaneity of collecting: that as the collector (or in this case documenter) acquires or represents an Indigenous object, they are both presenting it in the present and foreseeing its place in the future annals of history. In both examples, the dehistoricisation, decontextualisation and dehumanisation create a vacuum of significance. The viewer has no sense of the objects’ function, how they are valued or what context they would normally inhabit. There is a sense of wiping a slate clean, onto which a new story can be written.

The nineteenth century saw a number of official government ethnobotanists and plant collectors set out on expeditions around Australia. Lieutenant Philip Parker King led an expedition to northern Australia with horticulturalist and botanist Allan Cunningham in 1818. The party would collect plants to supplement their own supplies, and use Indigenous guides to assist them in both procurement and preparation. On the Tiwi Islands, locals gave them a basket of ‘sago palm’, in exchange for chisels and files. In 1844, whilst exploring the Robinson Creek area of South East Queensland, Friedrich W.L. Leichhardt noted that his party:

passed a native camp, which had only lately been vacated, (where) I found, under a few sheets of bark, four fine kangaroo nets, made of the bark of Sterculia

77 Ibid.
78 N. Thomas, Entangled Objects, p133.
79 R. Neville, op. cit., p57.
80 N. Thomas, In Oceania, p128.
82 P. A. Clarke, op. cit.
83 Ibid., p74.
As I was in the greatest want of the cordage, I took two of these nets; and left, in return, a fine brass-hilted sword . . . four fishing hooks and a silk handkerchief; with which, I felt convinced, they would be as well pleased as I was with the cordage of their nets.84

Further north, near the South Alligator River, Leichhardt exchanged a ‘few nails’ and ‘geological hammer’ for ‘presents of red ochre . . . a spear and spear’s head.’85 The lack of a cash economy led the botanists, collectors and anthropologists to rely upon trade goods to buy artefacts and guidance. Common trade goods included tobacco, pipes, metal tools, cloth, sewing equipment, beads, fishing line and metal fish hooks.86

The institutions of Adelaide, at the time the capital of both South Australia and the Northern Territory, led the fashionable mode of amassing natural historical and Indigenous objects. The South Australian Museum provided a sanctioned, organized strategy for collecting under a social anthropology project. The frontier, already ‘discovered’, was now a site of studious, scientific collection. Philip Jones suggests that it was the activity of the colonial frontier that shaped the profile of the South Australian Museum.87 Collectors mediated the establishment and treatment of Indigenous material culture. At the top of the collecting project was Stirling, the director of the South Australian Museum, largely credited with initiating the Museum’s ethnographic and ethnobotanical collection.88 Stirling drew on the collecting services of Foelsche, and went on to coordinate a network of collectors across Australia. In March 1891, Foelsche accompanied South Australian Governor Lord Kintore, Stirling and museum collector Thomas Cornock on the Kintore-Stirling expedition from Darwin to Adelaide. They passed through the Daly River farming region to collect specimens. A photograph from the expedition shows Stirling, Foelsche, his son-in-law Hildebrand Stephens and two

unnamed Aboriginal men above a crocodile, prior to its skinning.\textsuperscript{89}

Victorian Government Botanist Baron Von Mueller initiated the North Australian Expedition in 1865, from Brisbane across to the Victoria River, approximately 600 kilometres south west of Daly River. The party consumed species of cabbage palm and \textit{Pandanus spiralis}. Von Mueller also employed Foelsche as a collector and correspondent. His collection of specimens and artefacts were acquired by the South Australian Museum from the mid 1870s, and displayed to the public.\textsuperscript{90} In their essay on the emergence of Port Essington bark paintings, Susan Davies and Paul Tacon argue that it was Foelsche who initiated the bark painting market

\textsuperscript{89} Photograph by Paul Foelsche, ‘Crocodile shooting on the Daly River, 5 March 1891’, digital print from 600dpi scan of original dry-plate glass negative, Noye Collection, Art Gallery of South Australia, fig. 4.

in the Northern Territory.\textsuperscript{91} Two of Foelsche’s collected objects in the South Australian Museum, being a spear thrower and ‘musical instrument, drone pipe’, were sourced from the Daly River community.\textsuperscript{92} The majority of items in the Museum’s collection, however, were sourced from A. M. Christie. The other predominant collectors of Daly River fibre in the first half of the twentieth century were ‘G. F. Hill’, ‘P. C. Cole’, ‘T. R. Styles’, ‘R. D. Boys’ and ‘C. French Jnr’.\textsuperscript{93} The latter is the earliest collector, having procured a ‘twined conical basket’ with ‘multi strand string handle’ in the Daly River region in 1902.\textsuperscript{94} The next group of collectors were active two decades later: Hill, Styles and Boys all collected twined or looped container bags between 1918 and 1925.

Gerald Freer Hill was Naturalist to the Commonwealth Exploration Party, Central Australia and Northern Territory 1911-12. He was a member of the 1911 Barclay Expedition, which travelled from Adelaide to Boroloola near the Gulf of Carpentaria and had the task of collecting botanical specimens. Together with Dr J. A. Gilruth and Professor William Baldwin Spencer, Hill collected over 600 specimens, prompting the publication of \textit{The Flora of the Northern Territory}.\textsuperscript{95} The expedition:

\begin{quote}
moved north from Oodnadatta . . . continuing north by way of Lander Creek, on a route about one hundred kilometres west of the present Stuart Highway, the party met the Overland telegraph line again at Newcastle Waters.\textsuperscript{96}
\end{quote}

A letter dated 19\textsuperscript{th} July 1911 claimed the group ‘met very few aboriginals, such as we saw were on friendly terms with and obtained photographs and other

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{footnotes}
\item[92] Anthropology item numbers 4598 and 2923, South Australian Museum collection.
\item[93] Museum of Victoria and Australian Museum collections.
\item[94] Item number X10165, Twined conical basket. Multi-strand string handle, collected 13 October 1902, Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice), Acquired from C French Junior, 170 x 340 x 200mm, collection of Museum of Victoria, fig. 2.
\item[95] Alfred J. Ewart, and Olive B. Davies, \textit{Flora of the Northern Territory}, McCarron, Melbourne, 1917.
\end{footnotes}
\end{footnotesize}
particulars regarding them." The area referred to in the letter was between Haasts Bluff and Newcastle Waters. An excerpt from Hill’s journal on 25th June 1911 stated ‘native fires were seen in nearly every direction but no natives were seen, nor could we find any springs or waterholes.’

It appears as though Hill did not collect any Aboriginal cultural items on this expedition, however in 1918 he returned to the Northern Territory as an inspector, the announcement of which appeared in the NT Times and Gazette:

APPOINTMENTS,
To be inspectors under the Plant Diseases Ordinance of 1918; GERALD FREER HILL.
and all officers of the Northern Territory Police Force
J.A Gilruth, Administrator.

In the same year as this appointment, Hill collected the ‘MV String bag’ from ‘Daly River East Bank’, now in the Museum of Victoria’s collection. The bag is a loop stitch made from two-ply twine, with a multi-strand handle that has been attached with a black binding substance, most likely sugarbag honey. A second string dilly bag, also collected by Hill in 1918, also has a multi-strand handle, with a tight, small looped weave. The object is of a particularly high quality, exemplified by the intricacy and delicacy of its weave.

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97 CRS A659 item 42/1/2696 letter of 19/7/1911, from Fraser (1993:210): Australian Archives. ACT Branch. CRS A659 1942/1/2696 Barclay - McPherson Expedition through Northern Territory 1911-12 Progress Reports re (1911-1918; 5cm).
99 Northern Territory Times and Gazette, June 29, 1918, p23.
100 ‘MV String bag’, item X25825, acquired from Hill, G. F., 17 December 1918, Australia, Northern Territory, Daly River ( Fitzmaurice), 30 x 78 x 30cm, multi-strand handle attached, Museum of Victoria, fig. 5.
101 ‘Bag’, item X25823, acquired from Hill, G. F., 17 December 1918, Australia, Northern Territory, Daly River 40 x 73 x 29cm, multi-strand handle attached, Museum of Victoria, fig. 6.
Figure 10 ‘MV String bag’, item X25825, acquired from Hill, G. F., 17 December 1918, Australia, Northern Territory, Daly River (Fitzmaurice), 30 x 78 x 30cm, multi-strand handle attached, Museum of Victoria.

Figure 11 ‘Bag’, item X25823, acquired from Hill, G. F., 17 December 1918, Australia, Northern Territory, Daly River 40 x 73 x 29cm, multi-strand handle attached, Museum of Victoria
Regina Pilawuk Wilson provided the following commentary on this multi-strand handle string dilly bag from the Museum of Victoria’s collection:

No one really does those anymore. Old ladies would do it. That same sort of width of that dilly bag. Where you put your things in. My grandmother, her mother used to make it. *Finyi* fig tree, maybe it’s made of that. They used to make *warrgadi* from *finyi* too. They used both, it and sand palm. Mabel knows how to do it.\(^\text{102}\)

In a later interview, Regina Wilson, after consulting with Patsy Marfura, states ‘fungili, that is’, referring to the binding substance on either side of the handle of the bag:

Old people used to do that. That’s the one for this side country. Always loose handle.

If you got that wind up one, it hurt you here.\(^\text{103}\)

Wilson indicates her shoulder, referring to her own handles in contemporary string dilly bags. We can assume from this observation that the multi-strand handle was a utilitarian design choice, replaced sometime last century by a decorative version for the emerging craft market.

\(^{102}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, June 22, 2011.

\(^{103}\) Ibid.
Whilst attempting to piece together the economic, political and emotional contexts in which these objects were acquired, one is also aware of Nicholas Thomas’ warning that ‘the burdening of a thing with a detailed story about the dealings between an anthropologist or missionary and a trade store owner may not help.’ Thomas suggests that this process echoes the original European-tribal trade process, placing the Indigenous object at the behest of historical Western connoisseurs. This is enhanced by the aura of progressiveness of the ‘pioneering’ collectors. As Torres-Strait Islander academic Martin Nakata states, ‘ethnology and early anthropological theory . . . provided a background against

105 Ibid.
which Islander society itself became in reality little more than an offen-stage presence imagined into being by a scientific audience.\textsuperscript{106} The solution presented by Thomas is to acknowledge the object’s place in a European canon, whilst highlighting their significance to past, present and future ‘Indigenous producers, users and viewers.’\textsuperscript{107} By reintroducing these objects to contemporary Ngan’gi weavers, they are reinserted with Indigenous ‘on-stage’ presence.

\textbf{CAPTIVATION}

A partially-made string bag is also in the Museum of Victoria’s collection, originating from collector P.C Cole, and acquired in 1940.\textsuperscript{108} This object, marked by its incompleteness, suggests a technical, perhaps ethnographic or anthropological interest on the part of its collector. Spencer describes it as ‘small bag in course of manufacture from bark string and string of pandanus leaf, Daly River, Northern Territory.’\textsuperscript{109} It brings to mind Alfred Gell’s theory of an object’s agency, particularly the agency of captivation, further developed by Lissant Bolton in relation to Australasian material culture. Gell discusses the power of enchantment or ‘spectacle of unimaginable virtuosity’ in relation to Papua New Guinean Trioband canoe boards.\textsuperscript{110} Designed to be ‘dazzling’, their intricate carvings enthralled and baffled European beholders, who were unfamiliar with the techniques employed. Thus the artistry was rationalised as magical or mystical. Without the vocabulary to articulate how the object was produced, collectors resorted to descriptions and discussions based on their own enchantment or captivation, their wonderment and awe. In his \textit{Guide to the Australian Ethnological Collection}, Spencer describes ‘the perfect symmetry of the lines of some of these soft-wood vessels’ as ‘remarkable.’\textsuperscript{111} Thomas notes of Angas’s engravings: ‘remarks are occasionally made upon the dexterity or ingenuity of carving.’\textsuperscript{112}

\textsuperscript{106} M. Nakata, op. cit., p102.
\textsuperscript{107} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{108} ‘MV Bag Partly made string bag’, 17 July 1940 X44526 Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice), acquired from Mr P.C. Cole 45 x 520 x 140mm, Museum of Victoria, fig. 7.
\textsuperscript{109} B. Spencer, ibid., p49.
\textsuperscript{111} B. Spencer, ibid., p44.
\textsuperscript{112} N. Thomas, \textit{In Oceania}, p100.
Gell’s ‘captivation’ permits a visually complex or unfamiliar design to embody significance.113 The design of the object maintains its own significance: a visual, rather than narrative, import.114 Another advantage of Gell’s captivation is its conferral of significance upon an object, leaving aside the argument of whether it is categorised as ethnographic tool, craft item or art.115 One may approach the Ngan’gi concept of distinctiveness of the object and avoid such discussions. This will be addressed in the later chapter on the wupun (coil basket). At the turn of the century collectors placed an increasing emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of artefacts, further enhancing the captivation effect.

![Figure 13 MV Bag Partly made string bag’, 17 July 1940 X44526 Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice), acquired from Mr P.C. Cole 45 x 520 x 140mm, Museum of Victoria.](image)

Rodney Harrison similarly applies Gell’s theory of captivation to his discussion of Kimberley spear points.116 Through captivation, Harrison argues that the points may be viewed as objects of colonial desire. The captivation by, or fascination with the technology of the points allows a new understanding of the objects’

114 Ibid., p113.
115 Ibid., p114.
affects on colonial collectors. As many of the collectors of these points were amateur anthropologists or non-specialists, they would have functioned in terms of their indecipherability. The agency they embodied bore no relation to the agency of familiar objects. As Harris notes, the movement of paint over a canvas and the technical proficiency inherent in the process of painting escapes us, or ‘defies...our ability to conceive a resemblance of our agency to the agency which originated the work.’ This inability to understand the object’s technology informed their desirability to antiquarians and collectors. As Elkin commented in 1948:

> An observer cannot help noticing the skill shown by the craftsman, his sureness of touch, his command of his instrument and the material he is working, and the quickness with which he decides which notches are required or whether, if present, they should be knocked off. It is astounding to see what appears to be very heavy pressure being applied to a narrow edge of a small piece of quartzite ... without fear of smashing the stone ... I saw sureness and continuous awareness of the goal—the formation by percussion and pressure of a useful and beautiful object.

The theory of captivation may also be applied to the process of looping warrgadi, as well as its unfinished object. Captivation is agency ignited through performance. In later chapters, this concept will be discussed in relation to the development and transition of body paintings, pattern construction and acrylic painting.

The captivation notion extends to the descendants of an object’s makers; when the Ngan’gi artists examined images of the museum objects, there was much discussion over the techniques that were no longer practiced, and the quality of craftsmanship involved in their construction. The discovery of Charles French Jnr’s 1902 basket in the Museum of Victoria instigated this dissertation’s research into Ngan’gi twined conical baskets. What marks French’s basket as significant is the fact that it, according to existing literature, would have been identified as a central Arnhem Land basket. The twining technique, visually synonymous with central and western Arnhem Land, has not been associated with the Daly River.
region or Ngan’gi language group. The discovery also initiated the ‘Airbell research project’ at Durrmu Arts, involving an examination of the technique and object associated with the previously-overlooked twined vessels of the Daly River region. Over the course of the project to date, the artists have visually analysed the Ngan’gi baskets found in public institutions, and developed workshops whereby weavers attempt to re-create the techniques and forms associated with the ‘airbell.’ At the time of this dissertation’s submission, the exact structure and physical qualities of the ‘airbell’ are still being established, however the process of rediscovery will be examined in this chapter.

The Ngan’gi syaw fish net and ‘airbell’ basket are bound by the common construction of twining. Twining is defined by the twisting of two or more fibres around a framework of fibres that determine its shape. Twined vessels are normally referred to as baskets, rather than bags, marked by the lack of lateral expansion. The form and material is associated with central and western Arnhem Land. There is no scholarly research, nor broader mention, of the technique existing in the Daly River region to date. Louise Hamby’s doctoral dissertation, now published as Containers of Power, and Twined Together, form the best part of the scholarship of these objects. In the research undertaken for this dissertation, Hamby’s findings are used as a contextual complement to the Ngan’gi twined history, as living memory of the technique is scant amongst the contemporary Ngan’gi weavers. This, combined with an examination of the Ngan’gi objects located in the Australian museum, allows for an initial reconstruction of this technique, its producers, users and collectors and the objects themselves.

One of the earliest references to twined Aboriginal vessels is in Robert Etheridge’s 1899 study:

...with the exception of their weapons, there are no other articles of daily use amongst the Northern Australians so highly ornate as their “dilly-baskets” ... the use of the term basket as distinguished from bag, is restricted to those receptacles of this nature made of grasses or rushes as opposed to those manufactured from

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121 See video 3: Regina Pilawuk Wilson attempting to twine the base of an ‘airbell’ basket.
A group of baskets collected by Harry Stockdale in the Alligator Rivers region in 1891 were constructed by ‘plaiting by using two lengths of strand in either case passed in and out alternatively and tightly interlaced from inside to outside and vice versa.’ The ‘groundwork’ of these baskets was ‘almost always Indian red’, with white, yellow, black or brown accents. During an exhibition of photographs of these baskets at the Australian Museum in 1899, they were described as consisting of: ‘chequer work, chevrons, triangles and other geometrical patterns, including figures of various natural objects of a vegetable and animal nature including conventional representations of the human form.’

Northeast Arnhem Land baskets such as Stockdale’s may have their entire surfaces stained with applied ochre, whilst others were broken up into patterned, horizontal bands of in-filled designs. Hamby suggests that the patterning indicates a ‘different focus of an overall connection with an Ancestral Being.’ The diamond pattern, for example, was imprinted on baskets as well as wooden articles and bark painting. Such designs have ‘strong meaning in relation to other painted surfaces’ and thus it is unlikely that a ‘similar meaning should not exist for these designs when they are painted on the bags.’ A rock painting at Oenpelli shows a decorated basket, divided into horizontal segments, including a segment with two stylized figures. The remaining panels are filled with a herringbone pattern. A comparable basket is found in Spencer’s collection. He noted the spacing of designs on baskets such as these was determined by ‘distinct, transversely running ridges’, now known as bolidj (cicatrices). The bolidj have a dual function of strengthening the bag – providing three-strand

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123 Ibid., p13.
124 Ibid., p14.
127 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
twining bands throughout the body of the bag – and an avenue for aesthetic decoration. As Hamby notes, ‘it is well documented in paintings that designs are owned by particular clans.’

The first evidence of the Ngan’gi airbell’s existence emerged during an interview with Regina Pilawuk Wilson. When discussing the techniques of her forebears, she pointed to an object in Louise Hamby’s Twined Together publication. The object was a twined conical basket from Margaret Preston’s personal collection, collected from Gunbalanya in 1947. The bag is decorated with ochre zigzag design, divided by central, horizontal band. Pilawuk Wilson states of the ‘airbell’ basket, assisted by her elder sister Mabel Jimarin’s recollections:

Airbell, yeah. Similar to this one here. Grandmother and her mother. Pinbin they used to go and get bush vine and scrape it into small pieces; how you strip pandanus into pieces, same as that. (Mabel) is talking about the lid and the little gate in the middle so the fish can’t come out. Criss cross. Old people know how to make it. Like a trap, murrawai. I used to watch them, the two old men. Not only one trap, two or three. Big tribe. When it’s dry it’s hard to make it. (Mabel) tried to teach it to me but I went that other stitch. Long one, from here to there, that size they used to make it. They used to use that bush vine or that fig tree vine. Wullipun/dilly bag and this one, this airbell, from same time, oldest, before coil basket.

The description of the airbell’s form differs from Preston’s basket, however we can assume that a lack of comparable images in current literature meant that Wilson drew upon a closest equivalent. There is no existing research on the ‘airbell’ basket and though twined conical baskets from the Daly River region have been located via a museum object search, none exactly match Jimarin’s recollection.

A photo dated 1945 in the Boerner Collection of the Northern Territory Library titled ‘River Beauties’, depicts two women on a paper bark canoe on the Daly River, the right hand figure wearing what appears to be a twined conical basket.
on her back. After showing the image to Regina Pilawuk Wilson, she confirmed that the basket was an ‘airbell’ and that the women were Mulluk Mulluk, most likely from Wooliana.141

Figure 14 ‘River beauties’, ‘Daly River NT 45 (Paper Bark Canoe)’, depicting two women and two dogs on a paper bark canoe, Daly River, 1945, Boerner Collection, Northern Territory Library.

Ngan’gi interviewees did not know the derivation of the name ‘airbell’, and did not have a Ngan’gi language translation, aside from the general word for basket, wupun. Unlike other regions of the Top End, the object would not be referred to as a dilly bag, as, for Ngan’gi weavers, this indicates a looped vessel made from sand-palm string. It is possible, from Mabel Jimarin’s description, that the ‘airbell’ refers to two varieties of baskets: one that matches the objects found in the museum collections – a simple, conical vessel – and one that incorporates elements of a fish trap, with gate and lid attached.142 As of May 2013, just prior to this thesis’ submission, a workshop between the Ngan’gi weavers of Durrmu Arts and the Kuninjku weavers of Yilan outstation, Maningrida, has just occurred. The workshop was coordinated by Durrmu Arts Art Centre Manager Rikki Lovell, with the aim of allowing the Ngan’gi weavers to rediscover the twining technique. The exchange has been documented by Lovell and filmmaker Cassie de Colling, of Natur Reel Films. Initial images obtained show the weavers being taught to

141 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, December 5, 2012.
142 See figs. 9 and 10, taken as part of the ‘airbell’ project workshop, May 17, 2010.
harvest and weave conical baskets and nets with *pinbin* bush vine.\textsuperscript{143} I aim to write a follow up paper on this workshop, and the weavers’ development, once documentation has been completed.

Figure 15 Regina Pilawuk Wilson attempting an ‘airbell’ basket base, using *finyi* (fig tree fibre), May 17, 2010. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

\textsuperscript{143} See figs 11 and 12.
Figure 16 Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s first attempt at the base of the ‘airbell’ basket, May 17, 2010. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Figure 17 Bonnie Roy showing the Ngan’gi weavers how to twine a fish net using bush vine (Flagellaria indica), Yilan outstation, May 2013. Photo by Rikki Lovell, courtesy of Durrmu Arts.
Two ‘container baskets’ are held in the collection of the Australian Museum, both collected by ‘T. Styles’ in 1925 in the Daly River community. According to the *Northern Territory Times*, 4 July, 1930, ‘Mr Styles arrived in the early nineties . . . and took up mining and was a familiar figure on the mining fields especially around Brock’s Creek.’\(^{144}\) Brock’s Creek Mine was located just north east of Daly River, hence we can assume Styles collected the containers through his work in the region. One of the baskets, item E029157, is highly decorated with horizontal banded designs in alternating ochre pigments of brown, pink and red.

\(^{144}\) *The Northern Territory Times*, 4 July 1930, p2.
Regina Pilawuk Wilson, with assistance from Annunciata Wilson and Mabel Jimarin, provided the following commentary in response to images of the ‘container’ basket, obtained from the Australian Museum:

Airbell stopped when the mission came. We wasn’t allowed to do this and that. All the tribe used to do it: Peppi, Tyemerrri, Merrepen, Mulfe, all come under Ngan’gityemerri. All used to make dilly bag, airbell and carried their tucker in (the airbell). They used to make it in Wuddi, old people from Daly, Malak Malak, Port Keats. Finyi (fig string), they used to put a little in there (airbell basket) and the hair belt. My mummy used to make basket similar to that; mummy, my grandmother, and her mother. We didn’t tell Robin (Hodgson) that.

Wilson’s statement explains that the technique was widespread, and that numerous rak-estates and language groups, collectively coming under the ‘umbrella’ of the Ngan’gityemerri language/estate, practiced the weave. If the Mission stopped the production of the ‘airbell’, perhaps they too gave it this name. Alternatively, an anthropologist may have suggested it, and from there, its use spread. An ‘airbell’, in the European sense, can refer to the air bubble formed in glass blowing; this may have reminded a European collector, missionary or researcher of the curved shape of the twined basket.

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146 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 20, 2010; Robin Hodgson is the author of Peppimenarti Basketmakers and undertook research with the Ngan’gi weavers in the mid-late 1980s.
The Ngan’gi experience of rediscovery is contrasted to that of the Kuku Yalanji lawyer cane weavers in Cape York, where consistent collecting since the early 1900s has enabled them to directly recreate older designs. As Trish Barnard states, ‘if a succession of anthropologists and enthusiasts hadn’t collected . . . our youth may not have the opportunity to examine remnants of their culture.’

The process of rediscovery and reengagement with culture via public institutional collections also arises in the work of Yidinyji artist Michael Boiyoul Anning, from Ravenshoe, Queensland. Anning sources the imagery for his crafted canoes and shields from the Anthropology Museum of the University of Queensland. Anning ‘appreciates the value of documented history of his people that is available in museums.’

The commercial potential for rainforest shields was fully realised at the turn of last century, by Walter Roth, the Northern Protectorate of Aboriginals. Joseph Campbell, the director of Cotton Culture (a company who

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used an all-Aboriginal labour force), gathered much of the Queensland Museum’s rainforest shield collection. Once again, scientific documentation stimulated commercial gain, as the revival of shield production paralleled the increased anthropological interest in far North Queensland during the first three decades of the century.\textsuperscript{153} As a result, shields were produced by the Yidinyji people, for the tourist market, throughout the century. Anning’s sculpture reflects both the colonial commerce of curiosity and subsequent modes of classification within cultural institutions. In order to re-produce his own traditions, Anning had to engage with the institution that helped remove them, and thus his sculpture acts as a conduit between nineteenth century European collection and contemporary Indigenous artistic practice.\textsuperscript{154}

Gerald McMaster argues that anthropology museums act as a ‘gate-keeping ideology’, maintaining boundaries and marginalizing the other.\textsuperscript{155} Whether a museum space is a traditional nineteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, or a contemporary white cube, they remain sites of identity production and negotiation, and thus cannot be neutral. The ‘disciplinary power’ of the modern museum commands and arranges both objects and bodies for public display.\textsuperscript{156} The institution organises an order of things, and formulates the position of people in relation to that order.\textsuperscript{157} This includes the demarcation of Imperialism, between ‘body and other body upon whom power is unleashed.’\textsuperscript{158} Thomas argues that the museum’s function is to displace objects and re-frame within a ‘functionlessness’.\textsuperscript{159} Private significance, exchange value, use and context are all purposefully removed, imposing a form of re-contextualisation, rather than decontextualisation.\textsuperscript{160}

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p67.
\textsuperscript{159} N. Thomas, ‘Indigenous Presences’ p4.
\textsuperscript{160} Ibid.
The Indigenous object’s visible and invisible elements may be related to the cultural constructions of the museum. In the seventeenth century, this was exemplified by an interest in scientific instruments such as microscopes, and man’s use of their powers of visibility to make conclusions about the invisible. The museum is an institution that ‘forms a consensus of opinion around the technique of opposing the visible and invisible.’ An installation at the University of British Columbia’s Museum of Anthropology (MOA) by Indigenous Canadian artist and curator Gerald McMaster explored these themes. Gaze of Science used the microscope as a metaphor for the practice of anthropological collecting. McMaster noted the eighteenth and nineteenth century collector’s interest in not only the aesthetic quality of an object, but its (invisible) culture behind it. The use of the Museum’s glass cabinets acted as a device to ‘museumify’ the culture of ‘other’ and encourage a clinical gaze.

