

Before Time Today





Before Time Today

Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art

Edited by Sally Butler

UQP





JOE NGALLAMETTA

Thap yongk (Law poles)
2002-2003

milkwood with synthetic polymer
paint and natural pigments

15 components:
182.0 x 250.0 x 250.0 cm

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Art Gallery, Brisbane.

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from the Queensland Art Gallery
Foundation Grant

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David F Martin, Georges Petitjean,
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Mavis Ngallametta and Tony Albert

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Warning

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers are warned that this publication contains the names and images of deceased persons, which may cause distress. All such names and images in this publication are with permission.

Commissioner



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Captions to Preliminary pages:

Page 1 (Frontispiece)

GARRY NAMPONAN

Eagle 2002

bronze, edition of 12

28.0 x 56.0 x 42.0 cm

Private collection

Photograph: Courtesy of Urban Art Projects

Page 3 (Title page)

ARTHUR PAMBEGAN JR

Untitled XXII (Walkan-aw and Kalben designs) 2007

natural ochres with synthetic polymer binder and synthetic polymer paint on linen

168.0 x 122.0 cm

Collection of The University of Queensland, purchased 2008

Photograph: Mick Richards

Pages 4–5

Coastline of red and white cliffs (Pera Head) known to Wik people as Ikalath. It is a source of ochres and the geographic reference for red and white stripes in Wik art.

Photograph: Carl Warner



UNKNOWN ARTIST

Freshwater shark c.1962
(Frederick McCarthy Collection)
ochres on wood with bone and glass
20.5 x 133.0 x 19.0 cm
Collection of National Museum of Australia
Photograph: George Serras, courtesy of
National Museum of Australia

Foreword

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art considers relationships between visual traditions of the past and contemporary art from the Wik and Kugu Aboriginal people of Aurukun in far north Queensland on the western tip of Cape York.

This publication brings together a broad scope of research across the disciplines of art history, anthropology, history and Indigenous studies to examine the life and culture surrounding one of the world's most outstanding carving traditions and how it inspires a flourishing new chapter of art production in the community today.

The University of Queensland Art Museum initiated this publication and associated exhibition two years ago when remarkable links were observed between contemporary Aurukun sculpture and historical sculptures held by the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, items that were collected from the 1950s. Contemporary artworks from Aurukun, a number of which have been acquired in recent years for the University of Queensland Art Collection, demonstrate a strong lineage from the early sculptures. Contemporary Aurukun artworks, however, also display an unexpected diversity, with artists increasingly exploring media such as painting and innovative weaving practices. Artists who once made objects only for ceremony now produce works for exhibition and the art market.

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art presents the first major study to focus on contemporary Aurukun art and consolidates scholarly and community knowledge about the art and culture of the Wik and Kugu peoples. It builds on the Queensland Art Gallery's important exhibition and publication of 2003, *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*, a project which surveyed contemporary indigenous art across Cape York. The *Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art* publication, which is edited and in part authored by the curator Dr Sally Butler, presents essays by leading authorities on Aurukun cultural history, aesthetics and politics, along with commentary by the artists themselves.

The University of Queensland gratefully acknowledges the support of all those who have assisted this project, particularly the Aurukun artists and staff of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre. We thank Nick Mitzevich, Director of the University of Queensland Art Museum, Dr Sally Butler and the authors who have contributed to the publication. We also acknowledge the public and private collections that have

loaned works to the exhibition and have assisted with reproductions, including the University of Queensland Anthropology Museum, the Queensland Art Gallery, the National Museum of Australia and the Wik and Kugu Art Centre.

This publication has been supported by the Gordon Darling Foundation, the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency (QIAMEA) and The University of Queensland Centenary Committee. We also gratefully acknowledge funding received for the associated exhibition from the Queensland Government through Arts Queensland.

Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art contributes to The University of Queensland's celebration of its centenary in 2010. The exhibition and publication are highlights in the University's centenary calendar.

Professor Paul Greenfield AO

VICE-CHANCELLOR AND PRESIDENT, THE UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND

CRAIG KOOMEETA
Large crocodile 2002
aluminium, edition 4/12
26.5 x 134.0 x 25.5 cm
Collection of The University of
Queensland, purchased 2010
Photograph: Courtesy of
Urban Art Projects





UNKNOWN ARTIST

Walkalan or Bonefish sculpture (detail)
c.1962 (Frederick McCarthy Collection)

137.0 x 216.5 cm

ochres on wood and string

Collection of National Museum of Australia

Photograph: George Serras, courtesy of
National Museum of Australia

Chapter 4

The Art of Wik Politics and the Politics of Wik Art

In this essay, I examine the impacts of the High Court *Mabo* and *Wik* native title decisions on the Wik people of Aurukun, and sketch in how these decisions, along with the profound social changes which Aurukun people have experienced over the past few decades, are manifested in the politics of Wik art and sculpture. Here, I am not concerned so much with the internal politics and meanings of Wik art as with its potential political role in challenging contemporary representations of Aurukun in public and bureaucratic discourse.

