

**"Jacky Jacky Was a Smart Young Fella":  
A study of art and Aboriginality  
in south east Australia 1900-1980**

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## **4 Art for tourists**

### **i Introduction**

The replica artefacts and staged displays produced by indigenous people for tourists have met with a mixed response. The pessimistic view adopted by many scholars interprets tourist art as a commodification of culture: a sign of colonial domination and a capitulation to capitalism. This criticism has further suggested that ethnic minorities and tourists are mutually alienated in this interactive process as indigenous people represent a stereotyped traditional way of life in response to the authenticity demanded by tourists. Other more constructive responses position tourist art alongside ethnographic objects and fine art as a form of cultural production expressive of a new social context. These various analyses have drawn attention to the uneven power relationships which operate when indigenous art comes into conjunction with tourism, but they remain generalised and need to be examined against specific instances of interaction and particular local patterns of commodity production. This analysis of the artefacts produced by Kurnai in the Lake Tyers region (Figs. 2 & 3) suggests tourist art fulfils a multiplicity of roles. When Aborigines choose to become involved in tourism, they negotiate a more favourable response from the majority culture, they gain a degree of economic autonomy and access to markets from which they are otherwise excluded. In the process, Aborigines articulate a local and national consciousness of their Aboriginal identity. Our discourses of primitivism impose strictures of tradition and authenticity which have emphasised dominance and ignored the diversity of representations initiated by Aborigines in this cultural arena.

It is increasingly apparent that Aborigines' extensive involvement in commerce since settlement has enabled them to maintain a vital and dynamic presence within a new colonial reality.<sup>1</sup> The problem is, institutional responses have

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent reappraisal in this direction see Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," pp. 59-71.

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recognised two categories of this cultural production—ethnographic objects and fine art—whilst tourist souvenirs remain excluded. As Bennetta Jules-Rosette argues, the error lies in trying "to view a contemporary . . . artwork as a deviation from traditional forms rather than an object emerging within a new social context."<sup>2</sup> Whereas ethnographic and art-historical continuums impose qualitative judgements which evaluate tourist artefacts in terms of their authenticity, Umberto Eco differentiates between these replicated signs on the basis of a type/token-ratio.<sup>3</sup> This semiotic interpretation recognises that tourist art may operate as an original and expressive sign system. Jules-Rosette continues:

Considered as a system, tourist art demonstrates the expressive and adjustive relationship between popular culture and economic change. It is a semiotic system in which signs also function as the medium of economic exchange.<sup>4</sup>

The innovative developments considered here emerged in response to and in collaboration with an adjacent tourist industry. In such a context, the production, display and exchange of indigenous art becomes entangled in patterns of cross-cultural interaction which are part of a dynamic and interpretative process that generates a multiplicity of meanings. Contrary to the modern conception of linear development, these meanings follow a cyclic pattern: commodities embody particular values for the community concerned, in exchange they signal a further range of meanings to consumers and Aborigines respond to and mirror the expectations of their consumers.<sup>5</sup>

Modern day tourism—not unlike anthropology—is often likened to a sacred journey. For Graburn, tourism is dissociated from everyday life and carries

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<sup>2</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 230.

<sup>3</sup> Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (1976, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979), pp. 178-183.

<sup>4</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, pp. 225-6.

with it the expectation of spiritual renewal.<sup>6</sup> He sees 'ethnic tourism' as a combination of earlier forms of natural and cultural tourism where romantic associations of the landscape are conflated with indigenous people—objectified as the childhood of mankind living in accord with nature. His assumptions ring true in the Australian context and suggest why Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) and Lake Tyers Missions proved so attractive to visitors from the late nineteenth century onwards. Nevertheless we cannot assume that the same single monolithic primitivism motivated all tourists. Chapters 2 and 3 revealed a plurality of primitivisms operating among individuals and groups in different art world arenas. Further distinctions need to be drawn between contemporary developments in global tourism to which most writers refer, and the local, relatively isolated context of a young settler colony where Aborigines interact with members of the majority culture for whom these objects constitute symbols of national identity.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, tourist art may operate as a constructive vehicle for cultural change.

Kurnai came into conjunction with tourism as a result of their changing historical circumstances. When Reverend John Bulmer founded the Lake Tyers Church of England mission in 1861, Aborigines collaborated in the choice of site: Lake Tyers (or Bunyarnda) represented an important meeting place for all Kurnai people.<sup>8</sup> After Bulmer's retirement in 1907, however, Lake

<sup>6</sup> Nelson H. H. Graburn, "Tourism: The Sacred Journey," In *Hosts and Guests: The Anthropology of Tourism* (ed.), V. Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), pp. 17-31, pp. 25-28.

<sup>7</sup> The comparison is evident in the contrast between the international approach adopted by Dean MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds: The Tourist Papers* (London: Routledge, 1992) and Jonathon Culler, "The Semiotics of Tourism," In *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (London, Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 153-167 compared with the local evidence from Nancy Williams, "Australian Aboriginal Art at Yirrkala: Introduction and Development of Marketing," In *Ethnic and Tourist Arts: Cultural Expressions in the Fourth World* (ed.), Nelson H. H. Graburn (Berkeley, L. A: University of California, 1976), pp. 266-284. Jules-Rosette observes that the more pessimistic position followed by the former studies give undue emphasis to the role of the consumer rather than the role which tourist art plays for indigenous communities.

<sup>8</sup> Phillip Pepper and Tess de Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be: The Story of an Aboriginal Family 1842-1980* (1980, rev. ed. Melbourne: Hyland House, 1989), pp. 38-39, 78; Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," pp. 123 -5.



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Tyers Mission came under the administration of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. In 1917 when it became expedient to consolidate the majority of the remaining Victorian 'full-bloods' on a single reserve, Lake Tyers' inaccessibility ideally suited a paternalistic rhetoric of protection.<sup>9</sup>

But the fascination which Aborigines held for mainstream Australians tended to undercut this government legislation aimed at segregating Aborigines from mainstream Australian society. Already during the protectionist policies of the late nineteenth century, the Station was a focus of attention for visitors and by the 1920s, this interaction assumed a new dimension when Lake Tyers came into conjunction with an emerging tourist industry at Lakes Entrance.<sup>10</sup> Taking advantage of developments in transport and communications, tourists could travel by train to Bairnsdale, then to Lakes Entrance by boat. Increasingly, many preferred to drive by car, visiting Lakes Entrance en route to Sydney.

At the many guest houses which catered for a diversity of visitors, it was assumed that tourists would be interested in 'the Aborigines' and arrangements were in place for them to travel by boat to visit Lake Tyers. (Plate 26) In the 1930s, at the height of the tourist season during the summer months, tourists could experience past and present aspects of Aboriginal life.<sup>11</sup> Eliza O'Rourke baked fish and potatoes in the mud for visitors at Bley's guest house. At the Station, tourists witnessed displays of boomerang throwing and fire-lighting, they purchased artefacts, took photographs and listened to variety concerts which included a fascinating medley of south

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<sup>9</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 43. Barwick observes that Lake Tyers was the only site not coveted by pastoralists.

<sup>10</sup> Lakes Entrance was known as Cunninghame till 1915.

<sup>11</sup> John D. Adams, *The Tambo Shire Centenary History* (Bruthen: Tambo Shire Council, 1981), pp. 234-7, 268-9, 278-280; Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be*, pp. 79-90.

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eastern Aboriginal songs, Afro-American spirituals, renditions of popular music on the piano and the Lake Tyers gum-leaf band.<sup>12</sup>

The situation changed again in the late 1930s when a succession of bad managers led to an increase in tension at Lake Tyers. Instances of open resistance and vandalism by the young artist, Sydney McRae, led to discussion about a possible reformatory at Tortoise Head Island.<sup>13</sup> As a consequence many Aborigines walked off the reserve—despite their deep attachment to the region they refused to accept further restrictions. Some chose to live in nearby fringe camps at Jacksons' Track and Toorloo Arm, others enlisted in the army for the duration of the war whilst many moved temporarily or permanently to Melbourne. In the post-war period, Kurnai resumed their interaction with tourists; Aborigines living at Lake Tyers and nearby fringe camps performed in concerts staged at Gilsenan's tea rooms at Bancroft Bay, Metung. Others, such as the Mullett and Mongta families, who were linked by marriage, produced boomerangs and staged displays of boomerang throwing for the benefit of tourists travelling on the Princes Highway past Bairnsdale.

Thus tourism brought Kurnai directly into interaction with the majority culture. The distinctive artefacts and staged displays which emerged in response to this interaction, on and off the reserve, represent an innovative set of local manoeuvres which can be attributed to Aborigines' determined exploitation of a tourist presence.

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<sup>12</sup> D. Baglin and F. Wheelhouse, *Collecting Australia's Past* (North Ryde: Cassell Australia, 1981), p. 106 notes that "playing the leaf" was part of the folk music repertoire of nineteenth century music halls where a variety of instruments were played: "bones", saw and gum leaf. Research now extends "playing the leaf" to Aboriginal communities in Queensland and south west Western Australia. Aborigines warmed the leaf by a fire and sound was produced from a breath from the mouth when the leaf was held in various positions.

<sup>13</sup> For references to McRae see: A A, Series B356 /Item 54, Managers Reports for period ended 31 July, 1935 and 31 May, 1935, p. 2, Lake Tyers Managers Reports 1930-1944; Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 96.

## ii Artefacts as culture

The tourist art produced by Lake Tyers Aborigines can be interpreted as a form of opposition which countered the hegemony of such government institutions. As far as the Board for the Protection of Aborigines were concerned, Lake Tyers Aborigines were fully provided for: supplied with housing, rations, clothing, blankets, medical and dental care. In return, they were expected to work for the reserve at a minimum wage of 3d an hour or 10/- per month.<sup>14</sup> Those Aborigines who fulfilled special duties as butchers, sanitary men, nurses and domestics were paid at a higher rate of up to £5 per month.<sup>15</sup> Within such a system, Aborigines were expected to relinquish their freedom, independence and dignity in exchange for survival within a ration economy that kept Aborigines paupers because it denied them access to material goods.

Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that men frequently left the isolated reserve to take up seasonal work. Sometimes accompanied by their families, they moved up and down the coast, picking fruit and vegetables and wood-cutting.<sup>16</sup> Officially, Aborigines were meant to get a pass before they left the station; rations were docked if their absence was noted. Mary Harrison recalls during the period when Major Glen was manager 1931-1945:

You had to say 'Yes boss' or 'No boss'. There was no talking back. You had no rights. You had to have an application to go off the reserve and on the reserve.<sup>17</sup>

Although work as itinerant labourers bound Aborigines together as a community racial discrimination often meant local farmers exploited their

<sup>14</sup> A A, Series B356 /Item 90, Inspection Reports 1931-1934, Chief Secretary's Department; Wages Blacks, Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 9 October 1933.

<sup>15</sup> Alice Thorpe, Interview, 6 March 1993 worked as a nurse for £5 per month whereas Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993 undertook general duties at 10/- a month.

<sup>16</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, pp. 76, 90-91.

<sup>17</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

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labour. In his family history, Philip Pepper says that in the 1930s, Aborigines were paid 3/- a bag of peas and they picked 10-15 bags per day.<sup>18</sup> Allowing the more conservative estimate of £1 per day cited elsewhere,<sup>19</sup> it is apparent that the wages Aborigines earned as itinerant labourers brought them far greater access to a capitalist economy than the 10/- per month earned on the Station. In addition, Aborigines withheld information about their earnings so this additional money purchased food and clothing.

Aborigines employed in the Northern Territory pastoral industry were similarly constrained within a ration economy. Significantly, the Hermannsburg watercolourist, Albert Namatjira, cited his resentment against rations as the main catalyst for taking up painting. Namatjira recalled,

before he started painting, no matter how hard he worked—whether at carpentry, blacksmithing, building stockyards or working with Afghans as a camel boy on the train between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs before the railway was put through—he could get rations and clothes but never even a sixpence.<sup>20</sup>

Aborigines in the settled south east felt similarly. In the late nineteenth century, residents at Coranderrk made artefacts for sale and the money they earned purchased necessities such as boots, clothing and food.<sup>21</sup> Indeed this work was so profitable that Brough Smyth, then Secretary to the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, found it "humiliating that profits from [the sale were] not paid into consolidated revenue to maintain the reserve."<sup>22</sup> Subsequent events at Lake Tyers discussed later in this chapter suggest his response typified official attitudes to Aboriginal initiatives

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<sup>18</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 91.

<sup>19</sup> Adams, *The Tambo Shire Centenary History*, p. 272.

<sup>20</sup> Rex Battarbee, *Modern Australian Aboriginal Art* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1951), p. 11.

<sup>21</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 25.

<sup>22</sup> McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," quoting Brough Smyth, p. 19.

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Fortunately, Lake Tyers Aborigines were permitted to retain the money they earned from the sale of artefacts. Prices Aborigines received for their artefacts in the 1930s ranged from 5/- and 10/- for a boomerang or basket but even the lower price indicates that an artefact made in a couple of days could earn Aborigines half the average monthly wage paid by the reserve!<sup>23</sup> Given the hundreds of visitors who arrived at Lake Tyers over the summer holidays, it is clear that production for the tourist industry offered Aborigines a means of circumventing both the ration economy of the reserve and the racial inequality of the outside world. This evidence of Aboriginal intransigence to incorporation into a ration economy accords with the findings of Barry Morris working amongst the Dhan-gadi in northern New South Wales and Annette Hamilton's historical overview of Aboriginal resistance.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Aborigines did not passively acquiesce in the restrictions imposed by the Board. As already shown in Chapter 3, Aborigines implemented many tactics which circumvented regulations and gained them relative freedom. Officially, Aborigines were allowed off the Station to sell artefacts twice a year: once for the Bairnsdale Carnival and again for the Agricultural Show but in actual fact many seem to have moved on and off the Station at will, to sell or exchange their wares with the wider community at Lakes Entrance and Bairnsdale. Laurie Moffatt emerges once again, as an innovative entrepreneur, a man who actively sought a market for his boomerangs by carrying them with him in a hessian bag when he walked into Lakes Entrance.<sup>25</sup> In contrast to remote communities where Aborigines were restricted to exchanging their art through

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<sup>23</sup> Prices within this range have been confirmed by many Aboriginal informants. The extent of this production in stations and reserves is borne out by official records: BPA, 42 Report 1906, Coranderrk, 4 July 1906 Joseph Shaw, p. 6. 8; BPA, 43rd Report, Coranderrk 1 July 1904, Joseph Shaw, p. 6.10 and BPA, 45th Report, 1909.

<sup>24</sup> Morris, "Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence," pp. 96, 105-107; Annette Hamilton, "Equal to Whom?," pp. 134-5.

<sup>25</sup> Brian Hancock, Interview, 23 February, 1993.

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mission stores,<sup>26</sup> south east Aborigines dealt directly with consumers—a situation which still allows them far more opportunity to sway public opinion.

Commodity production allowed Aborigines to maintain a voluntaristic philosophy of action similar to that which Basil Sansom identified amongst the fringe camps of Darwin. There he found a "grammar of service" operating which assigned value to human action on the basis of an exchange modality.<sup>27</sup> At Lake Tyers women bartered directly with shopkeepers to exchange their baskets for clothing and shoes for their families. Their coiled baskets were highly sought after as presents and many of the women produced on commission.<sup>28</sup> When Aborigines presented artefacts as gifts, they not only acknowledged their friendship and regard for individuals from the wider community but they also involved non-Aborigines in personal relations of indebtedness and reciprocity. Hilda Rule, wife of Len Rule, (assistant manager, later manager), who worked as a matron and craft teacher at Lake Tyers (1935-1958) received boomerangs from Aborigines in return for her kindness in nursing the sick or baking a birthday cake. It is further evidence that amicable relationships sometimes prevailed between staff and Aborigines that her daughter, Dot, received a boomerang as a birthday present from Lindsay Mobourne, an Aboriginal friend at Lake Tyers primary school.<sup>29</sup> ( Plate 27)

In another instance, Lake Tyers Aborigines presented a poker-worked boomerang to Reverend James Stannage in recognition of his assistance to Aborigines whilst he was Rector of Bairnsdale, 1925-1936. (Plate 28) At the

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<sup>26</sup> Howard Morphy, *Ancestral Connections*, pp. 20-23, 28-30, 33-36 explores the problems confronted by the Yolngu artist, Narritjin Maymuru at Yirrkala in the shift from Mission craft work which inculcated assimilation to an emerging fine art market for Aboriginal art.

<sup>27</sup> Basil Sansom, "A Grammar of Exchange," In *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia* (1988; Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), pp. 159-178, p. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. conv. 18 March 1993.

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time, Kurnai informed Stannage they had commissioned a special boomerang depicting a corroboree from a New South Wales community.<sup>30</sup> Whether this boomerang indeed represented a commission placed with a nearby community such as Wallaga Lake or whether a member of the Kurnai community had parted with a family heirloom this boomerangs differs significantly in style, technique and imagery from those given to Hilda Rule which typify the tourist art produced at Lake Tyers. The particular circumstances surrounding this gift indicate Aborigines' awareness of and response to existing discourses of primitivism. In recognising the value which mainstream Australians placed upon Aboriginal ceremonial life, Kurnai gained status for their gift and their community.

Hence commodity production brought economic gain and a degree of freedom and independence from the restrictions imposed by the Board, but equally importantly, the production and display of artefacts allowed Aborigines to undercut institutional impositions aimed at their integration into the majority society. Whilst Attwood emphasises the freedom Aborigines gained away from the Station when they lived communally as seasonal labourers, commodity production on and off Lake Tyers fulfilled an even more significant role.<sup>31</sup> Unlike the agricultural and domestic work demanded by the Station or the itinerant labouring undertaken away from Lake Tyers, the production of artefacts allowed Aborigines to work collaboratively and draw upon their own cultural heritage. From an Aboriginal viewpoint, artefacts are culture and the production of tourist art was a sign of this culture.

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<sup>30</sup> Tom Stannage, Letter to the author, 11 November 1993.

<sup>31</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 75-77.

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Culture is performed, not just conceptualised; it is culturally constituted through actions which actively link individuals to the community. Daniel Miller argues,

Culture is derived as a historical force prior to the existence of any individual subject, but is realizable through agency. It is therefore the means by which the individual is socialized as a member of a given society, and is, in turn the form of all individual and social creativity.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless the actions of individuals involved in this cultural production must be historicised and contingently situated. Speaking from a later, more heightened, public expression of Aboriginality, contemporary Kurnai see the production and display of artefacts as a reaffirmation of their Aboriginal heritage. Aileen Mongta and Chook Mullett recall with pleasure how they gathered around the person making the boomerang and were shown how to shave the wood with a piece of broken glass and learn the skills in making them fly whilst listening to humorous stories from a past hunter-gatherer way of life. In their view, making boomerangs is not just a skill, it "reminds you of what you know—it's all related, it's a way of keeping up the culture."<sup>33</sup> Beckett suggests such essentialist definitions—which tend to incorporate our primitivisms—represent Aborigines' strategic response to a colonial context.<sup>34</sup> Today Aborigines conceive of their culture as an entity that incorporates both local and national arenas. In an earlier era, however, Aborigines operated from a more private sense of Aboriginality when individuals drew selectively from their existing skills and knowledge to produce and reproduce their culture in order to gain some degree of control over the social systems in which they were embedded. This process involved Aborigines in a succession of transformations whose outcomes were largely unforeseen.

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<sup>32</sup> Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1987), pp. 80-81.

<sup>33</sup> Chook Mullett, Interview, 2 September 92; Aileen Mongta, Interview, 5 March 1993.

<sup>34</sup> Jeremy Beckett, "Aboriginality and the Nation State: A Comparative Perspective," unpublished paper, 1991, Copy in the author's possession.



This consideration of tourist art at Lake Tyers adds another element to our understanding of institutional structures. In many ways, Aboriginal stations can be likened to the model of the "total institution" proposed by Erving Goffman.<sup>35</sup> Managers habitually referred to Aborigines as "inmates" and they often wielded power autocratically and arbitrarily.<sup>36</sup> Understandably, the destruction of Aboriginal culture and Aborigines' subsequent subservience and dependency has been attributed to the impact of institutionalisation.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there are critical differences.<sup>38</sup> First, race relations on missions and stations were not unique to these institutions but mirrored, in various ways, the racial discrimination Aborigines experienced in mainstream Australian society. Second, hierarchical relations between staff and Aborigines were not inflexible; they could be set to one side. Third Aborigines were not confined within these institutional structures. Although families suffered through separation, Aborigines crossed official boundaries to maintain relationships with kin and interact with mainstream Australian society. Whilst Goffman shows that total institutions tolerated activities like theatrical performances and hobbies as a release of tension for the community, the role which tourist art played for Aborigines as a means of economic gain, and as an oppositional tactic which maintained cultural continuity was of far greater significance.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Erving Goffman, *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co. 1961).

<sup>36</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 173. For instances of rebellion see AA, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report for Twelve Months Ending June 30, 1926, pp. 5-6.

<sup>37</sup> Oral histories such as *The Two Worlds of Jimmie Barker: The Life of an Australian Aboriginal 1900-1972 as told to Janet Mathews* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1980) contain many indictments of the Aboriginal reserves as do the contact histories of Charles Rowley, *Outcasts in White Australia*, pp. 270-8.

<sup>38</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, p. 28-34.

<sup>39</sup> Goffman, *Asylums*, p. 68-70.

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### iii Boomerangs: regional identity/ national symbol

To south eastern Aborigines returning boomerangs are symbolically important as part of their regional heritage: to members of the majority society, returning boomerangs represent a symbol of national identity. In a highly original way, the cultural production of the Kurnai mediated between these two apparently opposed realms and, in the process, negotiated new roles and meanings for Aboriginal artefacts emblematic of Aborigines' changed political, economic and social circumstances.

Chapter 2 demonstrated the intense interest which the boomerang elicited from evolutionists for whom it represented evidence of developmental stages amongst indigenous people. But the emphasis given to ethnographic interpretations has overlooked the parallel emergence of the boomerang in the broader sphere of popular culture as a symbol of national identity. As Australia's national symbols emerged in the wake of late nineteenth century nationalism, the boomerang underwent a further set of transformations to take its place alongside the kangaroo, a sprig of wattle and the swagman as an ubiquitous symbol of national identity. In his book *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Daniel Miller points out that portable artefacts lend themselves to such abstract legitimations by the state.<sup>40</sup> Simultaneously, commercial interests appropriated the boomerang as a sign of a uniquely Australian product to which, it was implied, consumers would undoubtedly return. During the First World War, the returning boomerang conveyed a more poignant message when it was deployed as an emblem in various locations: on the aeroplanes flown by the few Australian pilots who served with the Royal Air Force, on comfort fund badges and on the Lest We Forget badge. In detailing this history, Philip Jones notes that "[e]ach successive wave has contributed to

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<sup>40</sup> Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, p. 125.

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the remaking of Aboriginal culture in European eyes and promoted a new category of Aboriginal object."<sup>41</sup>

In the process of these appropriations, the boomerang became stereotyped, losing sight of local, regional differences and giving rise to several common misconceptions in the process.<sup>42</sup> The difference between *Wonguim*, returning boomerangs, and *Barn-git*, fighting and hunting boomerangs, became confused. In general the public assumed boomerangs were generic to Aboriginal Australia when in fact they were unknown in Tasmania and the far north. In contrast with these misconceptions, returning boomerangs maintained a special meaning for south eastern Aborigines as part of their own regional heritage. In an earlier era, returning boomerangs featured in sport and in hunting ducks when the boomerang's flight above the surface of rivers and lakes drove birds out of the water and allowed them to be caught.<sup>43</sup> The difference was, produced, displayed and exchanged as tourist souvenirs, these boomerangs accrued a new set of meanings beyond their original use-value within a hunter-gatherer economy.<sup>44</sup> When Kurnai staged displays of boomerang throwing for tourists from the majority culture they transformed the meanings encoded in these artefacts. Such interaction began to disinter artefacts from their museological associations with a dead culture to demonstrate Kurnai's continuing presence in the modern world.

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<sup>41</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," p. 66; This overview of the history of the boomerang relies upon the information brought forward by Jones and that in the exhibition catalogue *Boomerang*, 27 February-19 July 1992, South Australian Museum.

<sup>42</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," pp. 67-68; Chips Mackinolty, "Whose Boomerang Won't Come Back? . . . or At Least Get a Decent Return," In *Aboriginal Arts and Crafts and the Market* (eds.), P. Loveday & P. Cooke (Darwin: The Australian National University, 1983), pp. 50-51.

<sup>43</sup> Jones, "The Boomerang's Erratic Flight," p. 67.

<sup>44</sup> During the nineteenth century Aborigines on reserves were able to supplement government rations by foraging for food on adjacent land. By the turn of the century however, pastoral development and the progressive closure and reduction of reserves gradually curtailed these activities. BPA, 43rd Report 1907, Lake Tyers, 17 July 1907, John Bulmer, unpagged, point 9; BPA 37th Report, Coranderrk, 1st July 1901, Joseph Shaw, p. 7.9; BPA 41st Report 1905, Lake Condah, 2 July 1905, J. H. Stähle.