![Image](image_url)

Figure 20 Michael Boiyool Anning, Bama (the people), 2003, natural pigments on softwood, 101 x 41 x 9.5cm, purchased 2004, collection of the Queensland Art Gallery.

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161 K. Pomian, op. cit., p43.
162 Ibid., p37.
163 Ibid., p43.
164 G. McMaster, op. cit., p257.
165 Ibid., p258.
Within Anning’s practice, this isolation of the Indigenous object is apparent in *Rainforest shield (hand-held fish net design) and sword, 2000-01*. The work was included in *Storyplace* in 2001, and again in *Floating Life: Contemporary Aboriginal Fibre Art* in 2009, both at the Queensland Art Gallery. In the former exhibition, the work was hung upon a white wall, with minimal textual information. Its black outlines, rich ochre pigments and precise oblong shape created a clarity and strength that isolated the object from its surroundings. Placed near original turn-of-the-century Indigenous shields and swords, *Rainforest shield’s* pristine quality enhanced its sense of seclusion, as it was neither a museum exhibit nor contemporary artwork. As the artist states, ‘I wanted to make a bark painting on stringy bark and then turn it into a contemporary 3-D artwork.’ In *Floating Life*, the object’s depiction of string was used to demonstrate the diversity of Indigenous bush string’s significances; ‘Boiyool’ is a strip of lawyer cane, used to stir up poison in a waterhole, so that fish might be scooped up by a string net. By reproducing traditional Indigenous artefacts, Anning also recreates their experience of displacement.

When viewing Anning’s artefact/reproductions, their authenticity and sense of historical reconstruction is palpable. The copying of his ancestor’s craft, without any form of personal addendum, may prove perplexing for the viewer. We are used to Indigenous work that engages with its own history, yet contemporises itself through subversive, conceptual practices. Although we can observe the newness of Anning’s shields, they are above all replicas of historical objects, and therefore beg the question, what social or political purpose can they serve? Are they playing up to ‘colonial legacies of exoticism and neo-colonial processes of commodification’? Anning’s sculptures adopt a complex position, as they purposefully appear a-political, yet engage directly with the history of Indigenous artefacts; their stories of exchange, appropriation and display. When we look at works such as *Rainforest shield*, we are simultaneously looking at every other shield in every other anthropological collection. It is their imitative quality that allows the story of Indigenous objects to emerge.

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Just as the presence of Indigenous artefacts in the Museum of Anthropology at the University of Queensland enabled Anning to reproduce the complex clan designs of Yindinyji culture, the collected twined objects of the Ngan’gi have informed their relationship with, and understanding and expression of, visual culture. This process is one of loss and gain, deprivation and discovery. Museums and collections present the illusion of a complete world, a sense of ‘all you need to know.’ Yet the objects are disassociated from the site and hand of their production, and their ongoing cultural context. A Ngan’gi basket sits on the storage shelves of a museum, standing for the category of ‘Indigenous fibre, Daly River’. Both the meaning it holds to its makers, and the systems of exchange that led to it being there, are absent. The objects are neither curiosities to be in awe of, scientific evidence to be evaluated, nor ‘art to be admired.’ They are objects both from the past, the past within which the museum has placed them, and ‘pasts’ which later exhibitions may bestow. This theme of historical impositions upon objects continues in an account of the Ngan’gi wupun (coil basket) in Chapter 5.

4. WUPUN (COILING): MISSION AND MARKET

The Ngan’gi coiled basket, wupun, is a woven testament to a history of Indigenous and external forces, a meeting of ‘introduced tradition’ and market innovation, and ‘black’ and ‘white’ aesthetics. A study of the basket’s inception and development allows a story of hybridity to emerge; theories of cultural ‘emptiness’ and value will be evaluated in relation to the objects’ production, distribution and reception. Coiling is defined as ‘a core of fibre coiled and secured into shape by a binding thread.’

Ngan’gi coiled fibre baskets are marked by their rich pigments and solid, utilitarian forms. Each weaver has her own set of patterns, both inherited and improvised. The patterns are a template for both the weaving technique and aesthetic design. The coiled work is ubiquitous; the majority of women at Peppimenarti know how to make a coil basket. When asked, the women claim it is because it is easier than warrgadi string production and looping, or that they were taught more readily by mothers, aunts and grandmothers. The coil has, in many cases, usurped the warrgadi stitch.

Yet, coiling has a relatively recent history in the Ngan’gi community. The style and its associated skills travelled the estuary of the Liverpool River, across from Maningrida, through the travels of the Muang people of Goulburn Island. Margie West has researched this trajectory, noting that coiling spread ‘rapidly’ as the Maung passed the skills onto family in outlying communities, including Iwadja on Croker Island, Kunibidji of Maningrida and the Kunwinjku at Gunbalanya. From there, the style was distributed north and south-westward, to both the Tiwi Islands and the Daly River region. The missionary Gretta Matthews, who introduced the technique to the Maung weavers on Goulburn Island, unwittingly reformed the culture and practice of weaving across the Top End. Coiling is now viewed as a

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‘technical lingua franca’ due to its popularity in communities around Australia.\(^4\)

The meeting of missionary, South Pacific and market influences within these baskets casts them as objects of diplomacy and negotiation. For the Ngan’gi, they are wholly part of culture, their production having been subsumed within both the daily activity and ancestral realm of their weavers. The Ngan’gi word for coil basket – *wupun* – predates the objects, referring to the act of painting or smearing pigment, such as ochre. As such, the coil basket is bestowed an ancient significance, tied to rock art sites and the long-practiced ochre decoration of twined vessels.

**GRETTA MATTHEWS & GOULBURN ISLAND**

The coiling technique was introduced to the Ngan’gi weavers via a complex network of familial connections, originating in Warruwi (Goulburn Island) and the Alligator Rivers region, Arnhem Land, (approximately 400 kilometres from Nauiyu) in the 1920s and 30s. From the Methodist Goulburn Island Mission Station, the knowledge of making coiled baskets spread to the Arnhem Land mainland and consequently to the west and east, by direct and indirect means. The proliferation of this knowledge appears to have taken only a couple of years. The original introduction of the technique is attributed to Methodist missionary Margaret (Gretta) Matthews.\(^5\) Matthews brought knowledge of the Southern Australian Ngarrindjeri coiling practice with her when she arrived at the mission in 1922.

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\(^5\) This is asserted by Louise Hamby in *Twined Together: Kunmadj njalehnjaleken*, Inajalak Arts and Crafts, Gunbalanya, 2005, and by Margie West, *ReCoil: Change and Exchange in Coiled Fibre Art*, op. cit.
Matthews’ family worked on the Maloga Mission, Upper Murray River region, in the late nineteenth century, and as an adult, she commenced work at Glenelg, Lower Murray River. At Glenelg, ‘near what is known as the ‘Reed Beds’ Matthews learnt the technique of basket-weaving’ in 1899. Matthews learnt to coil baskets from local rushes from the local Ngarrindjeri women. Her subsequent mission postings included Swan Reach, South Australia, and Canada. As a member of the WAFM (Women’s Auxiliary for Foreign Mission), Matthews worked in Fiji for three years. An article in The Advertiser, May 29, 1925 stated:

Miss Matthews is responsible for the health and moral welfare of the youngsters in her charge but she said the whole 47 are easy to manage and were as quick and

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intelligent as any white child of their years . . . Prior to taking up work at Goulburn Island, Miss Matthews spent three years in mission work in Fiji. 

In an article published a month later, in the South Australian Register, Matthews is credited with ‘three years teaching in a Red Indian school in Canada, several more teaching small brown mission children in Fiji.’ However, Louise Hamby traces Matthew’s WAFM postings as Swan Reach, followed by Canada and then a return to work at Goulburn Island. Matthews was described in the South Australian Register, December 14, 1928 as:

a missionary with the greatest faith in the reality of Christian influence—but a friend and a white sister to the large, queer family, an authority unique in her way on this dark and secret people. Real Blacks.

The Report of the Methodist Missionary Society of Australasia, 1922, states that:

Miss Matthews, our Missionary Sister there, devotes herself to the girls and boys, and excellent progress is reported in the school . . . Certain days are set apart of industrial training. Miss Matthews has a mat-making class working in full swing.

This is the first recorded report of Matthew’s teaching of weaving techniques to the children of the Goulburn Island mission. Known as ‘Larla’, meaning ‘elder sister’, Matthews seems to have been viewed with affection by many of the Mission’s residents. Margie West interviewed Warruwi resident Miriam Ilaklak Kris in 2007, who stated:

She was a teacher here for the school kids. She used to be my mum’s teacher. That was a long time ago. They used to make baskets like that. Even my mum she made

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Ibid.
14 Ella Shepherdson, Half a Century in Arnhem Land, One Tree Hill, South Australia, 1981, p42.
flower baskets - strong ones for wedding, you know. She used to put lining underneath. She also made [baskets] with a lid and open ones.¹⁵

Head Teacher at Goulburn Island, S. A. Luck (Matthews’ superior), wrote an article for the 1968 Special School Bulletin, stating that ‘Aboriginal instructors are employed at Goulburn Island to teach the girls in the Intermediate and Senior in the Intermediate and Senior Primary classes the skills involved in making pandanus mats and baskets.’¹⁶ Luck goes on to explain that the pandanus work is a ‘development of’ traditional weaving of dilly bags, and that shell work, although regarded by Aboriginal people as traditional, was actually introduced by missionaries in 1932.’¹⁷

Twined conical baskets had been the prevailing form of woven container in Goulburn Island until Matthew’s arrival in the 1920s. Her knowledge of the Ngarrindjeri coiling technique was passed onto students through her craft classes. Aside from the change in construction method, the most pervasive and significant shift instigated by Matthews was the encouragement of a flat-based design, as opposed to conical. With her European perspective, the inability of a conical basket to sit on a flat surface would have seemed illogical. Handles were also added.

Hamby argues that the market demand from ‘down south’ dictated colour, thus missionaries such as Matthews initiated the use of natural dyes. The implementation of the use of dyes is largely attributed to the Fijian mission staff.¹⁸ Margie West describes how in 1947 the Reverend Alfred Ellison and his wife, both in Goulburn Island from 1947-58, continued this encouragement of the use of naturally dyed pandanus.¹⁹ Luck also attributes the use of ‘local dyes’ and the introduction of raffia needles to Matthew’s instruction.²⁰ He notes that prior to

¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Margie West, ‘Strings Through the Heart’, p17.
²⁰ S. A. Luck, op. cit., p11.
her arrival, objects were woven with the fingers only, and no dye was used.\textsuperscript{21} Ellison stated that missionaries that preceded Matthews discouraged the use of colour dyes due to their perceived association with totemism.\textsuperscript{22} Dyed pandanus baskets can been seen in a photograph of Elcho Island work by Harold Shepherdson, taken in the early 1940s.\textsuperscript{23}

The same shifts occurred at Milingimbi in the late 20s, this time triggered by missionaries Harold and Ella Shepherdson. Jennifer Hoff states that ‘Mrs Shepherdson brought over the blanket stitch baskets from Goulburn Island.’\textsuperscript{24} Soon after their arrival in 1928, the fibre craft was marked by the new stitch, as well as flat, rather than conical, mat weavings. Such mats were exhibited in the Mission Society Exhibition in Melbourne, 1933.\textsuperscript{25} In an interview with the South Australian Register, 1925, Matthews describes such a mat in its ‘traditional’ form:

‘Do you know what this is?’ ‘This’ was a large mat of woven grass which rose suddenly and mysteriously in the middle like an elongated mushroom. ‘That,’ said Miss Matthews, ‘is what’s put over the little black babies when they go to sleep — to keep the mosquitoes off. Would you have imagined that a wild Australian aborigine woman knew so much about mothercraft?’\textsuperscript{26}

Matthews’ admiration for the traditional mat is at odds with the assertion that traditional techniques were not permitted in the Mission. However, the interview took place during a visit to Adelaide, and Matthews may have had the mat in her possession as part of a personal collection or potential presentation to a museum. We can, at most, assume from the statement that Matthews was not wholly dismissive of original Muang fibre craft.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{22} Margie West, Maningrida: the language of weaving, curated by Margaret Carew and Andrew Hughes, research advisor: Margie West, Australian Exhibitions Touring Agency, Melbourne, 1995.
\textsuperscript{23} L. Hamby, Containers of Power: women with clever hands, p153.
\textsuperscript{24} Jennifer Hoff, Notes on Weaving (women’s art) at Elcho Island, Northern Territory, 8\textsuperscript{th} – 30\textsuperscript{th} August, 1977.
\textsuperscript{26} ‘Helping Aborigines: work of a missioner: life on Goulburn island’, op cit.
Whilst harvesting trepang was the primary occupation at Goulburn Island in 1922, Matthews’ introduced activity of weaving changed the commercial and industrial landscape of the community. As West has notes, ‘coiled mats and baskets soon became integral . . . even dominant’ in the ‘women’s repertoire.’ The work was not introduced with the aim of profit, but to ‘encourage the natives in habits of industry and in the virtues of self-support.’ The missions’ assimilationist policies included gender-specific labour, based on a non-Indigenous model. The Western concept of ‘inside’ work and ‘outside work’ for women and men respectively was adopted, leading to an inversion of traditional activity for Indigenous women. The exception to women’s ‘inside’ work was kitchen gardening and weeding, alongside washing, sewing and mat and basket weaving. The dignity of labour, a tenet at the heart of the Methodist missionary model, required a shift from a ‘hunter-gatherer’ to agricultural society.

Howard Morphy has examined the Methodist Overseas Mission in Yirrkala and its attempts to integrate the western approach with Aboriginal economies. Missionary Wilbur Chaseling stated of the mission’s economy:

> I started them painting craft within a week or so of arriving. I established the principle that I would give them nothing free - nothing except medicine. If they were to get things they had to work. I sent things only to museums and charged them the price I paid plus freight - I sent tons of stuff down. I realised that we had to start some kind of industry and craft seemed the most obvious one, even if I had to burn some of the things produced at first I had to do it.

Missions operating in northern Australia had limited funds, and were under pressure to generate income via the mission residents. The Anglican Church Missionary Society (CMS) were the most organised in terms of the production and

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27 M. West, ‘Strings Through the Heart’, p17.
28 By Reef and Palm, op. cit., p58.
31 Interview with Wilbur Chaseling in Sydney 11 December 1975, in, The Methodist Church and the Yolŋu, with particular reference to Yirrkala, Howard Morphy, ibid.
marketing of Aboriginal-made woven goods. Dilly bags, mats and baskets were produced and marketed through the CMS’s headquarters in the Sydney CBD.

The local demand for woven ‘craftwork’ had developed sufficiently by 1928 that Herbert Read, who worked on Goulburn Island from 1925-1928, opened a market in Port Darwin and could not meet the demand for the goods:

The women numbered between 60 and 70, and they engaged in mat and basket weaving. This was a very, profitable branch of the work, for when Mr. Read opened a market for them in Port Darwin the demand was such that they were unable to meet it. The proceeds from mats and baskets were used for the purchase of galvanised iron for the roofs of the houses.

Methodism’s desire to impart a ‘Protestant work ethic’ to the Indigenous population was demonstrated in their commitment to the agricultural and craft industries. In regard to Yolngu missions, Carolyn Schwarz argues that ‘the long-term goal was to provide Yolngu people with the educational background to become assimilated into the white Australian society’ and to ‘carry out their dualistic aires of Christianising and civilising, the missionaries tried to shape the younger people through education, hygiene, an agriculture and craft industry, and evangelism.’

The first example of coiled fibrecraft on the mainland was a small, lidded basket, collected just outside Darwin, circa 1930. In 1932, the cover of the journal of the Victorian Methodist Women’s Auxiliary of Foreign Missions, W.A.F.M Link magazine, showed an array of coiled baskets. The accompanying advertisement suggested buyers ‘use their own lacquer’ to ensure durability for use and display.

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in the home.\textsuperscript{37} In 1938, \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald} reported on an ‘oriental mission fete’ where mats ‘woven from pandanus grass by aborigines’, ‘both durable and attractive’ were displayed alongside ‘table cloths and doyleys embroidered by aboriginal children.’\textsuperscript{38} In 1941 a Sydney exhibition of ‘handicrafts by aborigines’ was described as:

\begin{quote}
Spinning and weaving, crochet work, dilly bags (of grass and bark), table runners, and cushion overs, will be seen in the work of aborigines which Miss Helen Baillie will show at the Y.W.C.A. in Liverpool Street this afternoon at 3 o’clock.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

The work on display was from the Mount Margaret Mission, Western Australia, where missionary Mrs. Bennett was ‘responsible for the very high standard the children and women have attained in their craftwork.’\textsuperscript{40} Bennett had authored \textit{The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being} in 1930.\textsuperscript{41}

This early market for coiled baskets existed somewhere between the world of western craft and the exotic. The baskets were both household objects and physical symbols of otherness. For the white market, the ability to display the item was paramount: these were items for the home, not vessels with which to gather food. Baby baskets, fruit baskets and coaster mats were all encouraged. A demonstration of western craft techniques was also valued, as it gave credence to the success of the mission’s civilising influence. Goulburn Island head teacher S. A. Luck reported that the students’ ‘table’ mats ‘may be finished with various borders giving the appearance of crochet work.’\textsuperscript{42} Yet, the items were still required to present sufficient evidence of their Aboriginality, however vague.

Carolyn Lovitt examines the cover of the \textit{Link} journal and its presentation of basket ware from Goulburn Island. The photo’s purpose was to advertise the baskets for sale. Lovitt notes that the design of the cover, by Miss Wade, includes

\begin{footnotes}
\item[37] C. Lovitt, op. cit., p19.
\item[38] A mat from Oenpelli: Lady Wakehurst’s Purchase; Oriental Mission Fete’, \textit{The Sydney Morning Herald}, August 17, 1938, p6.
\item[40] Ibid.
\item[41] Mary M. Bennett, \textit{The Australian Aboriginal as a Human Being}, Alston Rivers, London, 1930.
\end{footnotes}
a border of geometric patterning, an ‘unspecified and abstracted reference to the art of the South Pacific nations.’

The South Pacific connection emerges in a few important ways. The first of these is this conflation of cultures as the fibre industry emerged. Lovitt observes that the first baskets were marketed as ‘coiled bundle technique’. Seemingly no attempt was made to promote a sense of specific Indigenous authenticity or originality. The coiling technique, has, at the least, Fijian similarities and at most, derivations. This conflation, as shown by the Journal’s cover decoration and the admission of the product being an introduced style, is a fascinating contrast to the later market for Aboriginal material culture. Rather than being authentic objects of a dying race (this was reserved for museums), the baskets were ‘native mission produced’ items for the home, or ‘objects of industry’ and held an ambiguous aura of cultural difference. Lovitt argues that the cover indicates a homogenisation of Indigenous and South Pacific cultures, with the former being ‘even lower on the peg’ than the latter.

Matthews is credited with working at a Fijian mission for three years prior to her Goulburn Island stint. This emerges in a handful of sources but sadly there is no comprehensive detail regarding her experience. In Goulburn Island ‘lay missioner’ Herbert Read’s journal, he states that ‘Larla…(made) silly complaints, comparing this station with those in Fiji.’ Jennifer Hoff supported this theory in her 1977 publication Notes on Weaving, stating that ‘one of the Australian women in the early mission settlement on Goulburn Island has been a missionary in Fiji previously, and she developed the blanket weaving technique among local aboriginals.’

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
47 C. Lovitt, op. cit., p47.
49 J. Hoff, op. cit., p3.
In addition to Matthews’ Fijian experience, there is evidence of a number of Fijian Methodist missionaries working in Arnhem Land missions during the 1930s. The emigration or employment of Fijian missionaries was encouraged as part of a greater experiment, to use them as an example of the ‘intermediate stage of evolution’. South Pacific culture and society had already been exposed to Methodist principles, and thus recently trained Fijian missionaries were invited to continue the cause in northern Australia. However, many of the first missionary workers in Australia were ‘refugees’ from failed missions in the Pacific region. Pacific Islanders came to Torres Strait from the 1860s onwards to work in the trepang and pearl shelling industries, and from 1871 as missionaries and teachers. From there, many emigrated to far north Queensland communities. The introduction of a coiling technique also took place at Yarrabah and Aurukun, Queensland. In the case of Yarrabah, the introduction predates Goulburn Island by approximately 20 years. Yarrabah, an Anglican Mission, was established in 1892, and was declared a reformatory in 1902.

A missionary from Saibai Island called Jiga first taught the Yarrabah mission resident women how to weave mats and baskets in 1908. A photo taken in 1908 shows the students alongside Jiga, weaving. Former mission resident Vida Harris remembers ‘we used to learn to make yagal mats. White people called it pandanus... Mura mura, I used to make that one – lovely weave. Bundu or dilly bag – old ladies used to make it.’ Torres-Strait Islander Douglas Pitt Jnr has also been credited with teaching the women and girls at Yarrabah to weave mats from pandanus.

Lovitt suggest that the presence of Fijian staff at Milingimbi altered the state of the woven mats, from conical to flat. Paula Seru and his wife Nancy were the first Fijian staff at Milingimbi, from 1931. Ella Shepherdson recalls that ‘Nancy

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50 C. Lovitt, op. cit., p44.
52 Ibid., p162.
54 Ibid., pp 44-45.
55 C. Lovitt, op. cit., p44.
56 E. Shepherdson, op. cit., p53.
had a class of women and taught them how to make mats, baskets and fans Fijian style.\textsuperscript{57} In the W.A.F.M's \textit{Link} magazine, 1936, an anonymous interviewee stated that 'under Nanesi’s instruction women are starting to make Fijian baskets, very neat and very strong. Fans, too, are being made, and of course big circular floor mats'.\textsuperscript{58} Axel Poignant photographed a family on Goulburn Island making Fijian style fans from pandanus in 1952.\textsuperscript{59}

The direct influence of Fijian techniques is difficult to ascertain and the attribution of the blanket stitch varies from Matthews to Fijian missionaries. Hamby refutes Hoff’s Fijian theory, as Greta Matthews’ classes predated the arrival of Fijian missionaries on Goulburn Island.\textsuperscript{60} Certainly, there is enough evidence to show that the Fijian technique of interlacing or plaiting pandanus or coconut palm was encouraged amongst the mission women. Dorothy Yangthu was interviewed by Hamby in 2000 and stated that ‘Cresie from Fiji’ taught her to make fans in the 1960s, and that it was the teacher’s idea to make them.\textsuperscript{61}

In April 1938 \textit{The Courier Mail} printed a profile of the ‘soft-voiced Fijian’ mission worker Finau. It states:

\begin{quote}
She speaks English perfectly, and is a valuable help to the white missionaries’ wives in the Northern islands, helping them to teach the aboriginal girls to sew and make baskets, which are sold in Darwin, and even sent to Melbourne sometimes...\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

The dissemination of weaving techniques by South Pacific missionaries was not restricted to Indigenous Australia. Samoan missionaries introduced the island of Tubetube, Papua New Guinea, to a variety of Polynesian weaving styles during the first half of last century.\textsuperscript{63}

\begin{flushright}
57 Ibid., p52.
58 \textit{The W.A.F.M Link} magazine, Victorian Methodist Women's Auxiliary of Foreign Missions 1936.
60 Ibid.
63 M. Jolly and M. Macintyre, op. cit., p160.
\end{flushright}
The Pacific contribution further develops the idea of these early coiled baskets as objects of brokerage. Lovitt described the ‘Fijian style’ baskets as a form of assimilated art . . . recontextualised within Methodism.64 However, the Methodist/Mathews influence, for Lovitt, produced ‘empty baskets.’65 Matthews was an example of the Methodist ‘saviour’ approach to Aboriginal Australia in the first half of the twentieth century: a desire to both ‘save’ individuals from heathenism, and to save (or salvage) what was left of the culture and people. In the 1920s, it was widely believed that Aboriginal Australians would be extinct in the near future. Missionary work was a practical way of alleviating the distress of this reality whilst being an opportunity to disseminate God’s message to an entirely new audience. There was an attitude that Indigenous people may never have the chance to hear God’s message prior to ‘dying out’, boosting the impetus for missionary activity.66 The campaign to save Aboriginal children pervaded the mission halls and women’s auxiliaries of the 1930s. As stated in the Argus in 1936:

Few sections in the Children’s Week exhibition at the Town Hall will prove more enlightening to the members of the general public who visit the exhibition than that devoted to the work of aboriginal children in the various settlements and mission stations throughout the Commonwealth. The nature and quality of the work in this display which has been managed by the Victorian aboriginal group of which Miss A. N. Browne is secretary should help to refute arguments that these children do not repay the time and attention that is given to training them.67

In this way, the objects were also a justification of mission work, for both the missions and their supporters, the buyers of the baskets. Following the 1935 killing of Japanese trepangers in Caledon Bay, national policy swung toward assimilation, legitimising support for anthropological researchers and missions alike. The Methodist Overseas Mission spread west to east across the Top End, from Goulburn Island to Milingimbi, Elcho Island, whilst the Church of England moved from south to north, from Roper River to Groote Island. The boost was

64 C. Lovitt, op. cit., p45.
65 Ibid., p2.
‘given impetus’ by the Caledon murders.\textsuperscript{68} However, scrutiny on the effectiveness of missions also increased, triggering a renewed push for support in the community. Exhibitions such as \textit{Children’s Week} were designed with this in mind. As Lovitt argues, the baskets were ‘used as an answer’ to growing government intervention.\textsuperscript{69}

Lovitt calls on Nicholas Thomas’s ‘converted artefacts’, arguing that the coiled baskets are akin to Thomas’s example of Tahitian idols destroyed by missionaries and thus ‘recontextualised as tangible evidence of their repudiation’.\textsuperscript{70} In Thomas’s Tahitian example, missionaries were appalled at the use of utilitarian material culture as idols. The artist William Wyatt Gill annotated his 1885 engraving with the observation that ‘the God (will it be credited?) is the central side post . . . this god helps to sustain the roof and yet is an object of daily worship!’\textsuperscript{71} Such idols were not only false, but also practical and earthly, the antithesis of the divine. They were rounded up or surrendered and the collection used as ‘trophies of success’ for the Christian cause. However, in Arnhem Land’s mission history, fibre objects were used as tools of cultural and religious recognition and rapprochement. Berndt discusses the 1957 ‘Adjustment Movement’, wherein Galinwin’ku Yolngu elders erected \textit{rangga} (ceremonial objects) next to the community church, in order to proclaim their cultural worth within the context of capitulation to mission objectives.\textsuperscript{72} The \textit{rangga} were material evidence of self-determination, and initiated negotiations with colonists over economic independence.\textsuperscript{73}

Women’s fibre craft in 1930s Goulburn Island existed somewhere between the Tahitian idols and Yolngu \textit{rangga}. The Methodist missionaries appear to have been both wary and admiring of the weaving traditions. Aesthetic appreciation and curiosity were bound up within the Mission’s dismissal of traditional culture. Louise Hamby argues that the missionaries promoted a form of weaving whereby

\textsuperscript{69} C. Lovitt, op. cit., p39.
\textsuperscript{71} N. Thomas, \textit{Entangled Objects}, p153.
\textsuperscript{73} C. Schwarz, op. cit.
the end product ‘must be something that the missionaries could fill with their own cultural information’, rather than personal meaning for the objects’ makers. Lovitt develops this argument by adding that the baskets could only be the product of a teacher/subject relationship. This led to the concept of ‘empty baskets’: empty of Maung culture and its existing fibre techniques and associated stories, mythologies and religious connotations.