Colonial Australia was founded on the myth of *terra nullius*; that is, the early settlers recognised no system of pre-existing law by which Aboriginal people held title to land, or rights in its resources. This foundation myth not only served to legitimate the actions of the early colonists in dispossessing Aboriginal groups of their lands, but also continued to inform the settler nation's understandings and representations of itself. It underlay a collective denial, or at best amnesia, concerning the harsh historical realities for so many Aboriginal groups, of dispossession, exclusion, and systematic attempts to destroy beliefs and practices, what anthropologist WEH Stanner in his 1968 Boyer lectures¹ famously called 'the great Australian silence'.

The High Court's *Mabo* decision in June 1992 challenged the Australian legal system's reflection of the great silence, albeit in a specific and partial fashion. It rejected the doctrine that Australia was *terra nullius* at the time of European settlement, and overturned the established view that the rights and interests of Indigenous people in their traditional lands, which derived from their own laws and customs, were automatically and instantaneously extinguished by the acquisition of sovereignty by the British monarch. The judgment held that the Australian common law could recognise a form of Indigenous title to country that had its origins in Indigenous laws and customs rather than in Australian law – although that title was fragile, and could be lost by the 'tide of history' such that the relevant Indigenous group no longer follows its laws and customs, or by valid acts of government that are inconsistent with the continued existence of native title (such as the grant of freehold title).

'A wik is a long time in politics'

The *Mabo* decision incorporated the recognition of native title into the Australian common law. The Wik and Wik Way peoples² lodged their common law native title claim in June 1993. Their original instructions to their legal advisers were to put 'Wik law on top',³ and claimants sought a determination by the Court of the continuing existence of their title over an extensive area on the west coast of Cape York from just south of Weipa to north of Pormpuraaw, and east almost to Coen. The claim also argued against the validity of a large number of dealings with their traditional lands which impacted on Wik and Wik Way peoples' title, including the issuance of significant mining leases.

In response to the *Mabo* decision, and against the background of a national political controversy about native title fed in no small part by the politics of fear, the Keating Government developed the *Native Title Act*, passed by the Federal Parliament in December 1993. The Act *inter alia* established processes for claiming native title and having those claims determined through mediation or (if that failed) by litigation, and for its incorporation into Australia's land title management regimes. It also sought, through its complex validation provisions, to reduce the impact of claims such as those advanced in the Wik and Wik Way peoples' common law native title claim on pre-existing rights and interests held by miners, farmers and others.⁴

In March 1994, lawyers for the Wik and Wik Way peoples lodged a claim on their behalf under the *Native Title Act*. However, mediation on this claim was initially delayed by litigation in the Federal Court on a range of legal matters arising from their ongoing common law claim and, ultimately, appeals from the judgment on these matters were taken before the High Court. It was the High Court's judgment on

these appeals just before Christmas in 1996 that brought the Wik native title claim to national prominence. This decision made no findings about whether Wik people held native title, but centred on technical legal questions which concerned primarily the lands of those inland Wik groups under pastoral leases (for example *Wik Iiyeny*), as well as the lands of those Wik Way people lying between Aurukun and Weipa and subject to bauxite mining and exploration leases.

The High Court found that the Wik and Wik Way peoples had no legal basis on which to challenge the validity of the mining leases and agreements on lands between Aurukun and Weipa. However, a majority of the judges did allow part of the appeal, in determining that particular pastoral leases did not necessarily extinguish native title. A highly significant outcome of the *Wik* decision then, which continues to be one of the most important made by the courts since *Mabo* itself, is that certain types of interests in land granted by governments (such as the Cape York pastoral leases) do not confer exclusive possession, but may coexist with those of native title holders. This caused outrage amongst pastoralists, their representative organisations, and in the John Howard Government of this period, which in 1998 introduced legislative amendments to the *Native Title Act* to minimise the impact of the decision. As the cartoonist Leak put it in a set of cartoons entitled 'The wikness of John Howard' and published in *The Australian* after the court decision, 'A wik is a long time in politics'.⁵

At the time, Aurukun people interpreted the High Court decision as a great victory for them. One of the most compelling images on television and in the print media reporting of the decision was prominent Wik woman, the late Gladys Tybingoompa, exultantly dancing her people's *malpa* in celebration outside the High Court after the judgment was handed down. Yet, while the decision has thus far allowed agreement to be reached that Wik people hold native title in several of the pastoral leases over which the original Wik claim was lodged, its significance lies far more beyond Wik people themselves, in its impact on native title law nationally. This significance has two countervailing currents; the decision certainly extended the area over which native title potentially could be recognised across Australia, but it also has a direct political lineage to the subsequent 1998 'Ten point plan' amendments to the *Native Title Act* introduced by the Howard Government which, amongst a raft of measures to reform the Act and minimise the impact of the Wik decision, has enabled pastoralists to achieve a substantial increase in their tenurial interests.⁶

The High Court's 1996 *Wik* decision was far from the end of the Wik and Wik Way peoples' native title claims, nor was it the first time Aurukun people had taken legal and political action in response to



Gladys Tybingoompa's Victory Dance, High Court of Australia, December 1996
Photograph: Richard Briggs. Courtesy of *The Canberra Times*

government measures. The following section briefly outlines political and legal actions which Aurukun people have taken over the past three decades or so to defend their interests, of which the Wik claim was but one.