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The painted images and text characteristic of the boomerangs produced at Lake Tyers after the 1920s operated as a complex sign system which contributed toward these changing constructions for Aboriginality. As an innovative and highly original response to an emerging tourist industry, parallels exist between the Lake Tyers boomerangs and the painted artefacts produced by the Aranda at Hermannsburg Mission in the mid 1930s. (Fig. 1, Plate 29) Similarities in the style, content and technique of the artefacts produced by both communities indicate Aborigines' common colonial experiences; their differences suggest the impact of distinctive local circumstances. Although the Aranda maintained a privileged status in anthropology, the mission environment encouraged Aranda artists to produce art and craft as a means of gradually incorporating them into the majority society. This attitude generally meant missions failed to understand the importance which Aborigines attached to their art but it did guarantee their active support and artists were supplied with high quality materials. By contrast, tourist art produced by Kurnai at Lake Tyers was not supported by the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Lake Tyers boomerangs are an Aboriginal initiative produced with children's watercolour paint-boxes purchased from local stores.<sup>45</sup>

Cooper's analysis of south eastern artefacts established that, at contact, south east mobiliary art exhibited the richest diversity of geometric and figurative imagery of any stylistic area in Aboriginal Australia.<sup>46</sup> In tracing the changes which subsequently occurred she disputes earlier assumptions that Aboriginal appropriations from the popular imagery of coins, stamps, postcards and the media and their use of metal technology for engraved and poker-worked artefacts, constituted evidence of cultural disintegration.<sup>47</sup> Her reappraisal

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<sup>45</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. con, 18 March, 1993. Another source of supply may have been the Lake Tyers primary school.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 33.

<sup>47</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," pp. 37- 38.

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contrasts with the evidence from nineteenth-century collections. The Bulmer collection of Kurnai artefacts, presented to May Bulmer, daughter of Reverend John Bulmer at her marriage to Harry Rankin in 1900, demonstrates collectors' preference for geometric ornament. (Plate 30) Artefacts decorated with realistic imagery which appropriated from the majority culture were generally relegated to curio status.

In hindsight, it is apparent that the historical debates concerning the degree of geometric and figurative imagery in Aboriginal art are erroneous. In his overview of the critical response to central desert art Sutton demonstrates that, at various times, tendencies to representation *and* abstraction have both been attributed to European influences.<sup>48</sup> The problem is that Western artistic codes assume that art aims to represent (look like) objects in the real world. It follows that representational art and abstraction are dealt with as discrete categories when, in fact, their relationship is arbitrary and highly ambiguous. In reality, these culturally coded terms bear little relationship to the way small-scale societies encode a multiplicity of meanings by combining figurative and geometric elements in compositions.<sup>49</sup>

Hence, the general trend toward realism identified in third world tourist art becomes modified in the Australian context by cultural and historical factors. In her study of contemporary African tourist art, Jules-Rosette, found hyper-realism in association with certain recurring genres of flora and fauna in an idyllic landscape.<sup>50</sup> She maintains such utopian images do not constitute a

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," In *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 59-88, p. 87.

<sup>49</sup> Morphy, "What Circles Look Like," pp. 17-36; Nancy Munn, *Walbiri Iconography: Graphic Representation and Cultural Symbolism in a Central Australian Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973).

<sup>50</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, pp. 151-4; Similarities emerge in the popular painting produced for an African audience discussed by Ilona Szombati-Fabian and Johannes Fabian, "Art, History, and Society: Popular Painting in Shaba, Zaire," *Studies in the Anthropology of Visual Communication*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1976, pp. 1-21.

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nostalgia for the past: rather their hyper-realism is a knowing fiction which recognises the radical disruptions of the modern world. Her evidence suggested that the loss and cultural disruption experienced by indigenous people was expressed as three distinct categories of images: a longing for the past, a veiled criticism of injustices and a tension between individualism and cultural unity. My evidence from Lake Tyers accords closely, but not entirely with her evidence. By contrast with the hyper-realism of African tourist art, the Lake Tyers boomerangs maintain a tension between geometric and figurative representations which engender meaning as total compositions. The imagery on the anonymous boomerangs given to Hilda Rule exemplifies these differences: a map of the continent flanked by flags and the kangaroo and emu drawn from the Australian coat of arms fill the apical position; at the centre of each arm the artist depicts birds perched on a leafy twig, whilst geometric elements are placed either end. This combination of elements gives rise to a visual tension: a disjunction operates between the illusion of depth created by the receding scale and depth of the animals and the diagonal tree at the apex which enters and exits the edge of the boomerang like a pathway crossing the land.<sup>51</sup>

Viewed from this perspective; the figurative motifs at the apex and arms read in conjunction with the geometric elements at either end of the boomerang: placement is equally as important as imagery. The Kurnai elder, Albert Mullett, suggests the figurative and geometric elements which form symmetrical pairs encode continuing links with regional domains and kin. In a boomerang by Joe Mullett, the recurring motif of birds perched on a twisted branch of foliage identifies the family totem of the Mullett family—the Laughing Kookaburra (*Dacelo novaeguineae*). (Plate 31) On a boomerang by Laurie Moffatt the birds represent the wrens which signify Gippsland moieties: the

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<sup>51</sup> Ian Burn and Ann Stephen, "Namatjira's White Mask," pp. 249-282, pp. 250-255 note the same visual tensions in a Namatjira woomera.

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male moiety *Yeerung*, the Southern Emu-Wren (*Stipiturus malachurus*) and the female moiety, *Djeegun*, the Superb Fairy-Wren (*Malurus cyaneus*).<sup>52</sup> (Plate 32) Similarly, the geometric elements of zig-zags, triangles, dots, parallel lines and circles symbolise clan relationships. Comparisons between Lake Tyers and Wiradjuri boomerangs reveal that the range of elements and their placement on boomerangs differentiates regions. (see Chapter 6 )

In combination, these figurative and geometric images re-contextualise the past in the present. The individual motifs of the koala, emu and kangaroo depicted on a boomerang made by Wally Pepper (1918-1980) and decorated by Dolly Pepper née Mullett (1916-c.1989) represent the former, fertile landscape of their regional domain. (Plate 33) When such images of the land are juxtaposed with the maps, flags and coats of arms which denote colonial authority and power, Kurnai incorporate the heraldic imagery of the colonial power. Keesing argues that such oppositional logic is inherent in the counter-hegemonic discourses of the colonised. They

have repeatedly produced mirror-images of the political structures used to dominate them, have invoked conceptual entities that were convenient fictions of colonial administration, have mimicked and (often unwittingly) parodied the semiology of colonial rule and white supremacy.<sup>53</sup>

When Aborigines at Lake Tyers, as at Hermannsburg, deployed such symbols of national identity they incorporated themselves within the 'imagined communities' of modern nation states. In the process, Aborigines began to interweave local associations with their regional domain into a wider pan-Aboriginal concern with colonial dispossession. Since settlement, south eastern Aborigines had staged protests aimed at achieving recognition for their dispossession yet Federation in 1901 denied Aborigines existed by excluding them from the census. Nevertheless, Aborigines still felt patriotism

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<sup>52</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 26 February, 1993.

<sup>53</sup> Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation*, p. 8.

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for their country: nine Lake Tyers men (in addition to others elsewhere in the Victoria) served in the First World War and twenty-five enlisted in the Second World War.<sup>54</sup> At a time when authorised discourses on Aborigines refused to recognise their presence as part of a contemporary world, a boomerang like that by Keith Bryant, (1942-1979) operated as an "off-site marker"—a talisman which triggered associations in the viewer through the information it conveyed.<sup>55</sup> (Plate 34 ) As a souvenir, Bryant's appropriation of a post card image of Lakes Entrance and the inscription "Best Wishes from Lake Tyers 1957" resonated with memories of Lake Tyers and the tourist's encounter with Aborigines.

Likewise concerts performed at Lake Tyers incorporated the same Aboriginal messages to tourists and fulfilled a similar role for Aborigines. Although Captain Newman (1928-1931) is generally credited with initiating the concerts the previous manager, George Baldwin, (1925-1928) had already reported favourably to the Board that,

Frequent concerts are held and other forms of amusement provided in the social hall. I believe this has resulted in the natives taking a keen interest in their own affairs and in what is taking place around them.<sup>56</sup>

Seeing their positive value, Captain Newman extended the concerts. Cora Gilsenan, a close friend of Lake Tyers Aborigines recalls, Newman

was interested in anything that made [Aborigines] happy, and this meant keeping them occupied so he. . . got together a concert party and took them on tour around the country towns of Victoria . . . in hired halls.<sup>57</sup>

At the conclusion of the tour, the concert party continued to perform at Lake Tyers for the benefit of tourists. Such positive community action resulted in

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<sup>54</sup> Alick Jackomos and Derek Fowell, *Forgotten Heroes: Aborigines at War From the Somme to Vietnam* (South Melbourne: Victoria Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>55</sup> Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Macmillan 1976), p. 41.

<sup>56</sup> AA, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-26, pp. 5-6.

<sup>57</sup> Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993.



profits being pooled toward a Lake Tyers Social Club and, at Newman's suggestion, Aborigines helped purchase X-Ray equipment for the Bairnsdale hospital which would help alleviate illness in their community.<sup>58</sup> In his research at La Perouse in the 1960s James Bell similarly found a highly integrated social group who actively resisted assimilation by pooling their resources.<sup>59</sup> Despite material change, south eastern Aborigines, maintained many continuities with the hunter-gatherer values demonstrated by remote communities.<sup>60</sup>

"Jacky Jacky Was Smart Young Fellow" was a favourite song. Aborigines undercut the power wielded by the humiliating Jacky Jacky stereotype when they incorporated this derogatory term into a protest song played back to the majority culture. Other songs indicate the way Aborigines were demanding recognition that they were Australia's indigenous race.

Can't we have a song about Australia  
About the emu and the kangaroo?  
A song about the possum or the wattle blossom  
Any kind of rag will do.  
Can't we have a song about the old gum tree  
Or about our native land?  
Something that's original about the Aboriginal  
The real Australian man.<sup>61</sup>

Later, during concerts in Melbourne, critics would denigrate the American influences evident in Aboriginal culture but Aborigines selectively incorporated through their own world view. Such Americanisms may be better understood as further evidence of modernisation.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 85; A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Managers Reports 1930-1944, Managers Report for period 17 August 1931 - 30 November 1931.

<sup>59</sup> James Bell, "The La Perouse Aborigines: A Study of Their Group Life and Assimilation into Modern Australian Society, Ph.D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1967, pp. 146, 149-50.

<sup>60</sup> Altman, *Hunter-gatherers Today*, pp. 129-151.

<sup>61</sup> Alan West, Lake Tyers tape, 1961, Copy held by the author.

<sup>62</sup> In this regard, Philip and Roger Bell argue that the basis of American influences lies in strategic alliances. *Implicated: The United States In Australia*, Australian Retrospectives, Series Editor, David Walker (Melbourne Oxford University Press, 1993).

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Aboriginal tourist artefacts function as metonym: referring back to their original role within a hunter-gatherer society whilst they accrue new meanings in interaction with the majority culture. They are not replicas; rather in Umberto Eco's terms, they represent an aesthetic idiolect which allowed individual responses to agreed cultural codes.<sup>63</sup> For south eastern Aborigines, returning boomerangs were meaningful as part of their local heritage and in their response to settler nationalism, they maintained and extended their power over this symbol. It was a sign of a more heightened sense of Aboriginality when Aborigines incorporated boomerangs into new ceremonial contexts as, for instance, when Billie Russell attended the unveiling of Barak's memorial in 1934 or at the war-time wedding of Suzy Murray and George Patten when the guard of honour formed an arch of boomerangs in lieu of swords. (see Chapter 5) The additional appropriation of emblems from mainstream Australian culture allowed the past to be reinvented in order to draw attention to present injustices and imagine future possibilities.

#### **iv The critical response.**

It is surely more than a coincidence that the Museum of Victoria ceased collecting south eastern artefacts in the 1920s—at the same time as Lake Tyers Aborigines began to exploit their conjunction with the tourist industry.<sup>64</sup> Exclusion from institutional collections did not prevent the production of artefacts at Lake Tyers, but it contributed to the obscurity which has continued to surround the history of Aboriginal art in this region. In broader terms, such institutional exclusion expressed and reaffirmed the government policies which aimed to render Aborigines invisible by their consolidation at the remote Lake Tyers reserve.

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<sup>63</sup> Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, pp. 270-273.

<sup>64</sup> At the behest of the newly formed Native Welfare Board, the Museum of Victoria purchased an undecorated boomerang by Wally Pepper in the 1950s. McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 99-100, 108-9.

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This change in institutional collection policies are attributable to a number of factors. When ethnographic collections were first established in the mid-nineteenth century, it was presumed that the tangible reality of material culture represented objective, factual data which supported evolutionary paradigms. Discourses of primitivism thus inscribed artefacts within systems of knowledge and power which restricted understanding of the way they might be expressive of Aborigines' vital response to a changing social, political, and physical reality. Since the conceptual frameworks which shaped typologies evaluated artefacts as functional items within a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, commodification implied a breakdown of tradition and cultural disintegration.

Anthropology emphasised this interpretation when it conceived of Aboriginal culture as a totality, marked as other by its hunter-gatherer lifestyle, ritual and ceremonial life and kinship structures. When Baldwin Spencer said in 1898, that, "In Victoria there is not a single native who really knows anything of tribal customs" he defined Aboriginal culture in a way that seemed to neatly coincide with the policies of racial discrimination effected in government legislation.<sup>65</sup> In keeping with the thinking of his era, Spencer venerated tradition but could not conceive of a dynamic Aboriginal culture which would adjust to meet changing circumstances.

The effect of this discrimination against contemporary artefacts is heightened by contrast with the growing admiration expressed for Aboriginal art. Writing in 1878, the ethnographer Brough Smyth mourned the changes and adaptations then in evidence in the production of artefacts but he admired the creativity, and vivacity of Aboriginal art, describing the Lake Tyrrell bark

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<sup>65</sup> R. R. Marrett and T. K. Penniman, *Spencer's Scientific Correspondence with Sir J. G. Frazer and Others*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932), p. 140.

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drawing as "full of life and action."<sup>66</sup> Artefacts were expected to conform to an evolutionist typology whereas western artistic traditions applauded originality and creativity. Aboriginal artefacts were thus caught in a particular set of ethnographic criteria which associated authenticity with the traditional. In 1929 it was reported

The demand for genuine boomerangs . . . is steadily increasing. They have become so scarce, in fact, that the curator of our Museum, who recently tried to purchase two, was unable to secure them at reasonable price.

From 30/- to £2 is being asked for them in the secondhand dealer's shops and as much as £10 has been demanded for one of the old type of fighting boomerangs.<sup>67</sup>

For those professionals with specialised knowledge, authentic Aboriginal culture could only be located in the past.

As discussed already, Leason's response maintained a nineteenth century viewpoint associating inauthenticity with the hybridity of 'half-castes' and certain key factors: the replication of artefacts for commodity exchange, the use of modern technology and the incorporation of alien subject matter. In the catalogue to the *Last of the Victorian Aborigines* Leason was openly critical.

It should be said that the last of the Victorian aborigines offer little material for the student of primitive races. Their old customs have gone. If some of the old crafts are still occasionally practiced, most of these have been considerably modified, or have lost altogether their original technique.

In the making of boomerangs, for example, the modern axe and iron wedges are used to remove the rough block from the tree, and a vice, a saw, glass scrapers and sandpaper are employed to make the finished boomerang. It is usually decorated, sometimes with a sketch of Sydney Harbour Bridge, and half castes often do most of the work in producing those sold at Lake Tyers.<sup>68</sup>

Elsewhere, Leason cynically noted that Aborigines were not using planes and predicted (quite correctly) that automatic planing machines would soon be in

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<sup>66</sup> Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 287.

<sup>67</sup> "Boom in Boomerangs," *The Herald*, 7 November 1929.

<sup>68</sup> Leason, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*. 1934, p. 5.

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use.<sup>69</sup> His veiled contempt denied the skills and knowledge required to produce returning boomerangs from tree roots and elbows. Amongst the Kurnai, individuals such as Alex Mullett (1885-1952) and Wally Pepper gained status in the community as fine craftsmen. (Plate 35) In fact, the level of technology at Lake Tyers closely resembled that used by the Wangkangurru Aborigines, Stan Loycurrie and Jack Noorywanka who had staged displays for the 1929 exhibition *Australian Aboriginal Art*. Such ingenious and innovative adaptations of metal technology allowed Aborigines to compete in a capitalist economy.

Leason's commentary further implies that commodification alienates Aborigines—as indicated by their appropriation of images from spectacular sites unrelated to their experience. But the opening of Sydney Harbour Bridge in 1933 was a quintessential sign of Australia's modernity: when Aborigines drew upon media images or the influence of kin who had travelled from La. Perouse and Wallaga Lakes, to incorporate its image into their boomerangs, they secured a position for themselves within the contemporary world. Underlying Leason's criticism were racist ideologies. Leason suggested that the apparent deterioration of Aboriginal art was directly attributable to the 'half-caste' status of artists, yet elsewhere noted that 'full-bloods' like William Johnson (1860-c.1965) continued to make and use bark canoes.<sup>70</sup> In fact, 'half-castes' probably dominated production because they were in the majority, but Aborigines chose whether or not they wished to become involved with tourism and Leason's informants were the 'full-bloods' who modelled for his portraits.

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<sup>69</sup> Leason, Diary 1933/4, entry for 12 March 1934.

<sup>70</sup> Leason, *The Last of the Victorian Aborigines*, 1934, entry for William Johnson.

His rejections suggested Aborigines were dominated by their interaction with tourists and a capitalist economy; a supposition apparently supported by evidence from visitors to Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington) and Lake Tyers in the previous century. In his analysis of the responses recorded in the mission 'Visitors Books', Attwood reveals that tourists rarely expressed any humanitarian concern for Aborigines.<sup>71</sup> Most commended the good intentions of the missionaries and interpreted evidence of progress toward civilisation as confirmation of their own superiority.<sup>72</sup> The majority, Attwood suggests, were paternalistic voyeurs, with no consideration for an Aboriginal viewpoint. Even in the nineteenth century, tourism to Missions drew criticism. John Stanley James, who wrote for *The Argus* under the pseudonym of 'The Vagabond,' claimed that Lake Tyers risked becoming "a show place, an appanage to the hotels at the Lakes Entrance" who provided excursions to the Missions.<sup>73</sup> In reality, the position James adopts is more conservative than it at first appears: he criticises the way tourists reduce Aborigines to a spectacle but is equally concerned that they disrupt discipline. Later, in the 1940s, the anthropologist Norman Tindale similarly deplored tourists who viewed Lake Tyers as a "kind of zoological garden and place of amusement, where aborigines and near-aborigines can be seen and discussed almost as though they were an animal species."<sup>74</sup> Attwood sees that an element of hypocrisy underlies the elitist position adopted by Tindale, who privileges his own right to view Aborigines as objects of fascination over that of tourists, when the viewing position of both was really quite close.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Bain Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History: Mission Station Visitors Books," in *Koori History*, pp. 21-26. Attwood's analysis draws attention to the strategic and political role played by these 'Visitors Books' as an endorsement of Board policies.

<sup>72</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 115.

<sup>73</sup> Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History," p. 25.

<sup>74</sup> Norman Tindale, quoted by Andrew Markus in "Under the Act," In *Australians 1938* (eds.), Bill Gammage and Peter Spearitt, *Australians: A Historical Library*, Gen. Eds. Alan D. Gilbert and K. S. Inglis, (Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon Associates, 1987), pp. 47-54, p. 47.

<sup>75</sup> Attwood, "Reading Sources in Aboriginal History", p. 25.

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The critical response to tourism, then and since, implies Aborigines are dominated by such commercial interaction but this supposition is not borne out by local evidence. Within their own regional domains, Aborigines handled their inter-relationships with members of the majority culture in specific ways that preserved their autonomy. Speaking from an American context, Evans-Pritchard argues that from first contact, Indians have responded to whites by parodying their primitivism, hypocrisy, greed and naivety as a means of defending and protecting their group identity.<sup>76</sup> Hilda Rule, remains acutely aware of the disjunction which operated between Aboriginal viewing positions as 'hosts' toward their tourist 'guests.' She maintains that,

. . . [Aborigines] whom I worked with. . . are not the tribal blacks that the general public [hope to see]. I feel that people look back and let their imagination take over & from this, articles are published which give the wrong impression, if only the visitors [tourists] could have heard themselves being mimicked after they left, their faces would be red, this often happened & we would all have a good laugh, "Those poor white fellers" was and almost sounded like a pardon.<sup>77</sup>

Rule's local evidence offers a rare insight into the defences which Aborigines' implemented as tactics against the primitivist stereotypes which conditioned tourist perceptions. Aborigines were not naive: rather they realistically differentiated between transient tourists and those members of the majority culture with whom they were in daily interaction.

Aboriginal oral histories offer further evidence of the way Aborigines negotiated their interchange with tourists on terms advantageous to themselves. Attwood and Pepper recount versions of this story from the 1920s:

[Ellen (Kitty) Johnson (1849 - 1939)] was the oldest on the station and the white people always wanted to see her. She made a lot of money for her grand-children from the tourists. . . One Christmas I was out there when

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<sup>76</sup> Deidre Evans-Pritchard, "How 'They' See 'Us': Native American Images of Tourists," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 16, 1989, pp. 89-105.

<sup>77</sup> Hilda Rule, "Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station," c.1960, Copy in the author's possession, p. 2.

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the tourists were all about taking photographs of the Aborigines on the station. Old Granny Johnson always wore a scarf over her head and smoked a clay pipe: well. . . some of the tourists [were taken] to see this real old lady—she knew the language—well, when they got to her house there she was sittin' out the front with her head covered with a possum-skin rug, and she wouldn't pull her head out of it. She sat there listening to the tourists askin' her to let 'em see her so they could get a photo, but she just sat there. After a good bit of coaxing all of a sudden she shoved 'er hand out and stuck a mug on the ground in front of her and waited till she reckoned there was enough coins dropped in, then she pulled the rug off and sat there, grinnin' away, smokin' her pipe for the tourists to photograph her. The whites often gave her tobacco and before they left she'd bring out some boomerangs and some baskets she had made herself. . . and she got ten shillings [each] for them.<sup>78</sup> (Plate 36)

This narrative suggests the way Lake Tyers Aborigines commodified their culture through interaction with tourists on terms advantageous to themselves. Johnson exploits ethnicity as a sign of difference: language, clothing and lifestyle become markers of authenticity. Tourists are ultimately allowed to take a photograph of her as a souvenir of their visit, but in the process, she has ridiculed their desire, maintained her dignity and gained economically.

Off the reserve and after the war, when Aborigines resumed their interaction with tourists similar tactics prevailed. The Kurnai Mullett and Mongta families worked as itinerant labourers and staged displays of boomerang-throwing for tourists travelling on the Princes Highway past Bairnsdale. Today, the Mongta family continue to produce artefacts at Cann River, trading under the name Far East Gippsland Aboriginal Corporation. Aileen Mongta, a Bidhawal, says Aborigines differentiate between tourists who are interested in learning about their culture and those who treat them as curiosities, as if they were animals in a zoo. Faced with the latter situation, the Mongta and Mullett children recall hiding behind bushes and laughing at tourists when they were hit by a stray boomerang. From an Aboriginal viewing position, debates about authenticity and exploitation are irrelevant and merely represent further attempts

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<sup>78</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 141-2; Another version of this story appears in Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 80 .



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to restrict and retard Aborigines . . . After all they've done to us, do you think it would worry us to be sitting at the side of road selling boomerangs? . . . Every time I see a stall or something and it's public, it just reminds people that Aboriginal culture is still alive.<sup>79</sup>

Seen from the viewpoint of a contemporary Aboriginality, Mongta's comments encapsulate the connections between production, display and exchange of artefacts and the different range of meanings they might encompass for Aborigines and for a range of consumers.

When discussions of tourist art emphasise the "staged authenticity" of indigenous spectacles, this implies indigenous subordination and exploitation by tourists and a mutual complicity between producers and consumers.<sup>80</sup> In contrast, the evidence from Lake Tyers reveals that tourists' accepted diverse representations of Aboriginality. Although various levels of primitivism are apparent in the responses of mainstream Australian society, tourists accepted the different ways Aborigines represented themselves through the production of artefacts, staged displays and concerts. The emphasis which specialised professionals placed upon tradition and authenticity resulted in the exclusion of south eastern artefacts from collections and the criticism of both Aborigines and tourists. Their responses denied legitimacy to contemporary cultural developments amongst south east Aborigines.

Erik Cohen explains these apparent inconsistencies by demonstrating that authenticity is a generalised, abstract concept associated with the alienation of the modern world. In place of existing fixed and determined constructions he suggests authenticity is socially constructed and negotiable.<sup>81</sup> Cohen suggests encounters with the other occur at various depths of experience and

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<sup>79</sup> Aileen Mongta, Interview, 5 March 1993.

<sup>80</sup> MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, pp. 8-9, 18-20, 27-31.

<sup>81</sup> Erik Cohen, "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism," *Annals of Tourism Research*, Vol. 15, 1988, pp. 371-386.