According to Hamby, Matthews discouraged ‘traditional’ practice as it was viewed to be unhelpful in the process of ‘civilisation’. Forms and styles related to ceremonial practice were particularly discouraged. However, the ‘traditional’ forms did have a place: they were relegated to the collected cultural realm, or ‘salvage’ anthropology or ethnography. Just as twined vessels didn’t fit in the new marketplace, coiled baskets similarly had no place in the field of research. They were a symbol of a new start, and thus missionaries such as Matthews dispatched traditional weavings to anthropologists, collectors and museums around Australia. From the 1930s onward the three most senior missionaries from Eastern Arnhem Land were also the primary collectors of material culture for museums: T. T. Webb, Wilbur Chaseling and Harold Shepherdson. Lovitt carries the idea of emptiness through to the basket’s reception in the anthropological world: as touched or tainted by missionaries, they were declared ‘empty’ of significance.

This bifurcation exists today: when the Ngan’gi weavers at Peppimenarti prepare for the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, they turn their hand to coiling, yet when contacted by an institution for a purchase, they will produce a large wullipun fish net, using a warrgadi stitch. A combination of an anthropological material culture hierarchy and market forces have reinforced this dichotomy for over seventy years, profoundly affecting the Ngan’gi approach to fibrecraft. For example, ‘fruit basket’ will be the official title given to a coiled vessel, despite the fact that fruit

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74 L. Hamby, Containers of Power: women with clever hands, p199.
75 C. Lovitt, op. cit., p18.
76 Ibid.
78 L. Hamby, Containers of Power: fibre forms from Northeast Arnhem Land, p323.
79 C. Lovitt, op. cit. p2.
(or bush tucker) would never be collected in such a basket by the weaver - they would historically use a string dilly bag.

Margie West suggests that Lovitt’s reading ignores the Aboriginal agency within the evolution of basket design. The women’s active participation in the transformation of traditional designs and dissemination of new techniques suggests that the objects were not ‘empty’, but rather contained ‘cultural assertion and incorporation’.

It could be argued that coiling allowed a freedom of expression, ‘filling’ the baskets with their own, new value system.

The Maung weavers’ development and interpretation of colour further supports this. There is evidence to suggest that Matthews’ original introduction of Ngarrindjeri techniques produced undecorated baskets. The W.A.F.M Link magazine cover image shows baskets of solid, undyed pandanus coils. We can deduce, then, that the Maung women developed their own expression within the coil, imposing complex colour combinations and pattern construction. The technique allowed the weavers to further develop a pattern making culture, already existing in the form of twined and looped vessels. The ability to use dyed fibre, akin to coloured yarn, shifted the design and construction process. Prior to this, the weavers’ only avenue for decorative design was ochre, rubbed directly onto an already-completed twined basket. This resulted in bands of colour, geometric patterning and, occasionally, narrative scenes. The ochre material has ancestral connections, and the use of it, and specific designs, were subject to complex kinship relations. The rock pigment was seen to be an embodiment of ancestral body parts, whereas the botanical pigment process was one step removed from the direct embodiment; the plants had to undergo a transformation (dyeing) before use. The pre-dyed fibre opened up the field to more weavers and artists, and allowed a ‘new system of meaning’ to emerge.

According to West, the use of natural pigments started at Warruwi not long after Matthews’ introduction of coiling. Pacific Islander staff contributed their

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80 Margie West, ‘Ceci n’est pas un ‘basket’, op. cit.
81 Ibid.
82 Carolyn Lovitt, op. cit, p18.
83 L. Hamby, Containers of Power: women with clever hands, p152.
84 Ibid.
knowledge of botanical dyes, particularly *Morinda citrifolia*, a shrub found in Tonga, Fiji and northern Australia. West interviewed Kunwinjku man Thompson Yulidjirri in 2004 who stated:

> Those islands somewhere, like Fiji or anywhere there. Them people know this [use of natural dye], they show woman from here. They come up from there [Fiji], they made basket, they made colour and they made basket. Fijian, yes from mission, way back at Goulburn Island.\(^{85}\)

Rev. Alfred Ellison, who worked at Goulburn Island from 1947-58, attested to the weavers' development of local plant pigments, independent of missionaries:

> We learned that they would like to use some of the dyes from local flora in their pandanus weaving . . . The use of those dyes had been discouraged by previous missionaries because they had totemic relationships.\(^{86}\)

In Harold Shepherdson's black and white photo of Maung 'craftwork' for sale in the 1930s, the tonal array of the baskets indicates a substantial use of dyes.

The imposition of Mission doctrines and assimilation upon weaving was replaced by western market forces with the advent of art centres and the Indigenous art and craft market in the 1970s. The baskets slid along a hierarchical scale determined by missions, museums, galleries and consumers. From symbol of redemption to souvenir of extinction, item of fashion and object of decoration, they both absorbed and contested these impositions, and emerged as cultural interlocutors. Despite the Daly River region's strong Jesuit presence, the Ngan’gi language groups did not learn coiling from missionaries, but rather weavers such as Regina Pilawuk Wilson were taught the technique in the 1950s by their mothers and aunties, on traditional homelands during the holidays. Regina Pilawuk Wilson states:

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People who were going back and forth were doing weaving, only dilly bag and airbell. They used to make it for them girls’ ceremony. That old lady, Nelly, used to make basket.87

The style had shifted from an introduced to integrated art form, developed independently by the Ngan’gikurunggurr women who had previously twined and looped items.

In *The Archaeology of Difference*, Robin Torrance and Anne Clarke choose to use the word *engagement*, rather than *encounter*, to investigate the interpretation of Western and Oceanic cultural interchange.88 Engagement stresses two sides of contact and grants space for the consideration of Indigenous agency. Torrance and Clarke believe that purposeful and active intercultural engagement has been the dominant form of interaction during the colonisation and missionisation of the region in the nineteenth and twentieth century. By viewing Indigenous populations as autonomous participants in negotiation, new interpretations of historical exchange emerge.89 Furthermore, engagement indicates a form of ongoing negotiation, and is thus appropriate to the unfolding evolution of coiled fibrecraft in the Top End.

The existence of official records has focussed research upon the attraction of Indigenous language group populations to missions and settlements, however the individuals and groups who remained upon traditional lands, both rejecting and absorbing the forces of colonisation around them, are often overlooked. In the case of the contemporary Ngan’gikurunggurr weavers, who were children in the 1950s, Ngan’gi country was inhabited seasonally, and visited when on school leave from the Daly mission. This shared spatial arrangement is a physical manifestation of negotiated engagement: Ngan’gikurunggurr families chose to live in two culturally contrasting settlements, and broker their lives and culture between them. This is not to diminish the significant cultural and emotional upheaval experienced by many of the Ngan’gikurunggurr Mission residents, particularly children, however the autonomy of the many residents has been

87 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
89 Ibid.
unacknowledged. The Ngan’gi adoption of coiling was more a process of revision than conversion. The weavers were introduced to the technique by family members and thus the implications of its missionary origins is largely absent from the objects. For Regina Pilawuk Wilson, a specialist wupun weaver, the baskets ‘are part of our tradition and culture.’\(^\text{90}\)

The legitimacy associated with homeland country and community in turn bestows an inauthentic connotation upon mission settlements such as Nauiyu (Daly River). As Britta Duelke notes, residents’ decision to remain at the Mission ‘bore the taint of inauthentic wrongfulness since merely historical relationships imply . . . categories which are alien to . . . prevailing conceptualisations of tradition.’\(^\text{91}\) Duelke argues that the ‘lived social reality’ of the life in and around the mission forms an equally significant form of tradition to that of the homeland. However, as such a relationship is not easily associated with Dreaming or ‘justified by myth’, it lacks authorisation.\(^\text{92}\)

Wupun baskets are hybrid objects, encompassing Southern Indigenous Australian, Pacific Islander, non-Indigenous Methodist and missionary influences within the culture of their makers. The intercultural quality of the baskets does not diminish their significance to their makers; Ngan’gikurunggurr coil weavers are either unaware or unconcerned by the evidence of externality. It has been absorbed within the fibre of the objects, and exists beneath and amongst layers of communal and personal expression. West argues that the ‘very act of gathering materials from one’s country...is in itself a confirming activity...they have effectively adapted outside techniques for their own cultural agendas and requirements.’\(^\text{93}\) Maung and Yolngu weavers took to the coil stitch with great energy and creativity, launching an entirely new field of women’s weaving across the Top End.

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\(^{90}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.


\(^{92}\) Ibid., p203.

\(^{93}\) M. West, ‘Ceci n’est pas un ‘basket’, op. cit.
It could be argued that the early coiled baskets were a form of experimental art. Jennifer Biddle approaches contemporary Indigenous fibrecraft within an experimental art lens in *The Politics of Proximity*. The paper, an exploration of Tjanpi desert fibre work, allows a new reading to emerge: one that is not solely associated with the domestic or handcrafted, but saves space for concepts of experimentalism and associated ideas of hybridisation, innovation and tradition. Biddle states that:

> Experimentation responds to the pressing issue of how cultural knowledge is to be kept potent and relevant through practice in the present. Experimentation is integral, potentially revealing what tradition is for the first time.⁹４

The statement reflects the action of the Maung weavers, and subsequent groups across the Top End; one of re-analysing, re-constructing and re-imagining the potential of their fibrecraft repertoire in the context of an introduced technique. As Hamby notes, Yolngu weavers were both influenced by the south-eastern baskets, but also their own two dimensional designs applied to bathi (twined vessel).⁹⁵ A photo by Axel Poignant, taken in 1952 on Goulburn Island, shows Rev. Alfred Ellison packing baskets, presumably for sale in Darwin. The fibrecraft in the image ranges from lidded baskets, handled baskets and flat mats. Many display the zigzag decorative technique whereby the upper level of coiling is fashioned into geometric designs, mimicking the banded ochre markings on conical vessels. Chequering decorative elements using alternating pigments are also evident. Poignant’s images demonstrate that a culture of individual style and expression had developed within coiling by 1952.

Lovitt’s reference to ‘assimilationist’ craft also gives rise to notions of hybridity within the coiling technique. As Said asserted, hybridity is a ‘disjunctive, liminal’ space.⁹⁶ Hybridisation also relates to Bhabha’s ‘third space’, whereby the ‘value of change’ lies in the ‘rearticulation of elements that are neither One...nor the Other...but something else besides which contests the terms and territories for

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Fusion implies a creation of new form, as opposed to an old form, however hybridisation as ‘raceless chaos’ produces no new form, but rather an ‘uneasy, interstitial’ form, and one that is constantly evolving and revolving. Robert C. Young argues that hybridity assumes a set of pre-existing ‘pure, fixed and separate antecedents’ yet they may, too, have embodied elements of hybridity. Thus, the neat dialectical model of fusing forces is undone. Rather, hybridity ‘is still repeating its own cultural origins.’ Young calls upon Derrida’s ‘brisure’ to articulate hybridisation’s simultaneous breaking and joining, or difference and sameness.

All Ngan’gi coiling is achieved using split and dyed yerrgi (pandanus). The stripped fibre is bunched together to form a building material with which to bind. A single yerrgi strand, contained within a darning needle, is then used to stitch the rows of fibre together. The continuous spiralling, or coiling, occurs from the base up to the rim. The stitch used is a button-hole stitch, and in other Arnhem communities, at times a glove, split, wheatear, or spiral wheatear stitch. Wilson’s wupun basket is a ‘straight colour’ design, as opposed to the more complex ‘camouflage’ or ‘counterchange’ systems. Hamby notes that counterchange baskets use alternating coloured coils, a device that ‘began during missionary times.’ When achieved vertically, it may be called a ‘pinwheel’ design, particularly when radiating from the base of the basket. The pinwheel system is employed when producing mats or ‘coasters’, as in fig. 5.

However, wupun weavers Wilson, and her daughter Annunciata Nunuk Wilson, prefer to allow the coloured bands to remain rectilinear, often punctuated by borders of dark brown fibre, as show in fig. 3.

97 Homi Bhabha, cited in, Colonial Desire, p23.
98 Robert J. C. Young, Colonial Desire, p25.
99 Ibid.
100 See video 4: Regina Pilauk Wilson and Annunciata Nunuk Wilson harvesting yerrgi (pandanus), Peppimenarti, April 18, 2010.
102 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Wupun (coil basket), 2011, pandanus and natural dyes, 25 x 25 x 25cm approx., fig. 3.
103 L. Hamby, Containers of Power: women with clever hands, p158.
Coiling has also been fused with other techniques, further developing this notion of hybridity. Regina Wilson’s Sun Mat, in the collection of the Australian Museum, was, at the time of its collection in 1986, an example of experimentation in fibrecraft.\textsuperscript{104} The piece was constructed using a plaiting technique, also used at times for the base of a wupun coil basket. The sand-palm fibre was plaited, coiled and stitched together, then adorned with a large fringe, attached with fi (twine). A

\textsuperscript{104} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Sun Mat, sand-palm and natural dyes, 129cm diameter, item number, E80878, Australian Museum, collected by Meehan, 1986, fig. 4.
comparable Sun Mat by Wilson is also found in the Museum of Victoria’s collection. In the catalogue for the Museum’s exhibition Women’s Work, Indigenous collections curator Lindy Allen describes the work as:

A twined mat made by Regina Wilson of Peppimenarti in the mid 80s. The mat is a fine example of a new style of artefact made with an old technique. This 3 strand, plaited mat is made from shredded and dyed sand palm.\textsuperscript{105}

\begin{figure}[h!]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.7\textwidth]{figure3.jpg}
\caption{Regina Pilawuk Wilson, \textit{Sun Mat}, sand-palm and natural dyes, 129cm diameter, item number E80878, Australian Museum, collected by Meehan, 1986.}
\end{figure}

This mat was a ‘new’ form of cultural fibre expression; Allen articulates this from the viewpoint of the museum, as a ‘new type of artefact’.\textsuperscript{106} Wilson is further identified in The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture as extending ‘the

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
materials normally employed in the Top End, using finer, softer fibre from the sand palm, *Livistonia Humilis*, which the Ngan’gikurunggurr people call *merrepen*. The innovative qualities of the mats and baskets are acknowledged. As on Goulburn Island, these mats were originally conical, designed to shade babies or food from the sun and elements, or sometimes for ceremonial purposes. The shift from utilitarian to decorative object would have occurred at a similar period to that of central Arnhem Land, in the 1940s. For Wilson, born in 1948, the mats have always been designed to be decorative, and laid flat against the wall or floor:

My great, great grandmother knew how to make those baby shelter mats. Now it has gone, missionaries. Like that basket – it’s lost. We only know how to make them as sun mat.

For the contemporary weavers, they are yet another medium with which to display intimate knowledge of fibre and plant pigments, and activate country through their transformations. Wilson’s *Sun Mat* alters the tradition once more, fusing the coiling technique with a traditional *merrepen* (sand-palm) fringe, also applied using *fi* (bush twine).

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109 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Sun Mat*, 2011, pandanus and sand-palm fibre, 60cm diameter, fig. 5.
Figure 4 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Sun Mat*, 2011, pandanus and sand-palm fibre, 60cm diameter. photo by Vanessa Bellemore.

Figure 5 Annunciata Nunuk Wilson, *Sun Mat* (detail), 2011, sand-palm and pandanus fibre, 60cm diameter, photo by Vanessa Bellemore.
Wupun translates as both ‘basket’ and ‘to spread, smear, paint something’ in Ngan’gi. This conflation is significant; the act of constructing a coiled basket and decorating something via painting forges a link between the early ochre-rubbed (or smeared) vessels and their contemporary counterparts. The innovation or experimentation between the two is demonstrated by the adoption of dyeing practice, as opposed to ochre, giving the weavers greater flexibility with colour composition and range:

Wupun is painting and basket; those old baskets had ochre painting.
My mother used to soak the fi in ochre for the fish net, wullipun. For decoration. It would stay, that colour, in the water too. The ochre from around Peppi, rocks.110

For Regina Wilson, the process of applying paint (wupun) to the basket with ochre is akin to soaking fibre in ochre – two distinct processes. However, both embody the use of country – either rock or plant matter – and their application to fibre. Originally, ochre decorated twined baskets may have left a gap, where the body would rest or rub against. Once fibre dyeing was adopted, the decorative schemes enveloped the vessels. However, as Wilson explained, the ochre (at least in the case of wullipun fish-nets) was applied all over, forming a sense of entirety in the decorative design.

The process of coiling allows notions of the significance of wrapping to emerge. The coiling technique involves the needle and pandanus thread wrapping around the core fibres, in a process of concealment. Biddle argues that, for the Tjanpi weavers, wrapping and coiling create presence; it is yet another form of repetition that allows a meditation, calling upon ancestral presence and Dreaming as Law.111 When coiling, Ngan’gi weavers must make sure that each row or coil is completely covered by wrapped stitches. This contrasts to many western and central Arnhem Land weavers, who often choose to leave part of the core fibre exposed. Ngan’gi weavers take great pride in their tight, uniform coils. Theresa

111 J. Biddle, A Politics of Proximity, p4.
Lemon’s *Merrepen Dreaming* basket, fig. 7, demonstrates the importance of coverage; the basket’s free-form ‘border’ is a single coil, wrapped in dark black-dyed pandanus, resulting in a dense, glossy line. Lemon states that the basket is ‘to remind us of the *Merrepen* Dreaming.’ Significantly, the object is made not with *merrepen* (sand-palm), but *yerrgi* (pandanus). Lemon is utilising the once-introduced pandanus coiling technique to invigorate the dreaming story associated with the *merrepen* tree, located on a significant site just outside Peppimenarti. The material here is not significant; it is the process of its construction that conjures the dreaming. As Biddle puts it, the ‘technique is not arbitrary . . . how things are made matters.’

![Image of Lemon's Merrepen Dreaming basket](image)

Figure 6 Theresa Lemon, *Merrepen Dreaming*, 2008, pandanus fibre and natural dyes, 30cm diameter. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Returning briefly to the Maung example by way of comparison, coiling may have been external to Maung culture, but it was actively absorbed and integrated despite non-Indigenous caveats and conditions. It appears that such restrictions were not fully upheld, or if so, did not last long. Again, this is not to diminish or underestimate the severity of the impact of the Methodist mission on the Maung people. Rather, the weavers’ annexing of the coiling practice was a testament to

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the strength and flexibility of their culture. Missionaries such as Mathews may have initiated the shift, but within two decades the craft had been completely absorbed into the oeuvre of Top End weavers, most of who had never heard of Mathews. The baskets may have been introduced with the intent of emptying them of Maung culture and filling them with Methodism, however they themselves were not ‘empty baskets’, by the very fact that Maung hands had made them. From the first moment that the weavers adopted the technique, it was radically altered. As Hamby states, ‘both the older and newer styles of bathi are meaningful objects for their makers.’

Ngan’gi coiling practice also inverts notions of tradition and innovation. The long-held attribution of the technique to missionary and South Pacific antecedents ignores the processes of adoption, espousal, experimentation, and ultimately, Indigenous agency. The notion of coiling being ‘a technical lingua franca’ further contributes to its perceived lack of legitimacy. The relationship with its weavers is defined in terms of the decorative, and thus secondary to older fibre practices such as twining. Although the baskets ‘travel to us across a vastly different cultural terrain’, for the Ngan’gi weavers, they are an assertion of cultural value, independent of missionary and market forces. As Britta Duelke has argued, the original ‘quotation’ is ‘far less important than new history it helped to create.’

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115 M. West, ‘Ceci n’est pas un ‘basket’, op. cit.
5. SYAW: THE FISH NET AS MEMORY AND MOTIF FOR PAINTING

In 2003 Regina Pilawuk Wilson won the General Painting category of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, with a painting titled Syaw - Fish Net. The synthetic polymer paint on linen work presented an entirely unfamiliar visual language in the contemporary Indigenous art world: a yellow colour field that, on closer inspection, revealed fine, fluid, gridded line work. The work emerged at a time when abstraction was at the centre of the debate, commentary and criticism surrounding Indigenous art in Australia. Accordingly, the work’s reception revolved around discussion over the ‘non-traditional’, ‘non-dreaming’ and the ‘new’. However, in the audience’s interest over its innovative qualities, the origins and arguably the heart of the painting were overlooked.

For this was a painting of what Regina Pilawuk Wilson calls a ‘fish net’: a specific style of fish net twined by the artist’s male forebears. It was a painted testament to the now-lost technique of twining of the Ngan’gikurunggurr. Although it is named a ‘fish net’ by the artist, her descriptions of its structure are akin to a twined, conical fish-trap. By painting this object, Regina Pilawuk Wilson resurrected an activity and object that was once central to Ngan’gi life, and in the process informed both the perception and reception of Ngan’gi culture and the scholarship of both fibre art and contemporary Indigenous painting. Wilson’s work allowed the derivations of meaning in contemporary Indigenous art to shift and expand. No longer reliant on a linear deconstruction of symbology, her abstraction of country set new boundaries for the reception and interpretation of Aboriginal painting. Wilson’s painted representations of the Ngan’gi syaw will be used in this chapter to explore concepts of cultural loss, discovery, reimagining and reception.

It is an entirely ‘lost’ object of Ngan’gi material culture that has, more than anything else, defined the contemporary artistic expression of Peppimenarti: the twined syaw (fish net). Composed and produced by Regina Pilawuk Wilson alone, this oeuvre is at once a two-dimensional representation of a physical object, an

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1 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Syaw – Fish Net, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 246 x 200cm. Purchased 2003, Telstra Collection, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Winner Telstra General Painting Award, 20th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, fig. 1.
assertion of country and a powerful treatise on loss. In Painting Culture, Fred Myers examines the art of Linda Syddick, and her painting of her adopted father Shorty Lungkarta’s country, as an example of a ‘powerful symbolic formulation of loss, estrangement and redemption’. He argues that Syddick’s painting is a highly personal construction of country, and one that acts as a vehicle for identity expression and articulation. This identification of a personal country, as opposed to, or as an extension of, ancestrally inherited dreaming, also emerges in the work of Regina Pilawuk Wilson. Putting aside the conflict over rights to country and its representation that Myers analyses, Wilson’s expressions of fibre material are both formal designs (durrmu) of country and personal portraits of identity, family and generational loss. Syddick’s The Cleansing Rain is, according to Myers, a visual imagining of the loss of her biological father and the receiving of a new father figure (Shorty) and his associated country.

Figure 1 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw – Fish Net*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 246 x 200cm. Purchased 2003, Telstra Collection, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory.


Ibid., p310.
The conflation of communal and personal ‘understandings of sorrow’ is similarly evoked in Wilson’s Syaw – Fish Net, 2007.6 This Syaw was only Wilson’s second interpretation of the textured detail of the fibre article. Wilson constructed the work by painting saffron-hued synthetic polymer paint as a background on linen, and then layering the imagery in sepia, black, ochre red and white marks. The line work is achieved in uneven ‘block’ stages, resulting in the work’s overall undulating effect. This movement is heightened by Wilson’s alternating use of white line; every ‘other’ block of line work uses either predominantly black or white lines. Similarly, the density of line shifts according to the blocks, with areas made up of finely layered lines contrasting to sparser, denser strokes. The ‘breaking’ or interruption of the grid gives rise to vibration, rather than displacement.7 The resulting painting appears as a richly textured field of colour, both expansive and intimate. It undoubtedly evokes fibre, whether that of the pinbin vine, or a sheaf of wheat, or softly woven yarn.

5 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Syaw – Fish Net, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 200 x 140cm, fig.2.
6 F. Myers, Painting Culture, p310.
The work embodies what Myers calls the ‘interiority’ of a painting: an extension of the artist’s existence and experience. When asked about the syaw subject, Wilson states:

When I was small I didn’t know how. So my sister sat down and taught me how to draw that fish net design, syaw, you know. Robert Daly, Therese Daly’s father, and Mabel (Jimarin), while they were talking to me, I draw. No one used to know how to make that syaw. Idea from that two person for me to draw that design.

Us people, if we can’t make it, we have to draw it.