The art of Wik politics

As attested by the records of the early missionaries in Aurukun, and evidenced in more recent ethnographies of Wik people by Martin, Sutton and von Sturmer,⁷ Wik political culture is robust, fractious, and permeates all aspects of life, including connections to country and the aesthetic and ritual realms. Wik society in Aurukun is characterised by a competitive egalitarianism in which people of all generations strongly assert autonomy, and watchfully monitor and appraise the flows of material and non-material items towards themselves in comparison with those to others around them.⁸ Whether conducted through verbal disputation or, ultimately, physical violence, conflict is not seen as aberrant but as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, and (as will be discussed later in this essay) is reflected in the society's foundation mythology.⁹ Individuals have a right, even an obligation, to take direct action, including the use of violence as part of a repertoire of graduated responses, to redress perceived wrongs done to them. This repertoire includes public declarations, harangues, and ritualised chants of provocation and abuse. More generally, and certainly up to the 1970s and 1980s, public oratory was a marked feature of Wik political culture.

Internally, Aurukun has been a highly complex and, in many ways, fractured community since its founding by Moravian missionaries early in the 20th century. Typical of hunter-gatherer societies and their descendants worldwide, but perhaps accentuated even more than many, the paramount political and ethical imperatives for Aurukun's Wik people lie at the individual and local group levels, rather than at, for example, that of the 'Aurukun community'. Aurukun after all, in terms of Wik and Wik Way people's ancient occupation of their lands as hunter-gatherers living primarily in small, flexible bands, is historically and culturally an unprecedented aggregation of nearly 1,000 sedentarised residents. Notwithstanding this fractured internal polity though, Aurukun people have often presented a remarkably united political face to the wider world, most particularly in response to attempts by governments over recent decades to curtail their rights and to impose measures on them without first seeking their agreement. In these political events, a series of prominent and often feisty individuals became the public faces for Aurukun and its people, and attracted widespread media and public attention. Such people were competent in an intercultural realm, with a powerful sense of their own cultural strength and uniqueness, distilled oratory, and bi- or multi-lingualism.



GARRY NAMPONAN AND LEX NAMPONAN
Apelech Brothers and female figure n.d.
wood, natural fibres, ochres and feathers
dimensions variable
Private collection
Photograph: Carl Warner

In 1975, a national controversy erupted over Queensland's Bjelke-Petersen government's decision, without consultation with Aurukun people or the Mission authorities, to grant bauxite mining leases over a substantial area of the northern part of the then Aurukun Reserve to an international consortium through special legislation, the *Aurukun Associates Act*. This lease lay immediately inland of a bauxite mining lease held by Comalco, which had been excised in 1957 from the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve, also by special Queensland legislation, and without proper consultation with, or any agreement from, Wik and Wik Way people. A national campaign was organised, supported by the Presbyterian Church and involving key Wik people travelling throughout Australia and even overseas. A legal challenge was lodged by Wik and Wik Way people to provisions of the Act that meant no direct benefits would flow to Aurukun people. Their case was won in the Queensland Supreme Court, but ultimately lost on appeal by the state to the Privy Council in London (the *Peinkinna* case).

Also, in the early to mid-1970s, the move by a number of Wik groups to re-establish on or near traditional lands in the Aurukun reserve (mainly south of the Archer River) gained momentum, although the seeds of the outstation movement had been present throughout the mission era and Wik people had maintained close contact with their lands right through that period. This move to establish small, semi-permanent outstations on traditional lands aroused strong opposition from the Bjelke-Petersen government and from its powerful Department of Aboriginal and Islander Advancement, whose expressed policy at this stage was still one of assimilation of Aboriginal people into mainstream society. Departmental officers, the State's police and informants conducted both covert and overt surveillance of Aurukun outstations and supportive Mission staff during this period, part of general Bjelke-Petersen Government attempts to keep 'radicals' and their ideas out of Aboriginal communities, as Sutton has recorded.¹⁰

In 1976, the then Federal Aboriginal Land Fund Commission attempted to purchase the Archer Bend pastoral lease east of Aurukun for an aggregation of inland Wik people terming themselves the *Winchanam* clan, which included Aurukun resident, (the late) John Koowarta. The Bjelke-Petersen Government refused to allow the transfer of title. Mr Koowarta and the *Winchanam* people were successful in a 1982 High Court action which claimed that the state's refusal contravened the *Racial Discrimination Act*. However, the Queensland Government ultimately circumvented the decision by declaring the area the 'Archer Bend National Park'.

While John Koowarta himself (now deceased) and the *Winchanam* people have not as yet received justice,¹¹ the *Koowarta* case nonetheless set a significant legal precedent regarding the Commonwealth Government's use of its 'external affairs' power, for example in the *Franklin River* case.