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tourists arrive with a range of expectations: existential, experimental, experiential, recreational and diversionary. He likens anthropologists to the purist, existential tourist who tends to "switch worlds" by seeking a spiritual relationship which positions the other at the centre. Anthropologists differ of course because they approach their subjects with a more subjective detachment. Nevertheless, it is professionals associated with institutions, he argues, who place emphasis upon authenticity. Within the time frame examined here, the majority of Lake Tyers tourists fell within the categories of recreational and diversionary: those who sought an enjoyable and pleasurable experience and who acquiesced with Aborigines in the idea of authenticity as a "playful attitude of make-believe."<sup>82</sup>

#### **v The politics of tourist art**

The conflicting response which tourist art elicited from managers and the public lends support for these more constructive interpretations. Although Aborigines chose whether they wished to be involved in tourism, the quarterly reports which managers submitted to the Board, continually emphasise the problems which the industry raised from their perspective. When Aborigines gave priority to making artefacts and staging displays and concerts work on the reserve remained incomplete. One manager stated his grievance thus:

. . . during the tourist season even aged men and women and cripples can earn a good deal of money by making and selling baskets and boomerangs. . . the leaf band has been the great attraction to visitors, and together with the boomerang throwers and fire makers they have earned a good deal of money entertaining tourists.<sup>83</sup>

The Protestant work ethic which the Station hoped to inculcate in Aborigines was structured around the concept of regular hard labour. To implement these values, the community was spatially and temporally divided into discrete

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<sup>82</sup> Cohen, "Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism," p. 377.

<sup>83</sup> A A, B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers, Correspondence Files, Manager Reports 1919-1926, 1921, p. 2; Annual Report Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 30 June 1918; Aboriginal Station Lake Tyers, 31 March 1924.

groups: school-age children, mothers at home, women who worked as domestics and nurses for the administration and men who worked as farm labourers. When Major Glen informed the Board in 1932 that Aborigines made more money from "selling boomerangs than they would by legitimate labour" he recognised the extent to which their commodity production circumvented the proscribed boundaries of work called for by a protectionist regime. We can presume that missions and stations further differentiated between the pleasured leisure exemplified in tourism and the activities for self-improvement; reading, needlework and biblical songs which they promoted.<sup>84</sup> Finally Glen banned concerts altogether because they allowed Aborigines to earn money too easily.<sup>85</sup>

As tourism increased, managers continually requested a reduction in the hours that tourists were allowed to visit the Station. Initially in 1918, visitors arrived 10 a.m.-7 p.m. every day, by 1921 these hours were reduced to 4 p.m.-6 p.m. and by the 1930s, these hours were further restricted to Wednesday and Saturday afternoons and public holidays.<sup>86</sup> Indeed managers wanted to close the Station entirely except to authorised persons, but, they complained, "the station has become a recognised Tourist resort and if it were now closed against the T[ourist]s there would be a public outcry."<sup>87</sup> Bowing to commercial pressure managers suggested that tourists "be requested to buy nothing direct from the Aborigines and. . . refrain from any remarks which would tend to

<sup>84</sup> Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), Vol. 1, p. 64; Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, pp. 23-24: A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Manager's report for period 30 November 1933, Glen to Board 30th June 1932.

<sup>85</sup> AA, B356 /Item 103, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files 1865-1968, Permits and Conduct, 4 April 1936.

<sup>86</sup> AA, Series B 356/ Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926; Annual Report Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station 30 June 1918, p. 2.

<sup>87</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 19 February 1925, p. 15.

make the Aboriginals discontented."<sup>88</sup> In the 1950s, managers' wishes were realised and tourists were excluded altogether: this enforced isolation drastically reduced Aborigines' economic independence and their additional income.<sup>89</sup>

Just as the Board wanted to prevent tourists from entering Lake Tyers, so they consistently refused permission for Aborigines to perform corroborees and displays of fire-lighting and boomerang throwing away from the Station.<sup>90</sup> In correspondence with members of the public, the Board reiterated that its policy was to completely isolate Aborigines from contact with the white population to prevent them from being exploited.<sup>91</sup>

Board Reports reveal that the underlying reason why managers insisted on the exclusion of tourists from Lake Tyers was that interaction between Aborigines and tourists was seen as potentially subversive. As shown above, Baldwin tried to censor the conversations which occurred between Aborigines and tourists and he warned the Board that, "A number of Tourists sympathize with the inmates and lead them to believe they are not being well treated."<sup>92</sup> Indeed, Major Glen specifically attributed "the hostile attitude so recently displayed by our charges" to the bad influence of tourists.<sup>93</sup>

Visitors exercise a demoralising effect on natives, who become fawning mendicants when strange whites are on the station & refuse work

<sup>88</sup> A A, Series B356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, p.15.

<sup>89</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 80

<sup>90</sup> A A, Series B313/246, Visits and Displays, Letter to BPA, 22 July 1927; Letter to A .G. Allnutt, Mildura Harriers Club, 20 July 1927; Letter to George D. Muedeil, Historical Society of Victoria, 9 February, 1934; Letter to Mrs G. Brunt, 8 July, 1933; Letter from Chief Protector of Aborigines, J. W. Bleakey, Brisbane, 23 November 1933.

<sup>91</sup> Similar comments occur in several reports. A A, Series B313/Item 246, Visits & Displays, Letter from Secretary of the BPA, 18 July 1933; Letter BPA to Chief Secretary's Department, 22 November 1931.

<sup>92</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 53, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1918-1926, Report on the Lake Tyers Aboriginal Station, 19 February 1925, p. 15.

<sup>93</sup> AA, Series B 356 /Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Manager's Reports 1930-1944, Letter to Secretary, BPA, 1 April 1933, p. 2.

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because money from boomerangs manufactured surreptitiously in working hours is too easily come by.<sup>94</sup>

Far from protecting Aborigines from exploitation, we see that the Board's isolationist policies represented an institutionalised racism aimed at stopping all Aboriginal interaction with the public in order to quash potential rebellion. Exploitation was a highly emotive charge which incriminated tourists and elevated the Boards's role as moral guardian.

Off the Station, the Board continued to intervene in the interaction between Aborigines and tourists. In the post-war period, Freddie Harrison approached Reverend Richard Gilsenan, formerly of Condah mission, now resident at Bancroft Bay, Metung and a friend of many Aborigines, with a suggestion that the concert party be revived. From 1945-1960 concerts were performed twice weekly in the summer months at Gilsenan's tea rooms.<sup>95</sup> "It became so good [his daughter, Cora Gilsenan recalls], it was wonderful. . . hundreds and thousands came to hear the Aboriginal concerts. . . [because Aborigines are]. . . born entertainers."<sup>96</sup> On concert nights, those Aborigines still residing at Lake Tyers, would leave illegally, whilst others living nearby walked for miles to participate. Performances commenced in the afternoon with William Johnson throwing the boomerang followed by a three-hour evening concert of soloists, comedy, and "playing the leaf". Women were present, but rarely performed because they had "too many children to look after".<sup>97</sup> Afterwards, the Gilsenans provided supper and Aborigines walked home or camped overnight—once again, contravening Station regulations.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> A A, Series B 356/Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Manager's Report for period ended 1 August 1932-30, September 1932.

<sup>95</sup> Frank Hill, "Unusual Bush Concert: All Aborigine Cast," *Womans Day and Home*, 19 February 1951, pp. 13-14.

<sup>96</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993; Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>97</sup> Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>98</sup> Cora Gilsenan has been politically active on behalf of Lake Tyers Aborigines since the 1930s.

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Aborigines decided to revive the concerts but the Gilsenan family played a critical role as facilitators. Aware they would be accused of exploiting Aborigines, they did not charge admission. Instead Aborigines pooled the donation they collected during the concert. Members of the wider community who act as facilitators for Aborigines are often now criticised as paternalistic, but the Gilsenans provided a venue for Aboriginal concerts for fifteen years against persistent interference from the Board who demanded the concerts cease.<sup>99</sup> In an era of prevailing racism, Cora Gilsenan ensured that leading figures in Melbourne society visited Metung and heard the concerts. Fitzroy Aborigines also attended: Marj Tucker, the Aboriginal activist and singer, appeared as a guest artist whilst Alice Young and Joyce Taylor were amongst those who travelled to Metung to hear the concerts.

This evidence contradicts prevalent interpretations of tourism which have consistently denigrated tourists as uninformed and unsupportive of indigenous people. The assumption that tourists were motivated by a primitivism which demanded authenticity is further qualified. Rather, their differing response to various missions and stations suggest that some tourist viewpoints responded to Aborigines' changing political circumstances. In certain circumstances then, tourism offered an "alternative base for political action" which could undercut government infrastructures aimed at maintaining the social barriers erected by racism.<sup>100</sup> The response of tourists can be contrasted with that of government authorities who tried to prevent interaction between Aborigines and tourists. The evidence is pervasive. The local response of the Board for the Protection of Aborigines (later the Native Welfare Board) is matched in Central Australia with the actions of the Welfare Branch of the Northern Territory who actively discouraged the sale of artefacts to tourists and Geoffrey

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<sup>99</sup> Cora Gilsenan, Interview, 4 March 1993; Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993; Fred Bull, Interview, 6 September, 1992.

<sup>100</sup> MacCannell, *Empty Meeting Grounds*, p. 12.

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Bardon's extraordinary initiatives at Papunya in 1971-2.<sup>101</sup> Such paternalistic policies denied independence to Aboriginal people and tried to curtail their creative development.

## vi Conclusion

This study considered the replica artefacts, staged displays and concerts produced by Aborigines at Lake Tyers and the surrounding region in response to the tourist industry. The evidence supports the findings of Jon Altman and Howard Morphy who maintain that interaction with tourism is beneficial to Aboriginal art.<sup>102</sup> This study also found that Aborigines actively sought markets for their commodities and they gained a degree of autonomy in the process. In the process, this commodity production helped to maintain a sense of Aboriginal identity which resisted assimilation. The objects produced for exchange with tourists operated as sign system expressive of Aborigines' changed circumstances: artists reinterpreted their allegiance to land and kin by combining existing elements with techniques, styles and motifs appropriated from the majority culture. These innovations gained recognition for a contemporary Aboriginal presence within a modern nation state.

Whilst museum curators and ethnographers neglected these developments in south eastern Aboriginal art, tourists tolerated diverse representations of Aboriginality. Their support undercut the restrictive legislation implemented through the Board for the Protection of Aborigines. Artefacts are not then inert objects, anachronistic to the modern world, rather they perform a powerful

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<sup>101</sup> Jennifer Isaacs, *Desert Crafts: Anangu Maruku Punn* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1992), p. 46; Geoffrey Bardon, *Papunya Tula: Art of the Western Desert* (Ringwood, Vic: McPhee Gribble, 1991), pp. 41-46.

<sup>102</sup> Jon Altman, *The Aboriginal Arts and Crafts Industry : Report of the Review Committee* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1989), pp. 17-18, 44, 89, 96, 98, 123-5; Howard Morphy, "Art of Northern Australia," In *Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney: Australian Gallery Directors Council, 1980), pp. 52-65, p. 54.

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role; as real objects which bridged the gulf which exists between different social perspectives.

Ambiguities are apparent in the contribution which Aboriginal women make to these various processes of cultural production. Lake Tyers women acted as social agents when they determined whether and how they would be represented by Percy Leason in his portrait series. They also collaborated in the production of artefacts for exchange with members of the majority society. But the evidence has also revealed that women's role within the domestic sphere placed constraints upon their activities. Nor do their fibre crafts match the prestige which boomerangs maintain as a pervasive symbol of national identity. The anomalies and contradictions which surround Aboriginal women's art call for special consideration.



## **5 A women's sphere**

### **i. Introduction**

This chapter considers the cultural production of Aboriginal women in the south east. To date, their creative work has been marginalised. Western constructions of gender coupled with artistic hierarchies have assumed that a natural relationship exists between women and the crafts—with a particular emphasis on fibre. This revaluation draws upon examples outside the main time frame of the thesis to situate women's crafts within a particular historical era—prior to industrialisation—when assimilation policies restricted Aboriginal women within a domestic sphere in a settler colonial society. Our existing discourses evaluate Aboriginal women's craft as anachronistic and evidence of assimilation; alternative interpretations emerge through an Aboriginal perspective. In various responses to specific local contexts—on missions and stations, in fringe camps and in the city—Aboriginal women adapted existing skills and knowledge and incorporated from the majority culture to extend their cultural repertoire in the domestic sphere. In so doing, women maintained their autonomy and independence and their central role within the Aboriginal household. Evidence also exists that women continued to be involved in collaborative and cooperative processes of production, marketing and exchange that characterise Aboriginal productive endeavour.

When Lesley McCall identified an androcentric bias in late nineteenth and early twentieth century collections she attributed this bias to two factors: the peripheral sphere of women and the ephemerality of fibre.<sup>1</sup> Existing constructions for Aboriginality emphasised men's association with ceremonial life—a bias enhanced by the predominance of male collectors and ethnographers. Paradoxically, the predominance of men's hunting and fighting weapons in collections signalled both their ferocity and the colonial process of pacification. Today, such gaps in collections are being redressed

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<sup>1</sup> McCall "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality,'" pp. 90, 102-3.

and there is growing recognition for the rich heritage of Aboriginal fibre. Regional differences are apparent in the way Aborigines transform plant, animal and human fibres into complex structures for use in ritual and daily life.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless these re-evaluations remain narrowly focused on the traditional fibre crafts associated with a hunter-gatherer economy and raise a number of problems. Constructions of Aboriginality which emphasise traditional perspectives position Aboriginal fibre craft in the past, creating the impression that it is a dying tradition. Alan West, for instance, has usefully documented the processes of manufacture involved in string bags and coiled baskets but he excludes Aboriginal incorporations from the majority culture.<sup>3</sup> West's approach to material culture can be criticised as a sterile technical analysis which classifies Aboriginal fibre craft within the typologies of scientific discourse and removes objects from the meaning and value they generate in the process of production and exchange.

Cultural status and historical meaning for Aboriginal fibre practices reappear when natural and industrial fibres are considered as a continuum based on their shared material properties. This concept allows Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider to usefully explore how "cloth has furthered the organisation of social and political life."<sup>4</sup> Their idea of a fibre continuum is germane to this thesis but it is difficult to accept the distinctions they develop between natural

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Jennifer Isaacs, *Australia's Living Heritage: Arts of the Dreaming* (Sydney: Landsdowne, 1984), p.104; McCall, "The European Creation of 'Aboriginality'," pp. 44, 102-3; *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, 10 September-10 November 1991, Art Gallery of New South Wales, p. 7; *Yanada: New Moon*, 3-26 June 1993, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, unpagged; *Women's Work: Aboriginal Women's Artefacts in the Museum of Victoria* (Melbourne: Museum of Victoria, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Alan West, "Australian Aboriginal Cordage, String Bags, Nets and Other Single Element Fabric Structures," In *Memoirs of the Museum of Victoria (Division of Human Studies)*, (forthcoming); Alan West, *Aboriginal Australia Culture and Society: Fibre crafts* (Canberra: ATSIC, 1991), unpagged; *Making an Aboriginal Coiled Basket*, Director, Alan West, Museum of Victoria 1975; for an earlier but similar approach concerned with diffusion see D. S. Davidson, "Australian Netting and Basketry Techniques," *Journal of the Polynesian Society*, Vol. 42, No. 4, 1933, pp. 257-99.

<sup>4</sup> Annette Weiner and Jane Schneider, (eds.), *Cloth and Human Experience* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1989), p. 1. see also pp. 10-16.

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and industrial fibres: the former seen as signifying symbolic associations with spirituality and fertility, the latter associated with the exploitation of indigenous people within capitalist economies. This study questions these distinctions by showing that members of a small-scale society, situated within a young settler colony undergoing industrialisation, were able to selectively appropriate from Western technologies whilst maintaining their own world view.

This revaluation is further contextualised within an analysis of Western artistic hierarchies. Distinctions between the fine arts and the crafts established with the Renaissance associated the former with the masculine artistic practice of the academies, the latter with the industrial production of the guilds and the leisured pursuits of aristocratic women. In the eighteenth century, Kant's aesthetic theories reified these distinctions by arguing that craft's utilitarian role excluded it from the proper realm of the fine arts that were held to exist in their own right as objects of aesthetic contemplation. In her revaluation of embroidery from a feminist perspective, Rozsika Parker demonstrates how radical changes in the eighteenth century associated with industrialisation and capitalism divided bourgeois society into public and private domains such that the crafts, especially embroidery, came to express women's natural and essential femininity, a symbol of their virtue and dutiful obedience.<sup>5</sup> Parker maintains that the reconsideration of women's crafts cannot be divorced from class: for the wealthy, embroidery, lacemaking and dressmaking signified social status; for the poor it represented a means of economic survival.

Aboriginal women's craft has therefore been situated in the nexus between primitivist and patriarchal ideologies. Since Aborigines were assumed to be children of nature, the acquisition of domestic skills signified their civilisation. To Christian missions the idealisation of feminine virtue through training in

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<sup>5</sup> Rozsika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (1984, rpt. London: The Women's Press, 1989).

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obedient and dutiful domestic labour, could be seen to resolve the contradictions embodied in the popular stereotypes that Aboriginal women were both promiscuous and submissive. Given the ambiguity which surrounds women's crafts, it is not surprising that Grace Cochrane's history of Australian craft locates certain Aboriginal women's crafts within the sexual politics of colonial and racial relations.

From the nineteenth century teachers, squatters' wives and missionaries dressed their Aboriginal servants in European clothing and taught them the genteel (Christian) crafts of the time. Thus in many places traditional art forms were replaced by such objects as Victorian feather ornaments for dining tables, or white crocheted needlework.<sup>6</sup>

Cochrane's commentary implies maternalistic relationships but, as Parker notes, denigrating women's crafts disparages other women and can serve to endorse the stereotypes which support existing ideologies.<sup>7</sup> One might question the degree to which the Western nexus of public and private spheres is relevant to Aboriginal society. In Parker's opinion, patriarchal ideologies are only undercut when an analysis is made of who is producing craft, when, where, and under what circumstances. Hence this chapter also considers Aboriginal women's crafts in the context of the "close encounters" between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women—their commonalities and differences within colonial experiences constructed and bounded by gender.<sup>8</sup>

Underlying the value judgements imposed on Aboriginal fibrecraft is the erroneous assumption that fibre is naturally associated with women.<sup>9</sup> Although this study is not concerned with men's practice, an essential point of emphasis is that Aboriginal communities in the south east, as in remote

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<sup>6</sup> Grace Cochrane, *The Crafts Movement in Australia: A History* (Kensington, NSW: New South Wales University Press, 1992), pp. 135-136.

<sup>7</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges," p. 126.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Jennifer Isaacs, *The Gentle Arts: 200 Years of Australian Women's Domestic and Decorative Arts* (Sydney: Landsdowne, 1987); Jules-Rosette, *The Messages of Tourist Art*, p. 81; cf. Weiner & Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 25.

communities, structure their cultural production through differently engendered relationships that sustain collaboration and cooperation.<sup>10</sup> For example, Jan Penney's research found mid-Murray communities in the late nineteenth-century used nets co-operatively.<sup>11</sup> She further distinguishes between men's nets over 80 yards long made for the purpose of catching emus and smaller nets and baskets made by women.<sup>12</sup> Androcentrism and feminism have together tended to elide men's continuing involvement with fibre. Basket makers at Lake Tyers in the 1930s included at least one man, James Scott.<sup>13</sup> And in 1937, the anthropologist Norman Tindale, in association with the South Australian Museum, filmed Clarence Long (Milerum), one of the last initiated Ngarrindjeri men, making a coiled basket decorated with the feathers of his totem, the Boobook owl, and a coiled mat similar to those formerly used for burials in the Coorong region.<sup>14</sup>

## ii Weaving the past into the present

A recently excavated women's burial site near Melbourne poignantly evokes the role of fibre within Aboriginal culture. As Weiner and Schneider observe, "the softness and ultimate fragility of these materials capture the vulnerability of humans, whose every relationship is transient, subject to the degenerative processes of illness, death and decay."<sup>15</sup> The young woman was buried with

<sup>10</sup> Women's craft raises the question of women's status but gender relationships within Aboriginal communities are not my direct concern. The complexity of these issues is indicated in Annette Hamilton, "Daughters of the Imaginary," *Canberra Anthropology*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Oct. 1990, pp. 1-25. It should also be noted that Aboriginal women tend to refute Western feminist perspectives. For a critically reflexive analysis of these issues see Pettman, "Gendered Knowledges," pp. 124-126.

<sup>11</sup> Jan Penney, "Encounters on the River: Aborigines and European in the Murray Valley 1820-1920," Ph.D. Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1989, pp. 48-51, 70.

<sup>12</sup> Jan Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie: Culture Contact in the Mid-Murray Region," B. A. Honours Thesis, LaTrobe University, 1979, pp. 10-14.

<sup>13</sup> A 'scabby' or egg basket by James Scott in the Hilda Rule collection continues a Gippsland style of basket identified by Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol 1, p. 345, fig. 159.

<sup>14</sup> The film *Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making*, produced by the South Australian Museum in 1989 contains three short films: *Clarence Long Demonstrating Basketry in 1937*; *Basketry Workshop at the South Australian Museum in 1989* and *Feather Flower Making at the South Australian Museum*. Copy held by the author and original available at the South Australian Museum.

<sup>15</sup> Weiner and Schneider, *Cloth and Human Experience*, p. 2.

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her *til-bur-nin*, the emu feather skirt worn before the birth of the first child and in dances.<sup>16</sup> Buried with her was a small string bag containing emu meat, the bones of the emu split into knives and a bone awl used perhaps in basket making, as a pin for a possum skin cloak, or in magic. Her body, encased in a large string bag, lay on a bed of branches together with the emu bones and the small string bag. The association of these items in the context of a burial suggest how fibre's structural qualities might operate as a metaphor for personal relationships. In this instance the continuous, interwoven threads which produce containers for personal belongings are recontextualised to enshroud the body after death. Fibre contributes toward economic survival but it is also intimately connected to the spiritual beliefs that link Aborigines with the land. Despite its ephemerality, fibre can denote age, status and gender within an Aboriginal community.

George Angas' mid-nineteenth century depiction of a Milmendra woman from the Coorong region (Fig 3) in South Australia reveals the contribution which fibre objects made to a hunter-gatherer economy. (Plate 37) Hanging from the woman's shoulder on a long string handle, is a coiled basket used for food, tools and personal possessions whilst a coiled mat strapped upon her back transports a young baby leaving the young woman free to travel through the bush carrying a firestick. The contrast between this harmonious representation and the photograph of Caroline Hayes and Eliza O'Rourke producing baskets at Lake Tyers in the 1930s, strikes a jarring note signalling the radical change that has occurred in the intervening decades. (Plate 38) But it may well be that prevailing constructions of Aboriginality inflected the initial response of the artist and subsequent readings for these images; romanticising the traditional lifestyle of one whilst emphasising the apparent deculturation of the other.

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<sup>16</sup> "The Springfield Gorge Burial," *V. A. S. News*, Newsletter No 5, Winter, 1989, pp. 4-5; for references to the *til-bur-nin* see Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. 272-3.

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In their finely nuanced ethnography of the Ngarrindjeri people Ronald and Catherine Berndt trace the patterns of influence and interconnections which contributed to change following European settlement.

. . . traditional culture and those persons who were aligned with it did not disappear immediately. With the curtailment of the initiation rituals . . . a gradual winding down and replacement by European features took place. The break came with the passing of the old people . . . who had had first hand experience and knowledge of their culture. . . They were in fact the real repositories of their culture . . . However, something remained. There were still [those in the 1920s] . . . who had first hand knowledge of the winding down of their culture. Their memories were still vivid in regard to how they had lived, what they had seen and what they had been told. . . The men and women who had had direct exposure to their traditional background, and the opportunity to acquire knowledge about it, found that much of what they learnt had little or no practical use in their changed surroundings. There was no formal institution such as initiation through which that knowledge could be passed on to a younger generation; the Mission school had no use for it. . . Moreover, what had been their heritage could not be reinforced through living examples: there was nothing to back it up. It was categorized as obsolete information that had little bearing on everyday events, relegated to what were regarded as 'the old times'. . . Obviously, information was passed on, but nothing of a systematic nature or a rounded picture of what life had been like. . . There was not so much a gap between the generations as a great abyss linked by social relations and ties of kin but not cultural content.<sup>17</sup>

In their over-riding concern to record vestiges of a traditional memory culture it may well be that the Berndts overlooked the way Ngarrindjeri, like other Aboriginal communities, meshed continuities with the past with borrowings from the modern world in their material culture.

It was the case that settlement in the south east progressed so rapidly that many elements of Aboriginal ceremonial life and their former hunter-gather lifestyle were destroyed. Aboriginal material culture altered in form and content to accommodate these changes but it did not cease. Coiled baskets, for instance, were adapted for exchange as commodities. The basket made

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<sup>17</sup> Ronald M. Berndt, Catherine H. Berndt and John E. Stanton, *A World That Was: The Yarlaldi of the Murray River and the Lakes, South Australia*, (Carlton: Melbourne University Press at the Miegunyah Press, 1993), pp. 296-7.