The loss of this object has been central to the formulation of personal and collective identity in Wilson’s work. As discussed in chapter three, the Ngan’gi weavers rediscovered the ‘airbell’ basket through an engagement with historical objects in museum collections. Sadly, there are no known examples of a syaw fish

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8 Fred Myers, *Painting Culture*, p310.
net in Australian or international collections. The object has been entirely resurrected by Wilson’s recollections and discussions with her cousins and sisters, and comparisons with the neighbouring regions’ fish traps (such as those from Maningrida). Not only is the object itself lost, but also the activity around it. The Ngan’gikurunggurr, for whom the tasks around water are a central tenet of life and culture, lost a means of hunting and ritual when knowledge of the syaw technique eroded.

Kuechler observes that the theory of ‘memoria’, the conscious recollection of forgotten experience, supported the idea that concepts are imposed upon objects (or visual representations). However, mathematician Papert ‘offered a new approach’: rather than starting with concepts, we think with objects and these inform our conceptualisation. An object, and its physical properties and relationship to contextual space, can all be imagined before experiencing it. Similarly, in Image and Memory, Kuechler and Walter Melion argue that memory is a process ‘precipitated and shaped by relaying of visual information’ (rather than being a function preceding image production). Whilst painting a syaw design in 2010, Wilson narrated the following:

Syaw is round, same as those fish traps from Maningrida. They used to put out six traps. All the different clans used to go to one certain place. Different clans from each language group, all go to one place. They used to use spear too. They used to climb up on the tree, those old people used to go there, climb that tree, wait for fish to go past, they used to nail it with that spear. Moy we call it, the person climbing up the tree, to get the fish. One special tree used to be here, near the crossing, but big flood water came, knocked it down. They still do it on bush holiday. Syaw was like a dilly basket. They used to make five or six syaw, put them in a creek. Really big. We tried to make it but too hard. Pinbin vine and razor grass. Two ways they used to make it.

Men would make the syaw. Women made the airbell. For ceremony. You wear it around the neck. Women and men wore it. Bush tucker inside it. For women’s ceremony.

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11 Ibid.
I first painted syaw in 2000. To make it look nicer, use different kind of paint and colour and different kind of pattern.

The razor grass would be softer, the pinbin tougher.

The same grass that the goose use to make the nest. Normally grows in the billabong. *Mifyil* we call it.

Syaw was one of the first ones on canvas, that one in Queensland Art Gallery.

This was after I came back from Noumea.¹³

Wilson is recalling the significance of the syaw whilst producing an image, while the very image is triggering the recollection.¹⁴ Rather than being a passive store of data, memory is dynamically constructed, shaped by the process of image manufacture. Memory is functioning at the same time as image production. ¹⁵ This active transmission of visual information is itself a mode of memory.

Kuechler also argues that kinaesthetic performance further engages memory, and that ‘the hand, when it inscribes an image on a material surface, is precipitating memory, shaping and consolidating it.’¹⁶ The syaw is a testament, or deposition upon something lost. As the artist/maker is producing the image, it is simultaneously a process of reflecting and creating. As the image is recalled through the artist’s mediation, the prior ‘forgetting’ is also recalled.¹⁷

The resulting image ‘documents this complex interplay between recollection and handiwork.’¹⁸ The syaw is now viewed by the Ngan’gikurunggurr as both a two-dimensional painted design and the subject of recollection, perhaps more so than a vital, physical object. The meaning of the word has shifted; Ngan’gikurunggurr children associate the word with ‘nana Regina’s paintings’, rather than a fish-net. The syaw thus offers a version of its own history, a reworking of what constitutes cultural significance for Wilson. It is a document, constructed for posterity, yet its agency shapes the formulation and interpretation of Ngan’gi culture.

Kuechler also articulates the significance of spatial cognition and ‘knowledge technology’ in relation to objects. She notes that anthropology espoused the:

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¹³ Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, June 22, 2011.
¹⁴ See video 6: Regina Pilawuk Wilson painting a *Syaw* design on linen, Durrmu Arts, September 28, 2011.
¹⁶ Ibid., p7.
¹⁷ Ibid.
¹⁸ Ibid.
universality of the conception of space as proceeding from the human body, constrained by . . . the phenomenal world and . . . by human physiology with its visual system.\textsuperscript{19}

As such, it failed to keep up with contemporary realm of art and mathematics, particularly computer modelling, and new modes of vision and spatial reality. Art and mathematics, for Kuechler, converge in the modelling of the fourth dimension.\textsuperscript{20} The non-Euclidean theory of space expanded notions of strict geometry, opening up concepts of multiple perspectives and the possibilities of the fourth dimension.

Kuechler further draws on Stephen Levinson’s ‘knowledge technology’ - the transferral of non-spatial concerns into spatial ones, for example the rendering of the alphabet – something sonic – into linear markings.\textsuperscript{21} Essentially, it is the use of a ‘two or three dimensional representation of another domain.’\textsuperscript{22} The Torres-Strait Islander string figures collected by Haddon are an example of an interest in knowledge technologies and the externalisation of spatial cognition.\textsuperscript{23} Kuechler applies Levinson’s ‘knowledge technology’ to knot theory, suggesting that the knot object’s associations and inferences condition spatial cognition of it, due to its textured properties.\textsuperscript{24}

Whilst Kuechler argues that the knot demonstrates a complex relational field, experienced by the ‘doing’ of and ‘looking’ at it, in the case of the syaw, it also operates the other way around: it already embodies experience.\textsuperscript{25} The object hints at something underneath, below its loosely twined warp and weft (unlike a knot, which is an enclosed form). It could be argued that the syaw both constructs and reflects a form of floating space for the maker and viewer. It is both

\textsuperscript{19} S. Kuechler, ‘Why Knot?’, p60.  
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{23} S. Kuechler, ‘Why Knot?’, p60.  
\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., p71.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid.
weightless and embedded in the everyday.\textsuperscript{26} Similarly, a knot is both mathematical and affective, ‘abstract and concrete.’\textsuperscript{27}

Furthermore, the spatial conception and cognition of the syaw extends beyond the conception and perception within our space, to space beyond, through territory and terrain. The syaw functions as an intimate fibrous object, imagined by its maker, and yet for the viewer, the grid broadens out beyond its borders like country. The grid of the warp and weft allows a balance of inside and outside, front and back. Erin Manning observes that Dorothy Napangardi’s work ‘undoes the grid, exposing its apparent stability to its own process of unraveling.’\textsuperscript{28} In Wilson’s Syaw, we see not only line work, but the tension of the spaces in between, creating a pushing forward and receding back effect; this ‘reaching toward’, for Manning, may not capture dreamings, but ‘sets them in motion.’\textsuperscript{29}

The technical process behind Wilson’s representation of a syaw is one of pattern construction, giving rise to a discussion on the convergence of art and mathematics. There is a strong academic discourse on the mathematics of ancient and/or Indigenous patterns, or ‘ethnomathematics’, however theories of spatial cognition and topology are more appropriate when discussing the construction of the syaw.\textsuperscript{30} The concept of the ‘invisible’ effectively represents the relationship between mathematics and art: both feed into one another in order to illuminate the intangible patterns of connection in the world. The mathematics in Wilson’s syaw design is inherent yet hidden; as Lindie Ward argues, ‘the head can devise, the eye can recognise symmetry and sophisticated pattern without consciously understanding the mathematics behind it.’\textsuperscript{31}

When composing a syaw, Wilson is drawing on its essential structure, being a rectilinear grid, or tessellation by rectangles or parallelepipseds that are not

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\item\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., p64.
\item\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., p63.
\item\textsuperscript{28} E. Manning, op. cit., p187.
\item\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p178.
\item\textsuperscript{31} Lindie Ward, ‘Openwork patterns’, \textit{Artlink} vol. 32, no. 1, 2012, p37.
\end{thebibliography}
\end{footnotesize}
all equal. Basketry and weaving are ultimately expressed in terms of mathematical equations. The American weaver Ada Dietz wrote the handbook *Algebraic Expressions in Hand Woven Textiles* in 1949, deconstructing the relationship between the maths and art, or the measured and immeasurable, of fibre. In the construction of a twined object, positive and negative space is simultaneously developed in exactly the same way. This results in a ‘uniformity of units’, or series of parallelograms. As Ward has noted of Anniebell Marrngamarrnga’s *Yawk yawk* sculptures, mathematical concepts are implicit in weaving, no matter how visually ‘free’ it appears. Ward argues that the provisioning of fibre and measuring of stitches, for example, are part of a mathematical construction. Twined basketry doesn’t allow for adjustments, thus the pattern or design must be known intimately and thoroughly before initiating the weave. This has resulted in a greater reliance upon teaching, and the oral transmission of technique and design. In the case of Ngan’gi fibrecraft, the process is passed down through generations, requiring the maker to perfect repetitive tasks and techniques. Ward states:

It does not follow that if a process is not documented then it is not mathematical. The fact that a pattern has not been recognised and expressed formally does not detract from the complexities of the techniques mastered by the practitioner.

Similarly, in the composition of a *syaw* design, Wilson’s consistent calculation of space, and composition of the subject stem from the underlying framework of repetitious, rectilinear units.

However, the twined structure of an ‘airbell’ basket or *syaw* is unable to be graphed or prefigured. Textile historian Ed Rossbach states:

In weaving, the number of warp threads from selvage to selvage remains constant throughout the length of the piece so that the total design can reasonably be figured out on graph paper but in baskets the number of modular units constantly changes.

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34 Ibid.
35 L. Ward, op. cit, p36.
as the shape of the basket changes... [It is] very difficult to transcribe patterns onto graph paper.\textsuperscript{38}

Rossbach attributes the difficulty in formulating basket patterns into a two dimensional form to this cumulative quality of basket building.\textsuperscript{39} Likening it to the transcription of the world’s continents onto a piece of paper, he argues that the system that may be ‘successful at equator is a disaster at the poles.’\textsuperscript{40} This inability to mathematically translate the ‘airbell’ or syaw design into two dimensions makes Wilson’s designs all the more significant. The idea of baskets as blueprints prefigures the actualization of the object as mere mechanical transcription. Rather, as will be further explored in Chapter Six, the process of weaving is the design. The durru\texti{mu} is in the mind of the weaver as inherited cultural data.

As in basketry, the modular units change as the weaver progresses. In Syaw, 2011\textsuperscript{41}, Wilson’s grid has broken down into irregular, overlapping units. The forms morph over and into one another, scale-like in their placement. The quality of line changes where the forms meet, creating a series of undulating, blurred outlined shapes. In the top right hand corner, a nebulous, diamond shape has a radiating border of gridded line-work, further breaking the uniformity of the overall warp and weft design. Wilson has collapsed the strict rectilinear grid, allowing the design to embody the movement and three dimensionality of the object. She states that the design is ‘the syaw in the water’ or ‘being carried by the men’ and thus would be both moving and viewed from various perspectives.\textsuperscript{42} As Ward notes of lace construction, the ‘repetitive pattern of motion’ is key to the pattern.\textsuperscript{43} A conical object, though constructed with a grid, will warp and sway in our vision, and it is this passage of the object that Wilson seeks to reimagine. Whilst the mathematics of the rectilinear grid of the fish net is ever-present, Wilson has inscribed the textural and emotional landscape of the syaw within it.

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38 E. Rossbach, op. cit., p97.
39 Ibid., p104.
40 Ibid.
41 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Syaw, 2011, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 120cm, fig. 3.
42 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, June 22, 2011.
43 L. Ward, op. cit., p37.
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Figure 3 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw*, 2011, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 120cm. Image courtesy Durmu Arts.
Topology, the mathematical investigation of the fabric of space, may be applied here. Topology is concerned with ‘the problem of what it is that holds a space together.’\textsuperscript{44} Investigations into boundaries, frontiers and limitations are thus explored within it. Topology changed the idea of space as a motionless container and initiated an interest in the ability to include, exclude and differentiate, giving rise to issues of subjectivity. The perception of space is further altered by pattern. Just as the lustre and colour composition of a mosaic can inform the architecture of an edifice, the choice of pigment and cadence of line work instructs the perception of space within (and without) the syaw.\textsuperscript{45} There is a tension between

\textsuperscript{44} Topology at the Tate Modern programme, November 2011- June 2012, ‘Secrets of Space’ seminar, p9, accessed <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/bih/events/FINALTOPOLOGYPROGRAMME.pdf> October 30, 2012.

the underlying mathematics and rhythmical execution of the design. A dichotomy of planning and spontaneity, or the grid and the organic, is visible in the modulated design. The net is built from both units and a unifying line. Rather than creating a vanishing point, Wilson has produced a multitude of meeting points, triggering a ‘reaching-toward’ and receding back that stands as a metaphor for its embodiment of forfeiture and recovery.

As Wilson’s *Syaw – Fish Net* was the first of the Peppimenarti paintings to garner national media attention, it also provides an opportunity to examine the treatment and response in the art critical and historical sphere. There are few substantial critiques and reviews of Wilson’s, or Peppimenarti’s, paintings, however the few that exist reflect the art world and market’s difficulty in reconciling aesthetic innovation and the perceived ‘ancientness’ of Indigenous painting. Most of the responses to Peppi art have been driven by the market for it, rather than an academic interest in it, and this thesis aims to rectify this gap in knowledge and analysis.

Visual arts writer John McDonald stated of Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s paintings, ‘the strategy was simple: to make pictures that used the same form and colours as the fibre works’. The simplicity that McDonald describes is true within the realm of the market: the weavers of Peppimenarti sought a new medium with which to produce and sell their designs. The ‘strategy’ initially involved a series of painting workshops and exhibitions, coordinated by Darwin art dealer Karen Brown, in 2001. However, the ‘simplicity’ of this strategy belies the myriad of cultural implications for the artists, their art, and the broader ongoing debate over Indigenous abstraction and cultural production.

Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Theresa Lemon were invited to take part in the 2000 Contemporary Art Biennale, staged as part of the Pacific Arts Festival in Noumea, New Caledonia. As Wilson states, ‘we saw all that art at that festival’, ultimately

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46 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw – Fish Net*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 246 x 200 cm. Purchased 2003, Telstra Collection, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Winner Telstra General Painting Award, 20th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award, fig. 1.

triggering her interest in embarking upon media other than fibre work. As a result, the artists (weavers, carvers and ceremonial painters) of Peppimenarti took part in their first painting workshops in 2001, in the community’s clubhouse, organised and funded by Karen Brown. Brown’s father, Warren, was the CEO of the Peppimenarti Community Council at the time. The sessions resulted in a large body of works on paper, now in the collection of Durrmu Arts. Examples of these, by artists Patsy Marfura and Regina Pilawuk Wilson, will be examined in chapter six, however it is worth noting that the works focused on western perspectival scenes of country and bush tucker, as well as some *durrmu* (designs) of body painting dots and weaving patterns, often composed as borders around a central motif or scene. *The country I live in*49, 2001, by Margaret Kundu demonstrates this development. In the work, Kundu has created a central scene of the Peppimenarti rock, surrounded by magpie geese, paperbarks and pandanus plants. A string dilly bag looped stitch edges the scene, opening out into a radiating design of further loops, lines and dots, all inspired by body paint designs. Amongst these are small, circular sun mats. The work also reflects the nature of a ‘first’ workshop, in that the artists had been encouraged to paint their culture in terms of country, weaving and/or ceremony, and in this case Margaret Kundu chose to combine all the elements in one composition.

Artists such as Kundu had received a mission education at Nauiyu, including western perspectival drawing classes at some stage of their childhood; this influence was initially drawn upon when depicting country. The composition of landscape scenery, often associated with Daly River and Port Keats artists, dominated these early Peppi works on paper. As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 6 and 7, in subsequent workshops and general practice, the Peppi artists began to reject these western techniques and ‘zoom in’ on imagery of woven and wooden articles, developing a communal set of complex patterns and designs that they felt better reflected country and culture.

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48 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
49 Margaret Kundu, *The country I live in*, 2001, acrylic on paper, 38 x 55.5cm, fig. 5.
By 2003, the participating artists had decreased to approximately twenty, with only eight or so chosen to exhibit in shows such as Peppimenarti at Karen Brown Gallery, March 6th to 28th: Pincher Talunga, Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Theresa Lemon, Patsy Marfura, Linda Gilbert and Dianne Hodgson. In an interview with Murray McLaughlin of the ABC’s 7.30 Report, Karen Brown stated:

> Everybody came together and painted on little bits of paper. And out of that, about 25 people said, “We really want to do painting.” And then from that time the discipline of painting has narrowed down to about 14 people that are painting regularly now.

William Mora Galleries, Melbourne, exhibited a solo show of Pincher Talunga’s work titled Paintings from Peppimenarti in May. Wilson then won the General Painting category of the NATSIAAs in the same year, as described by Nicholas Rothwell: ‘Word spread fast: by 2003 Regina Wilson, the undisputed queen of the Peppy circle, had won the general painting prize at the Telstra Aboriginal Art

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50 See Index 2 for timeline of workshops, exhibitions and art centre developments.
Award.” The following year, an even smaller group of artists – including Wilson, Patsy Marfura and Pincher Talunga – made up Peppimenarti: Transcending Tradition at Sherman Galleries, Sydney, January 22nd to February 7th, 2004. When interviewed by McLaughlin, Mora stated that:

It’s fantastic to find a new community doing such exciting and quite original work and puts them into the real fine art category . . . it’s sort of jumped the tourist thing, if you like, and is straight now into the very serious fine art end of the whole indigenous movement.

Rothwell felt that ‘the translation has been rapid: from bush to city; from a painting workshop in a converted “silver bullet” trailer to glass-fronted gallery spaces.'

Commentary on Wilson’s winning Syaw painting falls into three modes of registration: abstraction, quality and ‘the new.’ Myers discusses the tension between the perceived antiquity of Aboriginal spirituality and the modernity of its abstraction through the reception of the Dreamings exhibition, 1988. This discussion can be borrowed to approach the broader relationship between artefact (or object or material culture) and contemporary ‘fine’ Indigenous art. The sense of the ‘contemporary’ or ‘new’ was vital to Ngan’gi art’s reception in a dynamic market place. Aside from denoting now-ness, it ensured a sense of innovation, trend awareness and sophistication. Reliance upon the conventions within Modernism, abstraction and western aesthetics, previously witnessed in the assessment of Emily Kame Kngwarreye’s work, emerged once more in the case of Ngan’gi art. As Alfred Gell states:

‘indigenous aesthetics’ is essentially geared to refining and expanding the aesthetic sensitivities of the Western art public by providing a cultural context within which non-Western objects can be assimilated to the categories of Western aesthetic art appreciation.

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53 William Mora, op. cit.
54 N. Rothwell, op. cit., p235.
55 Fred Myers, Painting Culture, pp277 - 314.
Myers notes that critics both conflated Aboriginal painting with abstractionists like Jackson Pollock, as well as differentiating them, as the value of art had to rely, in part, upon a challenge to historical practices.\textsuperscript{57} As was the case with the commentary surrounding the Dreamings exhibition, the diversity of criticism of Wilson’s Syaw was part of a broader movement of ‘moving objects from culture to art.’\textsuperscript{58} The prevailing mode of discourse surrounding Syaw involved the detailed description of purely visual devices:

In the last five years, a group of women has taken inspiration from weaving patterns and began to paint on canvas. The resulting works feature intricate patterns of loops, lines, and dots in strong, vibrant colours.\textsuperscript{59}

An emphasis on craftsmanship further played into the work’s reception. The use of the word ‘fine’ referred to a sense of quality, a conflicted field in Indigenous art that can’t be fully addressed here. However, in the case of Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s work, it serves to address the value placed upon labour, dedication and artisanship within Indigenous painting. Akin to abstraction, a Western audience leant upon long-held notions of quality, dexterity and ‘fineness’ when judging paintings such as Syaw. Clifford has noted that the use of the term ‘fine art’ leads to a moral and emotional cross-cultural value upon cultural production.\textsuperscript{60} William Mora stated that Talunga’s paintings were of ‘exceptional quality, like the read old-style, almost early Western Desert work.’\textsuperscript{61} By ‘jumping the whole tourist thing’, the work gave rise to notions of sophistication, particularly when viewed alongside the perceived ‘road house souvenir’ art of the nearby Daly River community. Maurice O’Riordan explained that ‘the defining nature of their mark-making quickly propelled the community’s painters into the sort of critical attention that has eluded Daly River’s artists.’\textsuperscript{62} The speed at which the Peppi artists had achieved this ‘sophistication’ was also worthy of mention:

\textsuperscript{57} F. Myers, Painting Culture, p283.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., p300 & 314.
\textsuperscript{61} William Mora, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{62} Maurice O’Riordan, catalogue entry ‘Patsy Marfura’, Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award catalogue, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, 2008, p16.
It was only after a brief, instructive visit to an international contemporary art biennale held at Noumea’s Centre Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 2001 that the women artists of “Peppy” began painting. At once, the canvases they produced had a distinct air of resolution, a completeness and authority.63

In their comments on Wilson’s winning Syaw, NATSIAA judges Brian Kennedy and Francesca Cubillo stated that the work was ‘beautiful and sophisticated’ and ‘effected with great subtlety.’64 Similarly, Susan McCulloch described it as ‘of outstanding quality.’65

Nicholas Rothwell has stated that ‘Peppimenarti is home to . . . Aboriginal Australia’s most immediately seductive painting movement.’66 The painting is characterised as ‘seductive’ due to its objecthood; as a representation of an object, it has the ability to exist as purely visual, devoid of complex cultural and intellectual data, and thus appreciated on aesthetic grounds. The use of the word ‘immediately’ is telling: Rothwell seems to be dismissing the audience from further reflection. As a representation of a hand-made object, Syaw’s appeal was in its ‘rootedness in the world.’67 This was something that could be easily reframed within western aesthetic appreciation of the physical object. As such, commentary around it embodied a sense of relief from the potential cultural and political flash points often associated with Indigenous Australian art. Here, what Peter Schjeldahl has termed the ‘power of strangeness’ had an opposing force: the value of familiarity. Wilson had succeeded in ‘maintaining tribal commitments’ whilst entering the international contemporary art realm via ‘fine’ abstraction.68 As Roger Benjamin has observed of the reception of Kame Kngwarreye’s work, ‘the political requirements for appreciating such painting had eased.’69 Ultimately, the knowledge that the works were a painting of a fish-net, embedded in a ‘long

63 N. Rothwell, op. cit., p235.
67 F. Myers, ‘Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings’, Cultural Anthropology, vol. 6, 1991, p84.
upstanding tradition of richly coloured weavings’, enabled an audience to opt out of further reading.\textsuperscript{70}

Patrick Hutchings wrote an article on the art of Peppimenarti for \textit{Australian Art Review}, November 2003, an article that has since been drawn upon by multiple media releases and catalogue essays on Ngan’gi art.\textsuperscript{71} In it, he states that:

Peppimenarti painters do not face us in the usual way with ‘story and design’ or ‘design v. story’, since their pictures render, in the flat, stitches used in weaving mats and in basket making. Technical diagrams of interlaces and stitches in Robin Hodgson’s \textit{Peppimenarti Basketmakers} replace the Dreamings. And Peppimenarti motifs are uncommonly perspicuous. On canvas or paper, stitches and weaves take on a life of their own and become for us pure ‘aesthetic’, as do dots without their spears.

Again, the precise stylistic quality of the paintings plays into the immediacy of their seductiveness, and perceived ‘purity.’ It is interesting to note that the gestural, painterly ‘style’ of artists such as Kame Kngwarreye or Sally Gabori equally gives rise to an application of ‘Aboriginal abstraction.’ Hutchings goes on to reference Kantian theories of aesthetics:

Immanuel Kant whose \textit{Critique of Judgement}, 1790, was one of the greatest contributions to aesthetics both of his time and ours, made a distinction between \textit{pulchritudo adhaerens} - the beauty that sticks to things (things such as the finely-made Peppimenarti baskets, etc) - and \textit{pulchritudo vaga}, the beauty which we feel when we let go of a thing’s purpose and just delight in how it is. This difficult, mental operation is accomplished for us at Peppimenarti, where they take away the baskets or the nulla nullas, and leave the beauty to float free.

We can take free beauty as purely free or we can invest it with reverie and associations. Regina Wilson’s free renderings of as if threads of a fishnet, make the practical objects now, for us, nets for dreams. Her print of stitches shows us how Yeats’s “clothes of heaven” might be sewn...
Our dreams are not their Dreamings, but at the depth of the Unconscious, perhaps they merge.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{70} \textit{Dreaming their Way}, op. cit., p102.
Using Kant, Hutchings sets up a dichotomy between the purpose and pure abstraction of the syaw. The painted object, however, exists between the two; it is at once a fish net and reverie. To deny it either is to ignore the position it holds in Ngan’gikurunggurr culture. Its purposefulness cannot be untangled from Wilson’s dream-like representation, as it is her memories of its use that inform her design.

While Papunya becomes a little ‘looser’, Peppimenarti returns to precision dots - but gives Aboriginal art a whole new non-referential turn. Peppimenarti’s ‘art about baskets and spears’ transcends the patterns of these things, and flies free as the vast skies above the ‘Big Rock’, itself a small incident in this vast green Top End landscape.

Something new and important is happening at Peppimenarti. It’s something else - twice over. It’s not about narrative, but spear-dots and weaving; however it’s also about a beauty abstracted from handicraft. It no longer maps a songline, but sings a new song.73

Hutchings made a reasonable attempt at allowing aesthetic and cultural registers to merge in his articulation of the Peppimenarti paintings. However, as will be further explored in Chapter Six, works such as Syaw are not ‘non-referential’, nor free of narrative; although not distinctly ‘dreaming’ mythologies, their physicality is strongly tied to cultural, historical and personal accounts.

However, it was the art media’s harnessing of the notion of ‘visual inventiveness’ that dominated the writing on Wilson’s winning Syaw.74 The reception of the work was dominated by terms such as ‘new’ and ‘ground-breaking’. The language slotted into the industry’s well-practiced idiom of ‘the florescence of a powerful tradition in new circumstances.’75 The idea of Indigenous aesthetic expression and innovation was, at the time of the Dreamings exhibition, aligned with cultural resilience. The paintings’ value was, in part, based on a rejection of oppression and western forces, further enhancing their indigeneity and interest to a white

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 The term ‘visual inventiveness’ is articulated by Fred Myers in ‘Postprimitivism: Lines of tension in the Makings of Aboriginal High Art’, in, Painting Culture, op. cit., p282.
75 F. Myers, Painting Culture, p297.
audience. This response to Wilson’s work, is demonstrated in Nicholas Rothwell’s statement that ‘old patterns yield fresh fruit.’\textsuperscript{76} The sense of hope and renewal is countered by an existing belief in a ‘dying’ Indigenous race and culture, and loss of knowledge through elders’ deaths.