In 1978, because the Bjelke-Petersen Government claimed law and order were breaking down in

Aurukun but in reality because of its hostility to the outstation movement, and also anger at the very public campaign Aurukun people had waged against the Aurukun Associates bauxite mining agreement with the support of the church, the Queensland Government attempted a pre-emptive move to bring Aurukun under its direct control by unilaterally abolishing the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve and church administration, and proposing to impose a form of local government there. A large-scale national campaign was mounted by Aurukun Wik people, again with the support of the church, which attracted considerable national attention.

After initial strong backing from the Fraser Coalition Government for Aurukun's desire to be independent of state control, a final compromise outcome was negotiated between Queensland and Federal authorities, which established Aurukun and its sister mission, Mornington Island, as local government areas under special-purpose legislation. As with the previous Aurukun Associates mining lease controversy, this political struggle involved a significant number of key Aurukun Wik people travelling throughout Australia in a national campaign which attracted considerable attention, but also, as with the mining, final outcomes were negotiated between governments with no involvement by Aurukun's Aboriginal people and with little reference to their expressed wishes, as poignantly documented in the film *Takeover* (1980).

In 1989, in response to a proposal by bauxite mining company Comalco (now Rio Tinto Aluminium) to explore for gas and petroleum on their lands south of the Archer river, Wik clan leaders signed a formal application to the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs requesting an emergency declaration under heritage protection legislation. In the event, exploration was not conducted south of the Archer River, but one outcome was the formal compilation of the extensive body of anthropological and historical work, documenting Wik and Wik Way peoples' ownership of their traditional lands, which provided the substantive ethnographic evidence for the Wik native title claim.

The Wik claim therefore must be seen as just one in a series of actions taken by Wik people to assert their fundamental customary and legal rights and to demand recognition of their society and culture by the wider society. It was certainly seen and represented as such by Wik people themselves at the time. Travelling to Canberra to represent her people at the handing-down of the High Court decision, Gladys Tybingoompa was absolutely sure of the outcome. She felt strongly that the spirits of Wik ancestors who had fought for their lands and their culture were with her, carrying her on her journey, and that this signified the court would recognise the rights of Wik peoples, under their laws, to the pastoral lands. So confident was she of the decision that she borrowed a set of clap sticks from friends in Canberra that morning, hid them in her handbag, and planned her celebratory dance in the forecourt of the High Court.

UNKNOWN ARTIST

Freshwater shark's head c.1962 (Frederick
McCarthy Collection)

29.0 x 60.0 x 34.0 cm

ochres on wood, shark's teeth and buttons
Collection of National Museum of Australia

Photograph: Courtesy of National Museum
of Australia



But the original clarity of intent and purpose manifested in Gladys Tybingoompa's confidence in 1996 that the High Court's decision of itself would recognise inland Wik people's rights to pastoral country, and in the instructions of Wik people in 1993 to their legal team to have their Law placed 'on top', became increasingly overwhelmed by the complex legal and administrative processes of the *Native Title Act* in particular, and the bureaucratic state in general.¹² As noted previously, the Wik and Wik Way peoples' claim under the *Native Title Act* was launched in March 1994. In accordance with the Act, the claim went to mediation between the claimants and the multiple parties with interests in the extensive region over which the claim had been lodged. The claim encompassed a wide range of tenures including existing Aboriginal lands of various kinds, sections of a National Park, and pastoral and mining leases. The inherent difficulties of the native title system were exacerbated by the complexity and at times seeming intractability of legal and political issues raised in negotiations with the large numbers of respondents with their diverse positions and interests, not least of all the Queensland Government.

The first and most obvious consequence of this legal and procedural complexity is that 16 years after negotiations first started to achieve a determination of native title by consent, rather than having to litigate it in the courts, there are still areas of the Wik claim where native title has not been recognised. The first stage of negotiations was over those areas of the claim which had never been subject to pastoral or mining interests, and were in the heartland of Wik country with extensive ethnographic documentation on people's traditional and continuing connections to these lands. Even so, it still took over five years to conclude these negotiations, which were largely with the Queensland Government, and obtain a consent determination in the Federal Court in October 2000.

Almost exactly four years later, further negotiations culminated in a consent determination of native title over a large proportion of the remaining Wik claim area including a number of pastoral leases. The most politically and legally difficult areas of the claim were those over the Rio Tinto bauxite mining leases between Aurukun and Weipa, where Wik Way people had only limited procedural rights because of the nature of the mining leases issued. Five years of highly technical negotiations led to the signing of the Western Cape Communities Coexistence Agreement (WCCCA) in March 2001, which *inter alia* established a framework for the resolution of native title claims over Rio Tinto's bauxite leases and the surrender of particular areas to Aboriginal control following mining and rehabilitation, as well as establishing a range of financial and other benefits for Wik and Wik Way people.¹³ A determination of native title over these sections of the claim was finally made by the Federal Court in July 2009 following more than four years of, once again, highly technical negotiations. More recently, in a paradoxical historical twist, Wik and Wik Way people have also entered into an agreement with the Aluminium Corporation of China (Chalco), the Queensland Government and the Aurukun Shire Council for the

conduct of a two-year feasibility study into a large bauxite mine potentially to be established on lands north of Aurukun which had been the subject of the original Aurukun Associates agreement in 1975, and which, as previously discussed, had aroused such opposition from Aurukun people at that time.