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by Julia Edwards at Lake Tyers in 1956, typifies the new generic form which emerged when Aborigines replaced the long string handle which formerly hung from the forehead or shoulder with a short, firm handle—sometimes stiffened with cloth. (Plate 39) In the production of such baskets, women continued to draw upon their knowledge of the land and utilise its natural resources. At Lake Tyers, women gathered the spiny-headed Mat rush (*Lomandra longifolia*) and the red Tall Sword Edge (*Lepidosperma elatius*) which was then split with a thumb-nail, scraped out, tied in bundles and dried in the sun.<sup>18</sup> Following existing patterns, the stored reeds were damped down overnight before they were used, then baskets were constructed spirally by tying down bundles of reeds with a buttonhole stitch.

Such sturdy hand-made baskets were widely admired and much sought after by the wider community for use on farms and shopping. But for ethnographers, for whom material culture represented an index of acculturation, these changes suggested cultural decline. As Smyth commented,

It is not easy now to get baskets of the pattern which prevailed before the introduction of European arts. Those made by the women at Coranderk are of all shapes and sizes, invariably provided with handles, and made for sale, and with a view to meet the wants of the whites who purchase them.<sup>19</sup>

Smyth's response suggests that Aboriginal initiatives to market responses inevitably represented a capitulation to capitalism.

In fact, the balance between continuity and innovation evident in Aboriginal responses to a colonial context could only occur through the fragile, yet

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<sup>18</sup> The plants Aborigines used varied from one region to another. Thus the grass used by Connie Hart, the Gurnditjmarra (Maar) basket maker has been identified as Puung 'ort grass. Merryl K. Robson, *Keeping the Culture Alive*, Aboriginal Keeping Place, Hamilton and District Museum, 1986, p. 12.

<sup>19</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 346.



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tenacious process by which transmission of knowledge occurred. Mothers did not formally teach their daughters the skills and knowledge required for basketry; learning occurred through patterns of socialisation based on mimesis and observation. In her analysis of patterns of cultural transmission in the bilums produced in the New Guinea highlands, Maureen MacKenzie found that girls learned manual dexterity, physical movements and technical knowledge in the process of imitating older women.<sup>20</sup> In the settled south east, women were no longer with their children in a hunter-gatherer context but they remained the central focus of Aboriginal households.<sup>21</sup> Women placed value on maintaining their relations with kin, they co-operated in the face of insuperable problems and, as the story-tellers in the community, they relayed a shared history and stories of ancestors that reinforced the sense of belonging which formed the basis for lifelong patterns of socialisation.

Nevertheless, cultural transmission is a complicated process—made all the more problematic in the colonial context of a modern world. Doubtless all girls growing up at Lake Tyers saw baskets being produced, yet it appears only a few had the natural talent and tenacity to maintain these skills and learn the repertoire of known designs. In New Guinea, MacKenzie found a dual set of imperatives operating: on the one hand girls had to convince older women of their enthusiasm and desire to learn, on the other, older women guarded their cultural knowledge and withheld access from all but the most trustworthy and hardworking.<sup>22</sup> She arrived at the conclusion that, if the deception that techniques were difficult to learn was practised too convincingly, aspects of cultural knowledge may not be passed on to the next generation. In an

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<sup>20</sup> Maureen MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects: String Bags and Gender in Central New Guinea* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), pp. 102-6.

<sup>21</sup> Ian Keen, "Introduction," In *Being Black: Aboriginal Cultures in 'Settled' Australia* (1988, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991), pp. 12-13; Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 167, 278, cf 239-240 on the status of men; Macdonald, " 'The Koori Way' ," pp. 95, 168-169, 307-9.

<sup>22</sup> MacKenzie, *Androgynous Objects*, pp. 106-109.

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Australian context, anthropologists have attributed the apparent disintegration of Aboriginal culture in the face of radical change to older Aborigines withholding cultural knowledge and a lack of interest from the young, but these accusations fail to take account of the changed historical circumstances in which Aborigines lived.<sup>23</sup>

Confronted with the urbanisation of the modern world, Aboriginal women chose whether they would continue to produce their fibre craft. String bags like that in the Bulmer collection (Plate 40) were still produced at the turn of the century but when mass produced bags became commercially available for a few pence, production ceased. Coiled baskets confronted a similar set of circumstances at a slightly later date. At 'Aboriginal Enterprises', the outlet for Aboriginal art and crafts established at Belgrave in the post-war period, Bill Onus acknowledged that the "beautifully made grass baskets" by a relative, Mary Smith of Coranderrk, had to compete against commercial products. One wholesaler "wanted 200 of these, but I could let him have only two, because [it] takes a week to make a basket," Onus said.<sup>24</sup> As a successful entrepreneur, Onus had to rely upon silk screen fabrics and boomerangs which utilised modern technology and industrial materials. By contrast, baskets required access to a constant supply of natural resources: Alice Thorpe, Julia Edwards' daughter-in-law, recalls she only made six baskets—sold for 30/- each—after she left Lake Tyers for Melbourne in 1938.<sup>25</sup> Even then, Thorpe required transport to Healesville where friends helped her collect the necessary reeds. Today, contemporary basket makers located in the country: Thelma Carter,

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<sup>23</sup> Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 23-25; Beckett, "The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards," p. 42; Reay, "A Half Caste Aboriginal Community," pp. 311-312, 314; Reay, "Native Thought in Rural New South Wales," pp. 90, 96, 111, 114, 118; cf Keen, "Introduction," p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> This and the following quotation are drawn from Herschell Hurst, "He Tells Tales of his Own People," *The Australian Home Beautiful*, November 1955, pp. 25-26.

<sup>25</sup> Alice Thorpe, Interview, 6 March 1993.

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Connie Hart and Yvonne Koolmatrie, suggest that the continuation of their craft is threatened by the gradual depletion of the environment.<sup>26</sup>

Patterns of socialisation within Aboriginal culture mean skills and knowledge that appear moribund, actually remain available for revival and reinterpretation. Socialisation is not a unified package passively imprinted onto children or adolescents; its variable influences continue throughout our lives in tandem with the process of cultural change.<sup>27</sup> As a child, the Gurnditjmara (Maar) woman Connie Hart (1918-1993) observed older women making baskets but she had to practise in stealth because they forbade her to learn. "My mum told me we were coming into the white people's way of living. So she wouldn't teach us" Hart reports.<sup>28</sup> Forty years later Hart has retrieved her basket making skills by drawing upon her childhood memories. A similar resurgence has taken place through workshops held amongst Ngarrindjeri people: the coiled mats made by Clarence Long—formerly used in burials—are now reinterpreted as wall hangings. Most recently, Yvonne Koolmatrie's eel traps, bowls, echidnas and aeroplanes redefine coiled basketry in sculptural terms.<sup>29</sup>

Despite these creative reinterpretations, basketry is still dismissed as a dying tradition: an "atrophied version of the way things were" anachronistic to the modern world.<sup>30</sup> Ostensibly this response simply denies Aborigines the right to be creative by reinterpreting tradition in negative terms as a constraint on creativity. In commenting on the differentiated status of Aboriginal art and

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<sup>26</sup> For the reference to Thelma Carter and Connie Hart see A. Jackomos and D. Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria: Stories in the Oral Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 72-75; for the evidence on Yvonne Koolmatrie see *Murrundi: Three Murray River Stories*, 26 March-25 April 1993, Contemporary Art Centre of South Australia, unpagged.

<sup>27</sup> Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory*, p. 129.

<sup>28</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 74.

<sup>29</sup> *Yanada: New Moon*, unpagged.

<sup>30</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures': Inventing Aboriginal Craft," In *Craft in Society*, pp. 131-152, p. 135.

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craft, Philip Jones commends the "quirky" coiled basketry aeroplane made in 1942 by the young Ngarrindjeri woman, Janet Watson, as "a subversive and inspirational model" by a maverick artist.<sup>31</sup> (Plate 41) He contrasts the production of functional baskets as

allied to new functions: making money, satisfying the varying demands of an arts and craft industry and restating cultural identity. . . . Aboriginal craft [Jones argues] finds itself in a dilemma. The choice between good craft and bad craft is the choice between a craft founded on an atrophied version of the way things were—a kind of Aboriginal Morris Dancing—and one displaying characteristics of innovation, dynamism and opportunism. Examples of the former type abound in Australia. Dying traditions of carving and basketry, like the last speakers of Aboriginal languages, may be guarded like flickering flames.<sup>32</sup>

The distinctions Jones makes privilege the originality and individuality of the unique art object over the functional role and ordered repetition of skills and patterns intrinsic to craft. His value judgements subtly displace the basketry aeroplane from the banal sphere of domesticity into a more elevated fine art context where it is regarded as an expressive response to the modern world. It may be more productive, however, to consider the entire range of work produced by individuals within communities as part of women's contingent practice.

To retrieve meaning and value for all basketry we need to recognise that each object represents a creative solution to a unique problem.<sup>33</sup> Julia Edwards' basket thus represents a series of conscious aesthetic choices where the form of the basket frames and circumscribes the repeating infill of decorative patterns. Ethnographic parallels with remote communities suggest that these intricate geometric compositions of chevrons, diamonds and cones may be individual clan patterns transmitted between groups of women working

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<sup>31</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures'," p. 147.

<sup>32</sup> Jones, " 'Arts and Manufactures'," pp. 134-5.

<sup>33</sup> Ernst Gombrich, *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art* (London: Phaidon, 1979), p. 64.

together.<sup>34</sup> In addition, such geometric elements express our psychological response to space in terms of complex figure/ground relationships fulfilling a universal need to impose order, rhythm and symmetry on the natural environment. Reinterpreted in this context, the anonymous cake plate made at Coranderrk in the early 1900s makes an equally relevant commentary on certain aspects of Aborigines' contemporary existence as does Janet Watson's aeroplane. (Plate 42) In this functional item, the maker departs from previous generic types to incorporate from the twisted and filigree forms found in the domestic ornaments of silver-ware, ceramics and crochet.

### iii Flowers from the land

As already shown, feathers are incorporated within the systemic meanings of Aboriginal culture and early ethnography records many instances of feathers used in a ritual context.<sup>35</sup> Aborigines carried feather whisks and women wore their *til-bur-nin* or feather aprons in dances. Feathers operated as signals in intertribal meetings: attached to spears, they signalled a challenge to other tribes and along the Murray, women wore white cockatoo feathers in their hair as a symbol of their peaceful intentions when they moved outside their own territory.<sup>36</sup> Indeed Thomas Worsnop and Smyth perceptively noted that women used feather flowers as body decoration in preference to natural flowers.

Notwithstanding the numerous varieties of beautiful native flowers, it has not been observed that any use has been made of their decorative qualities. . . They almost always used the coloured feathers of the

<sup>34</sup> Dianne Moon, "Maningrida Arts and Crafts," In *Karnta: Aboriginal Women's Art* (ed.), Chris McGuigan, Adelaide Festival Centre, n.d. pp. 22-24.

<sup>35</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. 165-6; Thomas Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc. of the Aborigines of Australia* (Adelaide: C. E. Bristow, 1897), p. 159, pl. 28; Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, p. 679.

<sup>36</sup> Gerard Krefft, "On the Manners and Customs of the Aborigines of the Lower Murray and Darling," *Transactions of the Philosophical Society of New South Wales 1862-1865*, read 2 August 1856, pp. 357-374, p. 364.

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cockatoo, native pheasants, pelicans, or parrots as ornaments for the hair. . . <sup>37</sup>

Feather flowers emerged in the late nineteenth century from these earlier contexts and occur throughout Australia. Their provenance is not restricted, as Cochrane suggests, to specific historical situations; rather, as Mira Lakic argues, these social forces "simply modified an existing craft into an acceptable European mode of fashion and art."<sup>38</sup> The difference is, of course, that the feather flowers produced in the south east for exchange as commodities fulfilled a new role as decorative objects within the domestic sphere whereas some feather flowers produced in remote communities continue to be used in ceremonial contexts.<sup>39</sup> Western artistic traditions generally underestimate ornament, aligning it with the gendered constructions of women as superficial and superfluous but when Aboriginal women utilised natural resources to produce posies intended as decoration for their own homes and those of non-Aboriginal women, their aesthetic response recolonised the domestic sphere.

Although feather flowers occur throughout Aboriginal Australia, in the south east, the Murray River is a focal point for their emergence and dispersal—a status attributable perhaps to a mild climate, rich resources and relatively delayed settlement. In the nineteenth century, Indian hawkers along the Murray purchased feather flowers, rush baskets and pin cushions of stuffed tortoise shells from Aboriginal women.<sup>40</sup> Following the consolidation of Aborigines at Lake Tyers, Wotjoballuck (Wergaia) people from the Wimmera region transmitted the skill of feather flower making to Gippsland.<sup>41</sup> Point

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<sup>37</sup> Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts*, p. 156; see also Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xli, 270.

<sup>38</sup> Mira Lakic, "Dress and Ornamentation," in *Women's Work*, pp. 19-30, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> For the ritual use of feather flowers see Peter Cooke and Jon Altman, (eds), *Aboriginal Art at the Top* (Maningrida: Maningrida Arts and Crafts, 1982), pls. 171, 174, 175.

<sup>40</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 258.

<sup>41</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 7 September, 1992.

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McLeay Aborigines attribute their feather flower traditions to Victorian Aborigines who arrived in the 1930s.<sup>42</sup> Whilst earlier feather flowers were simply whisks—bundles of feathers bound together—feathers were subsequently assembled as flowers as a contact development. In the film, Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making, made by the South Australian Museum in 1989, women deftly assemble posies from a variety of coloured feathers: white and pink from adult galahs, orange from young galahs and green from grass parrots.<sup>43</sup> Looped buttonhole stitches—similar to those used in coiled baskets and string bags—bind the first group of small feathers to a wire frame to form a bud; thereafter larger feathers are added to form the petals. Feather flowers from the 1920s in the collection of the Museum of Victoria and the Mildura Arts Centre employ the same methods of manufacture.<sup>44</sup> (Plate 43)

A more detailed consideration of the role which feather flowers—and other commodities—performed emerged from an examination of individual women living in fringe camps near Swan Hill in the first half of this century. The Wemba Wemba woman, Aggie Edwards is a key figure in Swan Hill history. Born at Mellool station in 1873, Edwards began to attract attention as the last of the 'full-bloods' in the region following her introduction to Governor Hopetoun in the 1890s. At her death in 1928, Edwards' status was such that the Australian Natives Association erected a memorial in the Swan Hill cemetery, eulogising Aggie Edwards as the "Last Queen of the Moolpa

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<sup>42</sup> Judy Inglis. "Aborigines in Adelaide," *Polynesian Society Journal*, Vol. 70, 1961, pp. 200-218, p. 203.

<sup>43</sup> Ngarrindjeri Basketry and Feather Flower Making, South Australian Museum, 1989.

<sup>44</sup> In 1927 Sergeant Arthur Edward Bentley, then of the Swan Hill police, presented a collection of feather flowers to the Museum of Victoria. Although these flowers are anonymous documentation suggests they originate from Boundary Bend, Victoria. (Acc Nos: X36448, X36449, X36450, X36451, 36447, X36635). An unknown donor gave the feather posy attributed to Aggie Edwards (Plate 43) to the Mildura Arts Centre. The author wishes to thank members of the Bentley family for their assistance with my enquiries.

Tribe".<sup>45</sup> Edwards, like Barak, gained fame during her own lifetime: more recently, she has become the focus of considerable scholarly research—but the honorific bestowed upon her remains intact. In her research on Edwards, Jan Penney acquiesces in the settler myth that Edwards was the 'last of her tribe'—a subterfuge that masked the destruction of Aboriginal culture and denied legitimacy to 'half-castes.' Contradictions emerge as a consequence: having demonstrated that the unique aquatic environment of the river was a sustaining force for Aborigines until the turn of the century, Penney then blames Aborigines for their sudden disintegration—attributed to the withholding of cultural information by elders, Aborigine's dependence upon charity and their lowered birth rate as a result of disease and poor health.<sup>46</sup> The 'culture of poverty' approach she adopts mistakes cause and effect and disregards the origin of these radical changes in colonisation. An amended biography for Aggie Edwards establishes the continuity of Wemba Wemba people.<sup>47</sup>

Edwards' situation appears in a different light by positioning her within contemporary Aboriginal history. During the first decades of the twentieth century, many Aborigines lived as refugees as a result of government policies aimed at their dispersal. Aborigines met with racial discrimination in certain quarters as a result of the power vested in institutionalised forms of social

<sup>45</sup> Aldo Massola, "Mortuary and other Monuments to Aborigines, *The Victorian Naturalist*, Vol. 87, No. 10, 7 October 1970, pp. 299-305, p. 305. "Moolpa" refers to a station south of Swan Hill where many Aborigines lived.

<sup>46</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 321, 339, 345-6, 352; see also Danny Mackay, Dolly Moser and Wendy Moser, *History of the Swan Hill Mid-Murray Area* (Swan Hill Aboriginal Educators: n.d., p. 8.

<sup>47</sup> Here the author draws upon interviews with Nellie Moore and Doug Nicholls to correct the accepted biography for Aggie Edwards. See Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie," pp. 85, Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 331, 339, 344-6; Penney, "Queen Aggie: The Last of Her Tribe," in *Double Time: Women in Victoria — 150 Years* (eds.), M. Lake and F. Kelly (Ringwood: Penguin, 1985), pp. 97-103 and Mackay et. al., *History of the Swan Hill Mid-Murray Area* p. 8. King Wilson's daughter, Aggie was born on Mellool Station in 1873. At twenty, Aggie married Harry Edwards, an older Muti Muti man and the couple lived at Nesbitt's estate, several miles downstream from Swan Hill. After Harry Edward's death in 1912, Aggie contracted two further marriages, to Bob Nicholls, a non-Aboriginal shearer and Cobb & Co. coach driver and Jacky Logan formerly of Coranderk. Each marriage produced a son the second of whom was adopted by Bob Nicholls and assumed his name.



control implemented through government departments, private organisations and the police. They were also placed at an economic disadvantage. As 'full-bloods,' Aggie and her husband Harry drew some rations, but after his death in 1912, Edwards eked out a subsistence existence. Like other Aborigines, she struggled for survival in a fringe camp built from canvas, scrap timber and flattened, four-gallon tin drums. (Plate 44) Nevertheless, Aborigines maintained their dignity and autonomy living in fringe camps where they were free from the restrictions and regimented life of missions and stations. The independent existence Edwards chose, on land to which she was spiritually attached, links her to rural outstation movements of this period. This resistance movement, which witnessed Aborigines electing to walk-off stations to return and live independently on land formerly owned by their people, parallels and pre-dates by several decades similar outstation movements in remote communities.<sup>48</sup>

Although Edwards lived in difficult circumstances, she acted as a social agent and exploited every possible opportunity to interact within the local milieu of a small country town. Edwards earned a penny each time she opened the gates across the Speewa anabranch of the Murray River for local pastoralists and drovers.<sup>49</sup> She gathered and sold dead wool caught on barbed wire fences.<sup>50</sup> Drawing upon her intimate knowledge of the environment, Edwards sold fish, ducks, eggs, rabbits and rabbit skins (seen drying on lines in Plate 44). She also produced feather lures and feather flowers, rush baskets and small draw-string purses made from the skin of water rats.<sup>51</sup> Despite her poverty and the prevailing racial discrimination, Aggie Edwards maintained a circle of friends amongst women from the wider community. Operating from cultural values

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<sup>48</sup> Peter Read, *A Hundred Years War: The Wiradjuri People and the State* (Rushcutters Bay, NSW: Australian National University Press/Pergamon Press, 1988), p. 82.

<sup>49</sup> Jessie Thomson, Letter to the author, 17 August 1992.

<sup>50</sup> Tom O'Halloran, Interview, 12 March 1993; Bill O'Lachlan, tel. conv. 26 October 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 346.

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grounded in reciprocity, Edwards' repaid the hospitality and kindness of her friends with gifts of fish, rabbits and feather flowers.<sup>52</sup> Exchanged as gifts or commodities, feather flowers thus decorated many of the domestic interiors of country towns. When women from the majority culture chose to incorporate these flowers into their interior decoration, their aesthetic response to the environment accorded with that of Aborigines.

Today, the Wemba Wemba elder, Nellie Moore, recalls growing up in the 1950s at Pinkeys, a fringe camp situated opposite the township of Swan Hill, across the river in New South Wales.<sup>53</sup> At the time, her grandmother, Mary Moore, sold small and large posies of feather flowers for 7/6 and 10/- each, at outlets such as Tom O'Halloran's jewellery shop.<sup>54</sup> As discussed, mothers are central figures in Aboriginal households and children growing up in such fringe camps knew they had to help their mothers by contributing to the supply of feathers. During his boyhood in Gippsland, Albert Mullett hunted birds with slingshots, but before he cooked and ate the birds, he plucked and kept their feathers to take home to his mother.<sup>55</sup> Women were proud of their feather flowers and other, more practical items. They represented a means of income—but they were equally significant as a form of aesthetic expression. Moore explains their dual role.

They were for food, that was to buy the flour, tea, sugar and meat. . . They use that as an art thing now and it's really not, it's an industry thing . . . It was something that they were good at doing and to say that they done that and they got a joy out of making that and it also provided the food on the table. . . [Before] it was a decoration for corroborees [but in the fringe camps] we had nothing so we had to have something to look at . . . If someone made a feather flower they might've gone out and got a crane [feather] 'Oh how beautiful.' you'd say because you never seen anything

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<sup>52</sup> Oliver Godena, tel. conv. 14 September 1992; Francis Cureton, *Remembering Swan Hill: Paddle Boats and Other Things* (Swan Hill: privately publication, 1977), p. 20

<sup>53</sup> A local police sergeant, Arthur Feldtmann cleared Swan Hill of fringe camps in 1950s through a series of initiatives which rehoused Aborigines. Arthur Feldtmann, *Swan Hill* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1973), Ch. 19, esp. pp. 185-7.

<sup>54</sup> Tom O'Halloran, Interview, 12 March 1993.

<sup>55</sup> Albert Mullett, Interview, 7 September 1992.

like that. Even if someone made a dress you know, they sewed it themselves. They did the embroidery stitching and the stitching was so fine my mum used to do, it looked like it was done by machine. . . and all the jumpers used to be hand knitted. . . because you never had those decorations you've got now. . . where you lived on the river bank you had nothing, you just had the bare essentials [so we'd] go and get gum leaves [and put feather flowers in the hut].<sup>56</sup>

Moore's memories of her childhood, add to our understanding of the role which fringe camps played in Aborigines' lives. Situated within their regional domain, fringe camps represented Aborigines' private realm, their "corner of the world" where they lived autonomously maintaining many elements of a small-scale society.<sup>57</sup> When Aborigines used feather flowers as interior decoration they compensated for the ugliness of their environment. Mediating continuities with the past, feather flowers mitigated the present.

Philip Clarke's research amongst Aborigines at Raukkan (Point McLeay), bears out this hypothesis. Despite state intervention which aimed to modify Aboriginal culture by changing its perception of time and space, he found that Aboriginal extended families tend to use the major rooms in their homes for a combination of activities including cooking, eating, relaxation and sleeping.<sup>58</sup>

Discussing the decoration of this domestic sphere Clarke argues

In southern South Australia, Aboriginal people tend to decorate the insides of houses in a distinctive way. Many homes of Aboriginal people I have visited feature large displays of family photographs on walls and in china cabinets. Often, objects such as clubs, boomerangs, sedge mats and baskets, feather flowers, painted stones, trophies and certificates, also decorate the rooms. The economics of decorating the home means that generally the objects must either be inexpensive or have been made by the owner or a relative. . . None of the Aboriginal people I have worked with in southern Australia have ever purchased Aboriginal art works such as Western Desert dot paintings and Arnhem land bark paintings. It appears that this Aboriginal art is chiefly produced for non-Aboriginal consumption. . . Most Aboriginal families take considerable pride in exhibiting a selection of objects that proclaim their Aboriginality. . . Household items associated with the pre-European material culture of the Lower Murray are considered to represent their links to the past Ngarrindjeri culture. For instance, Aboriginal visitors to houses of other

<sup>56</sup> Nellie Moore, Interview, 13 March 1993.

<sup>57</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tran. Maria Jolas (1958, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> Clarke, "Aboriginal Use of Space in the Lower Murray. "

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community members may remark, when inspecting a sedge mat hanging on the wall or a bunch of feather flowers in a vase, that a particular ancestor of the maker was also a good basket-maker or feather-flower maker. Continuity with the past is stressed by Aboriginal people through knowledge of their kinship. Both objects and photographs are used to demonstrate that people 'know their culture'. In many Aboriginal homes, the decoration openly reflects how Aboriginal people perceive their Aboriginality, in both the local and national arenas.<sup>59</sup>

Contemporary photographic evidence compiled by Penny Taylor further demonstrates the extent to which, throughout Australia, Aborigines decorate their homes with objects and photographs which they see as emblems of their Aboriginality.<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless there are significant differences between Moore's memories of an earlier era and Aborigines' contemporary self perception of themselves as part of a local and national Aboriginal polity. Today, a more heightened sense of public Aboriginality imbues objects such as feather flowers with past associations. James Clifford terms this "part of a modern re-collection . . . [of] family history and ethnic memory [that] becomes newly, *traditionally* meaningful in the context of the present-becoming-future."<sup>61</sup> By contrast, Moore recalls an earlier period when Aboriginality arose out of a private consciousness that was contingent upon the particular circumstances in which an individual operated and the relationships they negotiated with the majority culture. Moore's evidence also reveals that, prior to the emergence of a fine art market in Aboriginal art which has been dominated by the art of remote communities, the feather flowers produced by south eastern Aborigines decorated the homes of Aborigines and non-Aborigines.