The attention garnered was due to the fact that Wilson, and fellow Peppimenarti painters, were taking something ancient and reframing it within the ‘new’. O’Riordan declared that ‘the paintings of Peppi artists heralded a new kind of Aboriginal abstraction.’\textsuperscript{77} The response reflected the continued market for, and interest in, non-ethnographically framed work. However, the tradition associated with the women’s fibrecraft bestowed upon the work a weight that informed its reception. Without the old, the ‘newness’ would be worthless. As Michael Reid stated in 2008, ‘it is an art community very much looking forward, and able, for example, to take an age-old practice of weaving and render this important cultural tradition in an entirely new way.’\textsuperscript{78}

A profile of the Durrmu Arts centre in \textit{Aboriginal Australian Art} magazine in 2009 stated that ‘Wilson’s paintings were especially ground-breaking for their representation in paint of the stitches and patterns of weaving.’\textsuperscript{79} Rothwell also used the word ‘transfer’ when describing the work: ‘much more momentous, however, has been the transfer of idea and of technique that gives the art of Peppy (sic) its virtuosity and its appeal.’\textsuperscript{80} Myers suggests that the presentation of this cultural renewal via art production constructs a form of permissible Aboriginality, formulated by Western society’s approved notions of Indigenous society and culture.\textsuperscript{81} Merlan adds to this by arguing that the placement of Aboriginal cultural production onto broader ‘circuits of value’ has been formulated as a ‘recuperative strategy’, contributing to national heritage and identity, whilst

\textsuperscript{76} N. Rothwell, op. cit., p238.
\textsuperscript{77} M. O’Riordan, op. cit.
\textsuperscript{78} Michael Reid, interviewed in Durrmu Arts ‘profile’, Susan McCulloch, \textit{Australian Aboriginal Art}, March 2009, p170-171.
\textsuperscript{79} S. McCulloch, Durrmu Arts ‘profile’, \textit{Australian Aboriginal Art}, March 2009, p170-171.
\textsuperscript{80} N. Rothwell, op. cit., p235.
\textsuperscript{81} F. Myers, ‘Representing Culture’, pp34-5.
remaining recognisable Aboriginal.82 Interestingly, the winner of the overall Telstra Prize in 2003 was Richard Bell, with Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem), 2003.83 In his accompanying essay Bell’s Theorem: Aboriginal Art – It’s a White Thing, he states ‘there is no Aboriginal Art Industry. There is, however, an industry that caters for Aboriginal Art.’84 The sense that a ‘dying, soon dead, culture is being raked over’ was identified by Bell as playing into the Western market for the ‘spirituality’ of Aboriginal art.85 The Syaw embodied a sense of triumphalism for the media and audience, reflecting not only a ‘lost object regained’, but also a lost culture revitalised. Once again, a Ngan’gi fibre vessel was functioning as an object of rapprochement.

The mood for de-mythologisation in Indigenous art commentary and criticism via visual analysis and an emphasis on aesthetic abstraction, was, in the case of Syaw, here turned into a form of re-mythologisation.86 By existing somewhere between object and abstraction, Wilson’s Syaw presented new categorical dilemmas for its audience. John Carty is close to the mark when he notes of writing about Indigenous desert art:

Much of what is written often reinforces tired platitudes and romanticised visions; it struggles to get past the descriptive limits of catch-all concepts like ‘country’ or ‘dreaming’ and skates ill-equipped across the surface of acrylic painting. There is not much scope between musing over the tension between iconography and abstraction for expanding our vocabulary to accommodate the nuanced creativity of desert artists and their ever-evolving practice.87

Syaw was a work that was neither purely abstract, nor materially cultural, and thus called for Myer’s re-situation of ‘categories and hierarchies of value’ and a

83 Richard Bell, Scientia E Metaphysica (Bell’s Theorem), 2003, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 240 x 360cm, Winner, Telstra First Prize, National Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Art Awards, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, collection of the Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory.
85 Ibid.
86 Ian Mclean articulates the terms ‘de-mythologised’ and ‘re-mythologised’ in How Aborigines invented the idea of contemporary art, op. cit., p22.
87 John Carty, Ngaanyatjarra: art of the lands, UWA publishing, Crawley, 2012, p15.
multi-faceted engagement art that existed within the disciplines of anthropology, Indigenous painting and art criticism.\(^{88}\) It was placed within an overlapping set of Western frames, none of which entirely attempted to appreciate its existence as an object of loss, of country, of fibre and cultural form. What was missing was an ontological approach; reading the work from Wilson’s worldview, experience and being. The work’s interstitial status led to its audience immediately seeing a fish-net and being relieved that there was nothing more to unpack. However, as will be argued in Chapter Six, the mode of reading Ngan’gi painting calls for a new conception of tradition, and is perhaps even more demanding than the decoding of dreaming narratives or an understanding of country.

McLean’s use of the metaphor ‘a ship between two shoals’ to articulate the navigation of postmodernist and ‘Aboriginal cultural’ readings of Indigenous art rings true in the criticism of Ngan’gi painting; it rebounded between emphases on abstraction to a literal interpretation of a physical object.\(^{89}\) Adam Geczy has similarly noted that Aboriginal art is subject to both ‘pure spirituality . . . omniscience’ and ‘pure earth’, further reflecting the conflicting place of Wilson’s Syaw in Indigenous art writing.\(^{90}\) Both are ‘unknowable and inarticulable’ and it is true that both approaches alone result in unstable representations and allusions.

Wilson’s Syaw is undoubtedly, immediately visual – partially reflecting the emplacement of mathematical, spatial devices - yet also operates across mindful, memorial spectra. As a document, its experience of loss and forgetting is as significant as its remembering and resurrection. As will be addressed in the next chapter, Ngan’gi art further embodies the sensual; its textural significance emerging within objects of ‘affect-driven thought’.\(^{91}\) The chapter will explore the established dichotomy that separates ‘story’ painting and ‘pattern’ making.\(^{92}\)

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\(^{88}\) F. Myers, *Painting Culture*, p301.
\(^{89}\) I. McLean, op. cit., p22.
\(^{91}\) S. Kuechler, ‘Why Knot?’, p64.
6. **Fi / WARRGADI PAINTINGS**

*Pattern is a verb. It is a way of viewing the world, a process by which to take in and make coherent the random and often chaotic information the world has to offer . . . The act of connecting . . . of “patterning” provides a structure through which is sieved new information which, in time, becomes part of the structure through which it is sieved*

– Carrie Rickey, 1979¹

‘*art no longer needs to represent the world as it appears but directly, visually goes after the pattern and shapes at the root of things, the pure forms, not really abstract, but of nature itself*’

- David Rothenberg²

The fi / warrgadi (string / string bag) designs allow this thesis’ arguments on the cultural significance of repetitive pattern to emerge. The process of looping, in both fibre and painted media, embodies concepts of ancestral tracing, cultural synaesthesia and performance. *Fi* is the Ngan’gi word for string. It is fashioned from *merrepen* (sand-palm), and is the raw material for the construction of *warrgadi* (string dilly bag), *wullipun* (fish net) and the source of contemporary painted designs. In 2004, Ngen’giwumirri artist Patsy Marfura decided to strip her painted weaving designs down to their barest structure, and create a series of paintings and etchings titled *Fi* (string). Not long after, Marfura began to surround the *fi* design with soft-edged dots (*durrmu*), fusing concepts of body painting, ceremony and fibre forms. Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s earliest major painting was a *warrgadi* design; she has since transformed her interpretation of the design to incorporate her thoughts on the relationship between weaving, performance and country. These, and other, works will be contextualized within a discussion of the changing attitudes to, and readings of, pattern design.

Sylvia Kleinert argues that the interpretation and reception of Indigenous art may be traced through concepts surrounding the ‘decorative’.³ Originally, late nineteenth century ethnographic researchers aligned the ‘two-dimensional visual

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system” of Indigenous material culture with ‘play-work’ and a consequent absence of meaning. In their commentary on Central Desert material culture, Spencer and Gillen stated ‘...the patterns do not appear to have any definite meaning...the resemblance between the decorated Chilara, when laid flat down and the Churinga is most striking, though there is no real relationship between the two objects.’ Whilst pattern was admired, there remained an assumption that a series of lines or dots could act as no more than ‘in-fill.’

Yet it was the non-figurative that emerged as the central premise for the transmission and mediation of Indigenous cultural knowledge and understanding. Nancy Munn’s 1986 work on Warlpiri iconography initiated a re-analysis of Indigenous visual systems, decoding the abstract and linking it to ‘ways of knowing.’ The emphasis on the significance of symbology and iconography has continued in the study of central and western desert art, through the work of researchers such as Geoffrey Bardon, Vivien Johnson and Roger Benjamin. This thesis argues that, to illuminate cultural significances in the Ngan’gi language groups, a reading of repetitive pattern, rather than individual symbol, is required. Cath Bowdler has recently argued that ‘patterns, which encode identity, hold a multitude of meanings determined by context and relationship and now are subject to stylistic reinterpretation and aesthetic innovation.’ The statement applies to the Ngan’gi artists of Peppimenarti: pattern construction has been a way for them to navigate the transmission and expression of cultural knowledge in contemporary artistic practice.

Luke Taylor’s Seeing the Inside investigated the ‘iconic representation’ of Kunwinjku painting, arguing that an iconic reading was its ‘primary frame of reference for the interpretation of meaning.’ Although a painting may embody

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5 Spencer and Gillen, quoted in, Kleinert, S., ibid., p117.
6 Ibid., p118.
varying levels of meaning, an understanding of these meanings is reliant upon the ‘correct interpretation of the figure represented.’ Taylor defines ‘iconicity’ as a ‘culturally perceived formal resemblance between signifier, the painted form, and signified, the Kunwinjku concept of the thing or species represented.’ This is contrasted to rarrk, which, as a pattern, is not designed to be legible to a white audience. Iconicity has been equated to a sense of “look like”, just as schematisation is aligned with the restraining of abstraction by representation. Alexander Gallus divided the two ‘levels of formal art analysis’ into ‘Iconic (naturalistic) art, that which ‘more or less skillfully reproduce visual perceptions’ and ‘Schematic/non- iconic’, ‘constructions without any (or recognisable) iconic character.’

Nancy Munn made similar distinctions in her examination of Warlpiri ‘visual categories.’ Discrete ‘units’ are classified by Munn as ‘continuous’, whilst visual systems (akin to rarrk) are ‘discontinuous’, that is, embodying ‘heterogeneous classes of meaning.’ Despite the ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning associated with discontinuous patterns, Munn believes that they still have a ‘discoverable semantic structure.’ Munn notes that the use of ‘elementary motifs’, such as a circle or arc, are points within a narrative, to be read. She unpacks the potential meanings of these individual motifs, in secular and sacred contexts. The ‘signs’ combine simplicity of form and density of meaning. This approach is exemplified by the 1985 exhibition of Central Australian Aboriginal acrylic paintings, titled ‘Dot and Circle’, which referenced ‘dot and circle art.’

11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
17 Ibid., p938.
18 Ibid., p942.
The notion that an icon or motif is the concentration of complex ideas suggests that, in turn, the significance of repetitive pattern must be diluted. In Strehlow’s ‘The Art of Circle, Line and Square’, he analyses ‘sacred’ patterns in terms of their individual symbolic significance: ‘there is not much sense in the continuing nature of the patterns, despite them being applied to unending media such as the ground.’ The notion that the significance cannot lie in the repetition is questioned by Taylor, however, as he argues that the iconic properties of motifs may be exaggerated; for example, they are designed to be identified with ancestral presence, rather than pictorially representing ancestors. In 1974, Elkin noted that the designs found on ‘mundane’ objects ‘also belong to the world of mythology.’ He states:

when a native says that he is engraving a shield to make it pretty he may be merely endeavouring to satisfy the white inquirer... on one occasion when I showed some natives a bull roarer they referred to its pretty pattern and then at once commenced a sacred chant. Evidently the prettiness belonged to the sphere of ritual and belief.

Nonetheless, the association of cultural significance or weight with individual symbology, rather than pattern, has dominated much of Australian Indigenous art writing.

However, there has been an increasing interest in the significances of pattern in contemporary art, including Indigenous Australian, as evidenced by the recent edition of *Artlink* titled ‘Pattern and Complexity’, edited by Margot Osborne. Osborne cites *The Sense of Order* by Ernst Gombrich, and more recently Martin Kemp’s *Seen Unseen*, as some of the texts dedicated to a discussion of complex pattern making’s relationship with the visual arts. For the most part, pattern has been seen to possess an ancillary role in terms of visual art analysis, located behind a primary interest in the ‘scene’, the ‘icon’ or the ‘figure’. This is, in part,

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23 L. Taylor, op. cit., p149.
due to its association with the surface and the decorative. A pattern’s function is often deemed to be a visual entreaty, something for the eye to follow, in the lead up to a significant symbol. However, for those, like Gombrich, interested in pattern analysis, significance may lie in the surrounding nature of pattern, or their contextual repetition. He argues that, in viewing pattern, ‘what concerns us here is the perceptual effect of our projection, which goes further than the mere recognition of an individual motif.’

He goes on to set up a tension between the perception of things and the perception of order, the latter referring to pattern. The viewing or ‘scanning’ of order involves the simultaneous recognition of multiple stimuli and their context. Meaning is derived from the repeated forms and the intervals amongst them. The gaps are equally significant.

Dorothy Washburn argues that non-representational patterns can be read as encoded worldviews that hold ‘cultural salience’. Ngan’gi culture – country, ancestral presences, ceremony, kinship and law – is embedded within durrmu (design), and placed upon the canvas. The specifics of the cultural principles are consciously evasive, the pattern being a form with which to literally encode information designed for widespread dissemination. What, then, becomes significant is the form and nature of communication, the pattern itself. Washburn’s *Perceptual Anthropology: The Cultural Salience of Symmetry* provides a series of case studies to assert the claim that ‘pattern structure, rather than simply being another feature amenable to analytical manipulation, actually embodies cultural concepts and thus can be a sensitive record of cultural activities.’

**PATTERN AND PERFORMANCE**

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29 Ibid., p158.
30 Ibid.
32 Ibid., p548.
Regina Wilson’s second painting on linen, *Warrgarri (string bag stitch)*, 2003, was acquired by the Queensland Art Gallery in 2004. Wilson used a rich sienna brown to cover the surface, evoking the popular pigment from the te plant, used for dyeing *merrepen* fibre. Over this, the lines of *warrgadi* are strung across, gently bowed toward the lower half of the linen. These loops are gentle, with many of them receding almost completely into the background, whilst others, notably those marked in white, emerging as ghostly threads. Between the increasing and diminishing rows are those of an intermediate quality, composed of deep blue grey, ochre and yellow hues. Diane Moon, Curator of Indigenous Fibre at the Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery, described the work as ‘an intimate examination of the lines of the weave, their rhythmic repetition in rich ochre colours enlivened by random flicks of white.’ Abiding by pattern classifications set up by Washburn and Crowe, the *warrgadi* design would be classified as ‘Glide Reflection’, a ‘translation’ followed by a reflection in a line parallel to the direction of the translation. A fundamental example of such a pattern is the mark left by alternating left and right human footprints. The lines of loops correspond to one another in this way. A *warrgadi* pattern is designed to give a sense of going beyond the edges of the canvas, back into its country of production, perhaps to meet its fibre counterpoint. Moon also refers to Wilson’s ‘endless coloured lines’: the simplicity of the descriptor belying the concepts of cultural repetition and duplication it contains.

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33 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgarri (string bag stitch)*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 160 x 124cm, collection of Queensland Art Gallery, fig. 6.
36 D. Moon, op. cit.
Repetition, particularly warrgadi looping, is bound to concepts of rhythm, gesture and performance. Suzanne Kuechler’s *Binding in the Pacific* establishes an allied yet opposing dynamic between Pacific knotting and looping. Knotting is associated with the figural, with topology and manual coordination, whereas looping and its sense of limitlessness corresponds to process. Kuechler examines the ‘removal, rotting and re-fabrication’ of New Ireland knots as recalling
ancestral power in ‘cycles of movement and arrest.’\textsuperscript{37} Similarly, the Hawaiian practice of sacred genealogical cords involves the metaphoric and real ‘twisting’ of strands to enclose, contain and arrest divine powers.\textsuperscript{38} Again, processes of wrapping and binding are associated with re-enactment and revelation. Kuechler identifies looping as ‘the pulling of string through the knot’, creating an expandable textile which ‘draws attention visually and conceptually to the threaded string and its continuous run.’\textsuperscript{39} For Kuechler, it is the knot, rather than the loose loop, which allows questions of cultural worldviews to emerge. She does, however, acknowledge that, the loop and knot converge at a point of ‘purposeful coordination’ and that each brings its own time-space frames which ‘create difference in society and culture.’\textsuperscript{40}

Kuechler’s ingenious argument only serves to heighten this thesis’ reading of warrgadi as movement, process. However, I argue that this perceived lack of configuration, or the figural, does not lessen cultural revelation. As Lindie Ward states:

\begin{quote}
There are patterns in the process of creating a work which are integral to the work but quite unrelated artistically to the end result, such as the repetitive motion of bobbins in lacemaking and the loom in weaving. It would be hard to imagine how bobbin lace is formed if you had not seen the bobbins or lace pillows used to make it. Yet the repetitive pattern of motion is key to the potential for lace to create intriguing patterns of negative and positive spaces.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

It is, as Jennifer Biddle explains, ‘the gesture contained in their form.’\textsuperscript{42}

More than any other technique, warrgadi looping is conflated with the habitual or routine. This repetition means that the work can be put down or picked up at any stage of the construction process without affecting the outcome of the object.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., p67.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., p66.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., p78.
\textsuperscript{41} Lindie Ward ‘Openwork Patterns’, in, \textit{Artlink} vol. 32, no. 1, 2012, p36.
\textsuperscript{43} Maureen Mackenzie, \textit{Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea}, Harwood, Amsterdam, 1998, p60.
weaver of a string dilly bag must perform all the various steps, uniformly and consistently, conforming to the same steps performed the previous day, week, month or year. The process has homogeneity; the gestures of the performance are on an endlessly repeating cycle. This cycle is only halted by the weavers’ putting down of the fibre to attend to other matters. However, once it is taken up again, the cycle returns, seemingly uninterrupted. Mackenzie argues that the ‘principle of periodicity’ arises in the bilum weaving of the Telefol, that is, that regular, continuous activity is supported by the biological necessity of feeding offspring. Certainly, in Peppi, the women carry their warrgadi projects with them. They are able to be slipped into a canvas satchel, or indeed another warrgadi bag, and taken from house to house or community to community.

The gesture, movement and travel implicit in warrgadi production and utilisation reflect the transformation of objects to subject: items of material culture becoming subjects with agency. Rather than approaching the body as a thing, resulting from cultural and social processes, Jon P. Mitchell argues that the body is a tabula rasa, upon which ‘society signifies the cultural person.’ An obvious example is scarification, however the texture of a fi weaver’s hands is equally compelling. When rolling the bush string, downward pressure and forward movement on the skin of the thigh causes callousing over time. In this way, the skin of a fi weaver, as opposed to a wupun (coil basket) weaver, is immediately seen, a ‘natural symbol’ of performance and ritual.

‘The swing’ of the craftsman, the rhythm of his hands that ‘move in unison with his breath and perhaps his heartbeat’ is found within the resulting product. Thus the object moves toward being an active subject in the complex ecology of body, movement, landscape and material. They are ‘social agents’ in and of themselves. The warrgadi contain, transport and sift material in and around country. They are responsible for carrying their own fibre, when Ngan’gi weavers

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45 M. Mackenzie, op. cit., p60.
48 Ibid.
49 E. H. Gombrich, op. cit., p11.
collect *merrepen* for new projects. During the same trip, they might be used to wash bush potatoes (*misyawuni*) or apples (*yerrgeminyminy*) in a fast flowing creek. The *warrgadi* is a vessel designed to contain, however its power and purpose is also outwardly radiating. When exchanged, the bag is seen as a talisman of country, akin to a diplomatic souvenir, yet embodying myriad ancestral and cultural legacies. As Strang argues, when produced for the tourist or art market, the bag emits a general cultural message or lesson, with the maker optimistic about its power to impart something positive about Aboriginal Australia, however vague.\(^5^1\) This is definitely the case among the Ngan’gi *warrgadi* weavers. More than any other form, the *warrgadi* is bestowed as a gift when the artists choose to thank a non-Indigenous individual for services or support.

Storytelling is also implicit in the repetitive processes of *warrgadi* looping. Rather than a linear narrative, weavers may mention something briefly - for example, the recollection of a deceased weaver - as they start a new line of looping. This thread of history or culture is then taken up by other weavers, resulting in a collaborative conversation. More often than not, however, the voice is not used to tell a story. The very act of weaving, particularly in the presence of a younger generation, is the story. Walter Benjamin’s conflation of craftsmanship and storytelling resonates within the weaving work of the Ngan’gi women. The weaving process is a model of authentic memory. As Esther Leslie asserts, Benjamin’s understanding of objects ‘includes essentially an understanding of experiences to be had with objects, and memories evoked by objects or encoded in objects.’\(^5^2\) In *The Image of Proust*, Benjamin refers to the ‘the weaving of his memory’, as well as stating that ‘remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warp’.\(^5^3\)

Benjamin ‘s *The Storyteller* reflects upon the words of Paul Valery: ‘a certain accord of the soul, the eye, and the hand’, used to describe the craft of

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embroidery. This accord, for Benjamin, is the apotheosis of storytelling. The rhythm of these human parts in craft labour is akin to the storyteller’s relationship with his material, his words. Benjamin uses the words ‘fashion’, ‘raw material’ and ‘craftsmanship’ – all sensory, physical terms - to imbue the process of storytelling with a sense of tangibility and toil. Leslie notes Benjamin’s use of tactile, tactics, the tactical, ‘entering German, as it enters English via the Latin tangere, touch’. Touch, and the hand, are central to ‘stereognosis’ and authentic experience: to touch the world is to know the world. Stereognosis is the perception of an object via the experience of its texture, spatial properties, size and temperature. It is touch that ‘fingers the world’s textures, and hands-on knowledge of those textures.’ Through touch, the essential may be experienced.

The accord of hand, eye and soul is physically demonstrated in the looping of a string dilly bag. Unlike the disrupted coil technique, the looping of string is rhythmic. The gestures are repetitive and homogenous. Benjamin states that:

- After all, storytelling, in its sensory aspect, is by no means a job for the voice alone.
- Rather, in genuine storytelling the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures trained by work.

The union of the hand, eye and soul conjure the simultaneous experiences of thinking/feeling, seeing and handling. In relation to the Ngan’gi, the term ‘soul’ seems more appropriate than, say, ‘mind’ as the act of looping has a semi-conscious quality; the combination of repetition and innate knowledge means that the weaver can recall or discuss stories and histories whilst undergoing complex processes. In 2003, Nicholas Rothwell visited the Peppi artists and wrote:

- The paintings . . . are both art product and a record of a process; the unending detail of their pattern-creation can consume a week, or a month, in the painting room – a month in which the painter’s thoughts will return insistently to the old, lost days she is recreating, streamlining in the realms of geometry and imagination.

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56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
Through the craft process, the process of weaving, consciousness is changed. The body is possessed by the routine and rhythm of action. Esther Leslie notes that during this time:

the stories . . . forego an existence on paper, imprinting themselves onto the listener’s fantasy, awaiting retransmissions, after-lives. Storytelling is no simple form of time passing. It mirrors a mode of processing and reconstituting experience.⁵⁹

This reconstitution of experience or ancestral presence is essentially a communal process. The processes of making warrgadi require collaboration; ideally a co-weaver will hold one end of the initial strand when constructing the bag’s base. Furthermore, the making will rarely be conducted alone. The merrepen fibre grows in clusters, approximately two metres high, in the community’s surrounding country. Word spreads of a good ‘mob’ of merrepen and the women will travel out there in groups of about four to six to harvest the fibre. The plants will usually be harvested from a two hundred-metre radius zone and the group divides, each woman tackling a section of it. Occasionally, if out of sight, they will shout to one another in a high pitched call, to ensure no one has become lost in the thick scrub or come across danger, such as a buffalo or snake. The heart of the merrepen is often harvested and shared amongst the group as a thirst-quenching snack during their hard, hot harvesting. The entire plant is axed at the top of its trunk, the top half taken down onto the ground, the hessian layers peeled off, the outer wooded layers hacked off with a knife to reveal the heart or ‘inside’.⁶⁰ The subsequent activity of stripping, dyeing, rolling and looping fibre is communal. The knowledge associated with these tasks is also communal. There are no individual recipes for dyeing pandanus, for example. The women will collectively agree upon the amount of bafun (ash) and yewirr (colour tree)⁶¹ bark chips to add to the billy. Once ready, the fibre may be extracted from the billy by one woman, yet be allocated for use by another. There is no ownership of fibre. It is collectively produced and collectively used.

⁶⁰ See video 7: Margaret Kundu cutting out heart out of merrepen (sand palm), May 18, 2010.
⁶¹ See video 8: Margaret Kundu, Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Kathleen Korda digging out yewirr (colour tree) root, May 18, 2010.
Veronica Strang’s description of the Kowanyama women’s collection of fibre is an accurate portrayal of collective country ‘bush trips’ in and around Peppimenarti and the ancestral resonances they conjure:

The string from the leaves is collected by small groups of women, often accompanied by children. Ideally the expedition will be made to the home country of the women so they can visit (and thus care for) their ancestral land and make use of their own resources. Older women often bring their daughter or granddaughters, showing them how to cut the palm leaves with a small knife, or machete, peel the raffia from the central spine of the leaf and tie it into bundles so that it does not become tangled. There will probably be discussion about previous visits to the site, and who was present then. The engagement with a particular place will usually invoke some reference to ancestral meaning, to who the land therefore belongs, whose conception site it is and how the women present are related to ancestral beings and thus to each other... The bundles of raffia are carried back and distributed to female kin, affirming these relationships and enlarging the collective nature of the production.\(^\text{62}\)

\textit{Warrgadi} concepts of performance and gesture emerged in the painting practice of Regina Pilawuk Wilson in 2009. In November of that year, artist, printmaker and visual arts teacher Katie Stackhouse hosted a painting workshop at Durrmu Arts. After consultation with Wilson, who expressed a desire to alter and expand her \textit{warrgadi} design, Stackhouse provided artistic support and feedback as the artist explored new design concepts in the acrylic medium. A theme that emerged from their discussions and Wilson’s studies was one of movement. Stackhouse suggested that Wilson could work elements of gesture and fluctuation into her \textit{warrgadi} design through a shift in scale and orientation. Rather than the uniform, looped weave across the linen, she could replicate the movement of a \textit{warrgadi} weaver, resulting in gestural, irregular lines of looping. Wilson found the concept fitted well with her existing developments on the syaw design, and appropriate to the spirit of the \textit{warrgadi} ‘story.’