A second consequence of the complexity of the Wik claim and of the native title consent determination process generally is that despite best endeavours by their lawyers and other advisers,¹⁴ Wik and Wik Way people themselves have become progressively disengaged from the actual conduct of negotiations, perforce undertaken largely by specialists. This is notwithstanding the adoption of a range of measures over the years to involve them in progressing the native title claim and their negotiations with the mining companies, and to maximise accountability in the conduct of negotiations. These included the establishment of a steering committee, the use of communication strategies such as regular newsletters and feedback from the lawyers and other specialists, consultations and reporting back at family and sub-regional group levels, and meetings on country to develop strategies and in some cases to negotiate directly with respondent parties.

This progressive disengagement of Wik and Wik Way people from significant direct involvement in the progress of their own claims did not however arise solely because of the alienating technical requirements of negotiations. The period discussed in this essay from the mid 1970s until the present has also been one of quite profound social, political and economic changes in Aurukun.¹⁵ These recent decades have seen a progressive escalation of social problems in Aurukun, such as very high levels of interpersonal violence, virtual epidemics of alcohol and other substance abuse, increasingly troubled and often angry and alienated younger generations, and major health issues, such as high rates of diabetes and alcohol-related morbidity.

Where Aurukun people had come to national attention through the 1970s and into the 1990s through their feisty spokesmen and women, and their willingness to take collective political and legal action to defend their collective rights, in contrast, through the 1990s and into the present, Aurukun received unwanted (and resented) national prominence through its reputation for high levels of internal violence, alcohol abuse, destructive behaviour by young people, and other manifestations of a deep social malaise. The worsening circumstances of everyday life and its increasing atomism as social problems escalated – and as institutions of the state have established an ever greater presence in Aurukun, both required and legitimated by these very problems – have been paralleled by an increasing disengagement by many from working to address the circumstances of their lives, whether at the individual, family, or broader collective levels. The disengagement of many Wik and Wik Way people from active involvement in their native title claims is arguably just one aspect of this broader phenomenon, one which Aboriginal lawyer and activist Noel Pearson has labelled 'passive welfare'.¹⁶

The politics of Wik art

Wik carved and painted *maany*, images of totemic beings, are not only imbued with spiritual significance and power; they are also, as Sutton¹⁷ observes more generally of Aboriginal sculptures, political as well as religious statements, and objects of strategic as well as aesthetic importance.¹⁸ Indeed, as mentioned earlier in this essay, conflict and competition are seen as an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, and is reflected in Wik foundation mythology. The two *Pungk-Apalech Brothers* (see page 65) who travelled south together, down the central western coast of Cape York peninsula singing, dancing, creating the totemic centres and apportioning the country between the different Wik clan groups and languages of that region, also fought bitterly over disputed meat. After separating, the younger brother travelled south, leaving *wanam* ritual for those clans from the south-west coastal region of Wik country, while the elder returned north, creating *Apelech* for the clans around the Cape Keerweer region.¹⁹ Conflict and competition in Wik epistemology flow from the same deep cultural wellsprings as creativity and aesthetics.

However, in this essay I am not concerned so much with the internal politics and meanings of Wik art and sculpture as with its potential political place in challenging contemporary representations of Aurukun in public and bureaucratic discourse. Here, overwhelmingly, Aurukun is represented essentially in *deficit* terms, as lacking social order, capacity and vision, and as requiring a range of (government) interventions to address these deficits. There is no doubt that the kinds of social problems outlined previously are part of the realities of all too many Aboriginal lives there. However, these features of Aurukun (and many other remote Aboriginal communities) do not comprise the full extent of social reality, but one (albeit often dominant) component of it. Passion, humour, vitality, knowledge, abilities, creativity and aspirations are not only to be found in mainstream and ‘functional’ Australia, but also within ‘dysfunctional’ Aboriginal communities. These features *coexist*, a fact which is not understood or is ignored by both the problem deflaters and those who would characterise Aboriginal Australia solely in terms of its inherent dysfunction. And, crucially, it is precisely such attributes as passion, creativity and knowledge which have to be built on in any process of sustainable change.²⁰

Thus, in their continuing creation of works of art and crafts, whether directly for sale in the market, or for use in ceremonies and then ultimately for other purposes such as exchange or sale, Aurukun people are demonstrating that, within a community which now has a national image as one of the most dysfunctional in the country, there is also a reservoir of aesthetic sensibilities, talent, creativity and innovation. Such attributes can flourish, given support (like that provided by the Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun), even in the most difficult of circumstances. For example, the limited edition

aluminium casting of a crocodile carving by Craig Koomeeta (see page 13) draws on Wik traditions in carving²¹ but is innovative in a number of ways, not least its technology, and in its mischievous use of a material produced from bauxite, which has played such an important role in Aurukun’s recent political history. The delightful helicopter and plane models by Hans Welsh Poonkamelya (below), a teenager when he made them in 1987 but of the same generation as Craig Koomeeta, are innovative in a different way. They draw on acutely keen observation of technology used in the Aurukun region during this period for mining exploration, cattle mustering and outstation logistic support, are constructed from discarded building and consumer materials found around the Aurukun rubbish dump, and are entirely secular, with no direct reference to country, to the transcendent realm, or to clan or ritual group affiliations. The models then exemplify an arena of interest and meaning to younger generations of Wik people which has its origins firmly in the dominant western society, but which coexists with those arenas of a more specifically Wik origin.