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<sup>59</sup> Clarke, "Aboriginal Use of Space in the Lower Murray, pp. 3-4 in the author's copy.

<sup>60</sup> Penny Taylor, (ed.), *After 200 Years: Photographic Essays of Aboriginal and Islander Australia Today* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), p. 22.

<sup>61</sup> Clifford, "Of Other Peoples: Beyond the 'Salvage Paradigm'," p.127.

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#### iv Skilled providers

Clearly women like Aggie Edwards and Mary Moore were eminently resourceful, drawing upon a multitude of hand-skills and a broad knowledge of the plant and animal world to produce commodities for exchange, objects which decorated their homes and embroidered, knitted and hand-made garments for themselves and their families. The basis of their familiarity and understanding of fibre structures and skills in clothing construction came not only from basketry and feather flowers but from the production of possum skin cloaks which, in an earlier era, formed the main item of clothing in the south east. Production of such rugs required up to 80 pelts. Skins would be stretched with wooden or bone pegs, then dried and scraped with a mussel-shell or chip of basalt before being sewn together with sinew, or later, cotton thread.<sup>62</sup> Geometric and naturalistic designs, similar to those found in cicatrices, weapons, and dendroglyphs decorated the interior of the cloak. Such skin rugs were necessary for survival in the cool climate of the south east, but they were also used in burials, to transport babies and rolled up across the knees to form a drum during ceremonies.<sup>63</sup>

For white women living in a pioneering context, prior to the industrialisation of the post-war period and the greater social and political freedom gained by women in the past few decades, their work generally lay in the domestic sphere. For Aboriginal women, the situation was otherwise. As discussed already, a distinctively Aboriginal use of space undercut state attempts to assimilate Aborigines whether they lived in fringe camps or missions. Operating within conditions of oppression and racial discrimination, Aboriginal women's aesthetic expression adapted to achieve economic survival, practical necessity and personal pride. Eliza Kennedy grew up at the turn of the

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<sup>62</sup> Here I draw upon the research of Erika Block, "Possum Skin Rugs," B. A. Honours Thesis, ANU 1987; see also Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xxxix-xl, 271.

<sup>63</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, pp. xxvii, 168-170, 172.

century "camping about" in Bagundji country in central western New South Wales between Cobar and Ivanhoe. (Fig. 2) Her childhood memories reveal the conditions under which Aboriginal women lived and their skills in improvisation. Kennedy admired her mother who was equally adept at making string bags, possum skin cloaks and dressmaking. As Kennedy recalls,

Say, white people might've given them some old clothes, she'd unpick them. She'd copy off whatever garment she could unpick and cut out by that. After that she only had to look at what was on you. Say you came there with something she'd never seen before, she'd look you over and she'd sit down and cut that out and make it exactly the same.<sup>64</sup>

The ability of Eliza Kennedy's mother to conceive dress patterns from existing garments displays a visual facility in three-dimensional thinking directly attributable to an Aboriginal heritage in fibrecraft. Constructing possum skin rugs required women to assemble its constituent elements into volumetric sculptural forms. Other more ephemeral fibre practices, such as cat's cradles—the string games played by adults and children—similarly conceive and create complex spatial compositions of geometric elements and naturalistic motifs.<sup>65</sup>

Undoubtedly, there is an element of survival involved in these dressmaking traditions. In an earlier era, prior to the commercialisation of the fashion industry, all but the most wealthy of women, generally made the clothes for their family.<sup>66</sup> Even so, dressmaking was more than a matter of survival—as the testimony of Nellie Moore and Eliza Kennedy indicates. When mothers took pride in being autonomous and independent they retained their own

<sup>64</sup> Eliza Kennedy and Tamsin Donaldson, "Coming Up Out of Nhaalya: Reminiscences of the Life of Eliza Kennedy, *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 6, Part 1, June 1982, pp. 4-27. p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Caroline Furness-Jayne, *String Figures and How to Make Them: A Study of Cat's-Cradle in Many Lands*, (1906, New York: Dover Publications Inc. 1962), pp. xv-xvi, 1, 3-4; Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1 p. 178.

<sup>66</sup> Isaacs acknowledges this domestic heritage in *The Gentle Arts*, pp. 46, 58-61; Frances Derham's teenage diaries attest to the amount of dressmaking undertaken by women from relatively affluent circumstances. Melbourne University Archives.

Aboriginal values. From a contemporary viewpoint, the recycling of old clothes—which also occurred at Lake Tyers during the depression—suggests another level of poverty than that which women in the wider community would have experienced.<sup>67</sup> But, as Smyth noted, women took pleasure in recycling as a means of accessing new resources.<sup>68</sup>

When the whites came the native women made variously-coloured twine from the old shawls and other garments that were given to them, and with this they netted bags, both for their own use and for sale. Some of these are very pretty.<sup>69</sup>

Women may also have recycled industrial materials for technical reasons. In the Mid-Murray region, production of cumbungi—used for string bags and nets—was so labour intensive that Aborigines thankfully relinquished its production within twenty years of settlement.<sup>70</sup>

Intriguing parallels emerge between this evidence from twentieth-century fringe camps and women's earlier, enterprising contribution to nineteenth-century Victorian missions. Coranderrk Mission, founded near Healesville in 1863, progressed rapidly under the leadership of the Presbyterian lay preacher, John Green. From the outset, Green contributed his own salary, men earned cash wages shearing and harvesting off the station during summer, whilst women tended subsistence gardens and sold the possum skin rugs and baskets they produced in cooperation with aged or infirm men.<sup>71</sup> In the following decade, earnings from women's crafts proved the most reliable and largest source of income. As already shown, when Aborigines pooled

<sup>67</sup> Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 94.

<sup>68</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>69</sup> Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Vol. 1, p. lii.

<sup>70</sup> Penney, "Encounters on the River," p. 48. Cumbungi had to be roasted, peeled, chewed, then softened in water before it could be plied into twine.

<sup>71</sup> This history of Coranderrk draws upon two significant papers by Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," and Dianne Barwick, " 'And The Lubras are Ladies Now,' " *Woman's Role In Aboriginal Society* (ed.), Fay Gale, Australian Aboriginal Studies, No. 36, Social Anthropology Series No. 6 (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1970), pp. 31-38.

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resources in this way, they maintained their Aboriginal values and resisted incorporation into mainstream Australian society.

But it was not just 'traditional' crafts which made a contribution. Dianne Barwick reports that from the 1860s onwards, women at Coranderrk, Framlingham, Ebenezer (Lake Hindmarsh) and Lake Tyers, "most eagerly attended" embroidery and dressmaking classes.<sup>72</sup> Their hand sewing was considered "exquisite," and far outclassed manufactured goods because it was "an adaptation of the traditional skill of making skin rugs."<sup>73</sup> With the money earned from their industry, Coranderrk women,

dressed with remarkable elegance. Most furniture was made at home, and skin rugs covered the floors, but many saved to purchase luxuries . . . Visitors during the 1860s and 1870s repeatedly commented that their homes and furnishings were equal to those of 'English workingmen' and superior to those of many small farmers in the district.<sup>74</sup>

Moreover, clothing operates as a sign of social and political status. When Coranderrk residents farewelled their ally, Chief Secretary Graham Berry in 1886, Bain Attwood tells us they "donned their 'Sunday clothes' and put off their despised 'Government clothing'."<sup>75</sup>

Barwick's research further draws attention to the "genuine camaraderie" and intimacy that prevailed between Aboriginal women and missionaries' wives at Acheron and Coranderrk.<sup>76</sup> Her seminal paper, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now' " contends that, as a result of mission influences and the changing structure of Aboriginal society, women gained considerable equality and autonomy. Although few studies exist of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women, her interpretation can be contrasted with the picture of

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<sup>72</sup> Barwick, "And The Lubras are Ladies Now," p. 34: see also Pepper and Araugo, *You Are What You Make Yourself to Be*, p. 42.

<sup>73</sup> Barwick, " 'And the Lubras Are Ladies Now'," pp. 34.

<sup>74</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," pp. 27-8.

<sup>75</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 94.

<sup>76</sup> Barwick, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now'," p. 35.



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racism and inequality which Myrna Tonkinson found on frontier pastoral properties in the far north.<sup>77</sup> Whilst Tonkinson does not doubt Barwick's meticulous research, she draws upon Attwood's parallel study of nineteenth-century Victorian missionary activity to hint that Barwick exaggerates women's status and power. This may well be. Influenced by feminism and in response to an existing androcentrism, women anthropologists working in the 1970s tended to exaggerate the autonomy and independence of Aboriginal women.<sup>78</sup> As Tonkinson points out, Attwood's detailed reconstruction of the life of Bessy Cameron highlights the way missions changed Aboriginal consciousness through their proselytising aims.

But one does not have to concur completely with Barwick's representation of women as independent, autonomous figures in order to appreciate the way she recovers meaning and importance for women's craft. Whilst missions gave support to patriarchal ideologies which ordered and disciplined the sexual division of Aboriginal labour into discrete spheres, Barwick's evidence together with that from Lake Tyers, indicates the degree to which Aborigines maintained their own engendered relationships by producing goods cooperatively and pooling their returns. A further aspect of Barwick's research focuses on the intimacy present in the close relationships which were formed between Aboriginal women and missionaries' wives. In understanding how women's crafts might have bridged differences between colonisers and colonised, one needs to acknowledge how the domestic arts traditionally brought women together on a regular basis in the public domain. Howard Becker's reconsideration of American women's nineteenth-century quilt-making groups, shows how they operate as a force for social interchange and coherence.<sup>79</sup> For Aboriginal women, such communal activities fulfilled the

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<sup>77</sup> Myrna Tonkinson, "Sisterhood or Aboriginal Servitude?: Black Women and White Women on the Australian Frontier," in *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 12, Part 1, 1988, pp. 27-39, pp. 27-28.

<sup>78</sup> Hamilton, "Daughters of the Imaginary."

<sup>79</sup> Becker, *Art Worlds*, pp. 247-258.

further role of maintaining existing patterns of socialisation. When Lake Tyers women recall with pleasure their time spent in dressmaking and embroidery with Hilda Rule, they recognise these social formations.<sup>80</sup> Oral histories such as Glenyse Ward's *Wandering Girl* make the further point that Aboriginal women appreciated their friendship with mission staff in contrast to the loneliness and isolation they experienced as domestic servants.<sup>81</sup>

Barwick's evidence raises the further issue of Christian missions as agents of reform and domination. Nineteenth-century Protestantism is closely linked to a capitalist ethos. The studies of Jean and John Comaroff in South Africa and Attwood in nineteenth-century Victoria, show that indigenous identity was historically created and mediated through interaction with missionaries who inculcated the spiritual values which shaped consciousness through a temporal and material reordering of daily existence.<sup>82</sup> In their overview of Christian missions in Australia, Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose acknowledge that missions performed a protective and pastoral role.<sup>83</sup> however Ronald and Catherine Berndt take the more pessimistic view that Christianity represented "the hand-maiden of Europeanization" whose spiritual doctrines and paternalism have contributed to the disintegration of Aboriginal society.<sup>84</sup> Even in the south east, there are differences within Aboriginal society in relation to such questions.<sup>85</sup>

<sup>80</sup> Herma Pepper, tel. conv. 20 March 1993; Mary Harrison, Interview, 4 March 1993.

<sup>81</sup> Glenyse Ward, *Wandering Girl*, (Broome: Magabala Books, 1987), pp. 8, 125-130.

<sup>82</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, p. 78; Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*.

<sup>83</sup> Deborah Bird Rose & Tony Swain, "Introduction," In *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions: Ethnographic and Historical Studies* (eds.), Tony Swain and Deborah Bird Rose, The Australian Association for the Study of Religions, Special Studies in Religions, No. 6, Victor C. Hayes, General Editor (Bedford Park, S. A., The Australasian Association for the Study of Religions at the South Australian College for Advanced Education, 1988), pp. 1-8.

<sup>84</sup> Ronald M. Berndt and Catherine H. Berndt, "Body and Soul: More Than an Episode!," In *Aboriginal Australians and Christian Missions*, pp. 45-59, p. 53.

<sup>85</sup> Aboriginal experiences differed. Malcom Calley, "Pentecostalism Among the Bandjalang," in *Aborigines Now: New Perspectives in the Study of Aboriginal Communities* (ed.), Marie Reay (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1964), pp. 48-58 documents devout Christianity in one community. Many individuals found Christianity a great spiritual support. See Margaret Tucker, *If Everyone Cared: Autobiography of Margaret Tucker MBE* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1977); Mavis

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The idea of syncretism presents a possible solution to these problems.<sup>86</sup> For the Comaroffs, Christianity is never a discrete set of beliefs but a contested realm between consciousness and ideology; conversion "belied the fact that older modes of thought and action were never fully laid aside."<sup>87</sup> It follows that Christianity did not necessarily erase Aboriginal culture nor the political and social commitment to Aboriginal restitution and recognition.<sup>88</sup>

When Margaret Tucker, the singer and activist, reminisces about a wedding at Moonahculla reserve, she reveals how Christianity could work to prevent disintegration amongst Aboriginal communities. A central feature of her description is the importance given to her mother's dressmaking.

Aboriginal women could cook, and everyone would have a hand in making such a wedding celebration a joyous occasion. Mother would have a part in making the wedding dress. No one would see it until the bride wore it on her wedding day. . . [afterwards] The wedding feast would be held in a long green bough shed, freshly made for the occasion . . . Every family on that Reserve would contribute something to the feast, and believe me, in our people's opinion it was second to none. . . We children would look in wonder at the bride in her pretty dress, with lace and ribbon trimmings—how beautiful she looked! <sup>89</sup>

Tucker's fond recollection of the wedding highlights the way Aborigines selectively incorporated from mainstream Australian society in accordance with their own world view. The wedding feast was cooked using a combination of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal styles, the music combined gum

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Thorpe Clark, *Pastor Doug: The Story of Sir Douglas Nicholls: Aboriginal Leader* (1965, rev. ed. Adelaide, Rigby, 1975); Other Aborigines experienced racism from the church, see Monica Clare, *Karobran The Story of an Aboriginal Girl* (Sydney: Alternative Publishing Cooperative Limited, 1978), pp. 82-84.

<sup>86</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, pp. 243-251; cf Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 24-25, fn. 51 contrasts the evidence of two informants to suggest syncretism is impossible.

<sup>87</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, p. 247.

<sup>88</sup> Rose and Swain, "Introduction."

<sup>89</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 85-86, see also p. 87; Further evidence of the incorporation of Christian values is evident in Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, pp. 96-97.

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leaves, violin and concertina and the dances included sets, lancers and 'corroborees'.

Christianity transformed Aborigines but was itself transformed in the process—as the wedding of Suzy Murray and George Patten demonstrates.<sup>90</sup> (Plate 45) This wedding marks a significant moment in the self perception of the Melbourne Aboriginal community. The bride, Suzy Murray, was a Kurnai; Patten and his brother Jack, were leading political activists from Cummeragunga. On 26 January 1938, Jack had organised the National Day of Mourning in Sydney with the Aboriginal leader, William Ferguson; the following year, he led the Cummeragunga walk-off. This rapid sequence of events indicates the growing level of political leadership amongst urban Aborigines and their community commitment to political resistance. At this wedding, which took place during the Second World War at a church in Oakleigh, a Melbourne suburb, Aborigines used the public context of a Christian ceremony as an arena of activity to signal their association with a local and national Aboriginality

Amongst her accoutrements, Suzy Murray wears a miniature boomerang. Miniatures do not exist in nature, they are a cultural construction. This miniature artefact operates as a quotation from the past redeployed within a new ceremonial context. Appropriating from the pomp and status of military ceremonies, Lake Tyers servicemen form a guard of honour using boomerangs in lieu of swords to create an arch over the bridal couple.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> The author wishes to thank Herbie Patten for his assistance with my research on his parent's wedding.

<sup>91</sup> As in the First World War, Aborigines experienced racial discrimination from the Australian army who considered their services, "neither necessary nor desirable." Robert Hall cites one incident when eighteen Lake Tyers men who enlisted in July 1940 were discharged in March the following year, together with volunteers from Point McLeay. Robert Hall, *The Black Diggers: Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989), Ch 2, esp. pp. 20-21, 113-4; cf Jackomos and Fowell, *Forgotten Heroes*, p. 14 puts the number of Lake Tyers volunteers at 25.

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Acknowledging the status of remote communities, the first pair of boomerangs are Central Australian fighting boomerangs probably loaned from a private collection held within the community.<sup>92</sup> The fact that Lake Tyers boomerangs at the rear are similar to those produced for tourists is further evidence that these artefacts were also meaningful within an Aboriginal milieu. In this display, Melbourne Aborigines recontextualise artefacts from remote and local communities to produce a bold and imaginative assertion of their public Aboriginality

### **v The politics of embroidery**

As already shown embroidery most particularly has been taken to imply Aboriginal acquiescence and assimilation. To understand why this should be so, one needs to examine how embroidery—as a sign of femininity—came to be conflated with Christian values. Initially, embroidery was associated with the leisured pursuits of the wealthy. By the nineteenth century, however, an air of punitive morality surrounded the craft and women were meant to undertake embroidery as an expression of their selfless duty toward husband and home. The next stage in the history of embroidery proved crucial, as Parker explains.

Once embroidery had become an accepted tool for inculcating and manifesting femininity in the privileged classes, with missionary zeal it was taken to the working class. Teaching embroidery to the poor became an aspect of Victorian philanthropy.<sup>93</sup>

Parker's use of the term 'missionary' is apt given that Christian ideology aligned heathens with the poor. Just as embroidery was taught to the deserving poor on the assumption they could raise their social station through

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<sup>92</sup> Many Aborigines owned collections. The President of the Aborigines Progressive Association, William Ferguson (1882-1950), owned four such boomerangs, acquired during his youth in the pastoral industry in northern New South Wales and southern Queensland. Jack Horner, *Vote Ferguson for Aboriginal Freedom* (Sydney: Australia and New Zealand Book Co. 1974), p.4. The author wishes to thank Melanie Raberts of the Museum of Victoria for the identification.

<sup>93</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 173.

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diligence, persistence and patience, Christian missions encouraged such disciplined hand work in the belief that it contributed toward the process of self realisation involved in conversion.<sup>94</sup> At Ramahyuck (Lake Wellington), women's needlework represented part of the Reverend Hagenauer's pervasive attempt to alter Aborigines sense of time and space by dividing work from leisure. In particular, he "hoped to teach Aborigines how to 'occupy their time properly', pointing them to 'congenial amusement' which would enforce habits of steadiness and self-discipline."<sup>95</sup> The idea that embroidery constituted a sign of civilisation thus had profound implications within a colonial context. Inasmuch as embroidery implied class mobility and the gift of civilisation, it appeared to inscribe Aboriginal women within its hegemonic values. The crucial question is, To what extent do Aboriginal viewpoints concur with these existing interpretations? Is Aboriginal women's embroidery yet another instance where Eurocentrism has spoken for the other?

The inclusion of Aboriginal women's embroidery in an overtly political context, within the first land-rights petition lodged by south eastern Aborigines in 1863, suggests this may be the case. When Coranderrk was founded twenty-four years after the settlement of the south east, the native population of Victoria had already been reduced by eighty-five per cent. For the remnants of the Woi wurrung and Taungerong (Kulin) people, Coranderrk represented their seventh attempt to establish a permanent reserve.<sup>96</sup> Under the leadership of their headman, Simon Wonga, a delegation from Coranderrk attended the Governor's Birthday Levee on 24 May 1863 to present a petition that predates by exactly a century the bark petitions lodged by the Yolngu of Yirrkala in 1963. The presents they had prepared—maintaining Aboriginal values of

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<sup>94</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, pp. 64-8.

<sup>95</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 24.

<sup>96</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," pp. 15, 18-24. Assistant Protector Thomas established reserves at NarreWarren 1841-3, at Warrandyte and Mordialloc after 1852 and at Acheron and Mohican 1858-1860. With Green, the Woi wurrung settled at Warrandyte and Woori Yallock in 1862 and at Coranderrk with the Taungerong in 1863.

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reciprocity—thanked Sir Henry Barkly for food and clothing they had received and petitioned him, as the Queen's representative, to secure Coranderrk as a permanent reserve.<sup>97</sup> Most significantly, the presents forwarded to Queen Victoria included a crocheted lace collar, a rush basket and weapons.<sup>98</sup>

In her history of Coranderrk, Barwick suggests it was coincidental that the reserve was gazetted just as the Queen's letter arrived "guaranteeing her interest and protection," nonetheless it gave rise to the "enduring folk belief that the Coranderrk land was the gift of the Queen and Sir Henry Barkly, to be theirs in perpetuity."<sup>99</sup> At the time, Coranderrk residents accepted the contents of these letters at face value, unaware that pastoralists' greed for land would begin to revoke their rights by 1893. Barwick's point is that Coranderrk women gained their emancipation partly through the status vested in Queen Victoria.

These gifts, however, raise other issues. The presence of embroidery and basketry in this petition—as with the lyrebird tail and rush basket included in the gifts presented to Chief Secretary Sir Graham Berry at his retirement in 1886—indicate that women were not ostracised by their association with such fibre crafts.<sup>100</sup> Rather the Coranderrk community utilised women's craft to further their common goals. The petition was successful because the lace collar signified Aborigines' civilisation. Queen Victoria asked specifically that Ellen, maker of the collar, "*acquaint the other Aboriginal inhabitants of the interest that their Queen, however distant from her, will always feel in their advancement and welfare.*"<sup>101</sup> [emphasis in the original] Thus, in addition to the economic, social and aesthetic values incorporated in embroidery,

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<sup>97</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 24; Barwick, " 'And the Lubras are Ladies Now', " p. 36.

<sup>98</sup> Every attempt has been made to locate these articles in The Royal Collection—to no avail.

<sup>99</sup> Barwick, "Coranderrk and Cumeroogunga," p. 24.

<sup>100</sup> Attwood, *The Making of the Aborigines*, p. 94, citing *The Argus*, 25 March 1886.

<sup>101</sup> Barwick, " 'And The Lubras are Ladies Now', " p. 36.

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Aboriginal women also gained political status through such accomplishments. The inclusion of a crochet lace collar as part of the petition to Queen Victoria suggests Aborigines implicitly understood the way embroidery signalled aristocratic connotations. The conclusion can be drawn that Aboriginal petitions for land rights are historically constituted through changing constructions of Aboriginality.

Marie Fels recent reinterpretations for the role played by the Native Police Corps established in the Port Philip District 1837-1853, bear out these suppositions. Overturning existing interpretations which have formerly cast these Aborigines as traitors, Marie Fels argues that such collaboration gained Aborigines status within their own community and from the majority culture.<sup>102</sup> To endorse such an interpretation entails waiving the assumption that harmonious and egalitarian values prevail in Aboriginal society.<sup>103</sup> As a culture structured around personal prestige, Fels suggests. Aborigines understood and appreciated the status they gained through service with the Corps and used it to add to their cultural repertoire.<sup>104</sup> Both these reinterpretations recognise that the fragmented nature of Aboriginal society—prior to the emergence of public, pan-Aboriginal positions—meant Aborigine's diverse responses to colonialism might range from rebellion to various forms of accommodation.

Nevertheless, colonisation incorporated Aborigines within unequal power relationships. Mainstream Australian society assumed Aborigines would take their place as landless peasants prepared to work as domestic servants and manual labourers. Legislation introduced in Victoria after 1886 actively

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<sup>102</sup> Marie Hansen Fels, *Good Men and True: The Aboriginal Police of the Port Philip District 1837-1853* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1988), Introduction, pp. 19, 87, 89, 91.

<sup>103</sup> For a reconsideration of these issues see Hamilton, "Equal to Whom", pp. 136-138.