\(^{62}\) V. Strang, op. cit., p87.
The first large-scale acrylic on linen work to encompass these design shifts was *Durrmu*, 2010.\(^{63}\) The two-by-two metre painting was then chosen as the central piece for Wilson’s solo exhibition *Collection* in November 2011.\(^{64}\) Here, the horizontal lines of *warrgadi*, seen previously in works such as the Queensland Art Gallery’s *Warragarri (string bag design)*\(^{65}\) are undermined by Wilson’s inversion and distortion of the strands of looping. Rather than replicating the uniform, rhythmic repetition of the *warrgadi*, Wilson has played with the idea of the loops moving, or dancing with each other and the viewer. The strict ‘glide reflection’ symmetry has been broken: instead, Wilson has allowed the loops to mirror one another, or glance off one another, causing a sense of unruly enmeshed or knitted elements. When painting the work, Wilson would shift position to alter the orientation of her mark making: this was a major change in her process of practice. Again, the sense of order and uniformity was transformed into release and boundlessness. Rather than movement being evoked by concepts of consistent rhythm, it was now depicted via organic, limitless gesture. This transformation, for Wilson, was not able to take place through the media of fibre. The processes of looping *warrgadi* are (seemingly) fixed for the artist. When asked about this, Wilson stated:

> We can change those things with paint. The weaving is old. We’ve been doing it long time: mother, grandmother. I can do those new ones on the canvas.\(^{66}\)

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\(^{63}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgadi (dilly bag)*, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 200cm, fig. 7.

\(^{64}\) *Collection: new works*, held at Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney, November 2011.

\(^{65}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgarri (string bag stitch)*, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 160 x 124cm, collection of Queensland Art Gallery, fig. 6.

\(^{66}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, March 28, 2012.
Figure 2 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgadi (dilly bag)*, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 200cm. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.

Similarly, in the case of Tjanpi weavers, Jennifer Biddle observes that ‘imported’ materials are aligned with experimentation.67 As they are inherently secular, they are largely freed from ancestral associations. However, in the case of Ngan’gi painting, as soon as the imported synthetic paint is applied to *durru*, it reactivates ancestral significances. Wilson also decided to add a dotted design to the new *warrgadi* design, recalling Marfura’s blended *fi durmu* designs. When painting the dots, Wilson would use a specific colour for each loop. She was filling the *warrgadi* loops with *durru*, or, as we’ve established, multi-sensory, conceptual, cultural design. Wilson describes the process as ‘putting *durru* in

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the *warrgadi*.' By doing this, the artist is imbuing imprints of Ngan’gi culture within the string bag forms, as if to say ‘this *warrgadi* means all of this too.’

Scott Ortman has explored how meanings are generated through the relationships of pattern in weaving, pottery and basket design. He examines the emerging theory of metaphor within archaeological material culture, specifically the ‘textile metaphor’ in pottery painting of the Mesa Verde people of the American Southwest. Basketry designs have been used as decorative patterning on pottery for more than seven centuries. In the Great Pueblo Period (A.D. 1060 – 1280), the Mesa Verde textile process was highly technical, however the relatively simple practice of painting on pottery nonetheless mimicked the complex geometry of weaving. This reflects the Mesa Verde’s conceptualisation of the two media as equivalent. In many cases, the pots were painted structurally as baskets, that is, that interior coiled basket designs were painted on the interior of the pots, and rim detail onto rims. Ortman concludes that pottery was perceived as a textile, and that the stylistic unity between the two was an expression of a worldview grounded in containers, with the designs being the ingredients to express that view. This worldview is further found in the architecture of *kiva* dwellings and the Modern Puebloan interpretation of the cosmos as an ‘earth bowl’ and ‘sky basket’.

Chris Gosden takes the idea further, suggesting that the material forms don’t just embody concepts, but create them, giving rise to thoughts and representation. Within this, the Vygotskian concept of scaffolding emerges: the theory that material objects are a means of creating and informing social relations. However, Gosden asserts that it’s a two-way relationship: ‘ideas and feelings do not exist in cultural forms in a manner prior to things, but are created partly by

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70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., p620.
72 Ibid., p637.
73 Ibid., p638.
In the transferral of design from basket to pot, ideas are recontextualised, giving rise to abstract thought, ‘unconstrained by the nature of the materials from which they are made.’ The transmission of pattern from bag to canvas has similarly allowed a freedom in the expression of a Ngan’gi ‘worldview’.

*Durru* means everything everywhere. Design anywhere. Painted up.

Our culture don’t change. Still the same.

*Durru* is thus a concept as well as a translatable word. It stands for ‘dot’, ‘design’, ‘decoration’, ‘pattern’ and ‘drawing’. The way paper bark forms a rough-hewn pattern on the trunk of a *Melaleuca quinquenervia* is *durru*, as is the sporadic painted dotting on the body, as is the composition of lines of twined *pinbin* vine via synthetic polymer paint on linen. As the Durru Arts have collectively stated:

Our ancestors were in the Peppimenarti region a long time before the European people came to Australia.

My ancestors never used western material as a part of their cultural art. My painting represents the yellow, white and ochre used in the past. The ochre paint were painted on rock painting, didjeridoos, clapsticks, fighting sticks, spears and their bodies.

In the past, when the different clans fought, body paint was used to decorate specific clans using ochre to paint markings/symbols.

Body paint is also used today in painting men and women with marking to symbolise a specific dance. Artefacts such as didjeridoos, clapsticks and spears were also painted as a form of decorative art. This brought about pride to the surrounding tribes. These methods and materials of cultural art is still being used by the people of Peppimenarti today. This form of cultural art is being taught to the children of Peppimenarti in the classroom and at the home, by the elders.

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76 C. Gosden, op. cit.

77 Ibid.

78 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, March 29, 2012.

79 *Durru* Arts artists’ statement, composed in 2006, courtesy of Durru Arts.
As the artists stated, the process of drawing stands in the place of weaving. They are both processes of design and patternmaking and thus embody equivalent values. In the catalogue for *The Custodians: Country and Culture*, Margie West stated: ‘The only artist who eschews any ancestral references in her work is Regina Wilson, who as a master weaver, has chosen to work with the imagery of string.’  

West has read Wilson’s work as a purely utilitarian representation, overlooking the fact that cultural knowledge, and associated layers of meaning are encoded in abstract pattern.  

When asked about the description, Wilson stated:

> It’s still ancestral, from my grandmother and grandfather. It is a story for my children and grandchildren.  
> Country being inside.  
> Action of weaving in it too – weaving all together.

The statement effectively summarises the discussions of country, performance and their relationship to fibre objects. The Ngan’gi designs are at once action, narrative, country and object. They are patterns which ‘encode identity...subject to stylistic reinterpretation and aesthetic innovation, whilst retaining their cultural integrity.’

**PATTERN, COLOUR & COUNTRY**

For Ngan’gi weavers and painters, it is the repetition of the *warrgadi* loop that forms meaning. To focus on an individual loop is to cut it off from its greater significance. The objects or forms become secondary to the *durrmu* (design). The baskets, nets, bags and mats are objects within a landscape of complicated linking designs and decorations; the *durrmu* extends above and beyond the basket or the canvas surface to the rock walls, the sand or the body. The *durrmu* transcends the divisions we make between materials, media and forms. Artist Patsy Marfura best illustrates this concept through her layered, dotted *durrmu*.

81 C. Bowdler, op. cit., p43.  
82 Ibid.
and fi string designs. The majority of Marfura’s paintings are titled ‘durrmu’, whether they involve fibre articles or not, as the term is best translated as ‘design’ and thus includes concepts of both weaving and body painting. The conflation reflects the circular linkages between fibre, body and ceremony.

Patsy Marfura completed her first acrylic painting at a workshop held at Peppimenarti in 2001.83 The work on paper depicts a pair of magpie geese on their nests, surrounded by dotted and line designs. Pictorial and aerial perspectives are fused: the geese, their nests and nearby tree forms hover above an overall series of patterns. Marfura’s amorphous dots fill the space around the birds. Above them, a topography of lines and dots acts as a ceiling to the scene. The patterning in the left and right hand corner resembles what can be identified as ‘early’ Peppimenarti weaving designs, that being a clear, graphic series of alternating line, dot and dash marks. Directly above the geese are two bold, straight lines that separate stretches of dotting: it is this design concept that initiated Marfura’s personal interpretation of durrmu and fi. Between 2003 and 2007 Marfura ‘zoomed in’ on the decorative elements of her visual language, focusing entirely upon the interplay of dots and lines and foregoing pictorial motifs.

83 Workshop held by Karen Brown at Peppimenarti, 2001, see appendix 2; Patsy Marfura, Untitled, 2003, synthetic polymer paint on paper, 20 x 30cm, see. fig. 8.
In *Durmu*, 2007\(^{84}\), Marfura began the design by marking out the series of adjacent lines of *fi* in black acrylic paint, from one end of the canvas. After covering almost half the surface, Marfura attended to the opposite end, due to ease of access. This time, ochre hued paint was used for a series of lines, then followed by black once more. As these lines progress, they become increasingly irregular and circuitous, as though the string strands were being swept up together into a bale of fibre. When asked about this, Marfura responded that ‘the *fi* is not always straight when we’re weaving.’\(^{85}\) Marfura adds the dotting once the *fi* lines have met in the middle of the canvas. Choosing to break the pointillist marks into rectangular segments by pigment produces a series of dotted colour fields. In some areas, two colours are used together. It is this design that was explained by Maurice O’Riordan as ‘woven-like bands... the careful and intuitively

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\(^{84}\) Patsy Marfura, *Durmu*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 150 x 150cm, fig. 9.

\(^{85}\) Patsy Marfura, interviewed at Peppimenarti, March 28, 2012.
carefree lines and dotting of her paintings envelop a symbolic, abstracted space.'

Figure 4 Patsy Marfura, Durrmu, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 150 x 150cm. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.

From 2004-06, Marfura developed a range of fi designs that have been described as ‘her minimalist range.’ Deprived of her veiled dotting, the fi cross the surface in organic, fragile, quivering lines. In Fi, 2008, Marfura began with a diluted crimson background, painted in rough, gestural brush strokes. Again, her fi lines are laid on individually from either ends of the canvas, this time meeting at two points. The convergence of lines resembles a series of river deltas. Behind them, the wash of colour falls down the surface of the work, producing further,

87 Ibid.
88 Patsy Marfura, Fi, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 150 x 150cm, fig. 10.
tremulous movement. These works of Marfura’s stand apart from the Durrrmu oeuvre of careful, delicate and meticulous mark making. Here, Marfura’s lines are fleshy and appear to mimic the irregularity of a finger-applied mark. Comparisons to the hair string designs of Pintupi artist Makinti Napanangka arise. Both artists have a vulnerability about their work: their lines are at once fluid and undulating. Napanangka’s hair string refers to ceremonial woven skirts, worn by the Kungka Kutjarra or ‘Two Travelling Women’, ancestral beings whose dreaming mountain site is found near the Kintore community.89 Both artists are representing more than the item of material culture. They are physically marking out the feeling of the fibre, and simultaneously evoking its associations with country and ceremony.

Figure 5 Patsy Marfura, Fi, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 150 x 150cm. Image courtesy Durrrmu Arts.

Fi was originally constructed by Marfura for ceremonial adornments, further linking the depiction of fibre to bodily inscription and bringing the concept of durrmu full circle. As Elkin observed, ‘designs plus the associated songs or chants impart a virtue to the weapon or other object which they adorn.’

Regina Pilawuk Wilson states of ceremonial merrepen fi:

Special decoration for women in ceremony: arm bands, head bands, waist band, wrist bands. Wusye, that means hair belt. Pinbin used to make necklace, with colour, red, yellow, white
That women’s ceremony, they dressed up really nice
We’ve been doing it with that merrepen.
They used to do pattern too, in the band, really neat one, that pattern, my uncle used to do it, my uncle, my mother’s brother.

Repetition and ceremony are bound by the notion that something significant must be reiterated. Ceremony is an intensive period of semantic repetition. Djon Mundine has stated of women’s ceremony: ‘women move in a kind of minimalistic shuffle (not really a step) with the feet always in the sand . . . . A quiver, not a displacement but a qualitative shift . . . a dance of the not-yet.’ As in ceremony, the action of weaving creates a liminal space between the everyday and the sacred. Just as a Ngan’gi sugar glider dance will involve five repeated sequences, the looping of a warrgadi requires continuous looping, row after row. The repetition re-establishes a connection, to country, ancestors, stories and song cycles. The importance of labour and the handmade emerges; without the physical action of weaving or dancing, these connections cannot be made. Biddle calls this ‘ritualised forms of caring for country . . . Concrete processes in which country is held in the mind as much as it is in the hand.’

Marfura’s Durrmu, 2007, was both an imagining of ceremonial marks and a study in the colours of the mimeli and tyemerrmerr – local botanical pigments, used for dyeing fibre. The painting resembles the craft of patch-work, with

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91 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, April 19, 2011.
94 Patsy Marfura, Durrmu, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 109 x 93cm, fig. 13.
irregular scraps of fibre being knitted together to form a harmonic whole. Marfura varied the density and quality of her dotted marks from field to field: some are composed of looser, larger ochre marks, whilst others recede into the darkened backdrop through their deep violet-brown tones. O’Riordan used the descriptors ‘mottled’ and ‘stippled’ for the work, to articulate its tonal and textural gradations. The work, along with Durrmu and Fi, were exhibited in the Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award 2008 at the Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery.

In the catalogue essay, O’Riordan stated, in response to Marfura’s Durrmu, 2007:

Colour also packs a harmonic punch in Marfura’s third Durrmu painting, similarly in tune with the local range of natural dyes used in weaving. Here the horizontal bands expand toward the viewer, underscored by an indigo dot-mosaic – evoking the local blackcurrant (mimeli) colour dye – which also floats across the canvas in enigmatic, powdery patches. Though durrmu literally refers to the dotting motif in body painting, Patsy Marfura’s Durrmu paintings also clearly reference weaving and, intrinsically, ceremony and law.

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95 See video 9: Patsy Marfura painting a durrmu design on linen, Durrmu Arts, April 18, 2010.
96 M. O’Riordan, op. cit., p16.
97 Patsy Marfura, Durrmu, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 109 x 93cm, fig. 13.
98 Patsy Marfura, Fi, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 150 x 150cm, fig. 10.
99 Patsy Marfura, Durrmu, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 90 x 50cm, fig. 14.
100 M. O’Riordan, op. cit., p16.
Figure 6 Annunciata Nunuk Wilson holding *te* (*Haemodorum corymbosum*), from which brown pigments are derived, Peppimenarti. Photo by Vanessa Bellemore.
Figure 7 examples of mimeli (top), te (centre) and yewirr (lower right) pigments and examples of dyed merrepen fibre, prepared by Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Margaret Kundu, Annunciata Nunuk Wilson and Kathleen Korda, Peppimenarti, 2010. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Figure 8 Patsy Marfura, *Durrmu*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 109 x 93cm. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.
The choice of pigments is indeed connected with the harvesting and processing of blue, grey and purple colour through mimeli and tyemerrmerr. Mimeli berries (Antidesma ghaesembila) are akin to European blackberries and are a popular monsoonal snack. When not eaten, they are boiled with fibre to imbue a range of blues and violets, depending on the length of boiling time. Merrepen (sand-palm) absorbs the mimeli more than yerrgi (pandanus), hence Marfura chooses to depict fi string rather than, say, a coil basket stitch design, to communicate the colour.
This communication of colour is also a communication of country. *Mimeli*, for Marfura, is a marker of country. Approximately ten kilometres outside the community, the rak-Malfiyin estate is Marfura’s ancestral land, linked to her totem of the eagle. When sourcing the *mimeli* berries, Mafura is brought closer to that land, thus the harvesting trips hold a cultural as well as communal significance.

Diana Young argues in *The Colour of Things* that colour effects more than simply pigment, using the significance of green among the Pitjantjatjara and Yankunytjatjara language groups as an example. Colour has agency, and can alter both the understanding and development of cultural dimensions. In Marfura’s effecting of the spectrum of blues and purples, she calls up the plant (*merrepen*), its berry (*mimeli*), the land on which it grows (*rak-Malfiyin*) and that land’s ancestral and totemic implications. The colours embody a sense of being and enacting culture. Young cites another example, of the Melanesian *kula*’s reverence of white shells that have become red with age and human handling. The stain is a sign of history, knowledge and tradition, and the stronger the hue, the higher the value placed upon the object. Similarly, Marfura is activating the blue pigment through the processes of harvesting, preparing, boiling, infusing, and, finally, weaving. The value of the colour is achieved by this traditional, routine activity.

The process of preparing the pigment further activates its cultural value. Marfura must mix her acrylic pigments to best match the various shades of blue. Her conscious action of choosing, combining, diluting and applying all reanimate the country of *mimeli*. When dyeing fibre, white ash powder (*bafun*) may be added to increase the intensity of colour. Similarly, Marfura will add a heightened crimson pigment to her approximations of *mimeli* blue, producing a vivified version of the natural tint. The processes are akin to alchemy: colour embodies knowledge and being. In *Durrmu*, 2007, flecks of ochre, red and white interrupt the series of berry-derived hues, heralding the act of body painting and further embedding the

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102 Ibid., p181.
103 Ibid., p178.
104 Patsy Marfura, *Durrmu*, 2007, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 90 x 50cm, fig. 14.
painting in country and ceremony.

PATTERN, SCENT AND COUNTRY

The *warrgadi* weave is also used to construct the *wullipun* fish net. Kathleen Korda and Felicity Jimarin are specialist *wullipun* net weavers, spending around six months, over time, to complete one net. They are string dilly bags writ large; a mass of sand-palm textile that is fashioned into an oval scoop and used as a hand-held sieve to capture small river fish and crayfish. Today, the women prefer to use a simple line for fishing, and the *wullipun* nets are made as decorative, cultural objects. Once complete, the edges of the pocket-shaped object are bound to a long, pliable piece of *pinbin* (*Flagellaria indica*), commonly known as or ‘bush bamboo’ or ‘bush cane’. *Pinbin* grows in clumps around waterways close to Peppimenarti and is easy to harvest. The younger shoots can be manipulated into an oval shape without breaking. Originally, the nets would have been constructed with undyed *fi*, however in the last two decades, *warrgadi* weavers have approached *wullipun* as they would a marketable string dilly bag, carefully dyeing the *merrepen* and looping it in vivid, rainbow rows of looping. The form of a suspended *wullipun* resembles the gunwales and hull of a small boat. The final effect is of a suspended, semi-transparent vessel, vibrating with rich *yewirr* (colour tree) colour.

In 2009, Diane Moon commissioned a *wullipun* net from Kathleen Korda, for inclusion in the Gallery of Modern Art’s *Floating Life* exhibition, 2009. The resulting work was hung alongside Wilson’s *Warrgarri (String bag stitch)*, 2003, and *Syaw (Fish net)*, 2004. Moon stated of the works:

> Although not a landscape in the familiar sense, through a succession of textures and illusions the painting becomes an aerial view that suggests, both physically and metaphorically, the feeling of moving through country and sunlit water.

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105 Kathleen Korda, *Walipun (Fish net)*, 2008, looped merrepen (sand palm) fibre, natural dyes with bamboo, 62 x 132 x 105cm, purchased 2009 Queensland Art Gallery Foundation, see fig.15; *Floating Life: Contemporary Aboriginal Fibre Art*, Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery, August 1 – October 18, 2009.

Importantly, the two warrgadi-derived designs flanked Wilson’s Syaw (Fish net), 2004, as though the contemporary and flourishing fibre practices were supporting the elegiac net design. The display, and the greater exhibition, were an example of the changing treatment of contemporary Indigenous fibre practice.

However, it was the winning entry of the 2005 National Indigenous and Torres-Strait Islander Awards that heralded this renewed significance bestowed upon fibre articles. When announcing the winning artwork, Tjanpi Grass Toyota\textsuperscript{107}, Telstra judge and artist Destiny Deacon stated ‘I was looking for something that had the wow factor...you can smell it.’\textsuperscript{108} This simple phrase encompasses the multisensory qualities of material culture and their relationship to the materiality of human experience. More recently, Jennifer Biddle drew upon Deacon’s phrase to illuminate the visceral impact and immediacy of Tjanpi woven objects.\textsuperscript{109}

\textsuperscript{107} Tjanpi Weavers, \textit{Tjanpi Grass Toyota}, 2005, desert grass, jute string, mixed media, 190 x 120 x 420 cm. Purchased 2005, Telstra Collection, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory. Winner, Telstra First Prize, 22nd Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award.
\textsuperscript{109} J. Biddle, ‘A Politics of Proximity’, p11.
David Howes’s Scent, Sound and Synaesthesia examines the multiple sensory dimensions, or ‘sensual relations’ of objects, and their contribution to a form of ‘cultural synaesthesia’. Howes argues that every object embodies a sensory blend of its production origins (the senses employed in its making), its formal qualities and those of its consumer or audience. Steve Feld’s theory of ‘sense-scapes’, as opposed to landscapes, also arises. Applying this idea, the concept of space may be altered by scents; for example, if Tom Turner’s Creek, Peppimenarti, is high during the wet season, this visual scape would be sensed by the odour of submerged plants, and the altered water table across the community. Similarly, in the dry, the yenggitawan (smoke) from a bush fire or burn-off will indicate the sudden scarcity of merrepen fibre. Time, space and identity are informed by these sense-scapes. It is a process of emplacement, rather than solely embodiment. To analyse a warrgadi visually would be to ignore multiple meanings significant to its creator: the smell of the fibre and pigments, and its texture.

A model of intersensoriality – attending to the multiple sensory dimensions of objects - must be applied when reading objects such as a wullipun. Biddle similarly advocates analysis beyond the ‘distinction between subjective experience and object matter, human and nonhuman, inside and outside, me and it.’ The neat boundaries surrounding Indigenous art are dissolved with a synaesthetic treatment, not only for fibre products but painted designs also. When painting out the lines of fi, or the loops of warrgadi, the artist is conjuring the fibre. Merleau-Ponty’s ‘presences’ helps identify this process: sensations are experienced presences, presences reflecting an ‘embodied mind’.

Henri Bergson can be read to take this one step further, suggesting that sensation is also tied to memory: ‘with the immediate and present data of our

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111 Ibid., p166.
113 David Howes, ‘Scent, Sound and Synaesthesia’, p167.
114 Ibid., p169.
senses, we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience.’\(^\text{117}\) Although the line is a painted mark, the artist is thinking upon country, merrepen, string, fi and the processes that link them. Heightening this is the physical presence of fibre; weaving and painting are often both undertaken in an afternoon, and thus the green, sweet scent of the dyed merrepen alters the synthetic smell of the acrylic pigments.

Biddle’s thesis on the relationship between mark making and ancestral presences also arises here.\(^\text{118}\) The making of string dilly bags is a physical embodiment of culture and country, rather than a representation of them. The purple fibre, for example, does not refer to the plant mimeli, but is a tangible, tactile example of it. Biddle argues that ‘canvas becomes – like skin itself – the same stuff as country’.\(^\text{119}\) In the case of the Ngan’gi weavers, the fibre is at once physical specimen of country and a medium through which to inscribe country.\(^\text{120}\) The bringing forth of country is both literal and emblematic. The woven object is the site of the fibre, almost always from country outside the community: country that requires caretaking. These sites have both ancestral and modern stories and implications.

Biddle discusses the ‘inscriptive space’ of Warlpiri women’s skin in Breasts, Bodies, Canvas; in the case of Ngan’gi warrgadi looping, the inscriptive space is the space in and around their hands and the fibre. It is the space that is energised by the weaving activity, the space that emerges from the cyclical, confident strokes of looping, threading and knotting. Biddle also notes that the process of wrapping, coiling and binding of the Tjanpi spinifex weavers both creates and traces a form, creating presence: ‘they bring into being by tracing what already is.’\(^\text{121}\)

The artist and weaver Theresa Lemon conjures the merrepen dreaming when she weaves her mats and baskets. She states:

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\(^{117}\) Henri Bergsen, cited in, Senses of Place, op. cit., p93.
\(^{119}\) J. Biddle, Breasts, Bodies, Canvas, p56.
\(^{120}\) Ibid.
These designs are based on the Merrepen Dreaming. This dreaming is based on these two big palm trees - they've each got twenty branches. They're really beautiful. The shape is really beautiful.

This tree is found at Merrepen, a place not far from Peppimenarti, on the Moyle River. The place of Ngan’gikurungurr people.

This palm tree is my totem.122

Lemon enacts the ancestral story of the very fibre she is using. As Biddle states, ‘if painting is to engender the efficacy of the Dreaming, it must reproduce marks Ancestors themselves made first’.123 It is the process of activation that is valued, rather than the story itself. Biddle similarly noted this in relation to the Tjanpi weavers: ‘(it is) not what the Dreaming as Law means but how it is made and remade that matters’.124

Christine Watson’s Piercing the Ground established a haptic reading of Indigenous women’s painting. Working with the Kutjungka women, Watson argued that their image making was not purely visual but involved affective qualities of touch, sound and bodily elements.125 She notes the variety of Kukatja words for drawing and painting, many of which surround concepts of piercing and touching, due to the Kutjungka artistic sources of a sand medium.126 Ancestral presences, similarly, do not only appear visually. They are within the ground, and therefore felt during the making of a sand drawing, or connected to the weather, and thus sensed through a storm’s coming, for example. In this way, Marfura’s designs are both corporeal and sensory. By analogy to the Kutjungka case, the skin of the ceremonial body is alive with durrmu, as is the country from which the weaving designs originate. She fuses bodily and material concepts. Rather than simply a translation from three to two dimensions, the designs are actually ever present in both forms, as they are in forms throughout country. It isn’t translation, so much as a rewriting or re-enacting of durrmu.