The sculptures and crafts produced by Aurukun people cannot of themselves produce the economic independence and social transformation for Aurukun that the policymakers seek, nor (given the matrix of obligations to kin in which Wik artists are embedded) can they necessarily produce economic independence for the individual artists. But they do point a way to an alternative model of social and cultural transformation, one which builds on people’s creativity, skills and passions to generate change, rather than imposing it from outside.

David F Martin



HANS WELSH POONKAMELYA

Toy helicopter and plane 1987

wire, tin, batteries, miniature wheels

2 parts: plane: 7.0 x 37.5 x 22.0 cm, helicopter: 12.0 x 32.0 x 8.0 cm

Collection of Australian National University, Canberra

Photograph: Carl Warner



JUBILEE WOLMBY
Black cockatoo n.d.
 synthetic polymer paint
 on wood
 50.0 x 15.0 x 15.0 cm
 Private collection
 Photograph: Carl Warner



UNKNOWN ARTIST
Female dingo c.1955
 ochres and resin on wood and glass
 36.0 x 103.0 x 20.0 cm
 Collection of The University of
 Queensland Anthropology Museum
 Photograph: Carl Warner



UNKNOWN ARTIST
Black crow c.1955
 ochres on wood
 32.5 x 25.0 x 15.5 cm
 Collection of The University of
 Queensland Anthropology
 Museum
 Photograph: Carl Warner



CRAIG KOOMEETA
Ku' (Camp dog) 2008
 ochres with synthetic
 polymer binder on milkwood
 31.0 x 41.0 x 13.0 cm
 Private collection
 Photograph: Mick Richards

ENDNOTES

Chapter 1

- 1 This chapter was written with funding by the Australian Research Council, the University of Adelaide, the South Australian Museum, the Queensland Indigenous Arts Marketing and Export Agency and the University of Queensland Art Museum.
- 2 On the *Wik* native title case, see chapter 4 of this volume, by David Martin.
- 3 For historical details, see Peter Sutton 2003, ‘Sacred images and political engagements. A brief history of Wik sculpture’, in Queensland Art Gallery, *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*, pp. 54–59, 215–216, Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery.
- 4 For more detail, see Sutton 2003.
- 5 Peter Sutton (ed.) 1988. *Dreamings: The art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 22–29. New York: George Braziller/Asia Society Galleries, Melbourne/London: Viking/Penguin.
- 6 Island dance had arrived at Aurukun by 1927 (Ursula McConnel, field notes, South Australian Museum Archives AA191). It was certainly used in ritual house openings by the 1970s, probably earlier. Hula was added to the mortuary repertoire some time in the 1980s. In 2009 I witnessed a mortuary ceremony at Aurukun where one phase combined hula dancers and Island-style dancers simultaneously in a symmetrical arrangement. I also saw, for the first time, one house opened with the order of dance genres reversed. Performance innovation at Aurukun continues.
- 7 In classical terms, the Wik languages and cultural region extend from south of Archer River to the Edward, while the area north of the Archer to the Embley is part of what Wik people call the Wik Way (‘difficult languages’) area. The native title claim has been by a combined Wik and Wik Way group of people resident at Aurukun, Pormpuraaw, Napranum and several other centres. It has also been a combined Wik and Wik Way population, originating in both cultural areas but mainly resident at Aurukun, which has developed the sculptural tradition discussed here.
- 8 JPM Long 1970, *Aboriginal settlements: A survey of institutional communities in eastern Australia*, Canberra: Australian National University. The Weipa Mission, founded on the middle Embley in 1898, was relocated to the Weipa Peninsula in 1932 and its now secularised descendant is the community of Napranum at Jessica Point, Weipa. Edward River Mission was founded near the mouth of the Edward River in 1938 and its likewise secularised community descendant is Pormpuraaw. From the early 1970s outstations gradually enabled the resettlement of a number of outlying areas in the region, but by the mid to late 2000s most of these had been abandoned.
- 9 Letter from Peter Hinton to Frederick McCarthy, 8 April 1963, Weipa. McCarthy papers, ALATSIS Library, Canberra. Contact between the two communities did continue through this period, as is evident from, for example, marriages contracted between individuals resident at the two centres.
- 10 From my own field data, beginning in 1976.
- 11 UH McConnel 1953. Native arts and industries on the Archer, Kendall and Holroyd Rivers, Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland. *Records of the South Australian Museum* 11: pp. 1–42; EG Ramsay 1986. Aboriginal artefacts in the Donald Thomson collection 1928–1965. Microfiche. Melbourne: Museum of Victoria.
- 12 JB McCarthy was acting superintendent in 1949 while MacKenzie was serving as moderator of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland. He should not be confused with Frederick D McCarthy (see below). MacKenzie left Aurukun on furlough in December 1948 then took up his role as moderator in May 1949. From December 1948 to August 1949 the acting superintendent was CD (Doug) Sydney. JB McCarthy had been on furlough from Mornington Island and then was sent to Aurukun from September 1949 to July 1950. MacKenzie returned to Aurukun on 7 August 1950 (Geoff Wharton pers. comm.).
- 13 A O’Gorman 1990. *A guide to the collection of Aurukun sculptures in the National Museum of Australia*; A O’Gorman 1991a. *Anthropology – but not from an armchair*. Consultancy report on the Ursula McConnel Collection; A O’Gorman 1991b. *A report to the National Museum of Australia on the collections of Aboriginal sculpture in GAA*.
- 14 ‘Dreaming(s)’ has also recently become used in Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal English for this category (cf. Sutton (ed.) 1988).
- 15 Terms for narrative stories in Wik languages literally mean ‘old word’ (*wik al*, Wik-Ngathan; *wik katb*, Wik-Mungkan).
- 16 First two examples in Wik-Ngathan, third in Wik-Mungkan. The word ‘story’ seems to have been among those earliest taken on by early contact people in Cape York Peninsula and may have spread from a source area rather than being ‘discovered’ independently by each group. Pronounced */thorri/*, story has once or twice in the past been mistaken by anthropologists for an Indigenous word (McConnel MSS A191). In the 1970s I found that even elderly people with very little English vocabulary made use of this term. My interpretation is that its foreignness offered an avoidance register so that the emotion-charged Indigenous words that it translated could be sidestepped.