<sup>104</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, pp. 16-20 recognises the importance of these re-interpretations but considers issues of social agency and Aboriginality remain unresolved.



promoted the absorption of Aborigines by discriminating against 'half-castes' and welfare agencies were given the right to remove children from their families for industrial and domestic training. The importance given to displays of craft by Lake Tyers girls and boys suggests crafts were the focus of public attention as evidence of assimilation.<sup>105</sup> (Plates 46 & 47) Embroidery and Sloyd work—a Swedish method of woodcarving in vogue in Australian education—institutionalised sexual divisions of labour and a work ethic thought proper to a capitalist economy. In a recent revaluation of public education, Zygmunt Bauman argues just this point, that education is not so much a site for learning and knowledge but a means of gaining control over social groups marginalised by industrialisation. Although Bauman's insights are compelling, the evidence already brought forward suggests he may exaggerate the degree of control effected by formal systems of education.<sup>106</sup>

The ambiguity and neglect which attends embroidery is highlighted in recent revaluations of the Hermannsburg School. Although the school included women artists, an irretrievable gap exists between the status and fame achieved by the leader of the school, Albert Namatjira, and the hiatus which surrounds the embroidery by his wife, Rubina. (Plate 48) The critical response this embroidery elicited from the designer and child art educator Frances Derham, when she visited Hermannsburg in 1938, exemplifies embroidery's equivocal status. As an artist, Derham rebelled in a typically modernist way against the academic training she had received as a child that valued copying plaster casts and adherence to perspectival conventions. Influenced by Piaget, who recognised children's mental growth would be reflected in different stages of visual development, Derham came to value children's

<sup>105</sup> Similar classes operated at Cummeragunga. Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*. p. 169.

<sup>106</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity Post-modernity and Intellectuals* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), Chs. 3 & 5, esp. pp. 68-76.

original and free artistic expression.<sup>107</sup> At Hermannsburg, Derham found evidence of gender differences in children's drawings: whilst boy's drew pairs of animals, hunting scenes, landscapes and depictions of the pastoral industry, girls drew flower studies based on the Semco embroidery patterns used by their mothers. Semco was a brand name of a firm, popular in the 1930s, which manufactured and marketed embroidery supplies throughout Australia. Derham admired the boy's drawings as a direct response to their daily life within a colonial context but she lamented the influence of the Semco patterns.<sup>108</sup> When Derham enquired why Aranda women copied Semco motifs rather than using their own "native patterns," Pastor Albrecht explained that the embroideries from Hermannsburg met a popular demand that had earned the Mission £200 the previous year.<sup>109</sup>

The Hermannsburg evidence raises a number of critical issues. The modernist consciousness which informed Derham's response privileged originality and individual expression over the idea of the copy. Such aesthetic ideologies supported the modernist myth of the avant garde but in the process, they obscured the fact that all art builds upon prior forms. Copies occur universally; they extend our cultural repertoire by retrieving the past and gaining access to new imagery. To Derham, patterns implied domination and a restriction of creativity although she subsequently found that girls were equally creative when she encouraged them to produce their own designs. Significantly, Albert Namatjira's watercolour landscapes of the MacDonnell Ranges were similarly criticised as copies of a European artistic tradition. The emphasis which modernity placed upon originality and individuality and conversely, its concern with mimesis, is unique to the West.

<sup>107</sup> Frances Derham, "A Place for the Handcrafts in Education," *The Recorder*, 1st ed. March 1929.

<sup>108</sup> Jennifer Hoff, *Drawings and Paintings by Children from Hermannsburg, Aurukun and Malabunga*, 14 April- 20 May 1984, Australian National Gallery, p. 4.

<sup>109</sup> Frances Derham quoted by Jane Hardy, "Visitors to Hermannsburg: An Essay on Cross-cultural Learning," In *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 137-176, p. 164.

The general public would not have concurred with Derham's view that the Semco designs embroidered by Aranda women were a travesty. When Margaret Frances Strongman, an English tourist saw Hermannsburg embroideries in an exhibition of Aboriginal Art and Craft at the Melbourne Town Hall in July 1938, she considered them ". . . much better than most white women could do. . ."<sup>110</sup> Equally, the fancy work submitted by Lake Tyers girls to the annual Bairnsdale agricultural show was greatly admired and readily bought.<sup>111</sup> Circulating within these particular regimes of value however, embroidery retained its dubious association with charity. A paternalistic desire to support Christian missions may have inspired those who purchased embroideries from Hermannsburg. But, it would seem from Albrecht's comments that Aranda women gained status for the economic contribution they made to the Mission. At Lake Tyers, Aboriginal women took great pride in producing embroidery which raised funds for the Bairnsdale hospital. Under the auspices of Hilda Rule, who purchased cloth already printed with motifs, Lake Tyers women produced embroidery which was sold at the government shop on the station and at an annual fete.<sup>112</sup>

Irony abounds in Evelyn Johnson's embroidery of a Mexican asleep under a palm tree. (Plate 49) In one sense, the gaily dressed Mexican signals the extent to which Western primitivist stereotypes of an exotic other had permeated popular culture; conversely, Johnson's choice of design may well reflect her own interest in representations of other indigenous people. The elegant basket of flowers embroidered by Dolly Pepper sustains equally evocative and contested interpretations.(Plate 50) Embroidery frequently

<sup>110</sup> Margaret Frances Strongman, MS12176, Box 2753/3, Diaries Dec. 1937-July 1939, pp. 1-157, p. 89, LaTrobe collection, State Library of Victoria.

<sup>111</sup> Australian Archives Series, B356, Item 54, Lake Tyers Correspondence Files, Managers Reports 1930-1944, Managers Report for the period ending 30 November 1937.

<sup>112</sup> Hilda Rule, tel. conv. 26 October 1993.

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inscribed an ideology of the natural which alluded to the associations between women and nature, Christianity and the garden of Eden. It is perhaps indicative of the more heightened sense of class consciousness which prevailed in Europe than in the colonies, that Parker maintains, such a motif—symbolic of privilege—would never have been available for embroidery by the poor.<sup>113</sup> But the critical issue is, these embroideries do not signify assimilation.

Indeed one of the most interesting Lake Tyers boomerangs located during the course of this research was that made by Wally Pepper and painted by Dolly Pepper. (see chapter 4) Given the anonymity which surrounds so many Lake Tyers boomerangs, this single instance of collaboration raises the question whether other women were not also involved in painting artefacts? This evidence would mean that women were not ghettoised by their traditional associations with fibre crafts but, in keeping with the patterns which characterise Aboriginal productive endeavour, men and women worked in collaboration and both had access to the figurative and geometric imagery used to depict the land and its flora and fauna through totemic emblems and symbols of national identity.

## **vi Conclusion**

The skills and knowledge Aboriginal women possessed were readily adaptable to the changed circumstances of a colonial regime. Whether women lived on missions or reserves or, more independently in fringe camps or in the city, they demonstrate initiative and creativity in their ability to adapt and incorporate from the wider community. In so doing they maintained existing skills transmitted through patterns of socialisation, and they secured economic independence. The concept of a fibre continuum severed the ties

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<sup>113</sup> Parker, *The Subversive Stitch*, p. 174.

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which have, until now, restricted recognition for Aboriginal women's crafts producing a broader viewpoint which demonstrated that a small-scale society in a young settler colony undergoing industrialisation could exploit natural and industrial materials as a means of practical survival, economic gain and personal expression. Exchanged with the wider community, across all sectors of society, womens' fibre craft encoded several different constructions for Aboriginality: basketry and feather flowers evoked continuity with the past whilst embroidery operated as a sign of civilisation. The evidence from this study revealed that both were equally productive in gaining women dignity and status within their own society and that of the majority culture.

Several contemporary curators, Henrietta Fourmile in Australia, and Susan Vogel working in the area of African art, note that recognition for indigenous women artists has lagged behind that of men.<sup>114</sup> Their insights are predated by the findings of Frederick Rose who studied the impact of tourism on Aborigines at Angas Downs station in Central Australia in 1962. At the time, his somewhat deterministic approach argued that women earned less from production than men because they lacked technical skills.<sup>115</sup> In one of the few extended analyses of women's craft, Jules-Rosette establishes a more complex model. Her research in Africa found that women operated at a local level where they remained involved in repetitious, skill-based work. She found that women, unlike men, did not innovate, nor did they become involved in artistic, entrepreneurial ventures.<sup>116</sup> Her findings tend to support the theory that social distinctions between men and women influence the status given to women's production in many societies.

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<sup>114</sup> Henrietta Fourmile, "Aboriginal Women Artists—At Last," In *Aboriginal Women's Exhibition*, pp. 4-6, p. 4; Susan Vogel, Foreword," In *Africa Explores: 20th C African Art*, pp. 8-13, p. 12.

<sup>115</sup> Frederick G. G. Rose, *The Winds of Change in Central Australia: the Aborigines of Angas Downs*, (1962; Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1965), pp. 76-80.

<sup>116</sup> Jules-Rosette, *The Meaning of Tourist Art*, pp. 81-104.

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The evidence from this study, however, did not entirely accord with Jules-Rosette's evidence. In an earlier era, women were more constrained by their domestic commitments but they emerge here, and elsewhere in this study as equally involved in the process of cultural production. As discussed above, Aboriginal communities structured their productive endeavour differently so that it remained a collaborative practice, communities and households pooled their income from the sale of fibre objects and exploited its status to gain economically, socially and politically. Although fibre was generally located in the domestic sphere, fibre objects featured in the successful 1863 petition to Queen Victoria mounted by Coranderrk Aborigines. Western distinctions between public and private spheres are not as relevant to Aboriginal communities; consequently women were not ghettoised by their association with fibre, nor were they restricted to this discrete sphere of practice. There are distinctions to be drawn between the value and meaning Aborigines give to the crafts generally and their peripheral role within Western artistic hierarchies. In the West originality and individuality are associated with the status given to the fine arts whilst the crafts are linked to the idea of repetitious skills, function and the domestic sphere of women. One could usefully contrast the recognition given to the watercolour landscapes of the Hermannsburg School with the insignificant role allotted to craft produced at the Hermannsburg Mission.

The status given to women's crafts must also be considered within the broader relationships of power and knowledge which incorporate Aborigines within colonial relationships. Since south eastern Aborigines were deemed to have no traditional and authentic culture, neither women's nor men's artefacts were collected by the Museum of Victoria after the 1920s. Prevailing constructions of Aboriginality privileged objects from remote communities with an aura of authenticity and ethnographic significance. Melbourne Aborigines attempted

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to regain status and power for their community when they redeployed Central Australian boomerangs within a local wedding ceremony. But Aborigines in remote communities also appropriated from the south east. When Gretta Mathews, a missionary from Maloga Mission transmitted the coiling technique—indigenous to the south east—to Croker and Goulburn Islands at the turn of the century, Arnhem Land's rich social and ceremonial ties, absorbed the technique quickly.<sup>117</sup> The difference was of course, that the status given to remote communities allowed them to appropriate with relative impunity.

Modernity emerged as a key factor in this discussion. Whilst the evidence revealed that women were free to reinterpret the past and incorporate from Western technologies and imagery, their range of production was more broadly circumscribed by the restrictions imposed upon women in an earlier era. In retrospect it is apparent that industrialisation, combined with the resettlement of Aborigines into the cities, created a hiatus. These developments curtailed the production of items such as string bags and coiled baskets which were labour intensive and required skills to be transmitted from one generation to another. Aboriginal women living in the cities had to wait until the self determination movements of the 1970s before they gained access to the education and training which allowed them to extend their cultural repertoire into new arenas of artistic activity. Hence this study highlights the role played by the regional domain as a force for continuity within Aboriginal culture. Regional domains represented the land to which Aborigines were sentimentally attached through their kin and history; they also provided the resources necessary for the production of craft.

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<sup>117</sup> Lindy Allen, "Fibre Craft," In *Women's Work: Aboriginal Women's Artefacts in the Museum of Victoria*, pp. 11-18, p. 12.

## **6 Pastoral relationships**

### **i Introduction**

Aboriginal art produced in regional domains of the south east has a distinctive character. Like other Aboriginal communities, the Bagundji and Wiradjuri in the Murray/Darling basin suffered dispossession and dispersal following European settlement however geographical and historical factors mitigated the worst effect of this drastic upheaval, so that many Aborigines remained within their regional domains. The carved wooden artefacts and emu eggs which characterise the art from this area maintain many continuities with an Aboriginal heritage, transmitted within families through patterns of socialisation. The production of these art objects helped facilitate relationships with the wider community and the status artists gained from a local pastoral milieu enabled them to resist domination and assimilation and retain their independence. Aboriginality in the settled south east has been critiqued as only a nostalgic desire to return to the past whereas evidence presented here demonstrates Aborigines' dynamic interaction with the modern colonial world.

At settlement Bagundji and Wiradjuri (Fig 2) shared the common experience of gradual dispossession. Although their adjacent territories remained relatively isolated from capital cities, changing patterns of land use in the twentieth-century—associated with urbanisation—produced further radical disruption.<sup>1</sup> Initially, the dry grasslands of central and far western New South Wales were exploited as large sheep and cattle stations run by single companies. By the 1920s in Wiradjuri territory, east of the Darling, and by the 1950s in Bagundji territory, west of the Darling, the runs were broken up into smaller farms and soldier settlement blocks. Although subsequent rural depression returned

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<sup>1</sup> For the changing patterns of land use amongst the Bagundji see Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 12, 54-55; Beckett, "Marginal Men," pp. 93-94; For the Wiradjuri evidence see Read, *A Hundred Years War*: pp. 25-27, 48-51, 76; Heather Goodall, "A History of Aboriginal Communities in New South Wales 1909-1939," Ph. D. Thesis, University of Sydney, 1982, pp. 21-26, 41-53, 87, 90.



many into the ownership of companies, blocks generally remained smaller, worked by families who had less need for labour. Mechanisation further reduced the need for labour and the reliance upon bush skills, resulting in increased unemployment amongst Aborigines.

These historical perspectives form the background for a study of the art produced by three families in this region. Although many parallels are evident between Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists, their different situations in time and place influence the objects produced, their style, and, content. Whilst the Bagundji artists, Harry Mitchell and his son Gordon, experienced a considerable degree of continuity and stability in their association with the pastoral industry, the Wiradjuri artists—Joe Walsh and his son Hilton and Sam Kirby and his daughter Esther—encountered more pervasive and radical change. In Wiradjuri territory, closer settlement increased the effect of government legislation which aimed after 1909 at the forcible dispersal of all Aborigines.<sup>2</sup>

Thus the issue of cultural continuity is an essential concern. Whilst the research Jeremy Beckett conducted amongst the Bagundji from the late 1950s onwards established that there were many more continuities with a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle than formerly recognised, the contrast which his informants, like many others, drew between vestiges of a traditional culture—sustained through structural congruities with the pastoral industry—and the ‘culture of poverty’ which followed urbanisation suggested a gradual decline in Aboriginal values and pride. Peter Read’s history of the Wiradjuri people acknowledges the devastation which occurred. He argues that increasingly authoritarian government intervention in the personal lives of Aborigines, coupled with the shame produced by racial discrimination, halved the number

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<sup>2</sup> For the history of this period, see Read, *A Hundred Years War*, Chs 2-6. In 1909 the Aborigines Protection Act began to restrict the entry of Aborigines on to reserves.

of people of Wiradjuri descent who chose to identify as Aborigines.<sup>3</sup> He traces the regeneration of the Wiradjuri people from 1920s onwards to a number of factors including the growth in self esteem forged by Aboriginal leaders like William Ferguson, Aboriginal militancy and the importance of kin and regional domain to an Aboriginal world view.

The continuous history of cultural production examined in this chapter is tangible evidence that Aboriginal culture continued to reproduce itself and effect transformations through the ongoing practical activity of individuals in interaction with society and their changing environment.<sup>4</sup> This raises the question, Why was this history not evident to earlier informants and researchers? Typically, social actors are not reflexive about their day to day activities which they take for granted.<sup>5</sup> And, at the time Aborigines lived within conditions of oppression and racial discrimination prior to the emergence of contemporary ideologies of Aboriginality. Today Aborigines speak from a position of self determination and conceive of themselves as part of an imagined national community.

In the meantime, our understanding of the relationships which Aborigines maintain with their regional domain have undergone revision. John von Sturmer argues that our emphasis on Aborigines' spiritual relationship with the land produces a very generalised and abstract understanding of the regional domain.

Spirituality, religion, knowledge, affectivity, as expressed in land, can be seen as the history of practice, as the activity relations of people with each other, in the social, political and economic arenas, written onto the land. . . .[T]his history can change as a result of new patterns of activity

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<sup>3</sup> Read, *A Hundred Years War*, pp. 132-3. This estimate effectively doubles the present Wiradjuri population of 3000.

<sup>4</sup> Here I draw upon the theories of social action developed by Giddens, In *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method*, pp. 114.

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relations. . . in two ways—firstly, in its content; and, secondly, in its structures.<sup>6</sup>

Von Sturmer projects Aborigines' relationship to their land as mutable and flexible: through his interpretation the domain becomes an arena of practice, available for recolonisation, put to use by artists for economic, political, social and aesthetic purpose. In her research with Wiradjuri, Gaynor Macdonald found they now objectify their regional domain in the same fluid, relational terms. Thus the ties that bind south eastern Aborigines to their domain are equally as complex as those in remote communities. Relationships with the regional domain respond to changing historical circumstances: built up from a combination of tribal affiliations and the events of contact history they allow individuals and communities to continually renegotiate relationships with each other and with property.<sup>7</sup>

These insights inform this analysis of the art produced by the Bagundji and Wiradjuri: patterns of socialisation within families establish relationships with the regional domain. In turn, personal and historical experiences alter how land is conceptualised allowing local relationships with the regional domain to gradually accommodate pan-Aboriginal positions.

## **ii Pastoral artefacts**

As an elder of his people and a leading stockman on a property, Harry Mitchell typifies the adjustments and transformations which had taken place in Bagundji society since settlement. Aborigines had skills and knowledge that were readily adaptable to the bush-craft and horsemanship required by the pastoral industry and by the turn of the century, the majority of Aboriginal men worked in some form of rural labour.<sup>8</sup> Born about 1874, Mitchell grew up on

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<sup>6</sup> Sturmer, "A Critique of the Fox Report," p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> Macdonald, "The Koori Way," pp. 432-443.

<sup>8</sup> Aboriginal contribution to the south-eastern pastoral industry is acknowledged by Edward S. Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks* (Melbourne: Whitcombe and Tombs, 1911), pp. 12, 23; Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 37-46, 54.

Cuthero station, at the top of Lake Victoria, living with the shepherds who were required on runs prior to fencing in the 1880s.<sup>9</sup> Young boys growing up in such camps often helped with the sheep in exchange for rations. In 1893, Mitchell gained renown for his participation in locating a 'lost tribe' of Aborigines who had lived in isolation in the dry mallee region of the Anabranche, a tributary of the Darling, for twenty years.<sup>10</sup> Little is known of Mitchell's life in the intervening years except that he worked intermittently at Nulla station in 1896 and again 1911-1913.<sup>11</sup> From about 1920 to 1944—when he died at Ivanhoe whilst absent from the station—Mitchell was employed as one of the leading stockmen on Nulla, the million-acre property owned and managed by the Armstrong family at Lake Victoria.<sup>12</sup> (Fig 3) Mitchell, and his wife, Ellen, and their 12 children lived several miles from the main homestead at Waterjili. In addition, Mitchell's sons, Gordon, Toodlie (Tom), Lochie and the twins, Harry and Alec, worked with their father on the station and one of his daughters, Heanie, was employed as a domestic for the overseer.<sup>13</sup> (Plate 51)

<sup>9</sup> Dick Palmer, tel conv. 19 April 1993.

<sup>10</sup> Various versions of the 'Nanya' story exist. The historian Hardy maintains Mitchell worked as a dingo trapper with Fred Williams and Dan McGregor whilst the Aboriginal leader, Ferguson, who met Mitchell in the 1920s, says Mitchell worked as a black tracker with McGregor and Bill Bell. The popular novelist, Ernestine Hill provides the most sensationalised account. Some twenty years previously, Nanya Dthareenai had absconded from his tribe to escape retribution for the death of a woman, and taken another woman with him. In 1893, the 'discovery' of this 'primitive lost tribe' created great excitement but the 'Nanya' affair appeared to confirm the settler myth of fatal contact. Hardy suggests several of the Aborigines died, some remained in the area working on stations whilst others were dispersed to Pooncarie and Raukkan (Point McLeay) Missions. Significantly, Ferguson suggests Mulga Fred (discussed elsewhere) was a descendant of the Nanya people. Ernestine Hill, *Water into Gold*. (Melbourne: Robertson & Mullens, 1937), pp. 274-278; Bobbie Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji: The Vanished Tribes of the Darling Rivers Region*, (Sydney: Alpha Books, 1976), pp. 111-2, 167-171; William Ferguson, "Nanya," In *Paperbark: A Collection of Black Australian Writings* (eds.), Jack Davis, Stephen Muecke, Mudrooroo Narogin, Adam Shoemaker, (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990), pp. 175-196.

<sup>11</sup> ANU, Archives of Business and Labour, Series 6/25, Labels 11 & 12, Box Z180, Lake Victoria Station.

<sup>12</sup> This evidence contradicts, Hardy, *Lament for the Barkindji*, p. 171, who maintains Mitchell died in 1915 in Mildura hospital.

<sup>13</sup> R. A. Johnstone, Letter to Terence Lane, NGV, 20 May 1980, Copy in the author's possession. The author wishes to thank Terence Lane for making this correspondence available; Dick Palmer, tel. con. 19 April 1993.

Incorporation within the pastoral industry did not necessarily imply the Mitchells had ceased to identify as Aborigines. We know from several sources that Harry and his eldest son Gordon spoke their own language—in 1964, for instance, Gordon recorded a corroboree song for Beckett.<sup>14</sup> The fact that both were initiated suggests these ceremonies continued later than formerly thought.<sup>15</sup> In many ways Harry and Gordon Mitchell are comparable with George Dutton who emerges as a significant figure in Beckett's research. Dutton's biography reveals the extent to which ritual life survived amongst the Bagundji through their travel into Queensland and South Australia for ceremonies.<sup>16</sup> Men such as George Dutton, Harry and Gordon Mitchell knew the mythological associations of their country, and through their work in the pastoral industry they retained knowledge of the *muras* or dreaming tracks; as they slowly drove sheep and cattle from one water-hole to another, they travelled their tracks and sang the country.<sup>17</sup> There were many similarities between the itinerant lifestyle of the shepherd, stockman, boundary rider and drover and the hunter-gatherer lifestyle of Aborigines. Although dispossessed, Bagundji people were advantaged by their relative isolation: through the pastoral industry, men were able to maintain close ties with their regional domains.

The carved walking sticks and riding crops produced by Harry Mitchell represent an amalgamation of Aboriginal and European woodcarving traditions. (Plates 52 & 53) The basis of Bagundji and Wiradjuri art originates in the rich heritage of carved artefacts associated with the south east. As discussed already, the emphasis which ethnographers and curators gave to

<sup>14</sup> Margaret J. Gummow, *Aboriginal Music of New South Wales: Accompanying booklet to five demonstration tapes*, (Canberra: AIAS 1984), Item 17, unpagged; Jeremy Beckett, Letter to the author 10 August 1992; R. A. Johnstone, Interview, 19 October, 1991.

<sup>15</sup> Whilst Beckett cites 1914 as the date of the last initiation amongst the Bagundji, Morris found evidence that initiation ceremonies continued in northern New South Wales until 1935. Barry Morris, "Cultural Domination and Domestic Dependence," p. 112, fn. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, "The Land Where the Crow Flies Backwards," pp. 41-42; Beckett, "Marginal Men," pp. 97-9.

<sup>17</sup> Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 4-5, 17.

the cultural production of remote communities has tended to deny the cultural continuity of Aborigines in settled Australia and overlook their artistic traditions. In her analysis of south eastern artefacts, Carol Cooper found the geometric and figurative elements used in designs ranged from intricate compositions to repeated bands and simple longitudinal fluting—sometimes finished with oils or ochres.<sup>18</sup> That on a broad shield from the Murray river region of New South Wales, includes concentric diamonds, herring bone and small pecked incisions. (Plate 54) This weapon was probably incised with a possum-jaw engraver—a technique replaced by metal tools in a post contact era. Cooper argues the purpose of these weapons was not economic, rather, their designs fulfilled a powerful role in dances and ceremonial activities where they communicated individual and group identity. Within a colonial context, Aboriginal artefacts accumulated additional roles, as an expression of personal and communal identity in interaction with the majority culture.

Through his associations with the pastoral industry, Mitchell also came into contact with an English tradition of woodcarving or 'treen' ware. Emigrants were encouraged to carve bone and wood as a means of economising and 'making do' in the colonies.<sup>19</sup> Sailors contributed to this folk tradition of carved wooden artefacts: after they arrived during the gold rush they remained in the pastoral industry and gradually adapted their skills in scrimshaw to the carving of horn, wood and emu eggs.<sup>20</sup> By the turn of the century, Aborigines and non-Aborigines working as stockmen, boundary riders and drovers whiled away hours spent in camp in the production of plaited stock-whips and riding stocks which they later decorated and personalised. Amongst the sports and diversions of stockmen documented by Edward Sorenson in his 1911

<sup>18</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," pp. 32-33.

<sup>19</sup> *Colonial Crafts of Victoria: Early Settlement to 1921*: Catalogue of an exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria, 4 November-1978- 14 January 1979, (Curated by Murray Walker), p. 104, pl. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Baglin and Wheelhouse, *Collecting Australia's Past*, p. 61; Walker, *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*: pp. 13, 104-105.

publication, *Life in The Australian Backblocks*, he cites tomahawk throwing and the carving of initials into stock-whip handles.<sup>21</sup> To Aborigines, the production of personal artefacts around a temporary camp and the displays of prowess they generated would be understood, appreciated and appropriated as an extension of their past way of life.