122 Theresa Lemon, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 5, 2008.
123 J. Biddle, Breasts, Bodies, Canvas, p55.
125 Christine Watson, Piercing the Ground: Balgo women’s image making and relationship to country, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Perth, 2003, p50.
126 Ibid.
As argued in this chapter, the fi is a string that leads us to the looping of the warrgadi, the sensory implications of weaving and country, and the multidimensional qualities of Ngan’gi durrmu, design. It is one seemingly simple object – a piece of string – that has informed both ancient Ngan’gi culture, and the contemporary expression of that culture. A study of pattern allows us to explore the significances and processes of the fi/warrgadi design further. Analysing pattern supports an approach that is multidimensional and multisensory. Ngan’gi designs such as fi are interwoven within their context and thus call for a reading that incorporates a complex cultural ecology. Through these patterns and designs, the concept of ‘artist as catalyst of country’ emerges: Patsy Marfura and Regina Pilawuk Wilson are triggering their country’s reanimation via a series of reactions, through handling, preparing, dyeing and weaving and painting fibre. Deborah Bird-Rose articulated the nearby Victoria River’s ‘consciousness of country’, and it applies here.127 Ancestral presence is imprinted in the patterns of weaving. The repetition and performance associated with those patterns further reanimates it. Although the painted patterns have emerged within the milieu of public practices and cultural knowledge, they do not therefore embody less significance, nor ‘information’; they simply represent it in a different guise. Rather than legible icons that narrate a dreaming story, Ngan’gi designs evoke country and embody culture through their relationship to texture, colour, scent and movement. Durrmu patterns not only reflect, but are active designs, forming and giving meaning to Ngan’gi culture. They form a connection between the self and self-made.

The introduction of an entirely new medium, and material, has the ability to rewrite the ‘rules’ for technique and design and alter cultural articulation and transmission. Artists such as Regina Pilawuk Wilson had already reshaped the perceived tenets of Indigenous cultural and religious expression; her adoption of printmaking resulted in further disruptions to notions of the ‘traditional’ or customary in the visual language of the Top End. The history of Indigenous Australian printmaking has been one of cultural innovation, experimentation, and ultimately, renewal. From one of the earliest introductions - art teacher Madeline Clear At Nguiu, Bathurst Island, in 1969 – to the recent collaborative print studio Canopy Arts in Cairns, Indigenous printmaking has been marked by its technically specific, yet conceptually unrestricted, properties. Printmaking gives artists a space within which to innovate, experiment and ultimately reinterpret designs. In the case of Regina Pilawuk Wilson, the processes of printmaking - silkscreen and etching – and textile design, directly transformed her formulation of durrnu.

The first printmaking workshop to be held with the Peppimenarti artists took place in 2001, and was held by artist Franck Gohier of Darwin’s Red Hand Editions. The workshop was limited to silkscreen. The artists had taken part in painting workshops the same year, and the prints reflected what have since become known as ‘early’ Peppi designs, as well as the beginnings of pattern abstraction. During the workshop, Regina Pilawuk Wilson continued her investigation of the looped dilly string bag stitch repetitive motif in her print Dilly Bag. She had recently completed the painting Sun Mats - her first large-scale work on canvas. Sun Mats displays Wilson’s developing use of the dilly bag loop; in this case it acts as a linking mechanism for the five sun mat motifs, knitting them together against a yellow ochre background. In this work, as in her previous handful of paintings on paper, the looping is composed in one colour.

1 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Untitled, 2001, screenprint, printed in colour from multiple stencils, edition of 20, image size 62.2 x 42.6cm, printed by Franck Gohier, Red Hand Prints, fig. 1.
2 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Sun Mats, 2001, synthetic polymer paint on linen, 100 x 100cm, collection of Victoria Daly River Shire, fig. 2.
For the silkscreen print, Wilson utilised a variety of far brighter hues, including a background pigment of napthol crimson. However, the central shift was one of texture: the new technique rendered the dilly bag design flat and matte. The very nature of the silkscreen medium (layering each colour individually via transparencies) heightened the graphic quality of the design. Colours could not bleed together, and Wilson was unable to easily start a line of looping with one colour, and switch half way through. The resulting image has a pop, graphic quality, quite unlike the artists’ previous interpretations of rendering fibre. In this case, the fibre is more line, rather than texture. This was the first indication of the impact of printmaking on Wilson’s design development.

Figure 1 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Untitled*, 2001, screenprint, printed in colour from multiple stencils, edition of 20, image size 62.2 x 42.6cm, printed by Franck Gohier, Red Hand Prints. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.
In October 2007, Basil Hall Editions, with printers Basil Hall and Jacqueline Gribbin, held a silkscreen and etching workshop at the newly formalised Durrrmu Arts, Peppimenarti. The artists were keen to rekindle their printmaking experience, and had requested a workshop take place. Printers Hall and Gribbin spent three days with artists Linda Gilbert, Kevin Gilbert, Margaret Kundu, Theresa Lemon, Patsy Marfura and Regina Pilawuk Wilson, working with both silkscreen and etching media. I acted as an assistant to the printmakers and artists, assisting communication between the two, and ensuring the workshop ran smoothly. Once the different processes behind each medium were explained to Wilson, she decided to start with a silkscreen, due to her familiarity with the medium, and ability to use the same acrylic paints that she would for paintings on linen. The colours she chose – a range of ochres, pinks and black and white – reflected those used in recent syaw (fish-net) acrylic on linen designs. Such paintings were examples of what had become known as her ‘pale’ or ‘pink’
paintings, made up of a series of gently modulating crimson, flesh, ochre and sienna tones. They were inherently tonal: when viewed from afar they appeared to the viewer as blurred and layered impressions of warmth. The individual pigments were almost impossible to distinguish; yet on closer review, the multitude of individual strands of colour emerged. What seemed to be flesh-toned from a distance was made up, in part, of the darkest burnt sienna, and occasionally black.

From the outset, the process that Wilson had developed over the previous five or so years in actualising her painted syaw design was impaired by the layering of silkscreen transparencies. Roger Butler has observed that ‘the sequential overprinting of colours in screenprinting is paralleled in the way traditional bark paintings are realised’. Wilson, as a weaver, ceremonial and acrylic painter, did not experience this sense of familiarity with the layering quality of the technique. Printer Martin King has stated of Tiwi artist Kitty Kantilla’s printmaking process:

I watch as Kitty began drawing onto the aluminium plate, each mark applied with deliberation. She pondered the different tones of the dots, the strength of lightness of each mark. The image evolved in stages...like her first print etching, this print reveals a kind of ‘learning on the job’, an intuitive leap into the process.

This ‘intuitive leap’ echoes Wilson’s experience with the silkscreen. Ordinarily, she would have begun the design with two contrasting pigments in a warp and weft relationship. With silkscreen printmaking, as Hall explained, she would have to complete the entire ‘black’ component of the work, for example, in one process. Critically, Wilson was thus forced to separate her warp and weft line work into discrete processes. This separation ultimately led to her decision to not carry all chosen pigments across the weft plane of the work, leaving two vertical panels in the composition with only black and white warp and weft line work. Wilson decided to only intersect the pigments across part of the plate, producing four distinct vertical panels of patterning: two with ochre, pink, brown and two in black and white only. The farthest right panel is further broken down into horizontal

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bands of strong, graphic black and white line work. As she laid down a new transparency to use a new colour, Wilson was surprised to see the design emerge differently to her acrylic painted interpretations. At one point she exclaimed ‘it’s a new kind of syaw.’

The ability to build the design layer by layer allowed Wilson to reimagine the foundations of the twined grid. On the final transparency layer, Wilson reiterated the monochromatic sections, placing further black weft lines in the far right panel. The resulting image, *Syaw*, 2007, is a far more graphic, bold interpretation of the fish net than her previous ‘pale’ designs. Without the freedom of blending and switching pigments when desired, Regina honed the design into six colours, all strong and undiluted hues of ochre, sienna, orange, crimson, black and white. The syaw design had always, to an extent, embodied a sense of linear sectioning, but

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5 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 22, 2007.
6 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw*, 2007, silkscreen print, edition of 30, image size 57 x 42cm, printed by Clinton Barker for Basil Hall Editions, fig. 3.
the silkscreen medium had allowed this geometry to become its dominant visual message.

Prior to seeing the printed silkscreen some months later, Wilson decided to experiment with the new design in the familiar medium of acrylic on linen. After completing two studies, she initiated a larger work, to be entered into the 2009 Wynne Prize for landscape or subject painting at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Syaw7, 2008, is structurally similar to its silkscreen counterpart, however Wilson’s gently layered line work has been restored. Where the print lines were confident and unbroken, here they advance and recede in moderated undulations. One of Wilson’s newly acquired techniques from the print workshop - the overlaying of white lines above areas of colour – is evident here. The film-like sheets of white line create a transparency in the work, and greater sense of the seeping movement of water through fibre. The segmented areas of colour, whilst carefully modulated, are more isolated from one another than in previous syaws. The only linking mechanism is the overlay of white that stretches across the entire surface. The work is a synthesis of the clear, vivid quality of the print and Wilson’s existing syaw design’s multiplicity and complexity. The painting went on to be included in the Wynne Prize finalists’ exhibition, and has featured as an iconic image for Durrrmu Arts in publicity and marketing. More importantly, it also prompted an entire suite of the ‘new’ syaw paintings from Wilson over the following years.

Although the project altered the very structural DNA of the syaw design, for the artist this object was unaffected; it was still the twined vessel of her forebears and an object signalling the water and fibre of Ngan’gi country. The resonance of the syaw is unchanged, yet the artistic innovations and experimentations are ever changing. For the artist, newly acquired technical skills simply gave rise to another visual interpretation of culture.

7 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Syaw, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 120cm, fig. 4.
Wilson also undertook a large zinc-plate etching at the 2007 workshop, using bitumen paint to make her marks and produce another syaw design. This plate was later printed in sepia inks and included in *The Custodians: Country and Culture* print project and folio, 2008, published by Basil Hall Editions and Nomad Art, Darwin. Here, again, the process of a workshop and predetermined project had a bearing upon both the imagining and reception of the syaw design. *Custodians* brought together ten senior Indigenous artists from around Australia, all whom represented both artistic and cultural leadership in their respective

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countries. Wilson submitted the etching that she had completed at the 2007 Basil Hall workshop for the folio, stating:

I am a custodian because I came here with my husband many years ago and we built Peppimenarti. First we settled near the river, over near the flood plain, but a fire burnt our camp so we had to start again, in another place. I started painting after a workshop and now I can teach and help the others paint. I paint the traditions of weaving, of message sticks, *durmu* dot body painting and my mother’s dingo dreaming. This one is a *syaw* (fish-net). Only my family paints this one.\(^9\)

The image was drawn on the plate in sugar-lift aquatint. Wilson and Hall chose to print the image in sepia, to enhance the textural qualities of the line work. The print was acquired by the British Museum, and exhibited in its 2011 exhibition *Out of Australia: prints and drawings from Sidney Nolan to Rover Thomas*. Curator Stephen Coppel developed the exhibition to communicate the major developments in Australian art from the 1940s to present day, as seen through the Museum’s print collection. In its catalogue, Coppel stated of Wilson’s etching: ‘the nets become an abstract pattern of interwoven lines that evoke the dapple of light on weave.’\(^{10}\) The print is an example of the effect a project’s external framing of content and context may have on an image. As Wilson completed the print prior to the project’s parameters being set, she was unaffected by them, however the handling and reception of the image within the project allowed questions of custodianship, authority and associated responsibilities of ancestral law and land to emerge. For many of the participating artists, ‘ceremonially important’ imagery was being put forward.\(^{11}\) Whilst Margie West, in the project’s catalogue essay, stated that the ‘illustrations...all have meaning, because everything in their society reflects the totality of ancestral creation’, Wilson was also singled out as the ‘only artist to eschew any ancestral reference in her work.’\(^{12}\) As previously discussed, the statement reflected the perceived reading of Peppi art as predominantly abstract and utilitarian. Yet, its inclusion in the folio indicated the

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\(^{11}\) Margie West, *The Custodians* catalogue, op. cit.

\(^{12}\) Ibid.
interstitial status bestowed upon Ngan’gi art: existing somewhere between fibre and ancestral, ceremonial resonances.

In 2009-10, Durrmu Arts and Basil Hall Editions produced a suite of etchings that resulted in the exhibition *Prints and Pandanus* at Nomad Art, Darwin, in June 2010. The three-day printmaking workshop took place in Peppimenarti in November 2009, on the veranda of Durrmu Arts, and involved seven artists: Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Patsy Marfura, Dianne Hodgson, Veronica Wilson, Anastasia Wilson, Annunciata Wilson and Freda Kundu, as well as printers Basil Hall, Nena Zanos and myself as Art Coordinator. After some discussion amongst the artists, it was decided that the theme of the workshop would be ‘Ngan’gi weaving traditions and history.’ This request arose as a result of recent discussions at the art centre around this dissertation’s research, and its associated interest in historical and no-longer-practiced Ngan’gi fibrecraft. After briefing Basil Hall on the theme, he proposed the use of collagraphy, whereby materials may be placed directly onto a soft ground, such as cardboard, and placed through the press. Hall has previously stated that ‘the collaborating printmaker’s skills are mainly called upon to aid in the selection of the most appropriate medium for each artist.’

Interested in the new suggestion, the artists wove small examples of their various designs and techniques, ultimately creating a catalogue of carefully commissioned and executed specimens. The objects were then placed on the soft ground and run through the press, creating a fossil-like indented presence upon the card.

These marks evoked the place of these objects in history: in the storerooms of museums, the images in textbooks and diagrams of anthropologists’ fieldwork journals. As Lindy Allen has stated, ‘encounters with museum collections inspire new forms and interpretations and can influence greatly the contemporary practice of Indigenous artists.’ The collagraphs echoed the ghostliness, for example, of Haddon’s mounted string figures on cardboard. However, in this case the construction and production of the string imagery reflected Indigenous

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14 See figs 5, 6 and 7 of artists preparing their collagraphs.
agency. To further reinvigorate the image and object, the artists proceeded to paint their two dimensional interpretation of the woven items onto silkscreen transparencies. Hall suggested that these painted images could be overlain above the indented object marks, forming a union of two and three dimensional fibre history and tradition. The resulting works went one step further, embodying the very transformations of Ngan’gi fibre design over the preceding decade. The prints fuse actual fibre objects and painted interpretations of them, marking the Peppi artists’ oeuvre within the contemporary Indigenous Australian art movement.

Figure 5 Regina Pilawuk Wilson weaving warrgadi samples for her collagraph, November 2009. Photo by Harriet Fesq.
Figure 6 Regina Pilawuk Wilson preparing her collagraph, November 2009. Photo by Harriet Fesq.

Figure 7 Patsy Marfura gluing her woven piece to the card, November 2009. Photo by Harriet Fesq.
The resulting print *Warrgadi*\(^{16}\) by Regina Pilawuk Wilson exemplifies this merger. The woven example of *warrgadi* (dilly bag) is the central imprinted object, its ‘tail’ ends trailing up in an arc, mirroring the direction of a bag handle. This arc is traced by Regina’s own hand, in the form of her painted *warrgadi* image. The woven handle bounces off the graphic handle’s neat bold line. The rest of the painted or drawn bag is ‘filled’ with other remnants of *fi* string. The colour of the silkscreen image is Regina’s preferred pink, derived from quinacridone rose deep synthetic polymer paint. During the printing process, with the artist’s consultation, Basil Hall has created tonal effects with differential inking, allowing it to echo around the objects. The prints from this project acted as a suite of remembrance and renewal. Artists such as Veronica Wilson are not weavers, yet took part in the project to experiment with the construction of woven patterns and forms, a testament to the deeply held regard for, and cultural embodiment of, fibre in Ngan’gi culture. The project opened up new possibilities for cultural maintenance.

\(^{16}\) Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgadi*, etching, 2009, edition of 40, image size 29.5 x 20cm, printed by Mats Unden, Nena Zanos, Natasha Rowell for Basil Hall Editions, fig. 8.
In 2010, the prominent interior and furniture design firm Koskela, of Rosebery, Sydney, approached Durrmu Arts with a proposal for a textile collaboration. After admiring the art of Regina Wilson, Koskela owners Sasha Titchkosky and Russell Koskela believed the aesthetic and character of her painted designs would transfer successfully to textiles for the interior design market. Koskela had established their reputation for Indigenous design projects via the Yuta Badalaya (in a new light) project with Elcho Island Arts, Galiwin’ku, in 2009-10.\(^{17}\) In the project, Koskela provided Elcho artists with fixed wire lamp frames, and asked the artists to ‘fill’ the void space with any fibre technique they desired. The diversity

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\(^{17}\) Yuta Badalaya (in a new light) project between Koskela and Elcho Island Arts, 2009-10. Further detail on the collaboration can be found at Artslaw URL <http://www.artslaw.com.au/case-studies/entry/yuta-badalaya-in-a-new-light/>
and innovation of the resulting objects was astonishing. The project had provided the artists with a culturally or traditionally unencumbered medium, allowing them to feel unrestricted in form and design. The familiar materials of pandanus and bush string were transformed into entirely new woven patterns that stretched across the conical forms. The objects also blurred the boundary between product and artwork, craft and art, fibre and function. As Titchkosky has noted, it was ‘the first time these traditional techniques have been used to create products which are specifically designed for the contemporary interiors market.’

The acclaimed weaver Mavis Warrngilna Ganambarr stated of the project:

"I thought it would be interesting to take our traditional Yolngu materials and use them on Balanda objects. We all thought this would be a good way to show a new audience what can be done by Yolngu artists with materials from the bush."

Similarly, for Wilson, the opportunity to develop textile designs was a natural extension of her fibre and painted design practice. She was drawn to the idea that an audience would touch, feel and lie against her designs, and felt proud that people would have them in their home. For Wilson, the designs were always objects to begin with: mats for babies to shelter under, bags to be slung over a shoulder, baskets to carry personal possessions. The concept of bringing these objects back into the home once more was very appealing. The project caused a full-circle effect: from woven object, to painted representation, and back to textural object once more, all through the means of durrmu.

The Koskela collaboration differed to most Indigenous textile projects due to the nature of its production and distribution. Rather than hand printing in the community, the textiles were commercially produced by a specialty digital printing studio in Sydney. Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s interest lay in the design concept, rather than the physical printing process, and as long as there was a sample approval process – something stipulated in the contract between the artist and Koskela – she was happier leaving the printing to an external party. Similarly, the

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18 Sasha Titchkosky, Yuta Badalaya: In a New Light, media release, 2010.
distribution of the textile products, being sold exclusively through Koskela, rather than the art centre, was unorthodox. The contract/agreement between the two parties was based on a design commission fee plus royalties for every unit sold – these varied according to individual products but were approximately 15 to 20 per cent of retail sale prices. The arrangement removed all financial risk for Durmu Arts, and enabled a modest but steady income stream for the artist.

The marketing of Indigenous textiles has ‘always been a challenging activity.’\textsuperscript{20} In the early days of central desert batik, there was a dearth of galleries willing to exhibit textiles, and a lack of appreciation of the designs as ‘fine art.’\textsuperscript{21} Desert batik and silkscreen from the Top End have largely been exhibited in specialty fabric outlets – such as Adelaide’s Fabric of Life – or spaces specialising in multiples, such as Nomad Art in Darwin, rather than dedicated Indigenous ‘fine’ or ‘contemporary’ art’ galleries. The Koskela collaboration was featured in the January/February 2012 issue of Vog

The textiles were also featured in Inside Out magazine, and the international design publication Monocle.\textsuperscript{23} This coverage reflected the new market and audience sought by the project, that of the world of design, interiors and home wares. Judith Ryan notes that the Aboriginal women artists of Utopia only achieved artistic recognition once they transferred their designs from batik to an acrylic on canvas medium.\textsuperscript{24} For Regina Pilawuk Wilson, the transferral of design, and associated marketing challenges, was reversed. As an established and respected painter, the textile project could potentially be viewed as a ‘reversion’ to craft. This hierarchy, however, did not exist for the artist. As she stated of the project: ‘that fabric is my durrmu, like having my weavings and my durrmu on cloth.’\textsuperscript{25}

As Louise Hamby has stated, ‘woven cloth has remained an important part of Aboriginal culture...commonly used in ceremonies and...part of ceremonial

\textsuperscript{22} Alexandra Gordon, ‘Homespun’, Vogue Living Australia, January/February 2012, p46, , fig. 15.
\textsuperscript{23} Inside Out, February 2012, p178; Monocle Magazine, Issue 53, p184.
\textsuperscript{25} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
In central and eastern Arnhem Land, textiles were brought over from Indonesia by trepangers. George Chaloupka also noted that:

Many of the decorative elements in the art of the northern shelters are similar patterns seen in Indonesian weavings and textiles...the deco hatching, diamond and lozenge designs as well as the patterned parallel, horizontal and vertical blocks found in the art could be based on such fabrics.

The impact of imported Macassan cloth on the Ngan’gi is less evident, however the status of textiles amongst the Ngan’gi weavers is rarefied. The ability to construct a warp and weft that results in something light and pliable is viewed as remarkable by the women, as displayed by their exclamations over the ‘soft’ and ‘smooth’ qualities of the resulting Koskela-Regina Pilawuk Wilson products at the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, 2012. For Wilson, the ability to touch the designs enabled a wholly sensory experience, one that would best communicate the custom, country, culture of the Ngan’gikurunggurr.

The exclusion of textiles such as the Utopia batiks from ‘fine’ art also granted them distance from the systems of exchange and market demands that usually impact the production of Indigenous painting, resulting in more dynamic, unrestricted designs. In the same way, Regina Pilawuk Wilson was free to experiment with her established syaw, warrgadi and message stick designs for the Koskela textile project.

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28 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed in Darwin, August 10, 2012.
After completing three silkscreen plates, Wilson decided to paint the final designs on linen, rather than the silkscreen medium, as she wanted to allow the textural, layered quality of the designs to be captured in the textiles. She

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29 See videos 10 and 11: Regina Pilawuk Wilson painting a silkscreen transparency with *durrmu* (dot) and Message Stick designs for Koskela textile design project; initial studies prior to the final designs that were completed using synthetic polymer paint on linen, Durrmu Arts, April 18, 2010.
completed three 90 x 50cm works on linen: Message Sticks\textsuperscript{30}, Syaw (fish-net)\textsuperscript{31} and Warrgadi (dilly bag).\textsuperscript{32} After six months of printing trials and samples, using silkscreen and digital techniques, Koskela and Wilson decided that high-resolution digital printing resulted in the most faithful replication of the designs.

Figure 10 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Message Sticks, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela Pty. Ltd., Sydney. Image courtesy Durrrmu Arts.

\textsuperscript{30} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Message Sticks, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela, fig. 10.
\textsuperscript{31} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Syaw, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela, fig. 12.
\textsuperscript{32} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Warrgadi, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela, fig. 11.
Figure 11 Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s *Message Stick* design on silk cushions, collection of Koskela Pty. Ltd., Sydney. Image courtesy Koskela.

Figure 10 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Warrgadi*, 2010, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.
Figure 11 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Syaw (Fish Net)*, 2011, synthetic polymer paint on canvas, 70 x 50cm, collection of Koskela. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.
The syaw design for the project clearly echoes Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s silkscreen design from the 2007 Basil Hall workshop. Wilson aimed to fuse the graphic quality of the print with a heavier, denser textural aesthetic for the textile design, in order to ‘make it feel like that syaw, in the water, you know.’ Foreseeing its application onto silk and linen, Wilson applied a stronger line to the design, building up the pigments with more vigour, effectively anticipating the bold marks required for a repeat-print long cloth. In the second print run of the project, completed in September 2012, Wilson and Sasha Titchkosky decided to break

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33 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed in Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
the syaw up into its component panels, printing them separately and producing a discrete black and white design. As a result of this, the artist is now working on monochromatic syaw designs in acrylic on linen.

Figure 15 Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s Syaw design on silk, hanging in the Koskela showroom, Sydney, September 2012. Image courtesy Koskela.

34 See fig. 15.
Aside from her well-known fish-net and dilly string bag designs, Wilson chose to celebrate the cultural significance of message sticks - a traditional form of communication between communities and language groups – for the Koskela project, in *Message Sticks, 2011*.35 These sticks were delivered between clans and communities in the Daly River region, where Wilson was born, until circa 1940. A designated runner would travel for many days to relay messages relating to war and ceremonies. A set of marks was made by elders to remind the messenger of the content of the message. The lines incised across the sticks represented the notches made by the messenger to indicate how many days he had travelled. As objects, they were also an emblem of authority, and acted as a physical guarantee of credentials. Message sticks historically heralded important events and were a form of ‘aboriginal education’.36

35 See fig. 10.
36 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
In 2009, Regina Wilson, with the assistance of Peppimenarti elder Captain Wodij, recounted the following story of the message stick:

When we were young we used to live at Daly River and his mob used to live at Uban, near Timber Creek.
There was no road, no anything.
They used to carry message sticks
They used to come to Daly River from Uban.
For weeks they used to travel.
They carried message sticks to remember how many days they travel to that certain place.
It was like first Aboriginal education... just to remember how many days to travel from a certain place to Daly.
They used to travel from here to Beswick too.
Even in flood waters.
They used to swim creeks and rivers to get to a place for ceremony.
This was before WWII.
They were really young men. I remember they used to come.
When the war started they moved back to Uban.
They used to walk long way, no motor car.
They used to join up at Moyle River to fight different clans.
They used to swim in the sea, no boat and less crocodiles.
Also by bringing the message stick they would bring people back with them... they would all walk together, sometimes for one year. Sometimes stay in one place for camp: big mob food, turtle, yam, fish.
They would walk slowly, those old people.
And children too, and babies. They’d have the babies half way. We used to have bush nurses who would cut the cord with a mussel shell.
They used to take message stick to boss man of a language group. If Boss says yes, they’d all move.
If a mob went to another country for burning grass, the leader would get angry and a message stick would follow. Then there would be war.
If a man went off with message stick and didn’t return, they think big trouble. A different clan would go and steal another man’s wife.