- I concluded this in regard to names for principal totems as well; for example, old people, when referring to spears in the hearing of Jack Spear (one of whose totems was Spear), often referred to them as */ijipi/* (English ‘spear’).
- 17 *Wik-Mungkan* semantics are different: *n(b)inthan-maany*, literally ‘ridge-image’ (cf. Kilham, C, M Pamulkan, J Pootchemunka, T Wolmby 1986). *Dictionary and source-book of the Wik-Mungkan language*, p. 154. Darwin: Summer Institute of Linguistics.
 - 18 The sea is the resting place of inner souls in several parts of Australia. In other parts of the country the sky appears to serve the same purpose as the sea, as a location without political geography.
 - 19 Peter Sutton, field book 20: 95.
 - 20 Peter Sutton, field book 21: 97
 - 21 Carol Cooper, Howard Morphy, John Mulvaney and Nicolas Peterson 1981. *Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council.
 - 22 Sutton (ed.) 1988.
 - 23 Judith Bartlett 1989. ‘Australian anthropology’, pp. 13–70, in J Bartlett and M Whitmore, *Cultural exhibition of Queensland*. Saitama (Japan): Saitama Prefectural Museum.
 - 24 Bernhard Lüthi (translated by Theresa Bergne) 2003. *Aratjara: Art of the first Australians*. London: Hayward Gallery.
 - 25 National Gallery of Australia 2000. *Contemporary Australian Aboriginal art in modern worlds*. Canberra: National Gallery of Australia.
 - 26 Queensland Art Gallery 2003. *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery.
 - 27 Djon Mundine 2003. ‘Aw – Story place. The people of west Cape York’, p. 53, in Queensland Art Gallery, *Story place: Indigenous art of Cape York and the rainforest*. Brisbane: Queensland Art Gallery.
 - 28 Queensland Art Gallery 2003, p. 238.
 - 29 South Australian Museum A42077.
 - 30 Karel Kupka 1965. *The dawn of art. Painting and sculpture of Australian Aborigines*. Sydney: Angus and Robertson, p. 154.

Chapter 2

- 1 Personal interview with Stanley Kalkeeyorta conducted in Aurukun, 17 January 2010.
- 2 Peter Sutton 1989. ‘The aesthetic locus of Aboriginal art’, in P. Sutton (ed.), *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. Ringwood: Viking Press, 1989, p. 30.
- 3 *ibid.*
- 4 Noel Pearson 1995. Foreword in Jeanie Adams, *Crafts of Aboriginal far north Queensland, the Yalga-Binbi collection*. Cairns: Yalga-Binbi Institute for Community Development Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation, p. 5.
- 5 *ibid.*, interview with Stanley Kalkeeyorta.
- 6 Charles Lindholm 2008. *Culture and authenticity*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 16–17.
- 7 Carpentaria Ghost Nets Program, www.ghostnets.com.au, accessed 12 January 2010.
- 8 Jeanie Adams 1995. *Crafts of Aboriginal far north Queensland, the Yalga-Binbi collection*. Cairns: Yalga-Binbi Institute for Community Development Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Corporation, p. 13.
- 9 Eliza Cole 2005. ‘The woven purpose’, in *The woven purpose* [exhibition catalogue]. CQ gallery, Brisbane, 13 October – 12 November 2005, npn. This exhibition included fibre art from the three Queensland Aboriginal communities of Jumbun, Lockhart River and Aurukun.
- 10 Peter Sutton 2008. ‘Leigh Nampanon’, in *Menagerie, contemporary Indigenous sculpture in Australia* [exhibition catalogue]. Object. Surry Hills NSW: Australian Centre for Craft and Design, p. 102.
- 11 Personal communication with the artist at the Wik and Kugu Art Centre in Aurukun, January 2010.