Such carved artefacts—whittled with a pen-knife and polished with a shard of glass—were a widespread tradition amongst Aborigines from the late nineteenth century onwards.<sup>22</sup> Thomas Worsnop, writing in 1897, cites examples of carved walking sticks and stock whips from Central Australia, Luise Hercus refers to walking sticks produced in the Flinders Ranges and missionaries encouraged the production of such artefacts at Ramahyuck and Coranderrk.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the repeating, two-dimensional pattern in Mitchell's artefacts is very reminiscent of earlier south-east artefacts. In her analysis Cooper draws attention to the "visual puzzles" incorporated in these artefacts—an exploration of space through permutations of patterns.<sup>24</sup> In a new context these interconnecting lozenges operate as a form of *trompe l'oeil* which mimicked leather plaiting. As with the turk's head knot that acts as a handle, Mitchell exploits optical illusions which demand that the observer willingly suspend disbelief in order to read pattern as if it is an illusion of reality. The choice of figurative elements in the walking stick are equally significant. The turk's head knot, hands clasped in friendship and belt buckle incorporated from popular culture symbolise continuity, trust and friendship.

<sup>21</sup> Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks*, pp. 117-8.

<sup>22</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. conv. 19 April, 1993 describes the techniques used by Mitchell cf. Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc*, cites flint and shell as the technology used in the Central Australian artefacts.

<sup>23</sup> Worsnop, *The Prehistoric Arts, Manufactures, Works, Weapons etc*. pp. 46-47, pl. 25; Luise Hercus, "Eileen McKenzie," In *Fighters and Singers: The Lives of Some Australian Aboriginal Women* (eds.), I. White, D. Barwick and B. Meehan, (Sydney, George Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 68-75, p. 72. cites the walking sticks produced by Ted Coulthard at Mount Serle in South Australia; See *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*, p. 20, pls. 18 & 20 for the walking sticks produced on missions. Snakes are another recurring motif in Aboriginal walking sticks and one appears on a walking stick by Harry Mitchell held in a private collection.

<sup>24</sup> Cooper, "Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," caption for S. 24, p. 84.

They suggest that Mitchell intended the walking stick to act as bridge between himself and the wider community—a sign that Aborigines either sought equality and reconciliation or saw themselves in accord with the majority culture.

We know of one other Aborigine producing similar artefacts at this time. Mulga Fred (c.1860-c.1950), the Queensland Aborigine who gave displays of boomerang throwing, buck-jumping and whip-cracking in the Coleraine-Hamilton area between 1930s-1940s, made similar stock whips exploiting trompe-l'oeil decoration.<sup>25</sup> Riding whips and stocks produced by Aborigines are rare: few have survived the vicissitudes of time and usage. And, unlike walking sticks, they arose out of an artist's material circumstances within the pastoral industry. As the lifestyle of Aborigines on pastoral properties underwent radical change and mechanisation altered the skills that were required, this production ceased. These objects were circumscribed by the utilitarian roles they performed prior to modernisation, whereas carved emu eggs proved more mutable, fulfilling another role as interior decoration.

### **iii A Bagundji lifestyle**

Aborigines continued to exploit their regional domain as a food resource which supplemented the wages and rations they received as station hands: whenever the Mitchell boys found emu eggs on the station, they were always brought home to be eaten.<sup>26</sup> When Aborigines carved the empty shell of an emu egg they recolonised their regional domain, utilising its economic

<sup>25</sup> Aboriginal informants maintain Mulga Fred came from the Lake Eyre region—not West Australia as is commonly believed. As noted earlier, Harry Mitchell told William Ferguson that Mulga Fred was a descendent of the Nanya people. Mulga Fred claimed he came to Victoria as a blacktracker for the famous Gatton murders of 1896 however these trackers are now identified as George Combo and Charlie Williams. A link might be established via Mulga Fred's alternative names: Fred Wilson and Fred Williams. In addition, Mulga Fred is important as the model for the Pelaco shirt advertisement, "Mine Tinkit They Fit" and the artist A. T. Mockridge (see chapter 3) completed a painting of Mulga Fred in 193[4?]. Mulga Fred is now emerging as a significant figure in the Aboriginal history of the Hamilton-Coleraine region and the Casterton Town Hall holds a collection of his artefacts. Jack Kennedy, tel. conv. 29 July 1993; Gary Presland, tel. conv. 17 May and letter to the author 19 May, 1993.

<sup>26</sup> R. A. Johnstone, Letter to Terence Lane 20 May 1980.



resources as a source of raw materials to produce commodities for exchange. For Aborigines emu eggs are charged with association as beautiful objects which resonate with the value Aborigines place upon flora and fauna and their relationship with particular sites.

The earliest known carved emu eggs attributed to Aborigines is dated to the late nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The origins of this art form have sometimes been ascribed to the influence of missionaries at Maloga and Cummeragunga who may well have encouraged the production of eggs, for their association with the Christian ceremonies and as a form of dutiful labour which furthered assimilation.<sup>28</sup> But in point of fact, carved emu eggs cannot derive from any single point of origin: they occur throughout the Murray/Darling basin, and in West Australia.<sup>29</sup> More feasibly, carved emu eggs represent another widespread form of appropriation from the majority culture.

By the late nineteenth century, carved emu eggs were a common leisure pursuit amongst the itinerant workers of the pastoral industry. At the level of everyday life, carved emu eggs represented a skill which contributed additional income. Sorenson noted some itinerants,

never leave the rivers, except for short periods, and make a living by cutting out pipes, snobbing, tinkering, mending umbrellas, making water-bags, carving emu eggs, polishing bullocks' horns, and following many other trades that can be carried on under canvas.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, the fashion for carved emu eggs became part of a broader popular culture as townspeople appreciated how the large granulated shells—whose brilliant colours range from grey, to blue and green depending

<sup>27</sup> The Anthropological Museum in Dresden holds a pair of eggs acquired in 1881. (Acc. Nos. 54431A & 54432B)

<sup>28</sup> Larry Walsh, Interview 2 September, 1992.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Durack Miller and Florence Rutter, *Child Artists of the Australian Bush*, (Sydney: Australasian Publishing Company, 1952), p. 35.

<sup>30</sup> Sorenson, *Life in the Australian Backblocks*, pp. 99-100. Snobbing refers to the 'cobbler' the sheep left to last as the most difficult to shear. G. A. Wilkes, *A Dictionary of Australian Colloquialisms* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1978), p. 307.

on the food eaten by the bird—could be carved away with a penknife to create a cameo which incorporated three or four colours and as many tones. Perhaps the strangest figure to emerge within this folk tradition was the Japanese artist, Jonaski Takuma, who sold carved eggs from a shop in Imperial Arcade in Sydney at the turn of the century. In a further ironic twist, the origin of his designs, reproduced on postcards, and in a publication, *Kookaburra (The Laughing Jackass) and Black Snake*, clearly lie in Aboriginal legends!<sup>31</sup> Significantly, carved emu eggs were also part of the elite world of silver smithing. Soon after the European silversmiths, Ernst Leviny of Castlemaine and C. L. Qvist of Sandhurst, settled in the heart of Victoria's goldfields in the early 1850s, they began to express their fascination with Australia's indigenous flora and fauna by mounting (un-carved) emu eggs.<sup>32</sup> Australian and English silversmiths copied their innovations and, in a further development, silver tableaux were inserted into the eggs. Carved and un-carved emu eggs thus represented a uniquely Australian artistic expression, present at all levels of society as an expression of late nineteenth-century nationalism.

Harry Mitchell, his sons Gordon and Toodlie and son-in-law, Cooperluke Johnson, carved emu eggs, but to date, only six eggs attributable to Gordon Mitchell (c.1894-c.1965) have been located.<sup>33</sup> Gordon Mitchell's style and subject matter encapsulate the élan and vitality of his Bagundji culture. (Plates

<sup>31</sup> Terence Lane, Letter to the author, 7 August 1992; "How a Japanese Upstaged the Australians and Turned a Craft into an Art Form," *Australian Antique Trader*, March 1983, pp. 10-13; Jonaski Takuma, *Kookaburra (The Laughing Jackass) and Black Snake* (Sydney: Geo. Robertson & Co, 1891?).

<sup>32</sup> J. B. Hawkins, *Nineteenth Century Australian Silver*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 1990), Vol. 1, pp. 20-26; Vol. 2. p. 99, pls. 57, 58 and 374; J. B. Hawkins, *Australian Silver 1800-1900* (Sydney: The National Trust of Australia, 1973), p. 67, pls. 77-79.

<sup>33</sup> Gordon married Millie, a Ngyamba woman from Keewong Station whom he met at the Carowra Tank or Menindie. Jeremy Beckett, Letter to the author 10 August 1992. Of the six eggs, one pair is held privately in Mildura, another pair and a single egg are held by the NGV and a further single egg is held privately in Melbourne. The Wentworth Folk Museum holds four eggs which are similar in style to the work of Gordon Mitchell but the carving is rougher, their style less assured and they introduce new motifs suggesting they may be carved by a relative. Two other eggs, carved by an unknown Aboriginal artist in a more realistic style are in the Museum of Victoria collection. (Acc Nos X88509 & X88508).

55-57) Plants, animals and figures carved in a flat, two-dimensional style create a continuous narrative around each egg and stand out in bold relief against a heavily carved background. Oversize plants establish discrete divisions between each scene; their leaves and branches engraved with hatching and dots, spread out over the heads of Aborigines and animals to form decorative patterns. Although accurate identification of these plants has proved impossible, Aborigines suggest they may be wild spinach, lambs tongue and wild tobacco which supplied water, narcotics, medicine, and food.<sup>34</sup> Several of the eggs depict Aboriginal families journeying through the landscape: in one, the father carries a swag and a billy, in another, a kangaroo is carried back to camp. Vignettes of animals and birds suggest Aborigines are accompanied on their journeys; a kangaroo and a rabbit (or bilby) peer from behind foliage, pelicans and swans sit on nests of eggs and fledglings await the return of their parents. It would be simplistic to categorise Mitchell's idiosyncratic style as naive and primitive. Such terms deny the cultural context of Aboriginal artists, subsuming them instead within modernism's own constructions for a primitive Other.<sup>35</sup> In this instance, Mitchell's disjunctions of scale are centrally important to meaning: when he gives equal value to humans, animals and plants Mitchell reveals an Aboriginal viewpoint toward the natural world. Nor should Mitchell be accused of a nostalgia for the past. He portrays the contemporary reality of Aborigines living within a pastoral industry where they gained kudos as 'smart men' noted for their bush skills and knowledge.<sup>36</sup> Mitchell's dynamic image of the buckjumper has parallels with the vivid and accurate scenes of the pastoral industry portrayed by children from Hermannsburg.<sup>37</sup> Writing in the 1950s, Beckett found

<sup>34</sup> Bill Ellwood, Interview 9 September 1992; May Walsh, Interview, 15 September 1992.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example Philip Jones, "Namatjira: Traveller Between Two Worlds," in *The Heritage of Namatjira*, pp. 97-136, pp. 104-107 and John Kean, "Now Who is Being Naive?," *Artlink*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 1992/1993, pp. 49-52; An extended critical response appears in Sylvia Kleinert, "The Boundary Riders," *Artlink*, Vol. 12, No. 4, Summer 1992/1993, pp. 9-11.

<sup>36</sup> The term "smart man" is used by Beckett, "Marginal Men," p. 99.

Aborigines wanted to be thought 'smart men' to avoid the stigma attached to old Aboriginal people as 'Jacky Jackys'.<sup>38</sup>

Harry and Gordon Mitchell gained status and recognition from the majority society for the objects they produced but, significantly, these were usually presented as gifts. Harry Mitchell only produced stock-whips, riding stocks and walking sticks as presents for people he liked—those illustrated were given to Mrs Armstrong, the wife of the manager.<sup>39</sup> In another instance, Gordon Mitchell carved a pair of eggs for Bob Johnstone—a young jackeroo who had just commenced work at Nulla in 1926. Johnstone recalls,

Gordon Mitchell was a good stockman, [and] had quite a reputation for carving emu eggs. [He would] do a bit [of carving] in the evening. [One day Gordon said to me,] if you find a few eggs I'll carve them for you. It so happened that one day while mustering, I found an emu nest with fresh eggs, so I put two in my saddle bag, and brought them to the camp, and Gordon was good enough to carve them for me.<sup>40</sup>

As discussed already, when Aborigines chose to give objects which were highly esteemed and desired by their recipients, they maintained the exchange modality of a hunter-gatherer society. When Aborigines presented gifts, they incorporated members of the majority culture within their own exchange relations: operating outside the values of a monetary economy, gifts implicated individuals in future relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness.

This exchange of gifts raises further questions about the nature of the relationships between Aborigines and pastoralists. Although earlier, idealised accounts of these relations supported founding myths of egalitarianism and glossed over racism and violence; contact histories have since presented a

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<sup>37</sup> Buckjumpers are a common motif in carved emu eggs. See NGV collection, (Acc. No D17/1985) and *Colonial Crafts of Victoria*, p. 105, pl. 225; For the Hermannsburg drawings see Hardy, "Visitors to Hermannsburg," p. 158, fig. 4.13, p. 163, fig. 4.19.

<sup>38</sup> Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 49-50, 60.

<sup>39</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. conv. 19 April 1993.

<sup>40</sup> This quotation combines sections from a letter of R. A. Johnstone to Terence Lane, 20 May 1980 together with excerpts from the author's interview with Bob Johnstone, 19 October 1991.

more accurate picture of formal and distant relationships.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, these generalisations need to be tempered with the recognition that more friendly relations might operate in particular circumstances—in some instances, Aborigines view their relationships with pastoralists as representing an era of peace and security.<sup>42</sup> At Nulla, Mitchell received the same wage as other stockmen, together with sufficient rations to support his family—although not all Aborigines were treated similarly.<sup>43</sup> Dick Palmer, a nephew of the Armstrongs, had “tremendous respect for Harry Mitchell's bush skills.” [In his opinion, Mitchell] did a valuable job and the fact that he was black didn't make any difference.<sup>44</sup> It would be easy in hindsight to accuse the Armstrongs of paternalism, yet their support and respect gave continuity and stability to two generations of the Mitchell family. Whilst the work produced by many other Bagundji artists has slipped into obscurity, Mrs Armstrong ensured Harry Mitchell's memory would survive to posterity when she chose to donate his artefacts to the Mildura Art Gallery. Her action suggests the gifts she received from Harry Mitchell created an inalienable bond which she wished to see preserved.

Nevertheless, the trajectory of individual objects in the world of commerce is influenced by their period of life as commodities, and the status they attain within conflicting and dynamic regimes of value. Most of the items Harry and Gordon Mitchell presented to friends have remained in relative obscurity. But when, by happenstance, carved emu eggs by Aborigines came into

<sup>41</sup> Beckett, “A Study of a Mixed Blood Community,” p. 90.

<sup>42</sup> Morphy and Morphy, “The ‘Myths’ of Ngalakan History.”

<sup>43</sup> The debate on Aboriginal conditions in the pastoral industry is inconclusive. Mitchell's situation at Nulla contradicts C. E. W. Bean, *On the Wool Track* (Sydney: August & Robertson, 1945), p. 110 who maintains rations were not extended to wives and families; Penney says Aborigines were paid first in rations then at a current or slightly lower rate. “The Death of Queen Aggie,” pp. 49-50, fn. 50, 79-80; Penney, “Encounters on the River,” pp. 294-8. Read in *A Hundred Years War*, pp. 25-6 and Beckett in “George Dutton's Country,” p. 10 maintain Aborigines represented a “pool of cheap labour”. Elsewhere, however, Beckett cites two instances when Aboriginal stockman worked in similar positions of authority as overseers. “A Study of a Mixed Blood Community,” p. 44.

<sup>44</sup> Dick Palmer, tel. con. 19 April 1993.

conjunction with the status attached to silverware, their "cultural biography" shifted into the elite echelons of precious goods. One pair of eggs carved by Gordon Mitchell, in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria are now set in older, silver mounts.<sup>45</sup> The dissonance present between Mitchell's brilliant representations of a Bagundji lifestyle and the power, prestige and social status conveyed by their silver mounts, captures the very essence of the way art objects produced by Aborigines for exchange as commodities became entangled in the uneven power relations of colonialism.

#### **iv Illusions of reality**

Stylistic analyses of Aboriginal art have generally assumed that an increased tendency to realism represents a sign of acculturation. In her analysis of south eastern art, Cooper notes that, although geometric and naturalistic elements co-existed at contact, an increase in figuration accompanied acculturation. European observers—obsessed with tradition—interpreted this change as a sign of cultural disintegration.<sup>46</sup> Gaye Sculthorpe's research on a more recent art form—the carved boab nuts produced in the Kimberleys since the 1870s—takes account of regional differences and the role that boab nuts fulfil as rattles in a ritual context. Nevertheless, she found evidence of an increase in naturalism and decorative borders which enabled several scenes to be incorporated within a single object.<sup>47</sup> Although Sculthorpe does not pass judgement, she implies this change in style is associated with the impact of tourism.

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<sup>45</sup> In a letter to the author of 7 August, 1993, Terence Lane says the provenance of the mount is uncertain. Some marks indicate the silversmith may be Steiner who worked in the 1860s but stylistically the mount is dated to the late nineteenth century. Lane suggests the eggs carved by Gordon Mitchell were probably substitutes for earlier (un-carved)? eggs. The reference to a cultural biography for individual objects comes from Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, pp. 64-91.

<sup>46</sup> Cooper, "The Art of Temperate Southeast Australia," p. 38.

<sup>47</sup> Gaye Sculthorpe, "Designs on Carved Boab Nuts," *COMA*, No. 23, 1990, pp. 37-47, p. 43.

The pattern evident in the art of the Murray/Darling basin undermines these general assumptions and linear chronologies suggesting instead that a diversity of styles co-existed in adjacent regions in the south east. This heterogeneity is partly attributable to historical differences. Climatic factors ensured Bagundji people were more isolated—a situation assisted by fewer missions and the supportive structure of the pastoral industry. In her study of Aboriginal migrants in Melbourne in the 1960s, Dianne Barwick found Cummeragunga people predominated: few Aborigines came from the Mildura region.<sup>48</sup> By contrast, the changing patterns of land use detailed earlier meant Wiradjuri artists lived in a more densely settled area, where they were exposed to more rapid change and a wider range of visual information: newspapers, illustrated journals and films.

The striking differences in style between the carved emu eggs by Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists emerge in the comparison between an egg carved by Joe Walsh, born in Yass about 1901, and those carved by Gordon Mitchell from the same period. Like Mitchell, Walsh is interested in depicting the plants, animals and birds of his regional domain: making a very apt choice for such a medium, he depicts an emu in the landscape! (Plate 58) But whereas Mitchell's eggs are two-dimensional, combining geometric and figurative elements in a continuous frieze around the egg, Walsh uses intricate and detailed naturalism.<sup>49</sup> The emu is represented with complete verisimilitude—an illusion heightened by the oval frame which separates the dark textured surface of the egg from the deep landscape created by diminishing trees and aerial perspective. The point deserves to be emphasised that Bagundji and Wiradjuri artists conceive their compositions from two quite different visual parameters: on the one hand, Mitchell works negatively in bas-relief, carving away the background to produce the design, on the other, Walsh carves in

<sup>48</sup> Barwick, "A Little More Than Kin," pp. 63-5, 141-3.

<sup>49</sup> The author is indebted to Hilton Walsh for this attribution.

intaglio, to create a positive image—a cameo which exploits the shell's many colours and tonal layers.

Walsh remained outside the pastoral industry so, in all probability, the catalyst and source for the buckjumpers he often depicted came from popular culture—either from the American-style rodeos mounted annually in most country towns—or from films. (Plate 59) Indeed, his son Hilton (b.1923), recalls that, after seeing a film his father would return home and draw prolifically: "He was the type of chap that could go to the pictures and come home that night and before he went to bed he'd do several pictures of the leading artists."<sup>50</sup> Walsh is not unique amongst the Wiradjuri artists: Sam Kirby similarly took his visual ideas from reproductions in books and magazines whilst his daughter, Esther admires an even more eclectic range of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources including the Aranda watercolourist, Albert Namatjira, the cartoonist Eric Jolliffe and illustrator Ainslie Roberts. Realism raises many contentious issues within Western artistic traditions where mimesis is associated with Platonic truths of reality. Aboriginal artists, however, operate from their own world view: they selectively incorporate from the majority culture, and reinterpret these motifs in terms of their own values. Not surprisingly, the tendency towards verisimilitude occurs elsewhere in contemporary indigenous art because realism represents a new vehicle for imaging a contested colonial reality.<sup>51</sup>

The philosophy of practice which prevails amongst Wiradjuri artists supports my argument. Inside the community, the ability to carve illusionistically is not perceived as a sign of acculturation and domination: in this instance, Wiradjuri artists gain status for their ability to represent reality. Although children learn to carve by copying and observation, the choice to become an artist

<sup>50</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March, 1993.

<sup>51</sup> Vogel, "Introduction: Digesting the West," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 14-31, pp. 24-26, discusses similar patterns in African art.



represents a personal challenge. Joe Walsh began carving as a young man to emulate his uncle, Dave Kennedy from Balranald. Hilton Walsh recalls, "My father taught [his friend] Sam Kirby but he wouldn't teach me. It's so tedious and laborious, you've got to want to do it."<sup>52</sup> Hilton was forty-four when he commenced carving. He began by copying themes developed by his father; a bird perched on a stump and a dog attacking a kangaroo. Plate 60 illustrates another recurring subject within Wiradjuri art, a lone Aborigine fishing in the river. It was only when Hilton Walsh devised an original composition—depicting an Aborigine sending smoke signals—did he realise he had been in competition with his father all along. (Plate 61) As a young woman, Esther Kirby (b. 1951) had no intention of becoming an artist until she carved two eggs left unfinished when her father died in 1978. In the philosophy she expresses, the ability to carve deeply and reveal the colours, tones and image latent in each egg, is a metaphor for self knowledge and self esteem.

You never get to do your best work, it's always ahead of you. I suppose you hope the person coming up behind you is better. You only learn a few tricks by doing it yourself. You've got to learn how to go down and learn all the depths.<sup>53</sup>

In this history of practice, the personal challenge of becoming an artist is closely linked to family status. Pride in the transmission of Aboriginal values from one generation to another is encoded through aesthetic judgements.

Such illusions of reality drew admiration from the wider community: realism ensured carved emu eggs would be understood and appreciated by mainstream Australians. Pastoralists commissioned eggs from Joe Walsh because they admired his talent. "I saw [Joe Walsh's eggs] and liked them [and] thought he was a very clever man. There's not many people who could draw like that."<sup>54</sup> It was possible, then, for a carved emu egg by Joe Walsh—

<sup>52</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March, 1993

<sup>53</sup> Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

<sup>54</sup> Laurel Kelly, tel. con. 11 October 1992.

such as that depicting a kookaburra placed with a heart—to generate a similar aesthetic response from both Aborigines and the wider community, as a symbol of goodwill and as a reference to Australia's indigenous fauna. (Plate 62) To a modern consciousness, which values originality and creativity, the recurring themes in Wiradjuri carved emu eggs might be interpreted as a lack of vitality and evidence of cultural disintegration however Susan Vogel's analysis of contemporary African art reveals otherwise. She found that the repetition and reprise of familiar themes between artists and their audience actually holds in tension the play between expectations built upon memories, innovation and improvisation.<sup>55</sup>

Excluded from Cummeragunga by discriminatory legislation, Walsh supported his thirteen children by working sporadically in various rural industries such as hay carting and harvesting; during the Second World War, he burnt charcoal in the Barmah Forest with Hilton. Although changing patterns of land use meant Wiradjuri artists lived a far more precarious existence than the Bagundji, many artists supported themselves on the income from their production. In the mid 1950s, just prior to his death, Joe Walsh lived with his nephew, Amos Atkinson, who earned £7 a week in the pastoral industry: at the same time, Walsh received £10 for each pair of eggs he carved.<sup>56</sup> The paradox was, as an artist, Walsh could avoid the Protestant work ethic which aimed to inculcate in Aborigines a steady, regular habit of work as paid labour. For, inasmuch as Walsh was able to retain his independence, he remained semi-nomadic: art provided the means for Walsh to maintain affiliations to kin and regional domain.

<sup>55</sup> Vogel, "Introduction," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 17, 19-20.

<sup>56</sup> Zelda Brown, tel. conv. 14 September 1992; These wages tally with others cited to the author by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal informants yet they are considerably lower than those suggested by Beckett, "A Study of a Mixed Blood Community," pp. 156, fn. 75, 204-208, 216-7 and Table V cites average earnings between £5 and £13.16.0 per week.