Message stick is for war and ceremony and things like that.
That message stick means a lot.37

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37 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, with assistance from Captain Wodij, 2009, statement recorded and provided by Durrrmu Arts.
The message stick - a wooden, rather than fibre object - has been re-imagined by Wilson as a textured testament in her *Message Stick* designs. The representation and re-imagining of cultural articles also emerges in Dorothy Napangardi’s *karlangu* paintings. Erin Manning elucidates Napangardi’s depiction of digging sticks in *Karlangu*, 2001, as ‘forms of digging sticks...it is not simply their shape which gives them the resonance of the digging sticks: it is the force conveyed through the blackness pushing forward through the white...’38 Similarly, in Wilson’s *Message Sticks*, 201139, the objects are evocations of a physical object, yet equally attempts to represent the rhythms and forms of country and culture. Wilson initiates her message stick designs with an entirely dotted field, often in a myriad of colours. The dots here are freer and looser than in her *durrmu* designs; rather than a complex, undulating series of dotted line forms, here the dots act as an even ground upon which to place the cultural objects.

![Image of Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Message Sticks*, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 120cm. Image courtesy Durrmu Arts.](image-url)

39 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, *Message Sticks*, 2008, synthetic polymer paint on Belgian linen, 200 x 120cm, fig. 17.
In Napangardi’s *Karlangu*, the black dotted sticks emerge from the white background. Manning notes that ‘we feel the digging sticks before we see them.’ The interplay of dots, line and object in *Message Sticks* creates a similarly vibratory effect. The dots are absorbed by Wilson’s layered, organic line work. Wilson creates the illusion of space by constructing perpendicular relationships between her lined mark-making. The horizontal lines that cross the main body of the sticks, denoting the notches marked for the number of days travelled, are balanced by ‘background’ vertical strokes. The tapered end of the sticks is striated vertically, and hence the background is horizontal. When relating the significance of digging sticks within the Southern Cross constellation, Warlpiri custodian Wanta Jampinjinpa Patrick states that ‘they are more than artefacts – they represent what we stand for.’ He goes on to explain that the ceremony associated with the Southern Cross ‘let the artefacts do the talking...allow that

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40 E. Manning, op. cit., p204.
dance to talk back to you.” The illusion of space and vibratory quality of Napangardi’s sticks is a visual manifestation of these sentiments, communicating the relationship between object, law, ceremony and country.

Wilson’s message stick imagery is both painted, cultural object and abstracted design. When asked about the process of creating a textile print of the cultural article – a medium upon which people would potentially sit on, or cover themselves with, Wilson stated that ‘the story of this design is important.’ During the Koskela project, Wilson consciously altered the message stick design in colour and form, giving it a refreshed quality for its new context. The design uses a marigold orange background and series of jewel tones for the dotting and line work, a contrast to her previous complex colour studies in flesh or gold tones. The sticks themselves are thicker, heavier objects and the overall effect is lively and dynamic.

These articles may have originally carried the weight of bad news, in the form of death or conflict, yet Wilson painted these objects as a form of celebratory remembrance. The dominant visual message from her message stick designs is actually one of fibre; she transposed her ability to depict texture onto wooden objects, drawing them into her fibre oeuvre. The result was to reframe them in a new context. She made them her own, or part of her story, her personal memories. Thus the designs as textiles are less strictly ‘message sticks’ as we know them, but yet another textural image of culture and memory. The introduction of a textile medium freed the artist ‘from the need to ‘dress up’ their work with allusions to ritual, the Dreaming, or rights in land or to repeat the saleable aspects of their work on demand.’

Wilson’s painted representations of message sticks feed back into the transformation of the objects themselves. In 2009, Wilson decided to paint some wooden message sticks with her textured design, bringing the relationship full

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42 Ibid.
43 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
44 See fig. 10.
The fifty centimetre, oval forms were treated as a canvas, covered in a background colour, then a veil of dots, and, finally, line work that follows the curves of the object. They were created as an educational tool, to aid her explanation of her paintings. As no male relatives were willing or able to carve the sticks, Wilson superimposed her designs onto them, acknowledging that they were ‘not like’ the old ones, but were ‘her design.’ The sticks were nominated by Regina to be used in marketing material for the Koskela textiles, resulting in a photo shoot that presented the sticks, along with woven articles and the artist’s paint palette, as a tableau beneath her printed silk designs. As the object informed the two dimensional design, the painting fed recursively back into object making.

Figure 19 Image of *Durrmu*, Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s textile designs for Koskela, alongside the objects that initiated them, including message sticks. Photo by Andrew Cowen.

Robyn Healy and Judith Ryan have stated of Indigenous textiles:

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46 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, August 7, 2012.
47 See fig. 19.
The act of decorating cloth follows no set guidelines or grand traditions. Cloth offers a malleable surface, unique colour absorption, properties of luminosity, and a tactile allure. The textile is an untamed raw expression, a work that can simply hang or drape with no rigid display forms, defined shape or expectations.\textsuperscript{48}

The process of transformation from three dimensions (woven object) to two (painted surface) and back to three (printed textile) has allowed the artist to re-examine the formation, composition and expression of cultural motifs and their recurrence in pattern making.

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</tbody>
</table>

The motif, in this case a woven object, has been transformed into an overall pattern through painted design, and then back to a motif/object, in the form of a textural, tangible woven object, once more. Biddle’s accounts of the haptic qualities of Warlpiri painting emerge in this context: the Ngan’gi designs are now made up, in part, of loosely-woven linen or dense silk crepe, altering their textural and textual meanings. Here, the linen and silk, rather than canvas, become ‘like skin itself, the same stuff as country.’\textsuperscript{49} Indeed, when viewing an arrangement of the textiles in the Koskela showroom, Wilson stated that it was ‘like Peppi country in the city.’\textsuperscript{50}

In a recent article on the rise of Indigenous design, journalist Anna McCooe opined:

...there’s a new evolutionary principle at work in the design industry: the rise of the allegorist. Exquisite form and exceptional function are no longer enough. A design must have a narrative that renders it worthwhile. Australian indigenous design takes this storytelling to epic proportions.\textsuperscript{51}

\textsuperscript{48} R. Healy and J. Ryan, op. cit., p60.
\textsuperscript{49} Jennifer Biddle, Breasts, Bodies, Canvas: central desert art as experience, University of New South Wales Press, 2007, p56.
\textsuperscript{50} Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, November 2011.
The movement from object to painted representation (and back again), exemplified by Wilson’s textile designs gives rise to a continuing debate over cultural traditionalism and the legitimacy of aesthetic innovation. This chapter aims to observe the sort of cultural transformations wrought by new technique and media; these artists have recast their own material cultural heritage via externally introduced workshops and projects. Wilson’s printed designs do not mimic woven and cultural articles, but demonstrate new forms of mark-making and story-telling.
CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated, through an examination of historical and contemporary weaving designs, that the iteration of pattern forms a reconceptualisation of tradition and culture for the Ngan’gi artists of Durrmu Arts. Ngan’gi woven articles are far more than objects of utility or craft, communicating complex layers of ancestral and performative significances relating to country and community. This thesis’s findings present an opportunity for a new model for reading contemporary Indigenous Australian art: a move beyond translation, to an interpretation of transformations.

This historical and contemporary survey of Ngan’gi art has given rise to a series of relationships between the fibre object, and the body, country, and ultimately, processes of cultural modification. During the course of the research, it became clear that the distinction between Ngan’gi subject and object, weaver and weaving, is unfixed. The significance of the object is to be found not only in its agency, but also in its agency in relation to the space and body around it. Ngan’gi bags, baskets, nets and paintings are objects of action - storytelling, labour, ritual and performance - regardless of any specific relationship with cultural song styles, wangga and lirrga or dance ceremonies. The body is reproduced through the making of a basket, and stitched into its loops, knots and strings. Ngan’gi woven designs are ‘double-barrelled’ objects; that is, they do not discriminate between ‘act and material, subject and object.’¹ As explored in chapters five and six, objects such as syaw (fish net) or fi (string) are objects of experience, yet also stand for the experiencing of those objects.²

The dissertation’s findings have also established that Ngan’gi fibre and painted forms act as objects of rapprochement and experimentation. The wupun coiled baskets are a unification of internal and external forces, and thus objects of Indigenous agency and colonial renegotiation. These themes, first emerging in chapter four – Wupun (coiling): mission and market – recurred throughout the dissertation, through to the final chapter: Further transformations. The Ngan’gi

weavers’ manipulation of new techniques, and adaptation of introduced or imposed practices, suggests a self-determined transformation of cultural association. Printmaking and textile projects provide new avenues for a transposition of cultural data encoded in pattern. Coordinated art centre activity, particularly specific projects and workshops involving new media, can open up and affect the expression of cultural information, and trigger transformations. The process both alters the expression, and proves that it stays the same. Regina Pilawuk Wilson summarised this when describing her ‘new kind of syaw’. These media, rather than being cast as ‘empty’, are in fact undiluted, uncompromised modes of cultural renewal.

Fibre objects also hold meaning within the temporality of labour, and associated concepts of continuity and repetition. The relationship between Ngan’gi fibre objects and painted forms reveals the latter to be at once a textural object, an elegy to lost practice and the representation of a metonymic relationship with the body and self. Ngan’gi art thus provides an avenue for exploring a reading beyond visual analysis towards a textural, experiential, haptic consideration. Ngan’gi painting is not a conclusive image of culture, but rather a ‘process in constant dialogue with other mediums.’ This dissertation ultimately presented Ngan’gi woven design as an active agent, rather than stagnant object. The painted or woven designs/objects are one component in a larger cultural, circular process in which they interact with, and are supported by, the lived experience of a maker; the collection, preparation, storytelling and labour of weaving, for example, are held within the product. Rather than searching for meanings behind a basket, or painting of a basket, this thesis has sought to uncover what the designs are made to mean through these various moments of lived experience, and when viewed through the contexts of colonial collecting, mission forces or the introduction of contemporary techniques.

3 Regina Pilawuk Wilson, interviewed at Peppimenarti, October 22, 2007.
5 Michael Jackson articulates the shift in phenomenological anthropology from ‘what something means’ to ‘what something is made to mean’ in his introduction to Things as They Are, op. cit., p6.
FURTHER RESEARCH

The dissertation has formed an introduction to the significance of Ngan’gi pattern construction, however there is further scope for research in pattern design, development and transformations amongst other language groups of the Top End, and the Asia-Pacific region. A comprehensive comparative study, for example, between Ngan’gi, Tiwi and Amarasi (West Timor) artists and artisans would further illuminate the variety of processes within contemporary practice, and thus cultural reformation. Such a study would also follow a north south-west trade link, which may also be extended southward to include the Murrin-Patha (Port Keats) and Mirriwoong (Kununurra) language groups. Both ancient trade routes and contemporary artistic exchanges could be documented in such a study. A project examining the familial, estate connotations of Tiwi and Ngan’gi pattern could be compared to the *ikat* textile traditions of the Amarasi, that demonstrate the use of carefully constructed patterns to mark identity, political alliances and spiritual allegiances.

Initially, this dissertation aimed to examine the Ngan’gi experience in relation to the Amarasi weavers and printmakers of West Timor, however the breadth of undiscovered history, art history and contemporary analysis of the Ngan’gi warranted an entire thesis. As explained in the dissertation’s proposal, a comparative study of cognate practices within Indigenous Australian and Indonesian textile and fibre art would illuminate the processes behind the construction of patterns and the cultural, religious and historical significances they communicate. On viewing the Amarasi project and exhibition *Ta Teut Amarasi - contemporary textiles and prints based on the cultural traditions of Amarasi, West Timor* in 2008 in Darwin, the idea of investigating the transformation of designs through the textile and paper/linen media of the Ngan’gikurunggurr was initiated. Despite their cultural, religious, social and aesthetic differences, the processes of design conversion and innovation via contemporary workshops resonated within these Amarasi and Ngan’gi experiences. However, the initial stage of the research – that of a historical and

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artistic survey of Ngan’gi artistic expression – bore more than enough material for the entire dissertation. As no substantial research had been achieved in this area, it was important to create a foundation of historical data with which to build upon. Thus, there is considerable potential for forging further links, parallels, exchanges and comparative analyses with surrounding regions.

This thesis acts as an introduction to an ongoing discussion on the cultural meaning encoded within repetitive pattern. By examining the historical and current fibre and painted practice of the Ngan’gi artists of Durrumu Arts, arguments surrounding the place of pattern construction within Australian Indigenous contemporary art emerge. The research has shown that both the lost and recovered techniques and objects associated with Ngan’gi fibre have the power to hold, share and transform ceremonial, social, political and cultural values. Ultimately, the thesis has sought to trace both the objects’ durrmu (design)/patterns, and their patterns of movement through Ngan’gi history and culture, and within the contemporary Indigenous art movement.
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APPENDIX 1:

COLLECTION SEARCH: NGAN’GI OBJECTS IN PUBLIC COLLECTIONS

Art Gallery of New South Wales

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (Fish net)
2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200 x 229cm
Purchased 2004

Australian Museum

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Mat
17 April 1987
Collected by Betty Meehan 1986; purchased
133cm diameter
E080878
Accompanying notes:
A circular mat made from the plaited fibre from the leaves of Livistona humilis. The plaited fibre has been dyed blue, purple, red, orange and yellow. A fringe borders the central plaited area.

Net
02 October 1946
Mouth of the Daly River, Northern Territory. Made between Victoria and Humbert Rivers.
Donated by Mrs Sadie Herbert
E052057

Container basket
28 February 1925
Woguman Tribe, Daly River, N. Australia
Donated by T. Styles 1925
E029157

Kitty Nawula
Container bag
26 March 1987
Daly River Mission, NT
Collected by Betty Meehan, 1986
E080899

Container bag / dilly bag
10 August 1974
Port Keats
Donated by Mrs William Campbell, Mrs Edith Campbell
E066310
Roots used in making dye; wrapped in paperbark
On label: ‘dilly bag and sample of lily root’
Accompanying notes:
‘Container bag / dilly bag’ (fig.x), in the Australian Museum’s collection, was collected by Mrs William Campbell and Mrs Edith Campbell in 1974. Interestingly, the roots used to dye the fibre accompany the bag. The root is wrapped in paperbark. We can assume the collectors asked the artist for this as an educational accessory to the bag, as it is unusual for the root to be displayed in this way.’

Container basket
Woguman Tribe, Daly River, NT
28 February 1925
Donated by T. Styles
E029156
Accompanying notes:
Woven grass bag with handle of fibre string; decorated with stripes and patterns on entire basket

Nellie Kanda
Container bag
26 March 1987
Daly River Mission, NT
Purchased Merrepen Art by Betty Meehan 1986
E080901

String necklace
17 December 1982
Daly River NT
Donated by Mr Charles Ward
E67966 / E097911

The British Museum
Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (Fish-Net)
2008
Etching, signed
Edition 22/45
Printed by Basil Hall Editions
Acquired 2009, Donated by Gordon Darling

Museum of Victoria
String bag
17 December 1918
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)
Acquired from Hill, GF
40 x 735 x 290mm
Item X25825
Notes:
‘string bag. Multi-strand handle attached.’

Label 1:  
X25825(?)  
Bag  
Daly River  
Fitzmaurice  
NT  
Aus

Label 2:  
25823  
1918 Daly River East Bank  
NT Aust  
Pur. Fr. G F Hill Kew

Fishing Net  
17 December 1918  
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)  
Acquired from Hill, GF  
60 x 900 x 310mm  
Item X25818

Bag  
Partly made string bag  
17 July 1940  
Item X44526  
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)  
Acquired from Mr P.C. Cole  
45 x 520 x 140mm  
Label notes:  
45526  
1940 Daly River, NT Aust  
Pur. Fr. P. C Cole

Net  
23 April 1920  
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)  
Acquired from R. D. Boys, collected by R. D. Boys  
50 x 870 x 540mm  
Item X26921

Bag  
Twined conical basket. Multi-strand string handle.  
13 October 1902  
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)  
Acquired from C French Junior  
170 x 340 x 200mm  
Item X10165  
Notes:  
‘Dilly basket. Work open, end turned in forming a cone at bottom.’

Bag  
String bag, Multi-strand string handle attached  
17 December 1918  
Australia, Northern Territory Daly River (Fitzmaurice)  
Acquired from Hill, GF
30 x 785 x 300cm
Item X25825
Label notes:
1918 Daly River East Bank
Pur. Fr. G. F. Hill, Kew

Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (Fish Net)
2003
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
246 x 200cm
Winner Telstra General Painting Award, 20th Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award
Purchased 2003, Telstra Collection, Museum and Art Gallery of the Northern Territory

National Gallery of Victoria

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (fish net)
2008
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
198 x 200cm
Purchased 2008, NGV Supporters of Indigenous Art

Parliament House Art Collection

Anastasia Naiya Wilson
Weaving Design
2010
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
80 x 49cm

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (Fish-Net)
2008
Etching, signed
Edition 22/45
Printed by Basil Hall Editions
Acquired 2009, Donated by Gordon Darling

Queensland Art Gallery

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Syaw (Fish Net)
2004
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
200 x 210.5cm
Purchased 2004, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Regina Pilawuk Wilson
Warrgarri (Dilly bag stitch)
2003
Synthetic polymer paint on canvas
160 x 124cm
Purchased 2004 with funds from Corr Chambers Westgarth through the Queensland Art Gallery Foundation

Kathleen Korda
Walipun (Fish Net)
2008
Looped merrepen (Sand palm) fibre, natural dyes with bamboo
62 x 132 x 105cm
Purchased 2009, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Grant

South Australian Museum

Basket, woven
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NTza
21 x 12 x 7.5cm
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 2596

String, vegetable fibre, twine
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 2838

Band, shoulder, vegetable fibre
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 3380

Head-rings, rattan strips, plaited, set of 5
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 3528

Bag, dilly
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 3594

Bag, dilly
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 3594

Bag, dilly
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
Item 3638

Band, forehead
Registered 1911-1918
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
3882

Ornament, cane, strips, plaited (13)
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
11764

Band, arm, spiral, split cane, plaited
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
11776

Belt, twisted skein of human hair
Registered 2001
Daly River, NT
Collected by Christie, A.
75795

University of Queensland Anthropology Museum

Neckpendant
Daly River
Item 3559
Collector unknown
Acquired 1949
Source: Mrs McKew

Pubic Cover
Daly River
Item 3708
Collector unknown
Acquired 1949
Source: Mrs J. Clift
APPENDIX 2
PEPPIMENARTI ARTISTS / DURRU MU ARTS TIMELINE OF EVENTS

1988  Robin Hodgson publishes *Peppimenarti Basketmakers*

2000  Weavers Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Theresa Lemon are invited to attend the Biennale of Contemporary Art, Pacific Arts Festival, Noumea, New Caledonia

2001  Peppimenarti residents take part in painting workshops, held by Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin

Franck Gohier of Red Hand Prints conducts printmaking workshops with the newly formed artist group, resulting in a suite of silkscreen prints

2003  Regina Pilawuk Wilson is named the winner of the General Painting category of the National Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Art Award, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin

*Awa Yedi i Falmi Warrim Pek Durrimu* community exhibition and cultural open day at Peppimenarti

Queensland Art Gallery acquires two paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson; these works are exhibited in *Colour Country*, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Queensland

*Transcending Tradition*, including paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Pincher Talunga, Theresa Lemon, Margaret Kundu and Mabel Jimarin, 22 January - 7 February 2004, Sherman Galleries, Sydney

*Recent works from Peppimenarti* exhibition at Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin

2004  *Telstra National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Art Award: Celebrating 20 Years*, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory & traveling exhibition

Theresa Lemon solo exhibition, Karen Brown Gallery, Darwin

Art Gallery of New South Wales acquires *Syaw* painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson


Regina Wilson solo exhibition, Agathon Gallery, Sydney

Regina Pilawuk Wilson solo exhibition, Agathon Gallery, Melbourne

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Western Desert and Beyond Paintings: from the Sue & Ian Bernadt Collection*, Central TAFE Art Gallery, Perth

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Deadly: Campbelltown Art Centre’s Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Collection*, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest

Durrrmu Arts, through the Peppimenarti Community Council, receives funding for a dedicated building, housing and part-time Art Coordinator position; Anastasia Papageorgiou Moore becomes the first Art Coordinator

2007  Peppimenarti Cultural Open Day, Peppimenarti

Harriet Fesq starts work as Art Coordinator of Durrrmu Arts

*Peppimenarti* group exhibition of Durrrmu Arts artists, Chalk Horse Gallery, Sydney

2008  Artists Regina Pilawuk Wilson, Theresa Lemon, Kathleen Korda and Linda Gilbert chosen as finalists in the Telstra National Indigenous and Torres-Strait Islander Award, Museum and Art Gallery of Northern Territory, Darwin

Durrrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Important Aboriginal Art*, Caruana and Reid Fine Art, Sydney

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *The Sum of Us*, Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney

Regina Pilawuk Wilson is a finalist in the Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

*Ancient Culture, Modern Art*, Club 21 Gallery, Four Seasons Hotel, Singapore

Regina Pilawuk Wilson solo exhibition, Caruana Reid Fine Art at Michael Reid, Sydney

Regina Pilawuk Wilson solo exhibition, Santa Monica Art Studios, Los Angeles, U.S.A.
Patsy Marfura is selected as a finalist in the Xstrata Coal Emerging Indigenous Art Award, Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery.

2009

Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in the 3rd Moscow Biennale of Art, Moscow, Russia

Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson and a weaving by Kathleen Korda included in Floating Life: Contemporary Aboriginal Fibre Art, Gallery of Modern Art, Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Yewirr, group exhibition of Durrmu Arts artists, Raft Artspace, Darwin

Durrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin

The ‘Airbell’ Project, involving the investigation of the lost Ngan’gi twining technique, is launched

Regina Pilawuk Wilson’s work hangs in Country Culture Community, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Close at Hand, group exhibition of artist Silke Raetze and Durrmu Arts artists, Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney

Regina Pilawuk Wilson is a finalist in the Wynne Prize, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney

Woven Cultures: Peppimenarti and Papunya Tula at Amelia Johnson Contemporary, Hong Kong

2010

Durrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in Important Aboriginal Art, Caruana & Reid Fine Art, Sydney

Prints and Pandanus, group exhibition of Durrmu Arts artists Nomad Art, Darwin

Patsy Marfura solo show, Caruana & Reid Fine Art, Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney

2011

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in The Women’s Show, Vivien Anderson Gallery, Melbourne

Etching by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in Out of Australia: prints and drawings from Sidney Nolan to Rover Thomas, British Museum, London

Regina Pilawuk joins the Board of Directors of ANKAAA (Association of Northern, Kimberley and Arnhem Aboriginal Artists)
Durrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin

*Durrmu*, the collection of textile designs produced in collaboration with Koskela, is launched through Koskela, Sydney

Regina Pilawuk Wilson solo exhibition *Collection: New Works*, Michael Reid at Elizabeth Bay, Sydney

**2012**

Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Ancestral Modern: Australian Aboriginal Art from the Kaplan-Levi Collection*, Seattle Art Museum, U.S.A

Durrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin

Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Murr-ma: Uncovering Aboriginal & Australian contemporary art*, Michael Reid, Berlin, Germany


Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Le Point de Papunya*, Musee du Montparnasse, Paris, France

Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Patsy Marfura chosen as finalists in the Redlands Westpac Art Award, National Art School, Sydney

Rikki Lovell begins work as permanent full-time Art Centre Manager for Durrmu Arts

**2013**

Regina Pilawuk Wilson invited to take part in the *String Theory: Focus on Contemporary Art* exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney

Dianne Hodgson, Kathleen Korda, Clara Kundu, Regina Pilawuk Wilson and Leayah Wilson take part in an Artist Skills Development Project with Lily Roy and Bonnie Roy at Yilan and Maningrida, as part of the ongoing ‘Airbell’ Project, funded by the Australia Council

Painting by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in *Under the Sun: the Kate Challis RAKA Award 2013*, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne

Textiles designed by Regina Pilawuk Wilson exhibited at Koskela showroom, Sydney

Paintings by Regina Pilawuk Wilson included in the exhibition *Time* at the Poimena Gallery, Launceston
Dianne Hodgson, Kathleen Korda, Dianne Hodgson and Regina Pilawuk Wilson chosen as finalists in the TOGA Contemporary Art Award 2013

Regina Pilawuk Wilson selected as a finalist in the National Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander Art Award

Durrmu Arts takes part in the Darwin Aboriginal Art Fair, Darwin
APPENDIX 3

GLOSSARY OF NGAN’GI LANGUAGE WORDS

Anganni - magpie goose

Bafun – ash, dust, powder; the ash of bark used in the dyeing of fibre

Dagum – fog

Durrmu – design, painting

Fi – string

Fuke - dry season

Pinbin – bush vine; Flagellaria indica

Kurunggurr - a specific billabong west of Peppimenarti, as well as a general term for deep, dark water

Malarrgu – long-necked freshwater turtle

Merrepen – sand-palm; Livistona humilis

Midilmi - bush pea; Vigna lanceolata

Mikumulerrk – an edible root; Eriosema chinense

Mimeli – Blackcurrant tree; Antidesma ghaesembila

Minimindi – waterlilies; Nymphaea violacea

Misyawuni – bush potato; Brachystelma glabriflorum

Miwerrmisye - red plum; Flacourtia territorialis

Miwisamuy - white berry; Flueggea virosa

Miwulgnini - lotus flower; Nelumbo nucifera

Mudityi - sweet grass; Heteropogan triticeus

Ngan’gi’ - story, word, language

Ngunguwe – ‘build up’ time to the wet season

Rak - land estate

Syaw – fish trap, commonly referred to as ‘fish net’ by Ngan’gi fibre artists
Te – blood root; *Haemodorum corymbosum*

*Tyemerrmerr* – cabbage palm; *Carpentaria acuminata*

*Wangi* – sea breeze

*Warrgadi* – string dilly bag

*Wirrr marrgu* - early dry period of the wet season

*Wullipun* – fish net

*Wupun* – coil basket; to spread, smear or paint

*Yenggitawan* – charcoal; coals

*Yerrderrferr* – Emu tucker plant; *Haemodorum brevicaule*

*Yerrgeminyminy* – bush apple; *Syzgium eucalyptoides*

*Yerrgi* – pandanus; *Pandanus spiralis*

*Yerrwirr* – colour tree; *Coelospermum reticulatum*