Chapter 4

- 1 WEH Stanner 1968 (2001). ‘The great Australian silence: after the Dreaming’, in *The Boyer Collection: Highlights of the Boyer Lectures 1959–2000*. Selected and introduced by Donald McDonald. Sydney: ABC Books, pp.114–123.
- 2 ‘Wik’ is a term in many of the languages of this region which means ‘talk’ or ‘language’, and those languages south and east of Aurukun are typically prefaced by this term, as in ‘*Wik Mungkan*’, ‘*Wik Ngathan*’, etc. It has been used by anthropologists since the 1930s as a label to refer to the cultural bloc comprising groups whose country lies roughly between the Archer River and just north of Pormpuraaw, and inland almost to Coen. ‘Wik Way’ is the label used in *Wik Mungkan*, for generations now the lingua franca in Aurukun, of the people and ancestral languages of those groups whose country lies in the coastal region between Aurukun and Weipa.

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CRAIG KOOMEETA

Freshwater crocodile 2008
ochres with synthetic polymer
binder on milkwood
12.0 x 102.0 x 25.0 cm
Collection of Ipswich Art Gallery
Photograph: Mick Richards



CONTRIBUTORS

Tony Albert is a Brisbane-based artist. Over the past decade he has forged strong connections with the Aurukun community, working closely with a number of significant artists, including Arthur and Alair Pambegan, Joe and Joel Ngallametta, Ron Yunkaporta and Craig Koomeeta. Recently, Tony has worked collaboratively with Arthur Pambegan Jr on a major painting project.

Sally Butler is Senior Lecturer in Art History at the University of Queensland, and curator and editor of the *Before Time Today: Reinventing Tradition in Aurukun Aboriginal Art* exhibition and book. Her previous publications and curated exhibitions include *Our Way: Contemporary Aboriginal Art from Lockhart River* (2007), which toured Asia and the United States in 2007 and 2008.

Stanley Kalkeeyorta is an artist and cultural adviser from Aurukun. Since 2007 he has worked with Wik Media as cultural adviser, script writer, translator and presenter for numerous video productions. He is the presenter of the *Bush food: End of the wet* television documentary (still airing on NITV, 2010). Stanley also presented cultural awareness productions for the Aurukun Bauxite project in 2008 and 2009.

David F Martin is consultant anthropologist and Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Aboriginal Policy Research at the Australian National University. His research and applied interests include welfare reform, Aboriginal economic and community development, native title and governance. He worked in Aurukun as a community adviser with the outstation movement between 1976 and 1983, returned there for a further two years in 1985 to conduct research for his doctoral thesis, and continues to visit to work there on a range of projects.

Mavis Ngallametta is an artist and traditional elder of country surrounding the Kendle River region near Aurukun. Mavis was granted the Community Arts Achievement Award in 2004 for her contribution to the school and the community, teaching the children traditional crafts. She also worked as a host for the Aurukun Wetland Charters and is currently the president of the Wik and Kugu Art Centre committee. Her weavings and canvas paintings are held in major public and private Australian and international art collections.

Georges Petitjean is a Belgian art historian who completed a PhD on western desert art at La Trobe University, Melbourne. His research interest is the transition of Indigenous Australian painting from sites of origin to the wider art world. He lived and worked in Australia for many years and, since 1992, has studied the work of a number of Indigenous Australian artists. He was appointed curator at AAMU, the Museum of Contemporary Aboriginal art at Utrecht in the Netherlands in 2005.

Peter Sutton is Senior Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide and the South Australian Museum. He is an anthropologist and linguist who has lived and worked with Aboriginal people in remote, urban and rural Australia since 1969. He has assisted with over 50 Indigenous land claim cases. Peter is an author or editor of 13 books and has published many papers, mainly in the fields of Aboriginal languages, land tenure, art, history and Indigenous policy. His most recent book is *The politics of suffering: Indigenous Australia and the end of the liberal consensus* (2009).

John von Sturmer is an independent writer, artist and critic based in Sydney. Most recently, he was appointed Senior Fellow of the Institute of Postcolonial Studies in Melbourne. In 1970 he was appointed Foundation Lecturer in Aboriginal Studies at the University of Queensland, in conjunction with the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies in Canberra. Over many years John has been active in negotiating the nexus between government, big business and traditional owner groups, and has contributed to many major achievements in Aboriginal affairs since the 1970s. He first worked with the Kugu-nganhtyarra in western Cape York Peninsula in 1969 and was indelibly influenced by their rich and ceremonial life.

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THOMAS TOIKALKIN
Tortoise 2002
bronze, edition of 12
34.0 x 14.0 x 13.0 cm
Courtesy Urban Art Projects
Photograph: Courtesy of
Urban Art Projects



DUNCAN KORKATAIN

Apalech boy 2006

ochres and charcoal with synthetic
polymer binder on milkwood

80.0 x 24.0 x 26.0 cm

Collection of The University of
Queensland, gift of an anonymous
donor 2009

Photograph: Mick Richards