A particular pictorial structure characterises many of the Wiradjuri eggs: dividing them into two discrete images, creating a dark side and a lighter side—often carved in distinctive styles. A reference to race relations seems obvious but is denied by Esther Kirby. Rather, she suggests artists deliberately carve one side of the egg better than the other to gain the interest of their audience and, in "holding a bit back" retain their autonomy from market forces.<sup>57</sup> On a formal level, the bilateral symmetry and recurring mirror images present in Wiradjuri art are reminiscent of the designs on Lake Tyers boomerangs—a compelling symmetry observed elsewhere in Aboriginal art.<sup>58</sup> These parallels indicate the similarities which exist between the art of different Aboriginal groups. Nevertheless south eastern art is unique in the various ways symmetry operates between pairs of eggs and within a single object, dividing the form of the boomerang or the carved emu egg into spatial components. The combinations of geometric and figurative elements which form these complex compositions appears to support and extend Cooper's original stylistic analysis for the south eastern region.

In several pairs of eggs produced by Joe Walsh, he depicts nocturnal animals such as possums and koalas, birds or a buckjumper on the darker side of the egg. (Plates 59 & 62) These images are exquisitely carved, combining accurate observation with a lively and delicate contour. On the opposite side of each egg, Walsh repeats a stylised scene of the Murray River, depicting in text and image: 'Australia in early days' when Aborigines fished in the river from a canoe, and, 'Australia today' when the majority culture hunt from a motor boat armed with a gun and a dog. (Plates 63 & 64) The meanings generated by these twin images are ambiguous, on the one hand Walsh appears to depict Aborigines as the original owners of the land, utilising their regional domain, on the other, he comments on the passing of time and the

<sup>57</sup> Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

<sup>58</sup> Sutton, "The Morphology of Feeling," in *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, pp. 59-88.

way in which a former hunter-gatherer lifestyle has given way to a modern colonial world owned by others. In the post contact scene, Walsh seems to place emphasise upon the role technology played as the means by which colonisers gained control and maintained law and order.<sup>59</sup>

Not surprisingly, the image of Aborigines fishing in the river recurs throughout Wiradjuri art. Rivers represent an important focus of continuity and stability within the south-east. As in the past, Aborigines continue to exploit rivers as an economic resource. Until the turn of the century, the Murray represented a unique biotic environment which formerly provided such abundant and reliable food resources that Aborigines were able to live an almost sedentary existence.<sup>60</sup> During the twentieth-century, Aborigines continued to camp along the river and supplement their seasonal wages or rations from its resources. Mainstream Australians perceive the river as a physical barrier between two political states; to Aborigines it represents a resource and a refuge: a means of escape from the force of the law in one state and the opportunity to utilise rations and reserves offered in another.

To Aborigines, rivers are not associated with a past, hunter-gatherer lifestyle: rather, they represent significant sites within their regional domain. A site such as the river accrues meaning over time as individuals and communities continue to orient their lives and activities in relation to it. Margaret Tucker's autobiography describes how, as a child, she left Cummeragunga annually with her family to live along the Murray River, learning about bush foods, hearing stories from a pre-contact past melded with memories from contact

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<sup>59</sup> There are numerous references in oral histories to the presence of guns as a potential threat. see Ronald Morgan, *Reminiscences of the Aboriginal Station at Cummeragunga and its Aboriginal People* (Fitzroy: Fotoscreen Process Printers, 1952), p. 16; Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 93; For the recurrence of guns in African art see Julius Lips, *The Savage Hits Back* (1937, New York: University Books 1966), pp. 73-74, 139-146.

<sup>60</sup> For the unique environment offered by the Murray river until the first decades of this century despite the effects of steamers, irrigation and the depletion of flora and fauna, see Penney, "The Death of Queen Aggie," pp. 10-27, 30, 68-69, 85-89 and Penney, "Encounters on the River," pp. 15, 19, 31-48, 57-70.

history. In retrospect, she projects the Murray as a tangible conduit to her ancestors and a symbol of their continuing protection. "It is a constant reminder of the past as it softly whispers its secrets of days gone by. . .[and] our people of long ago add their murmuring, conveying messages of encouragement and hope."<sup>61</sup> As already shown mothers and grandmothers fulfil a central role as a focus of sentiment and stability, passing on knowledge to their children. Hilton Walsh, who spends most days fishing in the river, recalls his grandmother, Annie Hamilton, "used to wake me in the middle of the night and tell me what I thought were weird tales about Aborigines. . .This was part of the way [Aborigines] would hand on their teachings."<sup>62</sup> He continues,

I can go to bed some nights and not sleep and almost live in the past. I can wipe the whole of civilisation out of my mind. It's not hard to do along the banks of the Murray.<sup>63</sup>

There is an element of nostalgia in the response of Tucker and Walsh which could be interpreted negatively. Yet the contemporary Ngarrindjeri painter, Ian W. Abdulla who depicts scenes from his childhood on the Murray similarly claims he is "doing river stories [because Aborigines are] more or less interested in the past, than . . . in the future."<sup>64</sup>

Alternative explanations suggest these idealised representations of a tribal past, an earlier era on missions and in the pastoral industry represent a cultural construction which mediates and selectively re-invents the past.<sup>65</sup> Evidence from communities in remote and settled Australia show that such constructions of Aboriginality counter colonial domination and rationalise colonial history through a "remaking of the cultural distance" between

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<sup>61</sup> Tucker, *If Everyone Cared*, p. 48.

<sup>62</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History of Victoria*, p. 78.

<sup>63</sup> Hilton Walsh, Interview, 12 March 1993.

<sup>64</sup> Philip Jones, "An Interview with Ian W. Abdulla," *The Adelaide Review*, July 1990, pp. 18-19, p. 18.

<sup>65</sup> Jeremy Beckett, "Introduction," In *Past and Present: The Construction of Aboriginality*, (ed.), Jeremy Beckett, (1981; Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1988), pp. 1-10, p. 2.

Aborigines and the majority culture.<sup>66</sup> The selective and discontinuous histories which are created transform relationships with non-Aborigines through an active process of forgetting and remembering which "differentiates the past from the present, . . . by defining different kinds of people and relationships at different points in time."<sup>67</sup> Thus the recurring image of the noble savage must be balanced against the evidence that many communities have chosen, for a variety of reasons, to delete the evidence of a violent contact history.<sup>68</sup> Nostalgia arises out of a desire for the past, inventing and distancing objects in a symbolic realm. Like any narrative, it fulfils an ideological role, positioned in the past and the future but denying the present.

There is an element of myth in these constructions. Myths are a second order semiological system, a metalanguage, which selectively appropriates in order to neutralise (or naturalise) history.<sup>69</sup> Surviving fragments of tradition reappropriate the past experientially to release its potency in the claim for ethnic identity within a modern nation state.<sup>70</sup> In so doing, they incorporate representations of Aborigines drawn from the majority culture. In an intriguing inversion of these narratives, Roper Valley Aborigines filter the past through a Golden Age associated with the recent past of the pastoral industry. Their readings of history render the myth of the 'wild black-fellow' negatively as part of earlier era of violence and confrontation.<sup>71</sup> By contrast, the image of the Aborigine alone, fishing in the river, recurs as a positive theme throughout Wiradjuri art. The point is not that these re-incorporations necessarily invalidate Wiradjuri art as inauthentic, rather that the trope of the Aborigine as noble savage operated as an enabling device: a representation which

<sup>66</sup> Morris, "Dhan-gadi Resistance to Assimilation," In *Being Black*, pp. 33-63, p. 47.

<sup>67</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History," pp. 460-461.

<sup>68</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History," pp. 461, 473; Claire Ahern, "Turkey Creek," In *Aboriginal Art and Spirituality* (ed.), R. Crumlin, (North Blackburn: Collins Dove, 1991), pp. 34-41, p. 34; cf. Beckett, "George Dutton's Country," pp. 25-6.

<sup>69</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Tran. Annette Lavers, (1972 London: Paladin, 1984), pp. 109-134.

<sup>70</sup> Beckett, "Introduction," In *Past and Present*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Morphy and Morphy, "The 'Myths' of Ngalakan History."

empowered the Wiradjuri by sustaining continuity with the past during a period of continuing discrimination and oppression.

### **v Negotiating relationships**

Colonialism produced divided loyalties. An analysis of Sam Kirby's work reveals the dilemmas confronting Aborigines: loyalty to their Aboriginal identity within a colonial context, allegiance to sympathetic members of the majority culture and the negotiation of contemporary perspectives. Born in 1901, Kirby was orphaned as a young child, and placed into care at Kinchellah Home near Kempsey.<sup>72</sup> (Fig 1) (Plate 65) When he subsequently returned to Wiradjuri territory, as a teenager, he worked in the pastoral industry with his uncle, Alf 'Knocker' Williams. Kirby learnt to carve emu eggs from Joe Walsh, a close friend, but both men also produced artefacts. One boomerang by Walsh (as yet unlocated) was exhibited at the Australian Inland Mission Convention at the Melbourne Town Hall in 1934.<sup>73</sup> A surviving boomerang by Kirby is decorated with poker work—a laborious process which used fencing wire heated in ashes. (Plate 66) Although poker work was a well known craft technique in the nineteenth-century, it was also used in the pastoral industry as a means of branding animals and equipment.

This boomerang represents Kirby's most overt political statement. Significantly it was made as a present for Alick Jackomos (b. 1924), the Australian-born son of Greek migrants who has been a lifelong supporter of Aborigines.<sup>74</sup> In 1967—the year in which all Aborigines received full

<sup>72</sup> This biographical information derives from several informants but a discrepancy exists between Kirby's birth date and the period Kinchellah was in operation (1924-1970). This problem has not been resolved.

<sup>73</sup> *The Australian Evangel*, Vol. 5, No. 5, October 1934, p. 3.

<sup>74</sup> As a teenager, Alick Jackomos, (b. 1924) assisted Aboriginal activists speaking on the Yarra Bank and he played sport with Aborigines. In 1951, after his marriage to Merle Morgan of Cummeragunga, Jackomos raised funds for various Aboriginal causes before joining the Aborigines' Advancement League. In 1967 he worked for the Aboriginal Welfare Board before being appointed manager of Lake Tyers Station. Since retiring he has continued to research Aboriginal history and is the co-author of several publications.

citizenship—Kirby presented this boomerang to Jackomos a few months after his arrival in Swan Hill as Welfare Officer. The circumstances surrounding this gift and the personalities involved, highlight how activists, whether black or white, could act as a catalyst in the production of art objects expressive of a changing Aboriginal consciousness.

At the apex of the boomerang, in the most prominent position, Kirby superimposes black and white hands clasped in friendship over the Australian continent. Text inside the continent and the boomerang below reads, 'Australia Friendship No colour bar'. Either side, Kirby depicts indigenous animals in a landscape. At four points, geometric elements, symbolic of the Wiradjuri domain, intersect the boomerang.<sup>75</sup> In a clever visual illusion, Kirby plays upon the similarity between their concave forms and concentric infill to suggest these geometric elements represent dendroglyphs—the carved trees associated with Wiradjuri burial sites. (Plate 67) Hence this unique artefact combines a rich and complex range of references. Kirby combines images of flora and fauna with geometric elements specific to his Wiradjuri heritage. Symbols of national identity—seen previously in Kurnai artefacts from Lake Tyers—situate his call for racial equality within the modern nation-state. In Kirby's imaginary construction, recognition for Aborigines is mediated through friendship.

The same complex sign system, combining elements from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources operate as a set of signatures for each egg carved by Kirby. At the top of every egg, Kirby incised his totem, the morning star and as infill either side, he carved several distinctive plants. (Plates 68 & 69) Typically, the darker side of Kirby's eggs depicts a lone Aborigine fishing in the river surrounded by animals, birds and dense forest. On the lighter side,

<sup>75</sup> The author is indebted to Lucy Connelly for these insights into the meanings which Kirby gave for his imagery. Similar markings occur in the boomerangs produced by other Wiradjuri artists; Fred Bull, Alf "Knocker" Williams and his daughter, Lucy Connelly.



Kirby selects from a range of motifs which make direct reference to post-contact history: a sailing boat, maps of Australia and linked friendship hands. (Plate 70) In a further unique development, Kirby asserts his own individual identity through a personal coat of arms composed of a shield (which is sometimes signed) crossed with spears and boomerangs—an appropriation from European heraldic conventions. Kirby's use of these devices to identify his eggs reflects the changing self perception of Wiradjuri artists and their growing awareness of market forces within the modern world.

With the exception of the boomerang sold to Jackomos, Kirby's compositions exploit a deliberate ambiguity which ensured they were meaningful to different viewing positions. To Wiradjuri, the image of the lone Aborigine fishing in the river operated as a metonym, a symbol of a broader Aboriginal heritage of which they were part. To members of the wider community such images resonated with discourses of primitivism which supported the myth of the 'noble savage.' Insiders like Lucy Connelly, Alf William's daughter, who sat with Kirby whilst he carved, understand the symbolism attached to the different totemic emblems Kirby depicted but these associations were doubtless lost in exchange; and read as 'decoration.' And even within the Wiradjuri community, different interpretations prevail. Lucy Connelly maintains Kirby was bitter about Captain Cook and the history of colonisation.<sup>76</sup> For her, these images represent a covert political message which address the founding myths of settlement. To Esther Kirby however, the image of the sailing ship is a "beautiful thing in itself."<sup>77</sup> Sam Kirby's recurring images of the Endeavour, like the corpus of Aboriginal stories which surround other key historical figures; Captain Cook, Queen Victoria, Ned Kelly and police trackers represents a "genre"—"a distinctive way for indigenous people to make sense of the major features of the colonial encounter" by reconciling the gap

<sup>76</sup> Lucy Connelly, 10 September 1992.

<sup>77</sup> Esther Kirby, Interview, 22 October 1991.

between their original dispossession and the egalitarian ethos which underlies Australian national identity.<sup>78</sup> The point is, Kirby tells and retells these narratives through images of great beauty where pale, billowing sails, clouds and rolling waves carved into the shell read like a contemporary petroglyph, or rock carving. Aesthetics create the bridge for cross-cultural understanding.

As shown earlier, Aboriginal artists maintained their own voluntaristic mode of action when they exchanged objects they had produced with members of the majority culture. Today, some of Kirby's eggs remain within the community as family heirlooms. Others Kirby presented to friends as a gesture of reciprocity. Often, the personal, localised audience of a small country town generated commissions. Such client-driven relationships sit uneasily within the aesthetic ideologies of modernism which are based on a credo of individual artistic freedom; artistic hierarchies reflect these value judgements in the lesser status often attributed to commercial art and design. But, as Janet Wolff demonstrates, cultural production is more usefully thought of as a collaborative process: it is the emphasis which the West places upon individual creativity which tends to skew our understanding.<sup>79</sup> Just as the model of the Renaissance offers historical precedence within the West of successful patron/client relationships, ethnographic parallels with other contemporary indigenous arts reveal that such interaction relocates art in the public realm and enables audiences to engage as receivers and respondents—producing further continuities with the past for indigenous artists.<sup>80</sup>

In one instance, when Kirby carved an emu egg for a family whose son had been killed on active service during the Second World War, he responded to

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<sup>78</sup> Rowse, *After Mabo*, p. 15.

<sup>79</sup> Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, pp. 118-9.

<sup>80</sup> Vogel, "Introduction," In *Africa Explores*, pp. 16-17, 20-21.

their sense of loss by juxtaposing on one side of the egg a drover in the landscape, on the other, a soldier guarding the Australian continent. In another commission for a friend who was a minister in the Church of Christ, Kirby illustrates a trinity of biblical scenes: the star of Bethlehem, the image of Christ and the Crucifixion; a miniature boomerang with the text, 'God is able' completes the tableau. (Plate 71) Kirby's commitment to Christianity motivated such projects: in the mid 1940s he was associated with the Australian Inland Mission at Balranald and after his marriage, he joined the Salvation Army and rejoined in old age.<sup>81</sup>

This particular project is also of interest as an ambitious and challenging piece of sculpture, improvised with a minimum of tools and resources. With assistance from his daughter, Kirby has mounted the fragile egg on a metal pin set into a mulga wood plaque: the tableau is completed by a miniature inverted boomerang.<sup>82</sup> Miniaturisation, together with repetition, is most often cited as a sign of acculturation and commoditization<sup>83</sup> yet, in her extended analysis of the miniature, Susan Steward suggests that miniatures derive from our desire to objectify past narratives of identity.<sup>84</sup> In the process of miniaturising the boomerang in a new context, Kirby is, in effect, quoting the meaning of these artefacts within Aboriginal culture, thus privileging their origins whilst re-framing them in a more ambiguous context where the tableau is destined to fulfil other, more restricted functions within the domestic interior.<sup>85</sup> Thus miniatures operate through the figurative tropes of metonym and synecdoche to suggest relationships between the part and the whole,

<sup>81</sup> "News of Others," *The Australian Evangel*, Vol. 14, No 7 July 1944, p. 3; Lucy Connelly, Interview, 10 September 1992.

<sup>82</sup> Jackomos and Fowell, *Living Aboriginal History*, p. 121 illustrates a contemporary tableau by Arthur Kirby.

<sup>83</sup> Howard Morphy, "The Impact of the Commercial Development of Art on Traditional Culture," In *Preserving Indigenous Cultures: a New Role for Museums* (eds.) R. Edwards and J. Stewart, (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1980), pp. 81-94, p. 93.

<sup>84</sup> Susan Steward, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. ix-xiii.

<sup>85</sup> Steward, *On Longing*, pp. 19-21.

relating private narratives of cultural identity, with a public sphere, where Aboriginal culture is incorporated into the constructions of national identity. The totems and artefacts included in this tableau are further evidence of the continuation of Aboriginal values within Christian religion. Support for Christianity did not mean that Kirby denied his Aboriginality, nor his concern with social and political issues.

Artists living in the mid-Murray region also benefited from the development of tourism. The prices artists could expect to receive for their carved emu eggs—from American tourists in particular—rose considerably in the post-war period.<sup>86</sup> Initiatives such as the Swan Hill Pioneer Settlement founded in the mid 1960s provided a further encouragement to tourism, and Hilton Walsh and Sam Kirby were initially involved in this project. The settlement's first director, Ross Mellor, recognised that Aborigines retained many skills from their own hunter-gatherer lifestyle and their life in the pastoral industry: he considered Aborigines were great communicators who built a "bridge of nuance and understanding into history."<sup>87</sup> When the Pioneer Settlement was included in the itinerary of the Royal Tour by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and the Duke of Edinburgh in 1970, Hilton Walsh gave a demonstration of boomerang throwing and Sam Kirby presented a specially carved emu egg. (Plate 72)

Meetings between Aborigines and Regal and Vice-Regal visitors recur throughout this study: in the nineteenth century, residents of Coranderrk petitioned Queen Victoria and her representatives, Aggie Edwards was introduced to Lord Hopetoun and in 1954, Albert Namatjira met Queen Elizabeth II. A certain irony surrounds these ceremonial encounters which occurred in a separate realm, displaced in time and space from the reality of colonial relationships. Reigning English monarchs represented the original

<sup>86</sup> At the time, Aborigines distinguished between locals and tourists: Kirby sold eggs for £15 locally whilst prices in the vicinity of £250 have been indicated for tourists.

<sup>87</sup> Ross Mellor, tel. convs. 1 February 1993 and 10 May 1993.

colonisers: they met Aborigines whose marginalisation as an ethnic minority was, in some cases, mystified by honorific titles. For the majority culture, these individual Aborigines operated as a metonym for all Aboriginal people: an exotic and romantic spectacle and a symbol of successful assimilation. For Aborigines, such meetings represented a moment in time and an arena where colonial conflict could be addressed, if not resolved. Although Kirby remained bitter about colonialism, he gained status for his local community when he presented a carved emu egg to Queen Elizabeth. Indeed one resident has commented, in retrospect, that local attitudes towards Aboriginal art changed as a result of Kirby's gift.<sup>88</sup> Walsh and Kirby relished the opportunity to meet Queen Elizabeth because they refused to perceive themselves as anything but the equal of other Australians. Such significant encounters with Royalty recognised their status as Australia's indigenous inhabitants.

Kirby's astute response to this commission negotiates these conflicting relationships. As usual, on the dark side of the egg, he represents a 'noble savage' fishing in river—reiterating Aborigines' pre-eminent position as the original owners of the land. On the lighter side of the egg, Kirby reinterprets colonial relationships through the events of recent history. In place of the sailing ship which he frequently superimposed over the continent of Australia, he depicts the Royal Yacht, *Britannia*. Somewhat subversively Kirby places the Union Jack on the one side of the continent—opposite the American stars and stripes. The changing political allegiances to which he makes reference through the friendship hands underneath, occurred during the Second World War when America emerged as Australia's strongest ally in the Pacific theatre—displacing England. Swan Hill Aborigines experienced these strategic re-alignments at first hand: in March 1942, just prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbour, America established the largest flying boat repair depot at

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<sup>88</sup> Reg Fiedler, Interview, 4 January 1992.

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Lake Boga, 10 miles from Swan Hill—hence the seaplane Kirby depicts above the continent of Australia.

Kirby's carved emu egg tells the story of the war from the viewpoint of Aborigines in Swan Hill and Lake Boga. The siting of the Depot meant that, for the remainder of the war, both country towns were transformed into small cities which billeted an influx of over 1000 personnel from the United States Air Force and Navy and the Royal Netherlands Air Force.<sup>89</sup> During the war, many Aborigines enlisted and served in the armed forces, but the Wiradjuri, like many other Aboriginal communities found themselves involved in the war on a daily basis. The comment has been made that the city, unlike the country, offers individuals a greater sense of anonymity and freedom enabling them to realise their personal potential more fully. Coupled with this sudden transformation of their small, provincial country towns into bustling cities, Aborigines experienced an egalitarianism and a freedom from racism which made them aware that alternative relationships were possible with whites. Joan Knight, a Wemba Wemba woman, recalls vividly the pleasure, excitement and sense of purpose the war generated amongst Aborigines.

Swan Hill was like a big city [there were] several thousand people boarded out. It was a very exciting time. . . Everyone mingled with everyone at the time. Everyone was all friendly. Dancing was the main thing. My auntie played the accordion at dances, there was ballroom dancing and square dancing and Swan Hill was packed out with people all toffed up. . . it was a wonderful time and a serious time because it was a base for the Americans [and everyone] felt they were important. [It broke down the racism in Swan Hill] When these blokes came out it was like a big friendship. Afterwards we were sad but at the time it was important.<sup>90</sup>

For the duration of the war, when Aborigines were treated with equality, they gained a temporary respite from the racism which prevailed in Australia. After the war ended, however, social relationships reverted back to their former

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<sup>89</sup> The author wishes to thank Brett Freeman, *Lake Boga at War* (forthcoming) for making his research available. Brett Freeman, Interview, 1 March 1993.

<sup>90</sup> Joan Knight, tel conv. 11 February 1993.

state. Aborigines met American servicemen under particular circumstances when an egalitarian ethos temporarily prevailed but this was not an accurate picture of American race relations.<sup>91</sup>

## **vi Conclusion**

Where Aborigines remained on regional domains relatively isolated from the urban development of cities, they continued to develop dynamic and sustaining associations with their land. Patterns of socialisation built up relationships between individuals and their land which negotiated continuities between a past tribal life, relationships with the pastoral industry and the events of contact history. This allowed some elements of an Aboriginal world view to be maintained. The carved wooden artefacts and emu eggs which Aborigines produced gained regard and offered them a means of resisting incorporation into the labour force. In their exchange relations, Aborigines incorporated members of the majority culture into relationships of reciprocity and indebtedness. Within the philosophy of practice which prevailed, art represented a personal challenge and a means of transmitting Aboriginal values from one generation to another. The emergence of women as artists, in spheres of action formerly allocated to men, parallels the evidence from Lake Tyers and reflects changing patterns of employment and the greater social and political freedom gained by women since the 1970s.

Although there are many similarities between the art of the Bagundji and Wiradjuri communities, historical and geographic factors influence the objects produced, their style and content. The art styles of both regions employ geometric and figurative elements in complex compositions which encode totemic relationships with the land, past and present lifestyles and events from the modern world. Whilst Bagundji art is characteristically two-dimensional however, Wiradjuri art is three-dimensional. The carved emu eggs produced

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<sup>91</sup> Keesing, *Custom and Confrontation*, pp. 91-103 and Ch. 10.

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by Wiradjuri artists internalised the illusionism of Western artistic traditions as both an aesthetic criteria of quality and a means of gaining status from their patrons. Like the boomerangs produced at Lake Tyers and Aboriginal art elsewhere, symmetry is an important element in Wiradjuri art.

The uneven power relations and contested arenas produced by a colonial context created divided loyalties amongst Bagundji and Wiradjuri Aborigines. The rationalisation of these contradictions is evident in the juxtaposition of recurring themes of the noble savage with symbols of friendship, Christianity and national identity. In these narratives artists mediate between a past hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the events of contact history and international events and in the process, they begin to conceptualise local and national Aboriginal communities. As already shown the changes which occurred in the Swan Hill/Lake Boga region as a direct result of the war were a catalyst which significantly altered the perception of Wiradjuri and Wemba Wemba Aborigines. Cities contribute to the destruction of cultural traditions but they also offer individuals more opportunity to realise their personal potential. When Aborigines moved permanently to Melbourne, they lost direct access to their regional domains but in the process, the city, as a site of progress, contributed to further transformations in Aboriginal society.